

Maria Szymanowska (1789–1831) was born in Warsaw. Considering the restrictions of her age, especially because of her gender, that she became a professional musician at all – both an outstanding pianist and a very fine composer – is no small measurement of what must have been her immense talents. At the age of 21 she made her professional pianistic debut in Warsaw, before travelling to Paris, where she met Luigi Cherubini. In the same year, she married Józef Teofil Szymanowski, whom she was to divorce some 10 years later. They were to have three children together, all at the beginning of their marriage, one son and two daughters; the youngest, Celina, would later marry the famed Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz. Throughout the next two decades Szymanowska toured throughout Europe, giving concerts in many of the major musical centers of her day in addition to Paris and Warsaw – London, Berlin, Frankfurt, Hannover, Geneva, Milan, Rome, Naples, Florence, Parma, Venice, Amsterdam, Vilnius, Riga, St. Petersburg, and Moscow. She was especially praised for her delicate tone production, lyricism, and virtuosity. And quite the virtuoso she must have been, performing many of her own works, in addition to many of the works of her contemporaries: Hummel, Field, Klengel, Dussek, Ries, and Heinrich Herz, among others.

Most of the compositions on the current recital are typical of the salon music of the day, though some of them foreshadow the next generation of composers, especially those born right around the time of Szymanowska's debut in 1810. Though Robert Schumann was somewhat harsh in his opinion of her talents – “If we detect the uncertain woman in form and harmony, we also find a woman full of feeling, who has much to say, if only she knew how” – there is much in her music which is both attractive and compelling in design. One of the highlights of the disc, showing off the lyricism for which the pianist was praised, includes the posthumously published Nocturne in Bb, a curious mixture of rondo and variational principles. In this piece the composer manages to convey a natural flow of development from beginning to end. It is one of her most attractive pieces. The two different versions of the simpler and more tender *Le Murmur*, those for two-hand piano, the other for three hands, are simpler in design, yet curiously mesmerizing in effect. Brief but equally appealing are the 24 Mazurkas. Szymanowska's simplicity is a virtue: each little piece (the shortest of them being only 17 seconds in length!) perfectly portrays one mood. Here the pianist, Sławomir P. Dobrzański, is equally at home. He captures the Polish rhythms of these dances, along with the polonaises, distinguishing them from the quite different rhythmic quirks of the marches, the waltzes, and the contredanses. The beauty is in the subtlety of his playing. Where the pianist seems least comfortable – similar to the composer in Schumann's remarks – is in the larger forms. The F-Major Fantaisie provides a prime opportunity to show off the various sides of the composer – the brilliant, the virtuosic, the lyrical, the improvisatory – but is here performed as an extended nocturne. Where is the daring risk-taking? The sense of harmonic exploration? The differentiation in fast vs. medium tempos?

Also included here are some of the composer's chamber works: pieces for three- and four-hand piano, along with two pieces for piano and string instrument. Besides the aforementioned Nocturne, the rest of the piano three-hand and four-hand works are all waltzes. Here Dobrzański is joined by a whole host of different pianists, each bringing with them a refined technique and, more importantly, a fine sense of musicianship. The string accompaniment works are, in both cases, more lyrical in design, though the *Divertissement* has its more virtuosic moments. Both works see their performers at their best. Where the main issue lies here is in the recorded ambiance: both the works for cello and violin sound as though they've been recorded in a hallway, the string instruments right next to the microphone, the piano much further back. With performances as fine as these, it is a pity that they were captured so poorly. Is this an essential recording? No. But there is much attractive material here, especially for those interested in the more famous pianist-composers of the age – Herz, Hummel, Kalkbrenner, Czerny, Pixis, Thalberg, and the like – that one will not be disappointed with this collection. There are even moments here which foreshadow the likes of Chopin. To what extent did he know or was he influenced by Szymanowska's compositions? That question is up in the air. But with fine performances all around, perhaps lacking just a bit of that unrestrained quality in the more fiery moments, one is not likely to find a better value for one's buck; and, as this recording provides some world premieres, nor is one likely to find these pieces elsewhere at all. Recommended especially for aficionados of early 19th-century pianism.

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