

**SCHUMANN Piano Sonata No. 2 in g, op. 22. *Études Symphoniques*, op. 13. *Arabeske*, op. 18. *Papillons*, op. 2 • Sophia Agranovich (pn) • CENTAUR 4186 (68:17)**

This Schumann program is titled *A Reverie of the Soul*. It begins “as fast as possible” and ends with the fluttering of butterflies. Agranovich has a dozen CDs to her credit and more awards than imaginable, along with performances at most of the world’s major concert venues. Her Schumann is both brilliant and beautiful. Neither aspect is missing in these works composed over more than 30 years (1829-1861). This recital is well arranged and repays multiple hearings.

*Piano Sonata No. 2*, op. 22 in g is perhaps the most successful of Schumann’s three piano sonatas. At nearly 20 minutes it is the shortest and most concise. The opening movement is “*So rasch wie möglich*” (as fast as possible) and it is regularly noted that twice Schumann marked “noch schneller” (still faster) later in the movement. It is not always noted that the piano writing later in the movement allows for it to be played faster. In the final movement Schumann switches to Italian with the same direction: *Presto possibile* and *Prestissimo*. In my undergraduate years, a teacher played this sonata very well and remarked that the Finale was one of the most physically demanding things he had ever performed. I get all of the excitement from Agranovich and no sense of physical exertion (she might disagree here). This speaks to her incredible technical command of the keyboard.

The *Symphonic Etudes* occupied Schumann’s compositional efforts on and off from 1834 to 1861. Originally he wrote 18 Etudes, then reduced them to 12 for the first publication. Since the set is structured as a Theme and Variations with a grand Finale, subsequent versions numbered the Etudes as Variations. Brahms published 5 “posthumous” variations omitted from earlier published versions in the 1890s. Agranovich plays the 1852 version, revised in 1861 to include Etudes III and IX from the 1837 version. This makes for a Theme followed by 12 Etudes. The Etudes correspond to Variations 1-9 with a Finale and the two inserted Etudes: III between Variations 2 and 3, and IX between 7 and 8. Hopefully I have confused everyone about a work that in one form or another stands near the pinnacle of Romantic piano literature. Agranovich offers an outstanding performance.

The *Arabeske* (also spelled *Arabesque*) is the shortest work on the program at 8 minutes. Agranovich plays this beautiful rondo with a sense of “intimacy and emotional depth” as she writes in her excellent program notes. *Papillons*, from 1831 finishes up the recital with an early masterpiece from Schumann’s 21<sup>st</sup> year. Inspired by a novel, the composer combines several dances of different moods for the masked ball, ending with the clock tolling and the music fading into silence. I have never heard this work played with as much imagination as here.

Many, many Schumann piano recitals are in my library and it seems that more appear for nearly every issue. This one is special and will remain in my active listening stack for some time to come. **James Harrington**

Five stars: world-class performances of several of Schumann’s greatest piano works.