

SCHUMANN *Carnaval*, Op. 9. Fantasy in C, Op. 17 • Sophia Agranovich (pn) • CENTAUR 3504 (57:21)

As everyone knows, we owe the Romantic revolution in piano playing to Chopin, Schumann, and Liszt, but not for the same reasons exactly. Liszt approached the instrument for bravura display and death-defying thrills, Chopin as a reflection of his inner world, and Schumann as an autobiography. Not only does Schumann portray himself through his alter egos, poetic Eusebius and fiery Florestan, but every step of his love life is transcribed into his musical journal. In the case of *Carnaval*, probably Schumann's most popular early piano masterpiece, in 1834 he was secretly but briefly engaged to Ernestine von Fricken, a piano pupil of Frederick Wieck, although it was to his daughter Clara that Schumann's passions eventually turned, of course. Among the portraits scattered throughout *Carnaval*, along with characters from *commedia dell'arte*, Ernestine and Clara are both evoked, as "Estrella" (No. 13) and "Chiarina" (No. 11). Schumann's love of coded messages is present in the repetition of A-S-C-H and S-C-H-A (in German musical notation); they give No. 10 its title but reappear elsewhere, the one as a cryptogram for Schumann's name, the other as part of the word "*Fasching*," the German word for Carnival.

What makes *Carnaval* enduringly popular, I think, are not just its abundant melodies, exuberant energy, and the numerous personality sketches, although they certainly play their part. But this is an example of Schumann's imagination being kept from wandering by the tight form of 21 miniatures that take only around 28 min. to play. (The program notes helpfully supply a thumbnail description of what each episode signifies.) Dedicated listeners of Schumann's piano compositions tend to have deeply personal tastes, as befits a composer whose whole intent was private, sometimes to the point of obscurity. My ideal in *Carnaval* is high spirits, clear distinctions in mood from piece to piece, and a tone more lyrical than dramatic. Pianists who bang or who turn the score into a display piece rarely appeal to me.

Its good news, then, that Ukrainian pianist Sophia Agranovich, now well established in the New York City area, approaches Schumann along the lines I prefer, although I'm not surprised. Her previous disc of Chopin and Schubert (reviewed in 39:3) gave considerable promise. I remarked about the four Ballades that "Chopin freely called upon elements of the sonata, dance, fantasy, reminiscence, and song." The same is true about *Carnaval*, minus the sonata, and by applying a style I'd call "controlled rhapsody," Agranovich spins a lyrical thread that holds the score together while at the same time giving us the individual flavor of each miniature. Her yielding touch is perfect for the tenderness of "Chopin," but one also notices here that Agranovich possesses intuitive *rubato*, which is all-important for both Chopin and Schumann. She is forceful in the opening "*Préambule*" without sounding hectic or clangorous. The passionate sweep of "Chiarina" doesn't slip into recklessness. This is a demanding score that displays every aspect of a pianist's artistry except Lisztian barnstorming, and as Agranovich proceeds from episode to episode, she is strong in every necessary quality.

The Fantasy in C is often considered the absolute peak of Schumann's piano writing, and an elusive work to interpret. There is no program to follow, as in *Carnaval*, so the listener must rely on a performer's intuitive grasp of Schumann's very free fantasy structure. Being able to play beautifully from bar to bar isn't enough, nor is virtuosic dazzle. When a word like "intuitive" comes up, a reviewer doesn't have many objective grounds for placing one interpretation higher than another. But a fair description, I think, would say that Agranovich plays the Fantasy with passion that's not overblown, tempo fluctuations that are not excessive, and a dynamic range that's not extravagant. So much for the negative virtues of this well-balanced reading. The positive virtues are just as evident. She has no trouble with the large scale of the Fantasy, and she plunges into the storms of the first movement with technical confidence and emotional freedom—Schumann's signature exuberance and exaltation are both captured.

While the first movement grew out of a piece entitled "Ruins" that Schumann wrote to express his turbulent feelings on being parted from Clara in 1836, the last two movements were written as a contribution to a fund-raising project, erecting a monument to Beethoven in his native Bonn. This is worth mentioning because the second movement takes us into the world of Beethovenian heroic declamation. Agranovich is appropriately noble here but also switches gears quickly, as needed, into Schumann's scampering tone later on. The balance is very well judged.

Most critics seem to cavil about the tenderly wistful third movement, judging that few interpreters can navigate its almost formless spontaneity in a totally convincing way. The usual pitfall is wandering in the clouds, allowing the music to become vaporous. Agranovich maintains a steady enough pace, with firm rhythmic grounding, to avoid such a trap. She doesn't attempt to out-poeticize the poet. As a result, her interpretation is at once beautiful and well knit—the same terms apply to her whole reading, really. In all, this is a very satisfying recital that shows us a pianist with deep sympathies for Schumann's idiom. Good recorded sound renders the piano with depth and realism.

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