

Jelena Očić: BEETHOVEN, HINDEDMITH, BACH-MOSCHELES on CHALLENGE



Classical Reviews - Composers & Works

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Saturday, 19 May 2012

BEETHOVEN Violin Sonata No. 9, "Kreutzer." HINDEDMITH Cello Sonata , op. 11/3.
BACH-MOSCHELES 10 Studies in Melodic Counterpoint: excerpts • Jelena Očić
(vc); Federico Lovato (pn) • CHALLENGE 72524 (74:27)



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It's impossible to know what synapses snapped in Carl Czerny's brain that led him—pianist and piano pedagog extraordinaire, student of Beethoven, and not half-bad composer in his own right—to transcribe Beethoven's "Kreutzer" Sonata for cello. Thomas Schipperges's program note suggests that Czerny so admired Beethoven's own cello transcription of the sonata he'd composed for horn virtuoso Giovanni Punto that Czerny singled out his teacher's "Kreutzer" Sonata as a good candidate for a similar exercise. What Czerny seems to have ignored is that the horn doesn't do repeated notes played presto, notes in the ionosphere of the treble clef, double-stops, or pizzicato. Therefore, anything the horn can do the cello can do just as well.

so Beethoven's horn-to-cello transcription made sense.

Not so Czerny's transcription. Anyone who is well acquainted with the "Kreutzer" Sonata, or perhaps has even tried to play it, knows how frightfully difficult it is. Even in the hands of the best players, there are passages in the piece that sound raw and deliberately spiteful, something not lost on Janáček when he wrote his "Kreutzer Sonata" Quartet. As in other of Beethoven's works of extreme violence and emotional tumult, like the "Serioso" String Quartet, desire for heightened dramatic effect sometimes supersedes musical considerations. A work in which the violin already sounds ungainly and under duress can only sound worse on cello, an instrument that, due to its size, thickness of strings, fingering distances, and bowing angle, is not as agile or fast-speaking as its smaller sister. Slashing chords and high notes practically off the end of the fingerboard pose even more difficulties for the cellist than they do for the violinist.

That cellist Jelena Očić maintains her composure and emerges at the end with her dignity intact is testament to what a fine player she is. In fact, having heard not a few violinists struggle with the piece, I'd have to say that Očić dispatches it with an aplomb that would make them green with envy. Understand, though, that Czerny's version is not a note-for-note transcription. Accommodations are made in some of the rapid passagework—octave transpositions and reworking of string crossing figurations, and the like—to facilitate easier execution on the cello. If you're familiar with the piece, you'll hear the alterations immediately without them being pointed out to you. Still, Očić's accomplishment is an impressive one, even if Czerny's arrangement is one of those musical curiosities that someone has to take up simply because it's there. In this case, Očić is neither alone nor the first to record Czerny's cello version of the work. Raphael Wallfisch performed it with John York on a Cello Classics CD released in 2005.

With the 10 Studies in Melodic Counterpoint on preludes from Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, Ignaz Moscheles joins a number of other composers who either used a subject by Bach as the basis for an entirely original work—Schumann and Liszt come to mind—or took a piece by Bach more or less as is and spun an obbligato descant over and around it—Gounod's famous Ave Maria on the C-Major Prelude from Book 1 of the WTC being a prime example. These Moscheles studies fall into the latter category. In each, Moscheles weaves an independent melodic line for the cello over Bach's original prelude.

I must admit that Moscheles, perhaps better known as Mendelssohn's nanny than for his creative talents, has never made my list of important composers, but these Melodic Counterpoint studies, of which Očić and Lovato perform five, have raised my estimation of Moscheles by several notches. The cello parts are really quite fetching and remarkably well scripted to the character of each of the preludes they adorn. These are gorgeous, effusive, romantic pieces well worth the price of the disc on their own. Once again, however, Očić and Lovato are not the first to mine these gems. A 2007 Oehms CD with Ramon Jaffé and Elisaveta Blumine contains all 10 of the studies, which, if they're anything like the five given on the present release, I would love to hear.

There was a time back in the 1960s when Hindemith was being touted as one of the major composers of the 20th century, alongside Bartók, Stravinsky, Shostakovich.

maybe Prokofiev, and Schoenberg, the last of whom one had to acknowledge publicly or risk being shunned by the academic elite, but whose works, no one, in private, could bear to listen to. Hindemith has pretty much fallen from this august circle. In fact, but for an occasional airing of one or another of his Kammermusik scores and his once quite popular Symphonic Metamorphosis of Themes of Carl Maria von Weber, Hindemith is hardly heard from these days. His three cello sonatas, one unaccompanied, have been taken up by a handful of cellists, but they've not been embraced as standard repertoire items the way other 20th-century cello sonatas have, such as Shostakovich's.

Generally, I've responded positively to Hindemith's music, much of which has always struck me as being infused with a good deal of humor and high spirits. But this cello sonata, a product of the composer's youth written in 1919, is a tough nut to crack. At this stage, Hindemith is still discovering who he is musically and who he wants to be. The sonata is an outgrowth of early 20th-century German currents of extreme chromaticism, dissonance, and tonality so liberated from functional harmony that the effect on the ear is that of atonality. Schoenberg had yet to impose his 12-tone methodology on compositional technique, but its disorienting consequences are already anticipated in Hindemith's sonata. Nor can the contrapuntal influence of Reger on Hindemith be overlooked.

Hindemith would eventually find a voice more tonally centered and far less abrasive than what one hears in this cello sonata. It's not a very pleasant thing to experience, but as far as I can tell, Očić and Lovato give it their best, and their best happens to be very, very good indeed. This is an unusual program, to be sure, but one that speaks volumes about this highly talented young Croatian cellist and her equally endowed Italian partner, Federico Lovato. Uncommon repertoire, no doubt, but recommended to cello fans and curiosity seekers alike. Jerry Dubins

Last Updated (Saturday, 19 May 2012)