

SCHUMANN: *Carnaval; Fantasie in C, Op. 17* / Sophia Agranovich, pianist / Centaur CRC-3504

Sometimes, a review need not be long and detailed in order to convey what a performance says about the music. Such is the case with this new release from pianist Sophia Agranovich, whom I have interviewed in the past. I know just enough about her to realize that she generally detests studio recording—it makes her nervous and edgy, not an uncommon thing for artists—but also that she is often a bit nervous at the beginning of her live concerts. Nevertheless, these performances of two of Schumann’s most famous piano works is just so good, and so unusual, that it almost boggles the mind.

Those who are familiar with Agranovich’s playing need not be told that she only knows one way to play music, and that’s full-bore emotionally. She hasn’t earned the nickname “the tigress of the keyboard” without reason, and for those who wonder why I like her playing and not Martha Argerich’s, this CD is Exhibit A. Argerich has a spectacular technique and plays with tremendous energy, but energy does not (in her case) generally translate into an interpretation. In Agranovich’s case, it does, very much indeed. Even if you have a dozen other recordings of *Carnaval* or the *Fantasie*, you need to have this one as well, because it will overshadow most of them. Agranovich plays it as if her life depends on it. Every note, every phrase is alive with feeling and meaning; you cannot listen to this CD impassively. I was so swept up by her performance that I listened to it all the way through without comparing it to anyone else’s, but afterwards I put on Alexander Kobrin’s very fine performance of *Carnaval* (Centaur CRC-3365) and was absolutely astonished by the differences. Aside from the fact that Agranovich omits the very brief “Sphinxes,” which was not intended for performance and is generally left out, I just couldn’t get over the differences between the two performances. Kobrin sounded good but colorless; he phrased very well but missed things that she captured, Schumann’s unexpected changes of mood and color. There are moments where she played with what I would call a “skipping” motion, i.e., the rhythm is a bit punchy and jumpy, but in place of the type of phrasing one normally hears (and which Kobrin gives) I felt as if Schumann was communicating with me. It almost sounded as if she were the composer inventing the music at the keyboard. You keep listening for what happens next.

Part of the reason for the disc’s success is its almost astounding presence and clarity. The sound is so immediate that from the first note you feel as if Sophia is in your living room playing for you. Engineer Joseph DeVico has managed to capture every nuance and every touch with perfect clarity. When she depresses a key, you can almost feel it in your bones. You can hear her pedaling, even to the extent of that “woody” sound a pianist gets (and feels) when the damper or sustain pedal is depressed while in the midst of a busy passage. No, none of this is distracting; on the contrary, it pulls you the listener further into the heart of what she is doing musically. Just think it as a sort of hyper-realistic Welte Piano Roll if you will. Having seen Agranovich play Chopin on TV, I can also imagine her powerful hands and arms swooping over the keyboard like two mother hawks harvesting food for their hatchlings. This is not an unfair analogy. I’ve long felt that, to Agranovich, music *is* food for her soul, and that she would perish without it.

As the last phrases and notes of the “Langsam getragen. Durchweg leise zu halten” of the *Fantasie* faded out of earshot, I almost expected to hear an audience burst into applause. Except there was none. But it’s that kind of recording...you almost feel like jumping up and applauding your heart out at the end. Enough said.