

ROZSA: *Violin Concerto; Concerto for Strings; Theme, Variations & Finale*
Jennifer Pike, v; BBC Philharmonic/ Rumon Gamba

Chandos 10738—75 minutes

Here's a superbly played and recorded program of three rich, vibrant, romantic mid-20th Century scores. I was pleasantly surprised by this—but I really shouldn't have been. One of my favorite movie scores is Rozsa's for the 1961 film *El Cid*. Charleton Heston played the hero and was pretty candid about the quality of the script in his autobiography, saying it ranged from OK to "pretty crappy". That's a good assessment, but with Heston playing opposite Sophia Loren, Genevieve Page, Herbert Lom, and Raf Vallone, one doesn't notice the script much, especially with the other real star of the piece—Rozsa's music.

Like many of the classically trained European musicians who migrated to Hollywood in the 1930s and 40s, Rozsa continued to write "serious" symphonic music. Jascha Heifetz gave the premiere of the Violin Concerto in 1956, so it has something in common with Korngold's concerto. But Rozsa's music is so much more engaging! It's a moody work, too, with a restless first movement, brooding middle slow movement, and manic finale that has more than a little in common with the many action-adventure movie scores Rozsa wrote. But the work seems to have so much more depth than Korngold's.

The performance here simply makes the strongest possible case for the piece. Soloist Pike, Mr Gamba, and the BBC Philharmonic dig right in and give a firm, vibrant, committed performance. Chandos's reverberant acoustic serve the music well. Don't worry: you won't lose any of the detail of Rozsa's colorful orchestration or the fiendishly busy passages of the solo part.

The Concerto for String Orchestra was composed in 1943 and consists of three substantial movements (clocks in here at almost 24 minutes). The three-movement format begs comparison with Bartok's *Divertimento*; since Rozsa was Hungarian and only a generation younger than Bartok the works share a similar overall atmosphere and tonal language. Rozsa can be almost as spiky and angular as Bartok—and he brings out plenty of that in I. II is more lyrical and melodically effusive, and the finale has plenty of vigor and snap. Gamba's firm tempos and the Philharmonic's warm, sumptuous string tone suit the music perfectly. I certainly wouldn't mind encountering this on a few concert programs.

Likewise the much earlier, brilliantly orchestrated, gorgeous Theme and Variations,

which dates from 1933, written during Rozsa's tenure in Paris before moving on to California. This certainly is the work of the composer of the *El Cid* score: colorful, sometimes wild, sometimes pensive and sad. And it's a superb test of both the orchestra's virtuosity and expressive depth. Gamba and his players bring the same absolute commitment and concentration to this performance that they did to the other two works.

This is Volume 3 of a Rozsa series Chandos is doing. I must order the other two.

HANSEN

RUBINSTEIN: *Piano Concertos 2+4*

Alexander Paley, Russian State Symphony/ Igor Golovchin

Delos 2013—77 minutes

Piano Concerto 5; Caprice Russe

Grigorios Zamparas, Martinu Philharmonic/ Jon Ceander Mitchell

Centaur 3204—75 minutes

We reviewed Grigorios Zamparas's coupling of the Rubinstein 3 and 4 in September/October 2010, and now here is No. 5. It probably took him over two years just to learn this unwieldy and thankless concerto that is so rarely committed to disc—and with good reason. I have a theory that it's a lot easier for someone to learn even a massive score if it's something you hear all the time—for example the *Emperor* or either of the Brahms—but not if you have little actual listening experience to go by, as is certainly the case with Rubinstein's E-flat colossus that surpasses in length any of those examples. Indeed it's difficult to sit through it without coming away with the impression that, flushed with the success of the far better known D minor (4), Rubinstein decided "more is better" and proceeded to expand on the earlier score by at least a third, yet only fitfully approaching the melodic richness and rhythmic assurance of that masterpiece—my favorite Rubinstein concerto by far. I'd be very surprised—and impressed—to learn that Zamparas did indeed commit to memory this T-Rex of concertos, particularly since he could hardly have had much opportunity to perform it in concert beforehand, any more than Joseph Banowetz before him (Marco Polo; Nov/Dec 1994) or Adrian Ruiz before *him* (Genesis; Sept/Oct 1990).

Certainly there is much inspired writing in the opening Allegro moderato, but there are also vast arid stretches that sorely task the patience of the listener; and the same may be said of the Andante, which finally coasts to a stop after saying next to nothing for ten minutes. Only in the final Allegro, with its galumphing, almost ribald theme—certainly

as close as Rubinstein ever comes to the trenchant finale of 4—do we glimpse the true genius of the man, **aided immeasurably by Zamparas's formidable technique.** While he tends to come down harder than necessary, it's difficult to fault his enthusiasm in this swaggering dance, especially since Banowetz's even faster tempos don't really work to the benefit of the music and his clattery piano is far removed from **Zamparas's ringing tone.** Best of all is still Ruiz, whose solid grasp of the idiom and more varied tone really allow you to appreciate what Rubinstein has crafted here—even though at 17:19 it *does* go on (Ruiz takes 16:01 and Banowetz 15:45). Where Ruiz falls short is the Andante, which he takes quite slowly, though it must be admitted the ghostly march does come off effectively. Zamparas takes it pretty slow too, but a bigger problem is his failure to imbue the massive opening movement with the least spark of energy or forward motion where Ruiz by virtue of his sheer personality and unquestioned authority holds the interest a lot more, making the Genesis the one to look for (103, Sept/Oct 1990).

But Genesis only gives you the concerto, whereas both Banowetz and Zamparas also include a far more compact and tuneful effort, the *Caprice Russe* written four years later and based on what the notes refer to as “three purportedly Russian folk tunes” (!). Starting with a decidedly Slavic melody of melancholy mien, Rubinstein farther in introduces a more upbeat theme and finally an infectious folk dance calling to mind the secondary theme from the finale of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony actually written the year before—was the teacher now borrowing from the student? Unfortunately, Zamparas's sodden tempo suggests the dancers are too full of vodka and sausage to do much more than waddle around in formation. Even Banowetz, who's no sylph either, seems more spry than Zamparas, though he pounds the keyboard just the same. Valerie Traficante on Vox (Mar/Apr 1998) is even more heavy-handed (and she pounds the bejebers out of the Third Concerto too). Your best choice—if you can find it—is a disc on the Manchester Files label called “Russian Capriccio” (178) that includes a scintillating account of the Rubinstein *Caprice Russe* from Igor Lebedev alongside the capriccios of Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakoff and a familiar example by Glinka whose full title is actually *Capriccio Brillant on the Theme of Jota Aragonesa*. Only Lebedev makes of it the ebullient romp Rubinstein surely intended. Centaur throwing in the brief and unremittingly grim curtain-raiser to *The Tower of Babel* doesn't sway the choice all that much.

As it happens, I could also include Ruiz in

the comparison for 2—even though he's never released it commercially. I have a concert performance he did with Henry Lewis and the University of Southern California Orchestra (an excellent group) that I continue to listen to with far more enthusiasm than either of the two extant recordings. Here again the composer simply couldn't summon the melodic and rhythmic invention of 4—the pinnacle of his concerto *oeuvre*—but there's still much to savor: a fresh, vernal Rubinstein long dried up by the time he came to write his Fifth Concerto. And as with 5 the standout is the finale, which once again suggests a Russian folk dance; yet it doesn't come off all that well here. Delos has been doing a fantastic job recycling the old Russian Discs and it sounds tremendous, but they're at the mercy of the original recordings. Paley takes the “*moderato*” marking of the finale too much to heart, and his dogged, labored treatment simply won't do in this flight of fancy; even the winsome second subject comes off as sorely prosaic. Since Banowetz on Marco Polo is even worse—he slogs through it (Jan/Feb 1993)—I don't know what to tell you. Maybe you'll simply have to hope for better when Zamparas gets around to 2 along with 1 (also Banowetz's coupling and still the only one on CD).

As for 4, if Paley's performance at nearly 38 minutes isn't the slowest ever enshrined on disc, it must come pretty close. Shura Cherkassky (Decca import) can get away with such expansive tempos because he clearly believes in this music—as does Oleg Marshev on Danacord (July/Aug 1993). But my favorite by a wide margin is still Raymond Lewenthal, whose free-wheeling and heart-on-sleeve rendition is for me the very epitome of a Grand Manner now unfortunately only whispered about reverently (Elan; Sept/Oct 1999, p 295). I'm sorry to say Paley cannot begin to aspire to Lewenthal's league; and this Delos for all its splendid sound and cogent presentation (much more compelling cover art than the old Russian Disc) finally must yield to several others unless the only thing you're looking for is a respectable account of the Second Concerto. Paley's turgid Fourth is not competitive.

HALLER

RUCHMAN: Sonatas & Duets

Sharon Ruchman, p; Mary Costanza, vc; Janet Boughton, v; Kim Collins, fl

Ruchman 0 (CD Baby; 800-BUYMYCD)

This is the fourth self-issued disc of music by Sharon Ruchman, a singer, pianist, and composer who studied at the New England Conservatory and Yale. Five of the six works—a piano sonata, a cello sonata, a violin sonata, and duets for flute and cello and for violin and