CD Review by Scott Noriega

SCHUMANN *Kreisleriana*, op. 16. *Faschingsschwank aus Wien*, op. 26. *Romanzen*, op. 28 • Maria Gabriella Mariani (pn) • DA VINCI 01069 (70:12)

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The pianism of Maria Gabriella Mariani is new to me. Though she plays quite a few old warhorses here—thankfully she plays all three of the Romanzen, op. 28, not just the second!—what she brings to them is a new way of hearing them, one filled not just with fluidity and charm, but with a lovely sense of freedom—as though she is composing the music on the spot. One hears this in the exquisite way she handles the Sehr inning und nicht zu rasch second movement of Kreisleriana. Each time the opening material comes back it is transformed: at first, more contemplative, the second time, a bit more impetuous. Throughout the recital her tone is glorious—rounded and particularly bell-like in the higher registers. The fifth movement's Sehr lebhaft is equally beguiling. From the moment Mariani begins one knows one is in for something special. Where I miss the aggressiveness of other pianists—Cortot or Horowitz—is in some of the faster sections such as the opening of the Äußerst bewegt, where the pianist here feels too down to earth, too controlled in passages where the hardest thing to do is just to let go and jump off the deep end. By the work's end, she seems to have done just that, but it has taken her some amount of time to get there.

If Mariani is at times hesitant in Kreisleriana, she is the opposite of this in the three Romanzen. Perhaps it has to do with her studying these most recently, but there is a freshness, a biting quality she brings to these works that not only befit their nature but benefit their outlay. The first bursts forth with not only energy but passion—one feels this in one's bones. The more famous second is performed mezza voce throughout, lending the work a special glow, a sense of yearning love. The third's quirkiness is downplayed by the pianist, but she does capture its sense of understated grandeur and the lovely sense of calm at the work's end. This perfectly sets up the recital's finale: the fabulous and virtuosic Faschingsschwank aus Wien. From the grandeur of the opening, the heartbreaking loneliness of the Romanze, the passion of the Intermezzo, or the culminative finale, Mariani plays her heart out here. Quibble? Naturally, yes. Why is the Scherzino played so quickly and with so little sense of joy? Just compare this performance with that of either Murray Perahia or Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli to see how they create contrast here with the surrounding movements.

That said—Mariani is quite the Schumannian. She brings passion, thoughtfulness, and real musicality to music which in lesser hands could sound simply frantic or—even worse—empty. And that Schumann is not.

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