**American Record Guide vol.3**

This is the third installment of a seven-volume set of all Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst’s (1812–65) violin music. Ernst was a follower of Paganini – literally. He first heard Paganini play in Vienna in 1828, cut his virtuosic teeth on the Paganini Caprices, and then followed Paganini from one place to another, even renting rooms next to him so that he could listen to Paganini practice (and learn his unpublished material by ear). After a fascinating career that included sharing rooms with Ole Bull and kudos from Robert Schumann, Ernst eventually became Paganini’s successor as the favored violin showman of the day.

A few of Ernst’s pieces have remained in print (and in the literature) since their first publication in the 19th Century, but most of the music in this volume (particularly the pieces recorded here for the first time) is only available by way of the original editions.

Lupu plays this difficult music with the flair of a gypsy and the discipline of a soldier. His sound varies from phrase to phrase: sometimes the vibrato is fast, and sometimes it’s slow; sometimes the sound is biting, and sometimes it’s airy. He often treats the lyrical passages (particularly the opera arias to be varied) the way a 19th Century tenor, with a desire to get his point across to the top seats in the balcony, might treat them. There is a generous helping of sentiment and an extra helping of affect, but the affect is appropriate under these circumstances. It does take a while to get used to some of the expressive excesses, like the ones in the *Elegie sur la mort d’un objet chéri* (with an introduction written by Louis Spohr), but they do balance out the virtuosic excesses in the rest of the music.

Some of these pieces have simple piano parts, the kind of writing that usually fades into the background. Ian Hobson plays the simple Schubertian arpeggios beautifully and offers a wonderful contrast to, and support for, the cascades of arpeggios, leaps, and bowing gymnastics that Lupu plays so brilliantly.

The pieces I like best are the ones that Ernst wrote in collaboration with pianists who could write as well for the piano as Ernst could for the violin. He wrote the artful and Schumannesque *Pensées* *Fugitives* with pianist Stephen Heller, and he wrote his *Souvenirs de l’Opéra La Juive* with the Irish pianist George Osborne. I particularly like the *Introduction, Variations, and Final on a Strauss Waltz*, Op. 26 that he wrote with Charles Shunke. Here Ian Hobson matches Lupu’s virtuosity brilliantly, and his always tasteful playing makes for a set of sprightly dialogs with Lupu, who seems to ‘dress up’ for the occasion by tempering his gypsy ways, somewhat.

The recording ends with a violin and piano version of the *Airs Hongrois Variés*, which is normally played as a concerto with orchestra. Lupu dons his gypsy garb once again, and Hobson offers a very orchestral-sounding piano accompaniment to Ernst’s mind-bending and finger-twisting high-wire gymnastics.

**Elaine Fine**