

CHOPIN Nocturne in c, op. 48 no. 1. Polonaise-Fantasia in Ab, op. 61. LISZT Sonetti della Petrarca: No. 47; No. 104; No. 123. “Dante” Sonata. Hungarian Rhapsody No. 14 • Sophia Agranovich (pn) • CENTAUR 3601 (65:55)

The last time I encountered the accomplished Ukrainian pianist Sophia Agranovich, I commented that she plays with modified Russian style: “She exhibits power and depth of tone, yet these qualities are subordinated to a natural lyrical gift.” I feel the same about this new recital of Chopin and Liszt and perhaps even more so, because the unabashed Romanticism brought to both composers is found almost nowhere outside the Russian tradition. Agranovich is taking a bold step to wear her heart on her sleeve, but such personal warmth wins listeners over in a special way, as witness the love affair between Shura Cherkassky and his audiences.

Along with Schumann these two composers form the triad of Romantic pianism, but Chopin’s playing style, so far as eye witnesses report it, was radically different from Liszt’s; the ultimate introvert set against the ultimate extrovert. Berlioz speaks of Chopin playing so softly in a private recital that one had to lean close to the piano to hear him. This intimacy led to the mistaken conclusion that Chopin was a miniaturist and a salon composer. Liszt was expected to flabbergast his thronging worshipers, and no recital was truly successful unless some women were carried from the hall in a swoon.

Agranovich works against this generalization, which like all generalizations is only half true. She gives Chopin a bold voice and introduces a poetic, improvisatory *rubato* into her Liszt. If you love Richter’s free expression, combined in this case with the rich mid-range and rumbling bass of Gilels, Agranovich is likely to delight you. The *obbligato* style in which Liszt introduces the three *Sonetti della Petrarca* throws off many pianists, because he intends for the bar lines to vanish in a rush of pure feeling. Ideally no two interpreters should play these prelude-like passages the same. I found Agranovich very persuasive here, and when she arrives at the lyrical body of each *Sonetto*—gorgeous melodies that Liszt translated into versions for voice and piano—she is just as spontaneous. In lesser hands having the freedom to override the bar line can be messy, even woozy. Agranovich avoids this pitfall beautifully. I’d call the Petrarch group one of the album’s highlights.

In its full title, *Après une lecture de Dante: Fantasia quasi Sonata*, Liszt puts the performer betwixt and between. Should the sonata side of the piece—structured, harmonized, and balanced—be emphasized or the fantasy side—spontaneous, free-flowing, and unpredictable? A lot depends on how you feel about the “Dante” Sonata in the first place. It contains more than its fair share of rhetoric and near-bombast that you might want to tame, while on the other hand the music’s capacity to soar tempts any pianist to aim for thrills. Agranovich wants to soar, and the effect is like a tone poem, a second *Les preludes* in its unstoppable momentum to a blazing conclusion. There are other, cooler ways to approach the score, as Leif Ove Andsnes shows in

his excellent EMI/Warner account. But I admire Agranovich's warm, colorful performance, which never bangs or gives way to vulgarity.

It's quite unusual to perform a Chopin Nocturne without focusing on sensitive delicacy, so it's refreshing that Agranovich brings more Lisztian qualities to op. 48 no. 1, in the manner of his *Consolations*. The piece is guided by a strong pulse in the left hand, which increases into rolling thunder, and dynamics in the melody, which is beautifully phrased here, are louder than usual, reaching out to the listener rather than making us lean forward. In her readable program notes Agranovich quotes an opinion that Chopin's Nocturnes are "more aptly described as Ballades in miniature," which is what she achieves.

The late *Polonaise-Fantasia* from 1846 is another betwixt- and-between work; Chopin himself admitted "I don't know yet what to call [it]." The Polonaise side gives the music its bold melodic contour and strength; the fantasy side gives it unusually free harmonic progressions that Chopin's contemporaries, including Liszt, found difficult to understand. Agranovich weaves both aspects of the score's musical personality into a persuasive whole, aided, as in the *Sonetti della Petrarca*, by her natural lyricism. The same talent is applied to Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody* No. 14, one of the six he also orchestrated. The big tune is one of his best gypsy-flavored concoctions, and he imported it into the *Hungarian Fantasia* for piano and orchestra. Agranovich's account goes beyond technical display to reach into the piece's musicality, just as she does in everything on the program.

I don't know if the pianist or other listeners will agree with my notion that Agranovich brings Chopin to Liszt and Liszt to Chopin, but that's not necessary. These are striking interpretations from a performer whose style immediately appeals and at the same time offers an impressive depth of musicianship. Centaur's recorded sound is close, full-bodied, and very present.

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