



Robert Schumann: Fantasie op. 17, Kreisleriana op. 16 & Arabeske op. 18

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[Fanfare](#) (Steven E. Ritter - 01.11.2010)

Strange that only three years ago Audite issued another Schumann piano disc that also contained the marvelous Fantasy. Nicolas Bringuier was the pianist at the time, and his wonderful renditions propelled him onto my Want List for 2007. That recording is also Super Audio, and I was a little startled to see the same work turn up here in the same format by the same company. Whatever the reason, it does offer ample opportunity to make a direct one-to-one comparison. Japanese pianist Hideyo Harada has a warm, richly upholstered tone with a fine, easy touch that brings out the best of her instrument. Peter Burwasser was quite impressed by her Grieg Lyric Pieces (Fanfare 31:6, and I like them also), while Peter J. Rabinowitz in 32:5 seemed to appreciate her tonal qualities and the spectacular recording of Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky a little more than her playing, though he considers her far from negligible.

I find myself leaning toward Rabinowitz in this one; the sound is truly spectacular, even more vivid and present than on the Bringuier recording that I was so taken with in 2007. But interpretatively I have some problems with this issue. For one, it has to be the slowest Fantasy I have ever heard. Just putting it side-by-side with the Bringuier one sees that Harada is a full six and one-half minutes slower than her company cohort, spread fairly evenly over all three movements. I have always thought that Schumann played slowly could easily be made to sound like Liszt, and this is a prime example, especially in the rather harmonically divergent and offbeat first movement. The middle movement is rather impervious to slow-downs in general, but the last must have some connecting tissue to support it, and while I am able to simply sit back and indulge my senses in her lovely tone I cannot get over the frustration of the tempo wrecking the emotional moment.

There has been such a slew of excellent Kreislerianas recently that it is beginning to get tricky making judgments about the piece. Anyone with a technique can bring the thing off to a certain extent, and Harada has that; but again I detect a certain tendency to not only smell the roses but prune and fertilize them as well, and that dissolves some of the momentum even though the work is character-oriented per movement. As I have mentioned before, there is a subtle thread that connects even the most disparate of Schumann's separate pieces within one work, and if that thread is severed things become more difficult to comprehend.

This is not to say that these are uninteresting performances or badly played—far from it. But competitively more is needed. Harada does this in the Arabeske, one of the best versions I have heard. This time the propensity for microscopic examination does not get in the way, and her tone is simply stunning. But for the Fantasy I would stick with Richter, Hamelin, or the abovementioned Bringuier, while Kreisleriana fends better under Horowitz, Würtz, or Argerich.