SACD & Other Hi-Res Reviews

SCHUMANN: Variations on a Theme by Clara Wieck; Kreisleriana – Vladimir Horowitz, p. – Columbia/ Speakers Corner vinyl

A welcome re-issue of a classic recording with superb sound!

I am not a pianist – wish I was – but I have always loved superb piano playing and I grew up listening to a lot of Horowitz. He was an artist who specialized in music of the mid-Romantics and Schumann and Chopin in particular. His interpretations were always so sensitive to the style and his playing always had a stunning blend of technical bravura and lush quietude.

Schumann’s Kreisleriana is, literally, a depiction of a famous, perhaps notorious, character from the novels of E.T.A. Hoffmann. Johannes Kreisler is the name of a character in three novels by Hoffmann: Kreisleriana (1813), Johannes Kreisler, des Kapellmeisters Musikalische Leiden (1815), and The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr together with a fragmentary Biography of Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler on Random Sheets of Waste Paper (1822). (So say various internet sources; I do not know these literary works.)

Schumann’s expansive Kreisleriana is an eight-movement work that depicts several different episodes from Kreisler’s fictional life and existence as a composer-conductor whose genius and creativity is said to be affected and even stifled by his own emotional over-sensitivity. It is said that Robert Schumann recognized in himself a tendency toward over-reaction and emotional excess and found a somewhat amusing kindred spirit in the Kreisler character; hence this piece.

No matter; this is one of Schumann’s best known solo showpieces for piano and Horowitz gives this work great character and depth of expression. There is an amazing blend of exciting propulsion and expressive control throughout the up and down, back and forth, ebb and flow of Schumann’s style. Horowitz gives a performance that, to me, seems perfect and flawless.

The little Variations on a Theme by Clara Wieck (his Clara) is also known as the third movement, Andantino, from his Sonata No. 3. Schumann’s future bride was but sixteen when she wrote this charming melody and in but four variations, Schumann gives us what he thought of as a development of his love from childhood to young adulthood. The romantic Schumann is well on display here both musically as well as in the back story.

As for the recording, it is beautiful. Speakers Corner is a German company that presses on 180 gram vinyl and to the highest audio standards. The presence of the piano here is very “live” and very “real”. It sounds not like you are listening from the back of a hall but very close to Horowitz and the results are truly impressive. Speakers Corner has re-mastered a number of the old Columbia Masterworks recordings and I would welcome any of them that hold this level of historic performance and state of the art sound. It is a bonus that, in the high end vinyl market, their products are all reasonably priced, as well. Highly recommended!

—Daniel Coombs