

↓ **SCHUMANN Piano Sonata No. 2 in g. Symphonic Etudes, op. 13 (rev). Arabeske in C, op. 18. Papillons, op. 2** • Sophia Agranovich (pn) • CENTAUR 4186 (68:17)  
Reviewed from a WAV download: 44.1 kHz/16-bit

With this, her latest album, titled *A Reverie of the Soul*, Sophia Agranovich continues her journey through the solo piano works of Robert Schumann, a voyage that had already taken her to the landmark sites of *Carnaval*, the *Fantasie* in C, the Symphonic Etudes of op. 13, and in part, *Myrthen* and *Faschingsschwank aus Wien*. To her itinerary, she has now added Schumann's Second Piano Sonata, the *Arabeske*, and *Papillons*, and, significantly, a revisit to the Symphonic Etudes. While I'm not privy to whether this augurs a longer-range project to record an even larger survey of Schumann's major works for solo piano—such as *Kinderszenen*, *Kreisleriana*, *Davidsbündlertänze*, *Waldszenen*, and two remaining piano sonatas—I can hardly be blamed for hoping so, given the impeccable musicianship and beauty of Agranovich's playing.

Sophia Agranovich is hardly in need of introduction. She has appeared often in these pages and has established her credentials as a contemporary pianist who embodies the values and virtues of the Romantic period's golden age of great piano virtuosos. Technique and daring are only half of the equation; the other half is the ability to draw an audience into her music-making and hold the listener rapt through a seemingly incompatible symbiosis at once personal and intimate, yet at the same time universal. Agranovich, I believe is such an artist.

Let me deal first with her second take on Schumann's Symphonic Etudes, which is a do-over of the work she included on Centaur's 3367. The earlier version was recorded in October, 2014. This new one on Centaur's 4186 was recorded in April, 2025. Although Schumann's op. 13 underwent a bit of a winding road on the way to its final destination, Agranovich plays the same 1861 version which restores Variations III and IX that were included in the 1837 publication and then dropped from the revised edition that came out in 1852. Upon being revised again in 1861, a third version appeared, now with the two previously cut variations restored. That wasn't quite the end of it. Brahms then added five more variations that had been part of Schumann's earliest blueprint for the work.

For her remake of the Symphonic Etudes, Agranovich opts once again for the standard 1861 version which includes the restored Variations III and IX. Track timings between her two performances are so close in most cases that they go unnoticed, but in at least one case, there's a real difference, suggesting that the pianist has rethought her interpretation and come to a deeper understanding of the music. Previously, in the Etude No. 5, she took a fairly leisurely stroll of 1:22 through the piece, taking the *Scherzando* marking to suggest a lighter-weight, playful, entertaining number. In this new recording, she takes it at a faster pace of 1:08, interpreting it as more of a true scherzo.

But there's more to Agranovich's new reading than timings. In more than one past review, I've remarked on how Schumann was essentially a miniaturist who built larger works through a process of accretion. In listening to Agranovich's Symphonic Etudes, a further thought occurred to me. In manner of style and content, of course, the music is completely different, but it struck me that Schumann's encrypting of extramusical references in the spellings of musical notes to represent characters real (e.g., Ernestine von Fricken) and imaginary (e.g., Florestan and Eusebius, isn't far removed from the 18th century's French school of clavacin composers, chief among which was François Couperin.

Whether Agranovich has made this connection or not I don't know, but her second traversal of Schumann's Symphonic Etudes suggests a more integrated performance of the work

than her previous one. The individual variations now feel more unified into a logical progression as opposed to a sequence of pieces that can be randomized in varying orders. This is how Schumann arranges the individual bricks that become mortared together to form a sturdy and grand edifice. In her new reading of the work, Agranovich displays a deeper insight into and appreciation of Schumann's grand design.

The *Arabeske*, op. 18 (1839), is one of Schumann's longer short standalone pieces. Its title suggests the ornate and intricate mosaics seen in the obelisks and mosques of Islamic culture. But the title is more fanciful than descriptive of the music. In a five-part rondo form (ABACA), the *Arabeske* is most often associated with Schumann's temporary separation from and longing for his beloved Clara during his sojourn in Vienna. There's a feeling of wistfulness in the rondo theme (the recurring A sections), interrupted by the stormier B and C sections.

Vienna turned out to be a disappointment for Schumann who was not particularly well-received by audiences there, and to add to his lack of professional success, his anxieties concerning Clara were further intensified by her father's strenuous opposition to his daughter's relationship with a young composer whose future success, at that point, was far from guaranteed. Those contrasting emotions—the lovelorn Schumann, away in Vienna, pining for Clara, and his angst over the prospects for their future happiness together make up the material that expressed itself in the *Arabeske* and fused itself into a perfect musical form. Agranovich transitions seamlessly between the two contrasting emotional states.

I have a special affection and fondness for Schumann's *Arabeske*. I think it's because a piano major student in one of my college music classes was learning it, and I heard its strains coming from her practice room every day. It wasn't the first piece by Schumann I'd ever heard, but at the time, it was the one I couldn't get out of my head. It was beautiful then, and in the hands of Agranovich, it's even more beautiful now.

Not so short is Schumann's *Papillons*, op. 2 (Butterflies), composed in 1831, eight years earlier than *Arabeske*, when the composer was only 21. *Papillons* is a perfect example of what I was describing above as Schumann's method of assembling the smaller building blocks that eventually coalesce into a whole that's greater than the sum of its parts. This was his M.O. in many of his most popular and beloved solo piano works, the aforementioned *Kinderszenen*, *Kreisleriana*, *Davidsbündlertänze* among them.

Once again, the title is more fanciful than it is descriptive of the music, which, in this case, is actually a suite of dances. Perhaps the might have suggested a delicate feather fluttering hither and thither through the air, or perhaps it suggested the translucent kaleidoscope of colors seen in a butterfly's wings that gave the work its name, but the forensics of *Papillons* are not indicative of the so-called "Butterfly Effect."

A six-bar introduction is followed by 12 numbers: Nos. 1 through 10 are waltzes, No. 11 is a Polonaise, and No. 12 is a finale, which in cyclic fashion, recaps the theme from the first waltz. The work is said to represent a masked ball—I suppose one could correlate the colorful masks and variegated disguises as "butterfly-like"—but inspiration for the work was Jean Paul Richter's novel, *Flegeljahre (Adolescence)* (1804–05), which is sometimes confused with Henry James's novel, *The Awkward Age* (1899). Obviously, Schumann could not have been inspired by the latter, since it was written 43 years after his death.

Whether the piece evokes butterflies for you or not, I can tell you that Agranovich's performance definitely takes wing.

It's no secret that Schumann, not unlike Schubert, struggled with large forms based on Classical sonata-allegro principles. It took him four years, from 1830 to 1834 to complete his

Sonata in G Minor, op. 22, and even then, he wasn't done with it. At Clara's request, he replaced the finale with a less difficult one. It wasn't that she was incapable of playing the original finale, but she felt that its complexities would go over the audience's heads. I'm not sure if Schumann's new finale, replacing the original *Presto passionato* with a Rondo marked *Presto possibile*, *Prestissimo*, *quasi cadenza* made matters better or worse. Revisions aren't always synonymous with improvements.

Anyway, publication of the sonata was delayed until 1839, thereby resulting in it being assigned a later opus number (22) than his Third Sonata in F Minor, op. 14, composed and published in 1836, three years before publication of the G-Minor Sonata. But as late as 1853, Schumann revised the F-Minor Sonata as well, leading to further mischief with the numbering of the Second and Third Sonatas.

Of the three works that carry the title sonata, this one in G Minor (now No. 2) is the most often performed "live" and recorded. At just over 18 and half minutes (in Agranovich's performance), it's not an overlong work for a four-movement sonata of the period, but it's rich in melody, Romantic ardor, and the sort of virtuosic bravado that listeners love. There's no question but that the G-Minor is the most successful of the composer's three efforts in the medium.

There's also no question but that Sophia Agranovich is a master (or should I say, mistress?) of Schumann's domain. Her first movement is urgent, impetuous even, though not in a heedless, unthinking way—which is what the score's *So rasch wie möglich* (As quickly as possible) demands.

Her second movement, *Andantino*, a sweet, somewhat nostalgic idyll. Her Scherzo—*Sehr rasch und markiert* (Very quickly and *marked*—the German equivalent of the Italian *marcato*), emphatically articulated. And her finale—*Presto possibile*, *Prestissimo*—well, even if a pianist's fingers could race across the keys any faster than Agranovich's, I'm not sure the instrument's hammers could keep up. It may be near impossible to play the movement at the presto tempos Schumann imagined and indicated with making a blur of the sound, but Agranovich manages it muddle-free, and drives the concluding measures home with defiant force, as if to say, "There, it can be done and I've done it."

This is a Schumann recital to treasure. I just hope that Sophia Agranovich isn't done with Schumann's music. She has the technique, the touch, and just the right temperament for it. Very strongly recommended. **Jerry Dubins**

Five stars: Agranovich's Schumann is the way to get to know this music, and I mean *really* get to know it.