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## FEATURE REVIEW by Jerry Dubins

## SCHUMANN *Fantasia in C*, op. 17. BRAHMS *Klavierstücke*, op. 118: No. 2, *Intermezzo in A*. LISZT *Sonata in b*, S 178 • Shorena Tsintsabazde (pn) • ARS 38 358 (SACD: 73:22)

The album at hand is titled *Dedication*, and beyond the title having other resonances and reciprocities throughout her recital, Shorena Tsintsabazde dedicates this program to her beloved father, Revaz Tsintsabazde. There are, however, additional connections between the album title and the works on this disc which will be revealed anon.

Just so there is no confusion, which may be understandably unavoidable, Shorena Tsintsabazde's previously released ARS album (38 303) sported the title *Klavier Romantik*, which also featured works by Schumann and Brahms, but on that release Chopin rather than Liszt made an appearance. The earlier album was released in 2019 and reviewed by Peter Rabinowitz in 44:3.

But these are not the only two entries in the *Fanfare* Archive for Shorena Tsintsabazde. Earlier still, in 2010, she recorded for Naxos two rarely heard piano concertos and a rhapsody by Sergei Lyapunov, with Dmitry Yablonsky and the Russian Philharmonic Orchestra, and that disc came to me for review in 34:5. I was already familiar with all three works from the exactly programmed recording by Hamish Milne with Martyn Brabbins conducting the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra on Volume 30 of Hyperion's *Romantic Piano Concerto* collection, a recording made eight years prior to Tsintsabazde's. Still, the music was dazzling and I was dazzled by Tsintsabazde's performances.

Now, I haven't heard her Schumann/Brahms/Chopin companion disc—the one Rabinowitz reviewed—so I can't say anything about it, least of all the piano she played for the earlier recording. But for this new recording, the piano is identified as a Bösendorfer, Model 280, "Vienna" concert grand, No. 122; and as one who is accustomed to the sound of modern Steinways, Faziolis, and Yamahas, I have to say that this new modern model in Bösendorfer's lineup of instruments is, for the most part, mighty impressive. A further note on this a bit later.

This is a studio-made recording, but it's organized as if it were a live recital. Two large, virtuosic works—Schumann's *Fantasia* at the beginning, and Liszt's *Sonata* at the end—are separated in the middle by a quiet, contemplative lull—Brahms's *A-Major Intermezzo*, op. 118/2—which functions as an intermission between the program's two acts main acts. Tsintsabazde's program makes perfect sense in another way as well. Schumann dedicated his *Fantasia* to Liszt, and reciprocally Liszt dedicated his *Sonata* to Schumann. And there you have further reason for the album's title, *Dedication*. Unintentionally, there's also a connection between Liszt's *Sonata* and Brahms, though it's more one of

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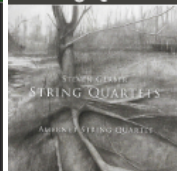
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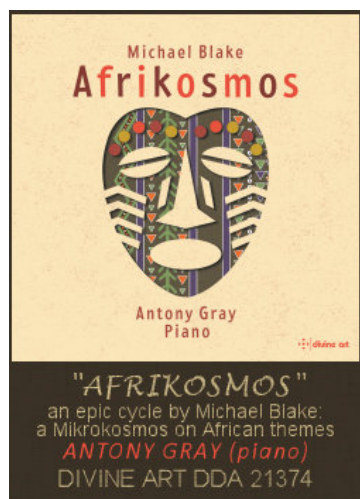
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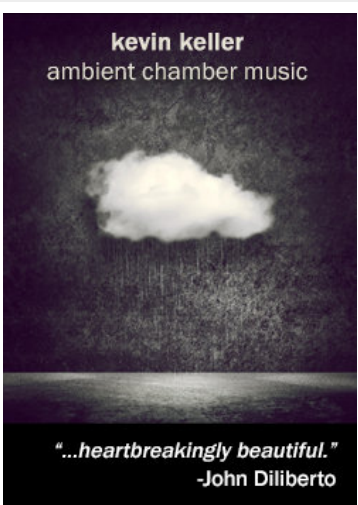
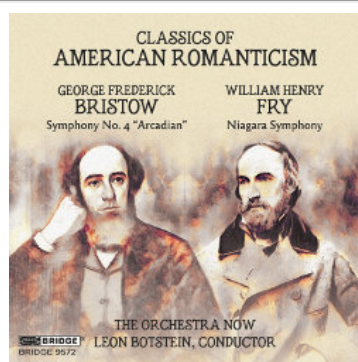
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disaffection than of dedication.

It is said that Schumann's *Fantasia* was one of the most technically difficult pieces of piano music up to that time. Liszt admired the work, marveled at its innovative ideas, and even played it for Schumann in private, but he never performed it in public. Schumann's widow, Clara, however, did take her deceased husband's *Fantasia* on the road, but not until 10 years after his death in 1856.

The technical terrors of the piece, whatever they are, slink away in shame at the indomitable presence of Shorena Tsintsabidze. The *Fantasia* is a work I associate with Horowitz, Argerich, Marc-André Hamelin, and Sophia Agranovich, powerhouse virtuosos all, who command the keyboard with the sort of iron grip that allows them the freedom to enter into Schumann's world, a world lightened by quirky flights of imagination, darkened by morose moods, and always touched by brilliant flashes of color and irresistible beauty. The consummate sweep of Tsintsabidze's dramatic and achingly expressive performance of Schumann's *Fantasia* is breathtaking.

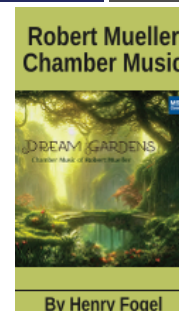
After the 32-and-a-half minutes-plus of its dizzying visions and emotional outpourings, we need Brahms's A-Major Intermezzo, the second number from his op. 118 set of Six Piano Pieces, to regain our breath and gird ourselves for the onslaught of Liszt's B-Minor Sonata. Among Brahms's sets of late piano pieces, the Intermezzo, op. 118/2 is one of the most peaceful and caressing. It's tinged with the reflective sadness that much of the composer's later works are, but this Intermezzo in particular has always struck me as having about it a tenderness that sorrows in quiet dignity. For me, that feeling really comes through in Tsintsabidze's reading—so beautiful.

Ever since first hearing the story told some time ago, it's hard for me to listen to Liszt's Sonata without forming the mental image of an apparently bored Brahms dozing off during a private performance of the piece given by Liszt himself. How could anyone, I wondered, snooze through such bombast and bluster? Needless to say, the episode didn't endear Brahms to Liszt. I suspect, though, that the hostility was mutual. Liszt, of course, along with Wagner, represented the "New German School," its aesthetic principles being antithetical to Brahms's adherence to the canons of Classical forms and norms.

It's in the Liszt that I have a reservation, but let me be clear, it's not about Tsintsabidze's performance, technical or otherwise. Rather, it's about the Bösendorfer or the recording of it. The instrument's bass is satisfyingly deep and tight, but in the mid-range I detect a sort of softness—I'd almost call it a squishiness in the core of the action—that doesn't affect dynamic amplitude, but gives the impression that the sound isn't firmly enough supported. It's a bit like when you're walking across a floor and your foot suddenly sinks a bit into what feel like a weak spot in the undergirding floorboard. It's not serious enough that you fear the floor is going to give way and you're going to fall through, but every time you feel it you wonder.

In the high treble range of the keyboard, too, the notes tend to go hollow in sound. Again, I can't know if this is the piano

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**Editorial**

**Is Fanfare Now the Magazine for Serious Musicians?**

By Joel Flegler

itself that's responsible or the recording, though I'd put my money on the latter because it's hard to believe that such a long-existing, famously-named, piano-building company, celebrated for its instruments since 1828, would engineer and produce a model with such faults. (Bösendorfer, by the way, is today a wholly owned subsidiary of the Yamaha Corporation.) Anyway, my suspicion for the acoustic anomalies I've noted fall on the recording. They do not affect the Schumann or the Brahms, but the recordings were made over a three-day period, December 5–7, 2022, so it's possible that the setup for the Liszt was different than it was for the Schumann and Brahms. I'm just speculating here. What I can say for sure is that the piano definitely sounds different in the Liszt than it does in the Schumann and Brahms. In any event, none of this has any bearing on Tsintsabadze's performance. She is every bit the master of Liszt's world as she is of Schumann's and Brahms's.

If you acquired the previously released album reviewed by Rabinowitz, you will definitely want this sequel to it. They complement each other nicely, the common denominators between them being Schumann and Brahms, with the earlier recording offering Chopin's *Andante spianato and Grande Polonaise brillante*, as an alternative to another work by Liszt. Between them, you have the four pillars of the post-Beethoven/post-Schubert composers of Romantic-period piano music. Very strongly recommended. **Jerry Dubins**

This article originally appeared in Issue 47:1 (Sept/Oct 2023) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

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