

Carolyn Widmann, Dénes Várjon Schumann Violinsonaten Nr. 1-3

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ECM debut for two outstanding young soloists playing with vigour and temperament. Carolyn Widmann's reputation as a both committed and exciting performer of contemporary music has constantly spread in recent years. Her first CD with unaccompanied violin works ranging from Eugène Ysaÿe to Salvatore Sciarrino met with unanimous critical acclaim and was immediately awarded an annual prize at the German Record Critic's award (Preis der deutschen Schallplattenkritik). Composers such as Matthias Pintscher, Erkki-Sven Tüür and her brother Jörg Widmann write pieces for the Munich-born violinist and in summer 2008 she is giving first performances of no less than five new violin concerti including, in September in Leipzig and Lucerne, a piece by Wolfgang Rihm with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra under Riccardo Chailly's baton.

Of equal importance to Widmann is the preoccupation with the repertoire from the Baroque to the romantic era and the conception of programmes that highlight affinities between composers from different epochs. Together with Dénes Várjon whose formative influences in his native Budapest included masters such as Ferenc Rados, György Kurtág and András Schiff – his career took off after a sensational first prize at the Zurich Géza Anda competition, in 1991 – she has worked on Schumann since the start of their collaboration in 2004. Especially on the three violin sonatas from his last years of his life, highly-demanding scores which clearly reflect the composer's difficult mental situation in the 1850s.

“I had always been under the impression that certain traits of these pieces had never been thoroughly explored, and this applies most of all to the third sonata which was virtually unknown for decades and was only recently published in a reliable critical edition. We wanted to contribute to the understanding of this music, revealing just how fantastic, crazy and modern these compositions are. Schumann has been one of my favourite composers for many years, everything I know out of his works grips and touches me. Dénes shares this passion, and he completely understands the mental attitude of these pieces”, says Widmann who has been a professor at the Leipzig Musikhochschule since fall 2006 thereby getting even closer to Schumann and the localities the latter's artistic activities.

In retrospect, the violinist describes the recording session at Lugano Radio Auditorium – a venue which Manfred Eicher has as well chosen for several important jazz productions in recent years – as a very lucky constellation. “Once the hall, the piano and the mutual trust with your partners both in front and behind the microphones fit so well together you can really play in a way you wouldn't have thought possible”, Widmann confesses, not so much alluding to technical perfection but rather to the courage to take risks in the rendition of the scores: “It was Dénes who always wanted to go still a step further, saying ‘we can surprise each other much more!’ And he was absolutely right: There is this enormous variety of characters in these sonatas, each tone has a different colour, each bar a new pulse. Maybe Schumann, as opposed to so many other composers, really is the one whose black dots on white paper represent the least that is actually to be said. No traditional triple meter can properly express the right kind of rhythmic inflection and that's why, in our playing, I wanted to virtually make the bar-lines disappear, suggesting rather some kind of three-dimensional

notation. In this respect, too, Dénes, with his incredible flexibility, has been an ideal duo partner to me. With many Schumann interpretations I miss this ‘edgy’ feeling and the constant quest of the meaning of every detail.”

Part of this questioning and digging is the work on very specific sound hues and timbres which should always be related most closely to the respective expressive qualities. “It’s terribly sad when we violinists reduce our spectrum to one or two colours, so I’m consciously looking for the sombre and rather grim shadings but also for some very bright, even piercing sonic qualities. I like to use open strings because this can be so painful: It hurts much more when this open E-string shrieks than when it’s appropriately muffled – the second finger on the A-string ... this really eschews all tragedy!”

The unusual sequence of the three sonatas on the record arose from extensive experiments and ruminations between the two musicians and producer Manfred Eicher. “Even from today’s perspective I somehow understand why Clara Schumann held back the third sonata and some other of Robert’s late compositions for such a long time” says Widmann. “She must have feared that they would expose just too much of this mentally ill man whose – then quite unstable – reputation she had to protect. Me, too, I sense a certain emotional decay in the course of this cycle, that’s why we didn’t conclude the album with the chronologically last sonata. For a while we were even thinking about a reverse order, putting the first sonata last. But this way one would have sensed even more how Schumann was drawn down within the years between these pieces.” This is not to express as judgement over artistic or compositional qualities: After her thorough work on this ragged third sonata, Widmann doesn’t share the *communis opinio* of this piece as a deficient Schumann whose creativity is almost extinguished. “You really have to accept the conflict of antagonistic energies, this constant back and forth between a rather strained classicism and complete unleashed passion. It’s essential for late Schumann to be uncomfortable – which might account for the difficult reception of this repertoire. But if you take the challenge a completely new world opens up. In such a world there is always a way to solve the technical and instrumental problems of certain passages.”

For extensive biographies please refer to CD-booklet

Useful Links

<http://www.carolinwidmann.com/>

<http://impresariat-simmenauer.de/>

<http://www.cadenza-concert.at/sites/kuenstlerneu/varjon.htm>

<http://www.ecm-records.de/>