

MENDELSSOHN Fantasia in f-sharp. Songs without Words: Albumblatt in a. Caprice in a. Variations sérieuses. 3 Etudes, op. 104b. Etude in f, WoO. 1. Rondo Capriccioso, op. 14 • Sophia Agranovich (pn) • CENTAUR 4038 (54:58)

Sophia Agranovich is a Ukrainian pianist, now living in the United States, whose recordings have been getting enthusiastic reviews from many critics at *Fanfare* for a few years now. This recording will only add to the esteem in which she is held.

Reading her biography gives real meaning to the word polymath. In addition to being a superb pianist, Agranovich had a 23-year career in information technology, worked as a systems analyst for Metropolitan Life Insurance, and later held multiple senior positions at Merrill Lynch. She has studied naturopathy and traditional Indian and Chinese medicine, and has taught yoga and Pilates classes. How she found time for all of that while amassing the musical knowledge and keyboard technique that allows her to perform at such a high level is something I cannot fathom.

What distinguishes this disc of Mendelssohn's piano music is the same combination of excellent technique and strong musical personality that reviewers have noted in Agranovich's prior recordings. She delivers crystalline clarity of textures with a natural gift for shaping melodies. She has a good instinct about when to add a touch of urgency to a phrase and when to relax the pace. Most importantly, she is willing to take interpretive risks. *Rubato* is generously applied to the first movement of the Fantasia in f-sharp minor without ever disturbing the flow of the music—forward motion is maintained. In the third-movement *Presto* the clarity of her fingerwork is breathtaking, exhibiting pinpoint control of dynamics.

Agranovich focuses on the first word of the title *Lied ohne Worte*, being songful without words. She makes the keyboard sing with a pearly *legato* that belies the fact that the piano is basically a percussion instrument. The remaining short works are equally effective thanks to her ability to balance freedom and discipline.

The same balance is readily apparent in the *Variations sérieuses*, whose theme with 17 variations and a coda encompasses a huge range of expression. Mendelssohn wrote the score in 1841 for a charity concert to raise funds to erect a bronze statue of Beethoven in Bonn. In some ways this is his most ambitious keyboard work, perhaps inspired by his admiration of Beethoven. The range of moods encompassed is enormous, and Agranovich slights none of them. Her performance has passion, humor, beauty, and above all, deep conviction.

The recorded sound of her Steinway D is natural and full, and her program notes are illuminating. If you have not yet discovered Agranovich, this is as fine an introduction as any.

Henry Fogel

Five stars: A superlative recital of piano music by Mendelssohn