



Karol Szymanowski & César Franck: Works for Violin & Piano

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There's an intensity and seriousness to the playing of German violinist Franziska Pietsch that makes her performances compelling. I was taken with the fierceness of her approach to Prokofiev's First Violin Sonata (enthusiastically reviewed in *Fanfare* 40:2), yet Pietsch can also make the violin "speak" in a wide range of expression, sometimes subtly shaded from note to note. In that regard she reminds me of Christian Tetzlaff, a musician I deeply admire, and now this new release of works by Szymanowski and Franck inclines me to believe in her even more.

For readers unfamiliar with Pietsch's career, here's a sketch from my earlier review. "She was born in East Germany, coddled and supported as a child star by the government, only to be oppressed for two years after her father escaped to the West in 1984. After her own emigration in 1986 and a peripatetic education that included studies with Dorothy DeLay at Juilliard, Pietsch has had a varied career as a concertmaster, touring soloist, and chamber music player. I first noticed her as a member of the accomplished Testore Trio, a group she helped found in Germany in 2000 and only recently left in 2015."

To start with the familiar work on the program first, the Franck Violin Sonata, presented as a wedding present to Ysaÿe in 1886, was hugely influential, in that it cemented the genre as a prestigious offering in Parisian musical salons throughout the late Romantic era. The sonata's cyclic form is typical of Franck, and he not only veered away from the tradition of using solo violin works merely as entertaining display pieces, but he also provided an equal partnership for the pianist. (Julia Fischer, who is proficient in both instruments, once commented that having played both parts in recital, she found the piano's contribution more interesting.)

There are plenty of elegant and suave recordings of this sonata, but Pietsch's isn't one of them. She subdues her intensity somewhat in the first movement, but it is unleashed in the second-movement Allegro, only to sink to a suspenseful quiet as the music unfolds. In 2015 there was a superb reading of the Franck Sonata by a stellar pair, Renaud Capuçon and Khatia Buniatishvili (Warner, reviewed in 38:4), and what shone in their performance—spontaneity, passion, and a wide variety of expression—is rivaled here. There are marked differences, though, such as the slower, almost meditative approach that Capuçon and Buniatishvili take in the first movement, her world-class technique in fast passages, and his rounded, lustrous tone. By comparison Pietsch and her pianist Detlev Eisinger, who also appeared on her two previous recital discs, are more urgent, raw, and at times powerful. At the same time, they display real inwardness in the third movement "Recitativo" and keep the sweet, salon-ready finale from sounding cloying. I'd place this performance

among the best if you value individuality of interpretation.

Karol Szymanowski was a stylistic chameleon, and even when he tethered a piece to underpinnings of Debussy, Ravel, or Scriabin he quickly took off on his own flights of fancy. His major and probably most original work for violin and piano is *Mythes*, a three-part suite from 1915 that interprets ancient Greek mythology in highly coloristic, harmonically free forms. The *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* hovers in the background as the music evokes the metamorphosis of *Aratheusa* into a fountain, *Narcissus* becoming enamored of his reflection in a pool, and a chase of woodland nymphs by the god *Pan*. But Debussy is more programmatic than anything here. As with Schumann, another highly literary composer, Szymanowski's references are oblique.

Of the few top readings I've heard, my standard has been a Melodiya recording of Sviatoslav Richter and Oleg Kagan made in concert from Warsaw in 1982 (released in good broadcast stereo by DOREMI). One can never argue against the excitement and authority of Richter, and the gifted young Kagan was a favorite partner. Yet Pietsch is dazzling in her imaginative ability to make Szymanowski's rhapsodic style come together as musical sense the ear can follow. She's bold and fearless even though this music is generally Impressionistic. The chain of trills in the third piece, "*Dyads and Pan*," mixed with slides and runs, conveys the mood of hysteria and wild abandon in this erotic chase. Suddenly the mood gives way to faint, whistling harmonics that Pietsch expresses with evocative mystery. In its beauty and drama, this reading goes a long way to revealing *Mythes* as the masterwork it is. The *Romance in D* that follows is like a vocalise for violin in the Romantic vein of endless yearning melody. It moves from gentle lyricism to passages of agitated passion, both of which Pietsch manages beautifully.

Franck and Szymanowski can be viewed as opposites in that one affirms every facet of Romanticism while the other is freeing himself from the same Romanticism through experimental harmonies, emotional ambiguousness, and a restless inability to find his place anywhere for long. But the works that Pietsch plays with such involvement and individuality are rhapsodically yearning at the core, not to mention ravishing to the ear. Since I listened to a streaming audio, I can't comment on the program notes or the packaging, but the recorded sound is clear and natural. Strongly recommended.