



Franz Schubert: Impromptus D. 935 & D. 899

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Schubert's lovely Impromptus are always a delight to hear, and each of these new recordings has given me pleasure, even though the first two are not special. For piece-by-piece comparison with these newcomers I chose two excellent recordings from my collection: Sheila Arnold (Cavi 8553336, J/A 2017) for the first set of four pieces and Maria Joao Pires (DG 457550, M/J 1998) for the second. Amandine Savary is a French pianist in her mid-30s who has recorded Bach toccatas and several discs of chamber music as a member of Trio Dali (none reviewed in these pages). Her playing is of textbook quality. There is little to criticize, but also little out of the ordinary. The interpretations are far from shallow; they are simply good, but not as compelling as Arnold and Pires. This is most strikingly evident in the third piece of the second set (the Theme and Variations), which makes the most varied demands on expression and which Pires plays magnificently. The booklet contains an excellent essay on the music but no biographical information. Thanks are given to Alfred Brendel, who perhaps did some coaching. The Turkish-German pianist Kemal Cem Yilmaz, who seems to be in his late 30s, takes a weightier approach in terms of both tempo and touch. His tempos are on the slow side, and forte passages are rather too forceful. He also occasionally changes tempo in a piece, most noticeably in the first of each set. These are solid and unmannered performances, but they are pedestrian compared to Arnold and Pires. The booklet has good notes on the music and a brief biography that mentions that Yilmaz earned his living for many years as a taxi driver while pursuing his music studies. He deserves our respect for that. This seems to be his first commercial recording. Khatia Buniatishvili, born in Georgia 32 years ago, is in a different category. She is already a high-profile artist with a busy career, much publicity (taking advantage of her striking good looks), and half a dozen previous recordings for Sony, three of which have been reviewed and praised highly in these pages (N/D 2011, M/A 2013, J/F 2015). Listening to her Schubert one can immediately tell why. Her command of keyboard, pedaling, and dynamics is superlative. Such outstanding pianism is perhaps more sophisticated than necessary for Schubert, who did not write for virtuosos and was not one. But Buniatishvili is also a tasteful and highly sensitive artist and remarkably unmannered despite considerable individuality. Her Impromptus are superb, played with a lovely touch and subtle dynamic differentiation. Buniatishvili also gives us Schubert's last sonata in a refined interpretation, but here she makes two controversial tempo choices. Perhaps inspired by Sviatoslav Richter's famous recordings, she plays the first theme very slowly but then speeds up considerably, only to return to the slow tempo when the theme recurs. She also takes the repeat, which makes I too long (20:34). Richter took even longer (24:16 on Brilliant 92229; 25:26 on Urania 121.316) because he more or less maintained the slow tempo he set at the beginning—at least he was consistent. Richter played II at the prescribed Andante sostenuto, which took him 9:20 (Brilliant) or 10:10 (Urania). Buniatishvili chooses an abnormally slow tempo for II, so that it lasts an unprecedented 14:32. That gives her an opportunity to

display her exceptional control at soft dynamic levels. Some will surely find her rendition mesmerizing, but I was not fully convinced. The tempo is just too slow, and it is certainly not what Schubert had in mind. The remaining two movements are at more conventional speeds. As an encore, Buniatishvili includes Liszt's transcription of the song 'Ständchen', played very beautifully. The presentation is most unusual. On the cover and on two additional photographs inside the booklet the gorgeous pianist, dressed in a sheer white gown and clutching a bouquet of baby's breath, reclines on the ground as if in the throes of death. Instead of a scholarly essay on the music and a biography there are two literary effusions of Buniatishvili called "Notes of a Feminist" and "Death and the Maiden". The first seems to be addressed to an unidentified male or perhaps to the male gender wholesale, but its relevance to the music is unclear. The second points out "a certain femininity and sensitivity in Schubert's works [that] are destined to die like a river, taking with it a white night dress" and then digresses into further feminist ruminations. At least there is a connection with the photographs, but unless those prose texts are to be considered poetry, licensed to be impenetrable, they seem pretentious piffle to me. At the same time I feel some admiration for this young woman who is determined to do things her own way and has persuaded Sony to let her go ahead.