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Composer: Johannes Brahms
Performer: Natalia Grigorieva, Ilja Korol
Orchestra/Ensemble: Moderntimes_1800

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Korol and Grigorieva give us the best that HIP can bring to Brahms' violin sonatas. Over the years I have come to enjoy historically informed performances thoroughly. More than that, I now expect a degree of period perspective from any performance I attend, or new recording I hear, of Baroque and Classical repertoire. I do get nervous, though, when period performance practice and period instruments are employed in Romantic repertoire. I cringe at the thought of Romantic masterpieces defaced by frantic tempi, anaemic strings, and the death rattle of keyboards unable to cope with the virtuosic demands of the 19th century.

The flowing eloquence of the performances on this disc immediately banished any such fears. Ilia Korol and Natalia Grigorieva give us the best that historically informed performance can bring to Brahms' sonatas for violin and piano.

Both Korol and Grigorieva are members of moderntimes_1800, a young Austrian period instrument ensemble that configures itself in various shapes from chamber orchestra to chamber ensemble. This disc is released under moderntimes_1800's auspices.

Grigorieva plays a Streicher fortepiano built in 1870. The instrument is well chosen for two reasons. Firstly, it is historically apposite. We know that Brahms had an 1868 Streicher, a gift from the makers, in his flat in Vienna. We also know that he played frequently the 1880 Streicher instrument owned by his Viennese friends, Richard and Maria Fellingner. It was on their instrument that Brahms made his only recording in 1889.

More importantly, though, Grigorieva's instrument simply sounds lovely. It has a mellow, fruity base register and plenty of warm shine in the upper reaches of its range. Overall, the instrument's sound is rounder than you may expect from a fortepiano, but without the ringing steel of a modern concert grand. The tolling of the piano's bell-like chords around the 6 minute mark in the first movement of the first sonata has a subtle bloom I have not marked elsewhere, and the runs that close the first movement of the second sonata have a wonderfully bucolic quality, like the burbling of a brook.

Korol's instrument is not from Brahms' time – he plays a 1999 Cai von Steitencron violin – but it is built in the style of a Cremona violin, strung with gut, and built to incorporate the customary “modernisations” of neck, bass-bar, finger board and bridge of Brahms' era. These “modernisations” undoubtedly assist Korol's projection. He plays with the sweetest tone I have heard from gut strings and, far from eschewing vibrato, he employs it liberally along with fine dynamic contrasts to colour Brahms' espressivo writing, giving the violin's long legato lines a naturally breathing, song-like quality.

As a general comment, each of these sonatas is spun with singing lyricism in genuine partnership between keyboard and bow. The first sonata showcases this balance in its flowing first movement. The second movement will surprise: it is taken at a daringly slow tempo, acquiring a decadent languor that one does not usually associate with Brahms. The piano's almost rhapsodic introduction to this movement has a wonderful expressive freedom under Grigorieva's fingers. The third movement is quietly enigmatic, rather than archly mysterious. Korol's thoughtful phrasing and subtle shading here are a delight.

The second sonata has the warm glow of the afternoon sun. Again it is the second movement that is most impressive, as Korol and Grigorieva capture the subtle shifts in mood admirably. The finale is spacious and nuanced too, with wonderful dialogue between instruments.

The performance of the third sonata is controversial in its understatement. Korol's hairpin crescendos and decrescendos in the long opening violin phrase may seem fussy to some listeners, but for me his ebbing expression sets up a first movement of dancing shadows. There is drama here, but it is subtle rather than overt, as it is with Oistrakh (EMI) or even Grumiaux (Philips). The second movement has warmth and limpid beauty, but mystery too, and Korol's double stopping – as ever on this disc – is clean and beautifully balanced. The third movement is quirky, and gives way to a finale of measured tempi and enigmatic light and shade.

This is as good a disc of these sonatas as any to have appeared in recent years, from any performance tradition. Korol and Grigorieva take a broadly similar approach to Renaud Capuçon and Nicholas Angelich in their excellent recordings on Virgin, but there is enough difference in expressive detail, not to mention instrumental timbre, to warrant purchasing both. As my comments thus far should make clear, this recording offers thoughtful music making from equal partners, rather than virtuoso display, and is none the worse for that.

The liner notes are helpful, despite the odd typographical error, and the immediate sound captured in the warm, resonant acoustic of Vienna's Beethovensaal serves the performances well. While Korol and Grigorieva may not be a first choice recommendation in this wonderful music, their performances are beautifully and thoughtfully presented and this disc deserves a recommendation as a MusicWeb International Recording of the Month.

Tim Perry, MusicWeb International