



Sergei Prokofiev: Violin Concertos

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There is one thing I like a lot in her performance of the First Concerto. The opening pages are filled with a sense of shimmering and shivering expectation. The effect is shadowy and spectral, as Pietsch and conductor Măcelaru trace the music's textures in a crepuscular chiaroscuro. But things start to come unglued as the tempo picks up around rehearsal letter 4 (from approximately 1:53 on). Pietsch gets ahead of the beat. She wants to go faster than Măcelaru does, so that soloist and orchestra lose the synchronicity that made the opening so magical.

The Scherzo is a near disaster. Mid-way through the movement, where Pietsch begins slithering up and down across the strings, she goes so off pitch it isn't funny. At other points, her tone isn't up to penetrating through the orchestra, leaving her overwhelmed, and us, the listeners, with the impression that technically she isn't quite up to the task.

As the third movement gets under way, Pietsch recaptures her composure and, with Măcelaru and the orchestra, she catches the tenebrous tone and textures heard at the beginning of the first movement, but it comes at the expense of an unusually slow tempo. In the end, my sense is that in the melodic passages, Pietsch emotes to excess with too much portamento, too many notes stretched or shortened in metric value to italicize a point, and more tempo fluctuations than the score calls for. These were the exact same criticisms I had of her playing in Tchaikovsky's Piano Trio with

the Testore Trio. Apparently she has not broken those habits. In the technically difficult passages—which are many, but especially in the Scherzo—I wonder, really, if she has all the notes firmly under her fingers.

When it comes to Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 2, I'm not sure I'd warm to anyone's performance of it. As I've said before—and I make no bones about it—I just don't like the piece. I find it hard-toned, steely, grating, caustic, and industriously unbeautiful. That's my subjective reaction to the piece. My objective reaction to Pietsch's performance is that she subjects the violin part to the same Romanticized exaggerations she does in the First Concerto. Just listen to her opening phrases. Within the first six or seven notes, we have an unwritten and uncalled for portamento, dynamic swells and attenuations, and rubato-like shortening of one note to elongate the length of another. Disregarding the tempo fluctuations within the prevailing tempo, the first movement is slow enough to raise questions, once again, about Pietsch's technical chops. She takes 11:28 to get through it, compared to Heifetz's 9:02. That's a significant difference in a movement of this length. The differential in the second movement is even more shocking: Pietsch, 10:11; Heifetz, 7:59. The only way to draw the movement out to the length Pietsch does is to make a schmaltz-fest of it. Surprisingly, in the fandango-flavored finale—the movement I find the most grinding and grating—she is quite close to Heifetz: Pietsch, 6:32; Heifetz, 6:11. The funny thing is that as much as this movement is like fingernails on chalkboard to me, I think this is Pietsch's shining moment. She seems really electrified by this danse macabre, playing it with the frenzied euphoria of Strauss's murderous Elektra dancing until she drops dead.

Among more recent releases that offer both concertos, I think I'd stick with James Ehnes. His readings are characterful and poised, and he is supported by one of the finest up and coming conductors on the scene, Giandrea Noseda, leading the BBC Philharmonic, and a Chandos recording that provides possibly the most detailed and illuminating window into these works I've heard.

Download Review by Jerry Dubins

PROKOFIEV Violin Concertos Nos. 1 and 2 • Franziska Pietsch (vn); Cristian Măcelaru, cond; Deutsches SO Berlin • AUDITE 97.733 (Download: 49:51) Reviewed from a WAV download: 44.1 kHz/16-bit

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