

MENDELSSOHN *Fantasia in f*, “Sonate écossaise,” op. 28. *Albumblatt in e*, “Lied ohne Worte,” op. 117. *Caprice in a*, op. 33/1. *Variations sérieuses*, op. 54. **3 Etudes**, op. 104b. **Etude in f**, WoO 1. *Rondo capriccioso in E*, op. 14 • Sophia Agranovich (pn) • CENTAUR 4038 (54:58)

Sophia Agranovich always surprises and never disappoints. For over a decade now, she has been building a very impressive discography centered around the three composers who, in their works for solo piano, defined and embodied the spirit and ideals of the musical Romantic—Chopin, Schumann, and Liszt. And with two of their predecessors, Beethoven and Schubert, and two of their successors, Brahms and Scriabin, Agranovich has also given us a prelude and postlude to the musical Romantic.

She now turns her attention to Mendelssohn, a composer whose Romantic stirrings were tempered by his well-born, well-bred, socially proper upbringing that leaned conservative and Classical. His technical virtuosity at the keyboard was second to none, yet the solo piano music he wrote lacked two essential ingredients of the Romantic ethos: the demonic, as in Liszt, and the fantastic—i.e., the extra-musical conjuring of imaginary characters and scenes—as in Schumann.

No one wrote melodies more mellifluous or harmonies more harmonious than Mendelssohn, but his pieces for solo piano have a *toccata*-like feel to them. I use the word in its formal sense of “being the action of touching” in a piece of keyboard music, “featuring fast-moving, lightly fingered or otherwise virtuosic passages or sections.” It’s the lightness of touch and fast-moving notes—lots of them—that give the impression of skimming over the keys. It teases and pleases the ear no end as it scurries by, and it’s all very beautiful in an abstract, not necessarily emotionally engaging way, and therein lies a bit of an irony.

By all accounts, Mendelssohn was an extraordinarily accomplished pianist, and his output of music for solo piano is far from negligible. Even if you don’t count the eight volumes consisting of six numbers each of the composer’s *Songs Without Words*, there’s still much else to occupy the pianist and the listener. During his lifetime, these pieces had an important role in establishing Mendelssohn’s reputation, as more and more people were finding the financial means to afford their own pianos and talented amateurs were able to master pieces by Mendelssohn and other composers at home. The more difficult, virtuosic showpieces were performed too by professionals taking the music into the salons and larger venues.

Today, that culture no longer exists, and the solo piano pieces that contributed in no small way to Mendelssohn’s popularity and fame are now not as familiar as they once were and are confined almost exclusively to recordings. Occasionally, one or another of the bigger numbers, such as the *Variations sérieuses*, will find its way onto a concert program, but it’s rare. Mendelssohn continues to be as famous and popular as ever, but now it’s for his orchestral works—the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* music, the “Scottish” and “Italian Symphonies,” the *Hebrides* (aka *Fingal’s Cave*) Overture, the Piano Concerto No. 1, and the Violin Concerto—a couple of his chamber works—the string Octet and Piano Trio No. 1—and once in a great while, an enterprising conductor, orchestra, and chorus will snag the needed vocal soloists and mount a performance of *Elijah* or even *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*.

Sophia Agranovich has here chosen a cross-section of works of varying sizes and types, and dating from different periods in the composer’s life. She begins with the *Fantasia in F* Minor, alternately titled “Sonate écossaise” (Scottish). As you probably guessed from the title, it was composed in 1828–29 during Mendelssohn’s walking tour of Scotland, his visit to Holyrood

Castle that inspired his “Scottish” Symphony, and his sea voyage to the island of Staffa in the Hebrides that inspired his famous overture.

In 1833, Mendelssohn revised the Fantasia, in the course of which he dropped the “Sonate écossaise” alternate title. R. Larry Todd’s album note to Nikolai Demidenko’s recording of the piece on Hyperion makes the interesting observation that Mendelssohn may have been trying to combine elements of fantasia and sonata in the same way Beethoven had in his “Moonlight” Sonata, qualified by the designation, *quasi una fantasia*.

Reading Mendelssohn’s own account of how desperately seasick he was on his boat trip to Staffa, I couldn’t help but find the tempo marking that he gave the first movement of the Fantasia: *Con moto agitato*. And listening to the tumultuous tossing of the music, I couldn’t help but picture Mendelssohn repeatedly rushing to the railing.

There’s no slow movement to this fantasy-sonata or sonata-fantasy. The second movement is marked *Allegro con moto*, and the finale is marked *Presto*, which reminded me of Aaron Copland’s discussion of tempo vs. harmonic rhythm, in which he observed that “all of Mendelssohn’s slow music is fast music played slow.” And to that, I would add, when you can even find a movement with a slow tempo marking.

In the 17 variations plus coda of the *Variations sérieuse*, for example, which Agranovich plays masterfully on the disc, eight of the numbers have tempos ranging from *Allegro vivace*, to *Agitato*, to *Con fuoco*, to *Presto*. “Well,” you might say, “but that leaves 10 numbers that could have slow tempo markings.” Except that three of the variations have no tempo marking at all, and only one of them, No. 14, has a true slow tempo of *Adagio* assigned to it. The entire set of 17 variations, plus the initial theme and concluding coda, are over and done in 11 and half minutes. Do the math. It averages out to 58 seconds per number.

Next, take a look at the Three Etudes, op. 104b: *Presto sempre*, *Allegro con moto*, and *Allegro vivace*. And then there’s the Etude in F Minor, WoO 1: *Presto agitato*.

Sophia Agranovich is unfazed by any of it. Her fingers move so fast they’re probably a visual blur, but there’s no audible blur in her playing. Every note of every sweeping arpeggio across the keyboard and every note of every run is perfectly weighted and clear as a bell. This is remarkable playing, and despite my fun-making of Mendelssohn having ants in his pants—listen to the second Etude in F Major from the Three Etudes, op. 104b—there’s some really gorgeous music on this disc. The *Rondo Capriccioso* in E Major, with which Agranovich ends her program, takes a page out of Chopin for its opening statement, but Mendelssohn can’t resist the temptation to take Chopin on a magical tour of his forest of elves, faeries, and leprechauns.

For me, personally, the single most gorgeous piece in Agranovich’s recital is the first of the Three Etudes, op. 104b, the one in B Minor. Here Mendelssohn seems to have taken a page out of the G Major Impromptu by Schubert—a song without words in which a sustained lyrical melody is supported by running arpeggios. But looking at the score, I can see that Mendelssohn took a different technical approach in his Etude. The sextuplet arpeggios are on top of the melody, in the treble (right hand), instead of below it in the bass, and the left hand, after marking the beginning and midpoint of each bar with a bass note, then has to cross into the treble clef to play the quarter notes of the melody. It’s not possible for the right hand to play the arpeggio sextuplets and the melody notes because the distance between the melody notes and the top notes of the arpeggios is over two octaves, and I don’t think any pianist has a stretch than can span that distance.

Now that I’ve seen how it’s done, I have an even greater appreciation for Sophia Agranovich’s ease of execution and shimmering beauty of tone. Played with consummate

technical skill and artistry, this well-chosen program of Mendelssohn's solo piano pieces can be unreservedly recommended to all audiences. **Jerry Dubins**

Five stars: Mendelssohn proves that music doesn't have to be slow to be beautiful