

Exploring the Magic of Mendelssohn with Sophia Agranovich

When I first spoke with pianist Sophia Agranovich, she had just returned from performing in Italy at the Teatro di Marcelllo, an acoustically astounding remnant of an ancient amphitheater, just one among her many ongoing concert appearances around the world. Those who haven't had the pleasure of hearing her "live" can get a taste of her captivating musicality by listening to any of the CDs she's released on the average of one per year since 2010, including two singles. She's been a frequent visitor to *Fanfare*, offering illuminating commentary on her recordings of Liszt, Chopin, Brahms, and more; sharing her unusual biography, including her 23-year hiatus from music while working in the IT world as a system manager; and propounding the artistic legacy and philosophy she hopes to perpetuate to interviewers Jacqueline Kharouf, Jerry Dubins, Colin Clarke, and Maria Nockin. By preference an exponent of Romantic music, although not neglectful of older or contemporary genres, she's now turned her attention to Felix Mendelssohn.

Why did you decide to devote a CD to Mendelssohn at this point in your career?

I have always enjoyed Mendelssohn's music, but a couple of years ago it grabbed me by its sincere expressivity, heart-melting spontaneously flowing melodies, and fiery passion of Romanticism—all perfectly balanced in the Classical tradition. My thoughts and emotions had fused with the spirit of Mendelssohn's sonic sphere.

How would you distinguish him from other Romantic pianist/composers whose works you have recorded?

I would like to quote Schumann, who wrote of Mendelssohn that he was "the Mozart of the nineteenth century, the most brilliant musician, the one who most clearly sees through the contradictions of the age and for the first time reconciles them." Beauty, love of life, kindness, optimism, and even light humor permeate Mendelssohn's compositions, balancing his expression of tragedy, deep drama, and despair. Mendelssohn's grandfather was the renowned Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, the model for Lessing's Nathan the Wise—an embodiment of tolerance in the intolerant world. I think Felix had inherited that philosophical view of the world, which makes his music special.

How do you react to the following?:

“In Jonathan Cott’s interview with Gould published as Conversations with Glenn Gould, Gould says the following:

GG: But I do find it difficult to muster any enthusiasm for the early Romantics. Schumann, for example, is a composer with whom I have very little patience, though Mendelssohn, on the other hand, especially when he’s not writing for the piano, appeals to me enormously.

JC: But then, Mendelssohn was probably the most disciplined and classically oriented of the early Romantics.

GG: Exactly. (p. 66)”

I agree that Mendelssohn was the most disciplined and classically oriented of the early Romantics. But I do love his piano pieces: They have orchestral elements as well as beautifully shaped “singing” melodies. And I adore Schumann and other early Romantics!

Any thoughts on Mendelssohn’s multiple musical personalities as expressed in the piano pieces: melancholy or serious, lyrical and melodic, or “elfin,” as in the Rondo capriccioso?

Mendelssohn’s works possess a rainbow of emotions and nuances. I also find his music very intellectual. All of it reflects his personality. Mendelssohn, in my opinion, was intelligent, sensitive, and altruistic. We know that he was very well educated and traveled much, learning about people and cultures. All of it is evident in his input to the musical world.

Why did you choose these particular pieces to record?

I chose masterpieces for this album that are not often recorded, and most of them are rarely performed live. They demand virtuosic technique of the highest order, and at the same time are deeply emotional. They mesmerize by their tremendous variety of emotions, sound textures, and coloration, ranging from poetic intimacy and serene meditation to tragedy and overwhelming drama.

Would you like to record more Mendelssohn? Perhaps more of the Songs Without Words?

I would love to record all of his works, but not the *Songs Without Words*—too many pianists play them, including my students, and there are too many recordings of them.

Have you played the Concertos?

Yes, the Concerto in G Minor. But at that time it was not one of my favorites; I preferred Schumann and Rachmaninoff.

To wander away from Mendelssohn for a moment, as a former IT professional you spent a great deal of time working with computers. In your opinion, is there any correspondence between music and programming?

Music is mathematical (just look at Bach's works, for example) and computer programming is creative! The common opinion in the IT world as I knew it is that musicians make good programmers. I agree, and having the Juilliard School on my IT resume was a big plus, believe it or not!

What do you think of Artificial Intelligence being applied to music?

We should not be afraid of technology, but be careful how to deal with it. AI can be a very useful tool, depending on the intentions of its users. Artificiality of the final result is what should be avoided. Actually, I am very interested in AI and its application to music and the arts in general. The first time I heard AI-generated music in the style of Bach was back in 2005. It was surreal but lacked some warmth. I realized that technology is moving forward very fast, and pretty soon we will have much superior music created by AI. So I waited until now to start exploring the possibilities.

Any plans for future recordings?

Lots of plans! As Rachmaninoff said, "Music is enough for a lifetime, but a lifetime is not enough for music."

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