

SCHUMANN: Fantasia in C Major, Op. 17; Piano Sonata No. 1 in F-sharp Minor, Op. 11 – Jin Ju, piano – MDG9471681-6

Curious: the lesser work gets a fine performance from Jin Ju, while Schumann's greatest piano piece is a letdown.

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SCHUMANN: Fantasia in C Major, Op. 17; Piano Sonata No. 1 in F-sharp Minor, Op. 11 – Jin Ju, piano – MD&G multichannel SACD MDG 947 1681-6 (2+2+2), 68:23 [Distr. by E1] *:**

Both the *Fantasia* and *Sonata No. 1* represent Schumann's attempts to carry on the exploration and indeed explosion of sonata form found in Beethoven's late piano sonatas, bringing the Classical sonata fully into the Romantic era. In the *Fantasia*, Schumann created his greatest large-scale piano piece despite his chronic problems when working in large forms. Perhaps his success comes from the fact that he set out with the intention of crafting a greatly modified sonata—hence the title *Fantasia*. Just as with his *Piano Concerto* written about a decade later, the finest movement is the first, a free-ranging sonata-allegro; in fact, Schumann initially conceived the *Piano Concerto* as a one-movement fantasy. In both cases, convention dictated that other movements be added to the first, but in both cases the level of inspiration flagged.

The complete *Fantasia* was intended as a contribution to a fund-raising effort for a Beethoven memorial to be erected in Bonn on the sixty-fifth anniversary of composer's birth. Appropriately, the first movement quotes from Beethoven's song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte*—especially appropriate because Schumann spoke of it as a passionate lament for his own distant beloved, Clara Wieck, whose father had forbidden further contact with Schumann in 1836, the year of composition. The grand first theme announced over a shimmering, cascading accompaniment sounds like a cry from the heart, with increased poignancy each time it reappears. Instead of a secondary theme cast in the usual dominant, the second theme appears in F major, the subdominant, while the beginning of the development section is so understated as to be indeterminate. It's as though that initial passionate outcry overwhelms, subsumes, redefines form in the movement.

It's a hard act to follow, and indeed Schumann called the movements that he added later "weaker," though they are powerful enough on their own terms—a monumental march-scherzo and a dreamy, ruminative finale touched with a subtle pathos. Schumann initially gave the three movements titles—"Ruins," "Trophies," and "Palms"—but abandoned them when the work was finally published in 1839, with a dedication to Liszt.

The performance of Jin Ju, who teaches at the Central Conservatory in Beijing, seems to underscore the dreamy, "fantastic" element in the *Fantasia*. The timings of all three movements are markedly slower than those of just about every other recorded performance you can name. This emphasis has little impact on the discursive first movement, but for me, the second movement suffers. Instead of a breathtaking virtuoso set piece, the movement lumbers, especially in the coda, which sounds gangly to the point of awkwardness here. Some listeners may admire the extra emphasis Jin Ju gives to the gentle pensiveness of the finale. For me, there's a sense of Schumann's music winding down like a tired clock; I'm just not sold on the pianist's interpretation.

If Jin Ju seems to think that the *Fantasia* is mostly the inspiration of Eusebius, Schumann's day-dreamy alter ego, in her performance of the *First Sonata*, Florestan, the fiery extrovert, dominates. In this work, Schumann approached the problem of the sonata entirely the other way around: he creates a fairly standard Classical sonata with an overlay of typical Schumannesque Romantic gestures. The result is a lesser work, certainly. The last movement has been especially criticized for its episodic nature; Schumann repeats in rondo fashion two sections of greatly contrasting nature. Rather than an organic sonata movement, he creates an extended character piece like one of his *Novelletten*. Actually, the first movement is a fairly unexceptional sonata-allegro—not Schumann at his most inspired but fairly commanding. Yet the work as a whole fails to hang together and needs special advocacy, which Jin Ju manages to give it. Her performance is bold, impactive, large-scale, without any unneeded idling over details, making me regret that I can't find more positive to say about her interpretation of the *Fantasia*. MDG's SACD piano recording is characteristically big and beautiful but can't compensate for the letdown I feel over what should have been a memorable Schumann recital.

-- Lee Passarella