



Robert Schumann: Complete Symphonic Works

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The Schumann Violin Concerto, rejected in his lifetime by its dedicatee, Joseph Joachim, and suppressed after his death by his wife Clara and devoted friend Brahms, is somehow entering its shining hour. “Somehow” refers to the considerable obstacles inherent in the score, which are open today to the same criticism it originally received from Joachim, who considered it the inferior product of an unstable mind. The music can be faulted as uninspired in its melodies, repetitive, disorganized in development, and feebly or incompetently orchestrated. Not many works can resurface after such a blanket condemnation, but advocates for late Schumann argue that he has unique intentions in mind, even as that mind became erratic. The argument isn’t worth entering, however, when confronted by a beautiful, intimately personal reading of the kind delivered by Isabelle Faust (Harmonia Mundi), backed by period-style accompaniment that edges Schumann into a different sound world from what we’re used to (reviewed in Fanfare 39:2).

As a non-fan of the Violin Concerto, I can hardly credit that I am even more enthusiastic about this new release in Heinz Holliger’s ongoing Schumann orchestral cycle, of which this is Volume 4, with the extraordinary violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja as soloist. In its daring departures from convention their reading surpasses Faust’s in fascination. To begin with, Kopatchinskaja, who was born in the former Soviet republic of Moldavia in 1977, has assumed the mantle of the late Lydia Mordkovich for fierceness of attack and courageous nonconformity. Her timbre here is almost never consistent within a phrase or even beautiful. The tone whistles, whines, and scrapes as often as it sings, all in service of an interpretation that takes not a single note for granted. I associate this kind of keenly felt violin playing with Leila Josefowicz and more recently the young Norwegian phenom Vilde Frang. But Kopatchinskaja is the only violinist who has the ferocity to frighten me—I found her extreme interpretation of the Prokofiev Violin Concerto No. 2 and the Stravinsky Violin Concerto with Vladimir Jurowski from 2013 (Naïve) almost too unsettling to listen to. But it and her other releases, especially a disc of violin concertos by Eötvös, Bartók, and Ligeti on the same label, have been rapturously received, or at the very least caused heads to turn. The same is certainly true here.

The Schumann Piano Concerto exists at the opposite end of universal love and admiration, which makes things difficult for a relative unknown like Hungarian pianist Dénes Várjon—he won’t be unknown to those who have heard his recordings on Naxos, ECM, Hyperion, Capriccio, and other labels (I seem to be out of the loop on this one). A graduate of the Liszt Academy in Budapest, where he now teaches, Várjon has recorded Holliger’s music under the composer, so I assume a close musical affinity. Here they collaborate to produce a reading of the A-Minor Concerto that I’d describe as streamlined but intense. Tempos and phrasing are not out of the ordinary. The total timing is about the same as for Jan Lisiecki’s recent DG recording

(reviewed in Fanfare 39:5), but where Lisiecki is poetic to the point of being subdued, Várjon puts his technique on extrovert display. Short of Martha Argerich's charismatic, rocket-fueled interpretations, this is one of the more engaging readings of the solo part that I've heard, even if the finale loses oomph after a while.

Heinz Holliger has focused his Schumann cycle on making us hear the music without prejudice and absent the traditional Schumann Romantic sound. His starkness in the Violin Concerto succeeds remarkably well, although the orchestral part in the Piano Concerto feels a little abrupt and dry at times. At 77 he's very much a force to be reckoned with. Holliger's transition from superstar oboist to composer and conductor has worked on all counts, although here he doesn't make the WDR Symphony sound better than workmanlike. That hardly matters, nor does the good but not exceptional recorded sound. It's Kopatchinskaja's highly original playing that wins the day.

