

Schumann: Carnaval, Fantasie in C
Sophia Agranovich, piano
(Centaur)

Sophia Agranovich, native of Ukraine who now lives in the U.S. with the New York City area as her home base, gives stunning accounts of two of Robert Schumann's best-loved and most difficult works for solo piano. And she brings both of them off in a manner that made me feel I understood them better in spite of many years' previous acquaintance.

Carnaval, perhaps Schumann's best known piano work, is deliberately and notoriously uneven in texture, touch, and tempi in a way that fascinates and frustrates keyboard artists. It unfolds in 20 numbered sections which reflect aspects of Schumann's personality, his life and loves, and his artistic ideals. It does not however flow smoothly any more than did the composer's life itself. Of the pianist, Carnaval requires frequent hand re-positionings, even within the same short piece (the majority are around a minute's duration, more or less). Frequent changes in mood, flow, and technique necessitate that the artist be continually alert.

Here we have thumbnail portraits of Commedia masks (Pierrot, Arlequin, Pantaloon, Columbine) and the two sides of Schumann's personality, the contemplative dreamer (Eusebius) and the man of commitment to a cause (Florestan). We are also given, pieces depicting his future wife (*Chiarina*, Clara) and a previous love (*Estrella*), coquettes and social butterflies (*Papillons*) at a masked ball, nods to two figures Schumann greatly admired (Chopin, Paganini), and finally a March of the *Davidsbund* against the Philistines that embodied his revolutionary ideals in music, building to a terrific *Prestissimo*.

The Fantasie in C major, Op. 17, has long been a favorite of pianists and audiences alike for its fantastic imagination and its abundance of romantic fervor. Schumann had his beloved Clara Wieck, his union with whom was still opposed by her father, clearly in mind when he wrote it. Most of its exalted feeling occurs in the first movement, subtitled "Thoroughly fantastic and passionate" (*Durchaus fantastisch und leidenschaftlich vorzutragen*) and the third and final movement, marked "Slow, sustained. Always soft" (*Langsam getragen. Durchwegs leise zu halten*). These markings provide guideposts for a sensitive artist such as Agranovich as to how to manage the flow of motion and emotion.

The middle movement, "Moderate. Always energetic" (*Massig. Durchaus energisch*) lives up to its billing in the formidable demands it makes of the performer, including the fantastic syncopated leaps in the coda for which my pet name is "Schumann's boogie-woogie." Agranovich handles it all with style and intelligence.

- Audio Video Club of Atlanta