

CD Review***Ghosts* — Caroline Oltmanns, piano**

by Jeremy Reynolds



Ghosts is an apt title for an album featuring Robert Schumann’s solo piano music. The composer had just finished his *Geistervariationen* (“Ghost Variations”) before entering a mental asylum for treatment of his schizophrenia, which manifested itself as spirits, ghosts, and demons playing him strange, otherworldly music.

Though Schumann believed that the theme of the *Ghost Variations* had been dictated by a supernatural agent, it was actually a theme he had composed some years previously.

Caroline Oltmanns, an internationally-acclaimed pianist and a professor of piano at Youngstown State University, released *Ghosts* — her most recent solo album — in November on the Filia Mundi Label. In addition to the Schumann, *Ghosts* includes music by Chopin, Brahms, and James Wilding.

As concept albums go, *Ghosts* is fun to get inside of. There’s the *Ghost Variations*, of course, which Oltmanns begins with a delightful stateliness and a touch of bitterness, then crescendos into an energetic, burbling murmur in the later variations.

There’s also Schumann’s *Carnaval*, a piece representing the celebration just before Lent. Each movement represents a character from the composer’s life, preserving a musical impression of their “spirits.”

There’s Brahms’s *Studies for Piano, Variations on a Theme by Paganini* (the theme you’d expect), another homage to that devilish violinist’s ghost. There’s Chopin’s *Fantasia Impromptu*, a piece published posthumously (make of that what you will).

And finally there’s Wilding’s music, commissioned specifically for this album. “Sphinxes,” “Voices,” “Ghost Fantasy,” and “Rising Subconscious” maintain a general ethos of spookiness and the supernatural through their sparse, often unmetered textures

and their placid, ethereal qualities. “Sphinxes” appears in the middle of *Carnaval*, in place of Schumann’s movement of the same name that is traditionally omitted from performance, while Wilding’s other pieces connect the Romantic works as musical bridges.

Oltmanns’ interpretations are strong. *Carnaval* is one of Schumann’s most difficult works — Chopin famously remarked that it was “not music” — but Oltmanns carries it off with a frolicking abandon. The tunes are based on various musical cryptograms, but Oltmanns’ playing is unencumbered by such intellectualism. Beautifully phrased, it sounds spontaneous and joyful.

Likewise, she plays Chopin’s famous *Impromptu* with uninhibited lyricism, those outrageously quick scales, arpeggios, and flourishes cascading with understated power. Her tender playing in the middle section provides an exquisite couple of minutes and is one of the true highlights of the album.

Ghosts concludes with with the Brahms Variations. Oltmanns carries off this extraordinarily difficult work with cool aplomb. Her taste is excellent, her technique, impeccable — it’s a fitting conclusion to a brilliant recording. *Ghosts* is available at [iTunes](#), [Amazon.com](#), and other retailers.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 13, 2016.

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