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Ernst

Complete Music for Violin and Piano, Volume 2.

Variations brillantes sur un thème de Rossini, Op. 4. Fantaisie brillante sur la Marche et la Romance d¹Otello de Rossini, Op. 11. Deux Romances, Op. 15. Boléro, Op. 16.

Ernst/Heller Pensées Fugitives, Part I.

Ernst/Schunke Souvenir du Pré aux Clercs.

Sherban Lupu (violin); Ian Hobson (piano).

Toccata Classics TOCC0138 (full price, 1 hour 20 minutes). Website www.toccataclassics.com Producer Samir Golescu. Engineer Frank Horger. Dates October 4th, 5th, 11th and 12th, 2010.

‘Ernst was the greatest violinist I ever heard – he became my ideal of a performer, even surpassing in many respects the ideal I had imagined for myself.’ This encomium to Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst (1812–65) attributed to Joseph Joachim and quoted in Andreas Moser’s authoritative book on violinists and the art of violin playing, Geschichte des Violinspiels (1923), attests to the massive influence of this celebrated virtuoso, one of a small cohort of fiddlers who could truly be said to have redefined his own art. Still, history saw to it that Ernst’s playing career was unfairly disadvantaged by the public’s insatiable and uncomprehending obsession with Paganini’s barn-storming theatrics and, as was ever the case, true artistry yielded to the tawdry and sensational; Ernst died in 1865 a lonely, disillusioned and obscure figure.

Until now, there’s been a dearth of Ernst on disc, with just a few landmark recordings like Aaron Rosand’s famous account (with the Luxembourg Radio Orchestra under Louis de Froment) of the spectacularly difficult Concerto in F sharp minor, Op. 23, preserving a niche for the great Moravian violinist/composer in the catalogues. There’s also Ilya Grubert’s creditable Naxos offering (Naxos 8.557565), which includes the Concertino in D, Op. 12, plus a smattering of other works, and one could also add Gringolts’s Hyperion disc (reviewed in March 2008), but most of Ernst’s characteristic smaller-scale pieces have been conspicuously absent from the listings for far too long.

Happily, that’s beginning to change. In May 2011 I gave an enthusiastic welcome to the first release in a new integral survey of Ernst’s music for violin and piano from the Romanian-born violinist Sherban Lupu, in whom Ernst’s music finds a dedicated and brilliant exponent. Lupu’s first foray into this repertoire came with a 1990 Continuum disc (CCD1017) entitled ‘Violon Diabolique’ (which also featured compositions by Wieniawski), but this comprehensive new survey on Toccata Classics (this is the second of a planned six) is set to be a major discographic landmark.

Two of Ernst’s Rossinian operatic fantasies top and tail this disc, beginning with the Fantaisie brillante, Op. 11. Written in 1837, shortly after Ernst’s violinistic ‘duel’ with Paganini in Marseille (the comparison with Liszt and Thalberg is obvious!), the work calls for extreme virtuosity and bravura of the highest order, and nowhere does Lupu falter, even momentarily, throughout this jaw-dropping account. The Op. 4 Variations date from around seven years earlier and are based on a melody from Rossini’s Zelmira. Predictably, every imaginable technical device is mercilessly exploited, and this performance meets every challenge head-on. While Lupu’s all-encompassing virtuosity is never at issue, his ability to vary the speed and intensity of his vibrato and subtle use of string crossings, expressive portamenti and finger-substitutions re-creates very accurately a performing style and approach which Ernst and his contemporaries would have instantly recognized.

Particularly fascinating here are two collaborative compositions, the first being the Grand Duo based on Hérold¹s last completed work, Le Pré aux Clercs, in which Ernst teamed up with the German-speaking Parisian pianist Charles Schunke (1801–39). For once, the piano has the greater share of bravura writing, and Ian Hobson revels in the outrageously taxing keyboard writing, while the partnership between both artists in the prodigiously difficult duo-cadenza (track 17) astounds. Pensées Fugitives, the result of another collaboration, this time with the Hungarian pianist Stephen Heller (1813-88), owes its existence to Ernst¹s personal altruism. Comprising 12 pieces in all, the first six of which are heard here, Ernst realized that Heller’s deep suspicion and mistrust of the public’s virtuoso obsession disadvantaged him and encouraged the young pianist to explore new avenues to commercial success in these studies, which are suggestive of Schumann’s Fantasiestücke, Op. 12. Thematically undistinguished and structurally weak, these miniatures are actually the least interesting pieces here, though this performance does its best by them.

If the repertoire here has been occasionally less memorable than was the case with the inaugural release in this valuable series, the eventual prospect of having Ernst’s entire output for these instruments available in performances of such high calibre and individuality more than compensates for any passing disappointments. Recorded sound is again closely focused, with the violin spotlit but never uncomfortably so. With engrossing insert notes by Mark Rowe, whose scholarly and thoroughgoing biography of Ernst was published in 2008, this project seems bound to gain in stature with each successive release: very highly recommended. Michael Jameson