



American Record Guide

From American Record Guide, May/June 2007

Sonatas by Respighi, Strauss, and Janacek
AVIE 2133- 72 Minutes

This is the second CD by Frank Almond and William Wolfram that I have had the privilege to review for ARG. I say privilege because Almond and Wolfram are musicians of rare caliber. To their recording of the Brahms Violin Sonatas (July/Aug. 2001) I gave my highest recommendation, and it is only rivaled by Tamas Vasary's set (Nov./Dec. 2004). My feeling about this release is nearly as strong as it was for the Brahms.

This is an effort to rehabilitate some works that have been largely neglected in recent years. Perhaps the least effective interpretation here, the quirky Janacek sonata, is in four movements; I, II, and IV were composed from 1914-1921, while II was salvaged from an earlier attempt at writing a violin sonata way back in 1880 when the composer was studying music in Vienna. So II comes from a different world, but it's very beautiful, so I can understand why the composer didn't want to let it go. Almond and Wolfram give a pleasant reading of this movement, but they miss that wonderful feeling of a fresh spring breeze that Gidon Kremer and Martha Argerich find in its main melody. Making sense of IV is the sonata's greatest challenge, though. There is a recurring figure played by the violin containing very fast, repeated notes that is meant to represent the arrival, or perhaps the greeting, of Russian troops in WW1, whom Janacek hoped would free their fellow Slavs from Austrian domination. Gidon Kremer plays it very violently, while Vaclav Remes of the Prazak Quartet plays it much more gently. The movement climaxes with a lyrical passage that seems to indicate frantic, desperate hope in Kremer's performance or confidence gradually giving way to doubt in Remes's. Almond plays the recurring figure in a manner in between these extremes, but his interpretation of the climactic lyrical passage feels too confident and placid to justify the quiet, inconclusive ending of IV.

The Respighi, a mature, post romantic work composed in 1917, has been recorded by Jascha Heifetz and Emmanuel Bay in 1950, and Kyung-Wha Chung and Kristian Zimerman in 1988 (Nov./Dec. 1990), but few others have recorded it. This may be because the sonata isn't perfect, as Almond admits in the booklet

notes, singling out its "clunky" Passacaglia finale for criticism. But a committed performance like his makes the piece much more than just pleasant listening. While Heifetz and Bay do their best to tighten up the work's structure, and Chung and Zimerman sound bloodless, Almond and Wolfram play this piece for all it's worth. Very rarely have I felt such emotional intensity and authenticity in a performance. There is a passage starting about 2:28 in II where Almond's playing gives me a feeling just like when someone is looking me in the eyes and saying, "I love you". I'm sure he was thinking about his baby girl, but thanks anyway, Frank! The emotions Almond and Wolfram find in this music are so much more intense and real than what Heifetz-Bay or Chung-Zimerman find in it. Even that "clunky" Passacaglia sounds terribly urgent and even apocalyptic here.

The Strauss sonata, the last piece of chamber music the then-23-year-old composer wrote, has been recorded by Heifetz and Brooks Smith in 1954, Chung and Zimerman in 1988 (Nov./Dec 1990) Gidon Kremer and Oleg Maisenberg in 1995 (Jan/Feb 2000) and Kolbjorn Holthe and Tor Espen Aspaas in 2005 (Nov/Dec 2006). Chung and Zimerman are just as uninvolved in this work as they were in the Respighi. Heifetz and Smith do a very fine job of clarifying this work's architecture, but they restrain their emotions. Kremer-Maisenberg and Holthe-Aspaas both take a leisurely approach to the music, making it sound more episodic than Heifetz-Smith do. Of the two duos, Holthe-Aspaas evoke the languid, slower-moving world of the 19th Century very well, and their taking-their-time-to-stop-and-sniff-the-flowers approach delivers many delights, despite the occasional slack moment. Almond and Wolfram keep closer to Heifetz and Smith's structural clarity while jacking up the emotional ante tremendously. I've always found the Strauss sonata pleasant enough, but this duo would have you believe this was the greatest violin sonata ever written. The emotional intensity of their Respighi performance is back here in spades. The equal balance of the piano and violin pays off in the climactic passages, where Almond sounds like he's trying to squeeze every last ounce of sound out of his violin so as not to be overwhelmed by the piano. The effect is terribly dramatic!

Among the recordings of the Strauss that I know, this one rockets straight to the top! Same for the Respighi!

Once again, I am deeply impressed by this duo's musicianship and artistry. My only complaint is that I have had to wait six years to hear a new recording of theirs. Almond and Wolfram are vastly superior artists to most of the big classical stars before the public today and pushed by the big record labels. I can think of a half dozen violinists who record for major labels whose musicianship can't hold a candle to Almonds. This is unjust.