

CD Review***Martina Filjak, piano***

by Jeremy Reynolds



In the eight years since Martina Filjak won the gold medal at the 2009 Cleveland International Piano Competition the Croatian pianist has performed around the world with distinguished orchestras and conductors. In December 2016 Filjak released a solo album titled simply *Martina Filjak, Piano* on the German Solo Musica label.

The disc runs just over an hour and includes the Liszt transcription of J.S. Bach's *Prelude and Fugue in a*, and the first sonatas by Robert Schumann and Alexander Scriabin.

The Bach is brilliant. She plays with a mesmerizing level of refinement and polish. The Prelude is evenly paced, clean, and graceful. The Fugue subject begins with deceptive sweetness — perhaps melancholy — and as she adds the succeeding voices she builds tension while maintaining an unwavering tempo. When she simulates the organ pedal tones, the piano growls with restrained aggression. Perhaps there's just a bit too much pedal in the louder passages — it blurs the effect of her impeccable technique — but Filjak's commitment to the Baroque style and her sense of poetry make this a must-listen recording.

Schumann began composing his first piano sonata while engaged to Ernestine von Fricken and finished it while courting Clara von Wieck. It is a passionate work, with two longer, headier outer movements separated by two shorter, interlude-like movements. Filjak's attention to character and detail in each of the four movements is commendable. The tempestuous first movement is well-realized, and the second sublimely delicate — not to be outdone by Filjak's spectacular dynamic contrasts in the scherzo or her ardent playing in the finale.

Often referred to as a personal cry to god, Scriabin's first sonata was completed after the composer damaged his right hand over-practicing. He was told that he would never perform again — not easy news to bear for one of the world's finest young pianists, though it was ultimately incorrect. The work's emphasis on the left hand and its angst-ridden thematic material contribute to its difficulty. Filjak tosses it off energetically. Particularly thrilling is her interpretation of the third movement Presto. The opening triplets burble along mischievously, and she gives the contrasting major theme just the right amount of whimsy to sound both optimistic and slightly desperate. The Adagio is also well-paced, and the finale (Funebre) carries the weight of the world in its solemnity.

This album, Martina Filjak's first solo recording since 2011, demonstrates why her career has taken off so wonderfully.

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