



Richard Strauss & Dmitri Shostakovich: Sonatas for Violin & Piano

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A bold and brilliant pairing of violin sonatas by Strauss and Shostakovich

A new Audite release offers a thought-provoking coupling of violin sonatas by Richard Strauss and Dimitri Shostakovich, written respectively in the early summer and winter of the composers' lives. Strauss composed his Violin Sonata in E1 Major during the years 1887–88. Strauss, in his mid-20s, was then an assistant conductor at the Munich Opera. During this period, Strauss met and fell in love with soprano Pauline de Ahna, whom he would marry in 1894. Strauss's tone poem Aus Italien premiered in Munich in 1886. On November 11, 1889, Don Juan received its triumphant first performance in Weimar, conducted by the composer. From that point on, Strauss became recognized and celebrated as a master of narrative works, including orchestral tone poems, operas, and songs. The Strauss Violin Sonata, which premiered in Elberfeld on October 3, 1883, is, unlike the programmatic Aus Italien and Don Juan, absolute music. But the voice of the Strauss Violin Sonata is clearly that of the composer who would soon dazzle the world as one of the greatest musical storytellers (the vaulting theme of the finale is a sort of Don Juan meets Der Rosenkavalier). And it is a bold, youthful, and exuberant voice in the bargain.

By contrast (and it's difficult to imagine a more profound one), Shostakovich wrote his Violin Sonata, op. 134, dedicated to David Oistrakh, in 1968. Shostakovich was 62, and just four years away from his death, due to lung cancer. In addition to the hardships of surviving the Stalin era and the Nazis, Shostakovich had suffered a heart attack, as well as contracting a form of polio that ended his ability to play the piano, and even made putting notes to paper a difficult task. Is it any wonder that the Symphony No. 14, composed in 1969, is a setting of various poems about death, or that at the work's premiere, Shostakovich told the audience: "Death is in store for all of us and I for one do not see any good in the end of our lives. Death is terrifying. There is nothing beyond it." In the Shostakovich op. 134 Violin Sonata, an expansive opening movement, bleak in mood and spare in texture, yields to a brief scherzo, a danse macabre laden with violence and anger. The finale is a passacaglia in slow tempo, based upon a 12-tone theme. The movement is constructed as a grand arch, building to a fearsome climax before resolving to hushed resignation. A final cry of pain yields to the whispered closing measures.



Both sonatas receive superb performances from the duo of violinist Franziska Pietsch and pianist Josu de Solaun. The Strauss is played with arresting virtuosity, rich and vibrant tone, and imaginative and superbly executed flexibility of phrasing. This is a performance with a level of precision that can only be the product of meticulous preparation, but one that still sounds absolutely spontaneous. The musicians adopt a far more austere voice for the Shostakovich, but with no lack of the requisite power for the work's emotionally crushing moments. Once again, the level of execution is on the highest plane. In short, Pietsch and Solaun both highlight the stark contrasts between the two sonatas, and realize each work's individual greatness. These excellent performances are reproduced in marvelous, lifelike sound; impactful, but without any sense of artificial enhancement. Jose de Solaun's superb program notes—passionate, insightful, elegantly written, informative, and educational, but without a hint of pedantry—are a model of their kind, and a true asset to the project. This is not a recording designed for easy commercial success, but it deserves to be heard by the widest listenership possible. Highly recommended.





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Reviewed in the United States on February 21, 2020

Ken Meltzer, Fanfare magazine

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