

Yael Weiss
piano
CD Review

"Sensitive, scholarly renditions of alternative Schumann repertory,
each a labor of love"

Audiophile Audition

SCHUMANN: Humoreske, Op. 20; Stuecke in Fughettenform, Op. 126: Nos. 1, 4, 7;
Impromptus on a Theme by Clara Wieck, Op. 5; Theme and Variations "Geistervariations," WoO
24; Phantasiestuecke, Op. 111, No. 2 - Yael Weiss, piano – Koch KIC CD-7650, 75:20 *****:

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Yael Weiss is an Israeli-born pianist whose pedagogy includes Leon Fleisher, Richard Goode, and Edward Aldwell. She plays a 1910 Hamburg Steinway D recorded (2005) at the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York. That she relishes the Schumann mystique with its often three-voiced investigation into polarities of the human psyche, becomes apparent in her rendition of the Op. 20 Humoreske, an episodic piece that relies on dynamic and affective contrasts. Weiss seems to favor dreamy Eusebius over assertive Florestan, although she can exhibit the bold, martial strokes when required - as in section five, marked *Mit einigen Pomp*. The last time I heard the Humoreske in concert was with Radu Lupu, and Ms. Weiss communicates the same inward sympathies with Schumann, what I signify as "a nostalgia for the dream." Weiss mentions in her notes that much of Schumann is *augenmusik*, indications for the performer's eyes that do not communicate aurally to the listener. Recall that Clara Wieck's father would permit music between Schumann and his intended, but no letters. So the black and white notes, rife with anagrams and *innere stimmen*, secret voices, bind their musical and amorous passions together.

The new addition to our Schumann legacy is the composer's last completed piece, the so-called "Ghost Variations" from 17 February 1854, the day of Schumann's much-cited suicide attempt. The tune itself has much in common with the slow movement of the D Minor Violin Concerto. There are five variations, albeit tightly focused around a kernel of notes and harmonic patterns, as is the composer's late-period, obsessive wont. The soft spirit prevails, and more than once the harmonies point to Brahms. The last variation,

more agitated than the others, swirls and pulsates its eddy of autumn leaves. The second of the Three Fantasies, Op. 111, with its tender lyricism, proves a Schubertian epilogue to this wistful program.

In between, Ms. Weiss gives us more of Schumann's studied polyphony, as in three of the set of Op. 126 studies in counterpoint (1853). The first plays as an improvisation; the fourth is clearly in the Bach mode, a toccata or staccato etude with its heart in the WTF, likely the C Minor from Book I. The last, No. 7, moves deliberately and slowly, a sweet song close in spirit to the slow movement from Bach's C Major Concerto for Two Klaviers. Weiss performs Schumann's revised version of his 1833 Impromptus, pieces championed a generation ago by Jorg Demus. Composed in a few days, the Impromptus point to Schubert's use of enharmonic and mediant harmonies, lyrically expressive. Several communicate bright colors, the youthful optimism of Carnival. Schumann's typical syncopations enter, as does his soft, pedaled palette. The fifth variant could easily be an addendum to the Symphonic Etudes. Mit grosser Kraft takes its cue from the Davids-League Dances. David Merrill's engineering has captured Ms. Weiss's pearly play, but the upper range of the piano does evince a hard ping. Sensitive, scholarly renditions of alternative Schumann repertory, each a labor of love.

-- Gary Lemco

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