
 ELGAR Cello Concerto. DVOŘÁK Waldesruhe. Rondo. RESPIGHI Adagio con variazioni • Sol Gabetta (vc); Mario Venzago, cond; Danish National SO • RCA 88697658242 (66:01)

 SHOSTAKOVICH Cello Concerto No. 1.1 RACHMANINOFF Cello Sonata2 • Sol Gabetta (vc); 1Loren Maazel, cond; 1Munich PO. 2Olga Kern (pn) • SONY 88725435752 (67:21)

Back in 31:2, Jerry Dubins endorsed the recording debut of cellist Sol Gabetta (playing the Saint-Saëns Concerto No. 1 and several Tchaikovsky pieces composed or arranged for cello) as follows: “A number of years ago, RCA may not have exercised its best corporate judgment in promoting another young cellist by the name of Ofra Harnoy, who was almost universally unloved by the community of critics. With Sol Gabetta, RCA is having another go at it, and this time the company has picked a winner.” In a subsequent review in 33:6 of concertos by L. Hofmann, J. F. Haydn, and W. A. Mozart (the latter arranged for cello from the composer’s K 314 Oboe Concerto), he modified his judgment somewhat, saying: “This new recording does not call into judgment my previous opinion of Gabetta’s playing, but to the extent that she was an accomplice in the medley of crimes perpetrated on this release, it certainly calls into question the soundness of her musical discretion.” Somewhat similarly, in a review in 32:6, Art Lange praised her performance of the Cello Concerto No. 1 of Shostakovich, writing: “A few opportunities for dramatic emphasis are missed along the way...but she sustains a tenacious momentum—matched by the orchestra—with an almost dogged determination to survive, to complete the arduous task at hand. This is an impressive achievement.” However, he severely criticized her handling of the composer’s Cello Sonata on the same release, concluding: “Let’s call it a youthful miscalculation and leave it at that.”

With its comparison and contrast to the ill-fated Ofra Harnoy, Jerry Dubins pre-empted the introduction I had planned to write. I also concur with the overall mixed verdict of both him and Lange—Gabetta (winner of both the Tchaikovsky Competition and the Natalia Gutman Prize, among other awards) is a very talented figure with the potential to go far, but also wanting in maturity of judgment and in need of further seasoning. These two new CDs illustrate both points in spades.

The performance of the Elgar Concerto presented here is an intriguing oddity. The great valedictory statement of Elgar’s career, it is drenched with bittersweet melancholy and tearful resignation, mourning the passing of cherished illusions and an old order of nobility not to be reclaimed. Whether intentionally or not, this reading is positively contrarian—completely devoid of tragedy, decidedly upbeat and even almost chipper at times. Gabetta employs her luscious tone and facile technique to make the music sing lyrically and skitter along lightly as needed, and she is ably supported throughout by conductor Mario Venzago. Much to my surprise upon initially hearing this approach, I did not dislike it but found it thoroughly intriguing, and continue to do so, though it will not replace or even rival any number of more traditional readings, beginning with those by Pablo Casals and Jacqueline du Pré. As for the filler pieces by Dvořák and Respighi, those are given competent but undistinguished run-throughs. With Dvořák’s music, a musician simply either has a feel in his or her blood for its Czech folk idiom, or does not, and Gabetta falls into the latter category, as her playing lacks the distinctive inflections and lilt that lift the tunes from the seemingly commonplace to the delightfully heartfelt.

What I just said for Dvořák applies in a somewhat different way to Shostakovich: To interpret his music successfully, one must feel in the marrow of one’s bones its aching world-weariness, its alternately sardonic irony and humor, and its gritty determination for perseverance in the face of daunting adversity and oppression, all within a distinctively Russian idiom. Given that fundamental criterion, this Sony release is an abysmal failure—indeed, if such a thing existed, I would nominate it for an anti-Grammy Award in the category of Most Tedious Concerto Performance by Internationally Renowned Musicians. Gabetta and Maazel here achieve a kind of musical anti-matter, sawing and plodding their way through this bleakly soul-penetrating music with a total lack of comprehension and empathy that is absolutely astounding. There isn’t even any attempt at shaping phrases; the whole thing from start to finish (including the surprisingly unfocused recorded sound) is a bowl of cold, gray, unpalatable mush. The Rachmaninoff Sonata is not much better; while not awful, it is played with a superficial loveliness of tone but not a nanogram of emotional expressiveness. Gabetta clearly has no feeling whatsoever for Russian music, and should simply drop it from her repertoire, at least for now.

I fear that this may be yet another instance of a promising artist suffering from premature exposure before having had a chance to ripen his or her musicianship. Gabetta needs to pull back and spend some years perfecting her craft before setting her interpretations—at this time still immature—before the critical judgment of posterity that recordings necessarily invite. While the Elgar concerto might commend itself to those looking for an alternative review of that work, the Shostakovich is more than a “youthful miscalculation”—it is a grave misjudgment of a sort that could do Gabetta’s career considerable and long-term damage. All this is too bad, because she is clearly a player who has not only great technical chops but (as the Elgar shows) some real ideas for interpretation when she puts her mind to it. Assuming she does not turn out to be a shooting star that crosses the musical firmament and flames out all too quickly, it will be interesting to hear where she is artistically 10 years from now. But for the time being, the best thing she can do for her career is to stay out of the recording studio and take the time to transmit the music she plays from her fingers to her heart. James A. Altena

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