

ERNST Prophet Fantasy. 2 Nocturnes. Carnival of Venice. 2 Salon Pieces, op. 13. Variations on a German Theme. Rondo Papageno. ERNST-SCHUNKE Rondo on Themes from Oberon • Sherban Lupu (vn); Ian Hobson (pn) • TOCCATA 0118 (76:20)

Complete Music for Violin & Piano 1

Audio CD

TOCCATA

The violin playing in Toccata's first volume devoted to the music of violinist Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst (1812–65) provides only one element in a very enticing package. Mark Rowe, whose biography of the violinist Ashgate Press published in 2008, wrote the voluminous notes, and Toccata has announced its intention to publish the sheet music (almost all of Ernst's works have been difficult to obtain) for each of the pieces in all the CD programs, edited by Sherban Lupu, who performs them. In addition, the disc contains 43 tracks, and each of the variations in the sets has one of its own, so readers of the notes can easily go to the precise locations that Rowe mentions—and he mentions quite a few.

Will listeners feel that Ernst is worth it? Nicolò Paganini, Hector Berlioz, Franz Liszt, and Richard Wagner, to name only a few worthies cited in the notes, surely did. And anyone who has compared Ernst's Six Polyphonic Studies with Paganini's caprices may already have experienced a nagging doubt about whether those time-honored caprices really hold up musically in the light of what Ernst accomplished. Then again, compare Paganini's Variations on "God Save the King" (British patriotism) with Ernst's on "The Last Rose of Summer" (a corresponding bit of Irish green): The former sounds mechanically perfunctory; the latter, wistfully poetic (even discounting the title).

Lupu's program begins with Ernst's *Fantaisie brillante sur Le Prophète*, and it's clear from the very first measures that Lupu, even if he sprinkles the first section's introduction with almost jarring accents, has what seems to be great sympathy for the composer's pathetic style, in which sighing portamentos perfume even the simplest passages. It's also clear, especially in the second section, that he sometimes finds it difficult to make the running passages (somewhat similar to those that ornament Henri Wieniawski's works) flow smoothly and gets into some trouble in the most difficult sections of rushing

double-stops (who wouldn't?). Nonetheless, the overall effect is one of delicately tinted virtuosity, much the same impression the pieces themselves make.

The Two Nocturnes further develop the sensitive side of Ernst's musical nature, although Lupu plays the impassioned octaves of the second with commanding intensity and the elegant operatic air of the first with easy vocal grace. Paganini's Carnival of Venice may be one of his signature works; in fact, Ernst's 25 variations may have been inspired by Paganini's original, but they're even more genial and wittier (I remember watching Vadim Repin play Paganini's work with a nonchalant sense of humor—that sense seeps through every measure of Lupu's performance—and Ernst's work as well). Rowe suggests that Ernst had in his repertoire some hundred such variations—but these sound very much like, though perhaps more difficult than, identical numbers in Paganini's set. Violinists should want to acquire the sheet music as soon as it becomes available; it might lighten (if not elevate) the mood of a sober sonata recital.

The first of the Two Romances, *Adagio sentimentale*, sounds ardent in Lupu's performance and almost serves as a prelude to the second, a *Rondino grazioso*, to which Lupu imparts all the elegance the title suggests. The booklet identifies the *Thème Allemand Varié*, op. 9, as receiving its first recorded performance. According to the notes, the German theme had appeared in Ludwig van Beethoven's *Andante favori* and in a romance by Henri Vieuxtemps. Lupu encrusts the five variations, some of them, like the first, quite jaunty, with ear-popping technical wizardry. But there's something extra: a fiendishly difficult and dazzling piano part composed by Charles Schunke as his own op. 23 (composers of the period often produced such fare jointly, as in the operatic fantasies by Servais and Vieuxtemps, on Naxos 8.572188, *Fanfare* 33:6). Ernst's set of variations serves as a sort of center of buoyancy for the entire program. The collection concludes with the relatively frequently recorded *Rondo Papageno*, which, according to Rowe, bears similarities to the finale of Paganini's *First Concerto* (obvious) and Antonio Bazzini's *Ronde de Lutins* (less obvious but plausible), and Lupu sounds simply stunning in it.

Earlier collections, like Ruggiero Ricci's (with the *Polyphonic Studies* and "The Last Rose of Summer," *Dynamic* 28); Ingolf Turban's (a selection of the *Studies* and more frequently encountered numbers like Ernst's fantasies on *Otello*, the *Elegie* in C Minor, and the solo caprice on *Erlkönig*, on Claves 50-9613, *Fanfare* 20:6); and Ilya Gringolts's reading of the *Élégie*, the *Otello Fantasy*, the *studies*, and the *Erlkönig* (on Hyperion 67619, *Fanfare* 31:6) have stuck closer to the core of Ernst's repertoire. So despite the overlap of the *Rondo Papageno*, this collection makes available lots of new music in highly appealing and, where appropriate, highly entertaining performances. With its close and detailed recorded sound, its sympathetic collaboration between violinist and pianist, and its exploration of the music of a central figure in the history of violin playing (and, in the note, that figure himself), both specialists and

nonspecialists should find something of interest. Urgently recommended to all sorts of listeners. Robert Maxham