

CHOPIN Nocturne in c, op. 48/1. *Polonaise-Fantaisie* in A \flat , op. 61 **LISZT** *Années de pèlerinage, Book II*, S 161: No. 4, *Sonetto 47 del Petrarca*; No. 5, *Sonetto 104 del Petrarca*; No. 6, *Sonetto 123 del Petrarca*; No. 7, *Après une lecture de Dante. Hungarian Rhapsody No. 14* in f, S 244/14 • Sophia Agranovich (pn) • CENTAUR 3601 (65:55)

Sophia Agranovich's Centaur release of Schumann (*Carnaval* and *Fantaisie*) was highly impressive (see my review in *Fanfare* 40:5); this present release hardly less so. The two discs share a recording standard that fails to do full justice to Agranovich's Steinway, however, as the bass can be lacking in recorded depth. Nevertheless, there is no hiding Agranovich's sensitivity in this repertoire. In her booklet notes, Agranovich quotes David Dubal's statement that Chopin's Nocturnes are "most aptly described as ballades in miniature". The C-Minor Nocturne is given a beautifully shaded, interpretatively deep reading; the elusive *Polonaise-Fantaisie* feels appropriately exploratory but at the same time Agranovich finds an overarching structure that prevents the experience from becoming diffuse. The *Polonaise-Fantaisie* offered here is a terrific reading of one of Chopin's most challenging works, one that ranks in maturity along with the likes of Pires (DG).

To take the last four of Liszt's second book of travels (Italy) is excellent programming. The same *cantabile* line that transformed the Chopin Nocturne into finely-spun magic is in evidence in the Sonnets, works which also exist in versions for voice and piano. In *Sonetto 47*, there is evidence of that recording letting down the interpretation: Agranovich places a bass note superbly, for example, but it loses its full effect. *Sonetto 104* has a lot of single lines, beautifully done by Agranovich; so much so that the effect reminds one of Bellini, a composer usually linked to Chopin's melodic writing. The *Sonetto 123* compares earthly feminine beauty to angels, and the higher lying registers reflect that. Agranovich finds all the necessary tenderness.

The so-called "Dante Sonata" finds Agranovich delivering Liszt's gestures with high intelligence, yet finds just the right stormy atmosphere later on. Her interpretative control is highly impressive, perhaps recalling Brendel in this regard, although the very thorniest passages do reveal some sense of strain, and here she has to cede to the likes of the magnificent Lazar Berman. Agranovich has a commendably sparing way with the sustaining pedal, allowing textures to remain clear.

It is good to see one of the lesser-known *Hungarian Rhapsodies* here: themes from the one here, the 14th in F-Minor, were used in the *Hungarian Fantasia* for piano and orchestra, S 123 of 1849—52 (the *Hungarian Rhapsody* was written in 1846). It is in the slow "Friska" section that Agranovich flourishes, teasing out the melodies. Overt, vulgar virtuosity is not her style, although she has technique to spare; she seems to relax into, and relish, any passage offering beauty, and this approach offers a refreshing alternative to the barn-storming performances that crowd the catalog.

A most enjoyable release that offers further proof of Agranovich's musical intelligence. **Colin Clarke**