

SCHUMANN *Carnaval*, op. 9. *Fantasie in C*, op. 17 • Sophia Agranovich (pn) • CENTAUR 3504 (57:23)

It must take some bravery to release a recording in this core repertoire. From Yves Nat to Bolet, from Arrau to Argerich, the competition is huge. Despite a less than flattering recording, Agranovich holds her head up high to provide performances that deliver much satisfaction; a glance back in the *Fanfare Archive* reveals a string of positive reviews in repertoire from Liszt to Schubert, Brahms and Skryabin.

A Steinway artist, Agranovich has been much lauded previous in these pages, and justifiably so. Her *Carnaval* is characterful and superbly rendered. Her teasing way with “Arlequin” is terrific, light and coquettish; yet she can convey all of the Romantic sweep of the line of the “Valse noble” perfectly. Her sense of timing is impeccable, rubato everywhere perfectly judged, so that “Eusebius” has a sense of flow as well as being gorgeously shaded; her fingerwork in the ensuing “Florestan” is impeccable, speaking of a superior finger strength much needed in this piece. Agranovich’s low pedal approach to “Papillons,” which would cause many a lesser pianist to crumble, works beautifully; similarly, the crispness of “Lettres dansantes” is most appealing. Throughout all this, Agranovich manages to keep the idea of a single piece, of a single thread running through all this diversity, perfectly in mind, lending the performance a sense of inevitability that climaxes with the “Marche des Davindsbündler” while honouring the individual nature of each segment, however slight. Listen to the delightful staccato of “Pantalon et Colombine,” for example, or her off-the-cuff way with “Promenade.”

As to the *Fantasie*, the recording could be more focused in the bass (it is a bit coloured at the outset), but there is no doubting Agranovich’s attention to detail, nor her true sense of flow. She is careful with pedal, allowing every note to speak, even in the opening left-hand swirls that give the music its momentum. Some tender suspensions, resolving beautifully and naturally, reveal her heartfelt link to this music. She does well with the central panel; Schumann’s quirky writing emerges as some of his quirkiest here, exuding a mesmeric fascination for the listener; the infamous passage of jumps is negotiated with ease and with no sense of the over-careful. An element of risk is included, and one notes that the recording data gives one day only for the recording of both pieces (August 5, 2015 at Wharton Hall, New Jersey). It feels like there had been an agreement to throw caution to the wind, and we gain immeasurably. Agranovich’s sense of keyboard colour is heard at its most radiant in the finale, where the music unfolds at a beautifully natural pace, and crowns this very special Schumann disc most memorably. **Colin Clarke**