

SCHUMANN Sonata No. 2, op. 22. Symphonic Etudes, op. 13 (1861 version). Arabeske, op. 18. Papillons, op. 2 • Sophia Agranovich (pn) • CENTAUR 4179 (68:17) reviewed from a WAV download: 44.1 kHz/16-bit

By my count, this is Sophia Agranovich's twelfth album. Each has revealed a virtuoso of uncommon technical accomplishment and a unique interpretive perspective. Many earlier releases have been reviewed here and critics have been unanimous in their positive reactions, a fairly uncommon situation, given *Fanfare's* diverse stable of personalities. It is safe to say that Agranovich is a high energy player who displays great intensity and is able to balance local detail with the long line to a degree fairly rare among contemporary pianists. Local rubato is applied generously, but a large-scale piece like the Symphonic Variations also reveals a carefully plotted overall narrative.

Agranovich chooses the 1861 version of the Symphonic Etudes—the one prepared by Friedrich Wieck that restores the two pieces that Schumann discarded in earlier publications, but skips the 5 etudes later restored by Brahms in his edition. This is often thought to be one of the most difficult to play of Schumann's piano works, but one would never guess that here; Agranovich is in complete control at all times. The theme is handled with great sensitivity. The fast sections, such as Variation 1 and Etude 3, feature superb clarity and crisp articulation. Variation 4 has a wonderfully light touch. Not all is powerful extroversion. Variation 9 really sings in its longer lines. The repetitious material in the Finale is nicely varied through control of dynamics and articulation.

The G-minor Sonata receives a highly-charged interpretation, emphasizing contrast in the opening movement through imaginative phrasing. This is again in evidence in the second movement; the central section is beautifully done. There are places where Agranovich is rather free in following Schumann's dynamic markings, but I did not find this problematic. In the Scherzo, the pianist emphasizes very short notes values, with staccatos exaggerated and some punchy accenting. Some might object. The Prestissimo Coda of the final movement is a real tour de force.

The lighter *Arabeske* demands a sensitive touch and a feel for detail and gets that here. Each local event is well characterized.

The early *Papillons* is a work in a similar vein. The playfulness and fantasy of the piece are brought to the fore with an impressively wide gradation of touch. Phrasing is highly flexible throughout; bar lines simply disappear.

This is great Schumann playing. It belongs in the company of interpreters like Richter, Nat, Perahia—name your favorites. The sound is a bit on the dry side, but with excellent clarity and deep bass. I was familiar with only a few of Agranovich's previous recordings. This one has encouraged me to seek out the rest. Highly recommended. **Michael Vaillancourt**

Five Stars: a superb new entry in Agranovich's expanding discography of Romantic masterworks.