

**SCHUMANN *Carnaval. Phantasie in C* • Sophia Agranovich (pn) • CENTAUR
3504 (57:21)**

A recent stream of new Schumann piano releases is testament to the enduring popularity of the composer's keyboard repertoire. Sophia Agranovich is not new to *Fanfare's* readers, nor is she new to Schumann, though her two previous forays into his music—which included the Symphonic Etudes, “Widmung” from *Myrthen* in an arrangement by Liszt, and *Faschingsschwank aus Wien*—were part of mixed programs containing works by other composers besides Schuman. Agranovich's latest effort is devoted exclusively to Schumann and to two of his larger-scaled works, *Carnaval*, op. 9, and the *Phantasie* in C Major, op. 17.

When it comes to Schumann, referring to a work as “larger-scaled” has to be understood as relative. *Carnaval* fits the description only by virtue of the fact that its mass, like that of a coral reef, is the result of tiny polyps and crustaceans—i.e., musical miniatures—sticking together and accreting. *Carnaval* is made up of 21 such tiny carbonaceous character pieces, the shortest lasting only 19 seconds. But string them all together, one after another, and you end up with a work of close to 30 minutes' duration.

Alternately titled “Little Scenes on Four Notes,” *Carnaval* is a collage of sketches intended to depict revelers at a pre-Lenten carnival, the revelers including Schumann himself, his friends and acquaintances, and characters drawn from the Italian *commedia dell'arte*. The “four notes” part of it is a topic that has been covered in depth in prior reviews, so there is no need to go into it again. In a nutshell, Schumann uses the notes A, E1, C, and B9 in various permutations to encrypt certain words in the form of musical ciphers, the object being a parlor game in which his friends would try to decode them. In reality, the game was probably one that Schumann enjoyed playing by himself, for even among his circle of friends, associating his then fiancée, Ernestine von Fricken, with the musical notes A, E1, C, and B9 for Asch, the Germanized name of the town where she was born, must have been a bit of a stretch. Today, of course, the topicality of these associations is completely lost, for no one alive remembers Ernestine von Fricken, and I doubt that the town of Aš (Asch) in the northwestern-most region of today's Czech Republic has many visitors.

The main theme of the work, which is set out in the “Préambule,” traces back to a waltz by Schubert. In what seems a rather odd gesture, Schumann dedicated *Carnaval* to the Polish violin virtuoso, Karol Lipiński, who some claimed was the equal of Paganini. One has to wonder why you would dedicate a work so intrinsic to the piano to a violinist who, unless he was as much a master of the keyboard as he was of the fingerboard, would have no hope of ever playing it.

Thanks to the double-jointed nature of the English language, the reader might understandably be led to a sidesplittingly uproarious but unintended conclusion if I were to say that Sophia Agranovich is beyond hope, when what I would actually mean by it is that her technical mastery and musical sensitivity are on a level that surpasses any need to rely on hope for a successful outcome. Without exaggeration, this can be described as a revelatory reading of *Carnaval*. Listen, for example, to the hiccupping, tipsy “Arelquin,” whose tripping steps Agranovich traces with the most amusing depiction of a snookered clown burping his way through trying to walk a straight line. Again and again, throughout the 21 vignettes, Agranovich proves herself an exceptional master of the pictorial, a real colorist in the art of musical tone painting, which, of course, is what *Carnaval* is ultimately about and what it calls for from a player.

If you ignore the long and winding path that led to Schumann's C-Major *Phantasie* and don't burden yourself with its programmatic baggage, the piece comes across as pure, abstract music, a quasi-sonata in three movements, albeit in the composer's most impassioned and thrilling Romantic voice. There are those who believe it to be Schumann's greatest work for solo piano. He completed it in 1836, but it wasn't published in its final form until 1839. In those three years, the work we know today as the *Phantasie* traveled a rocky road. Schumann offered the composition to the publisher Kirstner in the hope of raising money for a Beethoven monument to be erected in Bonn. The full title Schumann had given the *Phantasie*, was a mouth-and-a-half-full, *Obolen auf Beethovens Monument: Ruinen, Trophaen, Palmen, Grosse Sonate f.d. Piano f. Für Beethovens Denkmal*. I could not find the word "obolen" in any German dictionary, reference source, or online translator, so I have no idea what it means, but the rest needs no translation. Each of the three movements bore a descriptive title, "Ruins," "Trophies," and "Palms."

Kirstner rejected Schumann's score, so the composer next turned to Haslinger, who also refused it. Finally, he offered it to Breitkopf & Härtel who accepted it, but initially changed the movement's titles to "Ruins," "Triumphal Arch," and "Constellation;" and then, on further consideration, deleted the titles altogether, and finally published the score in 1839 with the one-word title, *Phantasie*, and with Schumann's last-minute changes and dedication of the piece to Liszt. The Beethoven monument was eventually completed and unveiled to great ceremony in 1845, but the lion's share of the money for it came not from Schumann but from Liszt, who laid out 2,666 thalers from his own pocket. In 1842 a thaler, in today's money, had a value of \$10.21, which means that Liszt donated an astonishing \$27,219.86 (!) to the project. I guess his piano playing paid off after all.

The *Phantasie* is an ocean of heaving emotional swells and gently undulating waves that caress and calm the waters with ripples of sirenic song. The last movement, once titled "Palms," is of a special transcendent beauty, I suspect because in ancient times, the palm branch symbolized triumph, peace, and eternal life. I, for one, would not be unhappy to hear Sophia Agranovich playing this movement for all of my eternity. This is beyond desert island music, it is kingdom come music. And yes, I know there are so many recordings of the *Phantasie* to choose from, you should ask not who by but by who not. But playing as beautiful, as poetic, as intimate, and as sweeping in its virtuosity as Sophia Agranovich's compels nothing less than an urgent recommendation. **Jerry Dubins**