

SCHUBERT *Wanderer Fantasy*. CHOPIN *Four Ballades* • Sophia Agranovich (pn)
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Since I interviewed Sophia Agranovich back in 35:4, she has become a familiar name to readers of this journal in general and to pianophiles in particular, thanks to a number of very well received recordings that followed. This, her latest release, Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy* and Chopin's *Four Ballades*, was recorded September 4, 2014 at Sean Swinney Studios in New York on a Steinway D piano.

There are many notable versions of these works to choose from, of course. For the Schubert *Fantasy*, I've tended to be drawn most often to those by Alfred Brendel (Philips, 1988) and Wilhelm Kempff (Deutsche Grammophon, 1968). Chopin beckons me less often, but when he does, and it's his *Ballades* I hanker to hear, the album that most frequently comes off the shelf is Maurizio Pollini's 1999 Deutsche Grammophon recording.

Sophia Agranovich is certainly up against some very stiff competition in this repertoire, but since her previous efforts have all demonstrated the same consistently high caliber of artistry, we should no longer be surprised to find that her readings, even in the most contested works in the standard literature, unfailingly take their place among the top contenders. And so it is with this Schubert and Chopin offering.

Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy* of 1822 is said to be his most technically difficult solo keyboard composition. Though the work gives the impression of being a very lengthy through-composed, free-form piece, it's actually a four-movements-in-one sonata-like structure in which all of its thematic material is derived from the melody to Schubert's *lied*, *Der Wanderer*, D 489, which serves as the basis for the *Fantasy*'s theme and variations movement. Thus, the entire work is tied together in an almost cyclical fashion.

Agranovich's technical address is never in question, but what I really like about her performance is that it strikes me as combining the best of both Brendel and Kempff. It's as if she has absorbed from Brendel his organizational skill to bind the piece together and reveal its unifying formal principles; while from Kempff, she has absorbed the sense of philosophical and spiritual probing. Of course, Agranovich is her own and artist and brings to the score both commanding technique and poetic expression; but it's the ideal balance she achieves between the intellectual and the emotional that makes Agranovich's reading of Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy* so satisfying.

If Agranovich doesn't quite bring to the Chopin *Ballades* the scintillating brilliance of Pollini, it's certainly not for lack of technical accomplishment. Rather, she takes a somewhat different interpretive approach to the pieces, focusing more on their inner subtleties than on their surface pianistic effects. What emerges are more personal, one might even say, programmatic portraits, though there's no evidence that Chopin had any specific literary or extra-musical ideas in mind. I do want to emphasize, however, that Agranovich does not shy away from pulling out the stops, so to speak, where the music calls for it.

All in all, a very rewarding recital, beautifully played and superbly recorded. Strongly recommended. **Jerry Dubins**