

New Interpretations Idiosyncratic Duos

Four works from the early 20th century: In this exciting transitional period that straddles an exhausted musical past and a promising, uncertain future, Leoš Janáček, Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Prokofiev and Maurice Ravel compose very idiosyncratic duos. These works have now been newly interpreted.

By Raoul Mörchen

With Raoul Mörchen and four works for violin and piano from the early twentieth century. They are works from an exciting transitional period that straddles an exhausted musical past and a both promising and extremely uncertain future. During this transition, Leoš Janáček, Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Prokofiev and Maurice Ravel write very idiosyncratic duos to that have, through the violinist Sarita Kwok and pianist Wei-Yi Yang, encountered two exceptionally energetic interpreters on the GENUIN Classics label.

Janáček remained long unnoticed

It is incomprehensible why this music was ignored for so long. How could one ignore it, although it draws attention to itself with so much anger and passion and is so different than anything else around it?

Simply put, nobody ever reckoned with the old Leoš Janáček. Until he was 50, he was known best as a fanatical collector of Moravian folk songs. His works were considered harmless mass productions. His incredibly momentous ideas remained long unnoticed, not only the melodies of songs and dances but also the melodic notation of speech. His first stroke of genius was the opera *Jenufa*, written in 1904. It was a decent result all the same, but it was not until the 1920s that Leoš Janáček, who was by then 70 years old, received international acclaim.

Much-famed late phase

His violin sonata plays an integral part of this development. It comes at the beginning of the now much-famed praised late phase. It bears the best features of the old composer and yet most major classical violinists like Heifetz, Stern, Szeryng or Milstein did not touch the work. It was only in the last twenty or thirty years that this fundamentally changed. And therefore, the new recording of the Australian violinist Sarita Kwok and Taiwanese pianist Wei-Yi Yang is merely another entry in a now ever-growing discography. One could easily overlook this entry, especially as the two performers are almost unknown in this country. But that would be a pity, because seldom is a recording so electrifying and troubling for its listeners.

Emotional and radical composition

One really gets goosebumps when following Sarita Kwok and Wei-Yi Yang, the two professors from Yale University, through Janáček's Sonata. The fact that the

composer did not plan anything in advance, that passion and temper motivated him more than any structure could have, that everything that begins so suddenly breaks off just as suddenly, and that Janáček, as if intoxicated, crammed the score with instructions and far too many markings, making it hardly possible to get through the piece in the end – one can actually hear all of this in this so radically unadorned and risky recording.

Janáček expects a great deal from his interpreter and Kwok and Yang pass this expectation on directly. Because, the essence of Janáček's music lies in this unreasonable demand: the immediacy of its will and expression. It speaks straight to its audience, sometimes screaming at it properly. Quite clearly, Kwok and Yang have understood the plight of this music.

Peculiar distance to the music in Prokofiev

What suits Janáček doesn't come easily for Stravinsky. His *Duo Concertante*, Stravinsky's only original work for violin and piano, makes no complaints; it does not want to express anything and keeps at a distance. Stravinsky gushed about the ideal of aesthetic objectivity; emotions were embarrassing for him. This distinguishes him from Janáček - and unites him with Prokofiev. Even with Prokofiev one can feel this peculiar distance to the music, even if a little more warmth is released and it appears more down-to-earth and folkloric. The *Five Melodies* that Sarita Kwok and Wei-Yi Yang have chosen for their recital were originally songs without words in the spirit of Mendelssohn. Prokofiev reworked them later and sharpened their contours but they are still emphatically friendly in the instrumental version.

Variety in Ravel

The transition from Stravinsky to Prokofiev is not seamless; the one from Janáček to Stravinsky is without abruptness. Not on this album. Sarita Kwok and Wei-Yi Yang manage to make the individuality of each work sound unique and yet make it recognizable as part of the same era. This also applies to the second violin sonata by Maurice Ravel. It concludes the recital, which covers the period of just twenty years and yet unifies very different positions. The album's ambiguous title probably also alludes to this as well: the word INTERCHANGE implies variety as well as exchange.

Variety is especially plentiful in the music by Ravel. His sonata looks as if it had been thrown together at random. The otherworldly, carried-away opening movement is followed by a melancholic blues and finally, as a finale, a frenetic perpetual motion. For the artist, this means switching quickly and not holding on to one single gait, tone, or mood. That thought also doesn't seem to occur to Sarita Kwok and Wei-Yi Yang. They prefer to be surprised by the whims of the composer. The two professors from Yale are as little professorial and academic as one could possibly wish. Instead of securely employing their enormous technical resources, they bravely deploy them each time anew. They take risks - and win.

The finale from the second violin sonata by Maurice Ravel, played by Sarita Kwok and Wei-Yi Yang. The new recording of the duo from Yale University in the United States is titled INTERCHANGE - exchange or variety - and also includes the *Duo Concertante* by Igor Stravinsky, the *Five Melodies* by Sergei Prokofiev and Leoš Janáček's violin sonata. The album, released by the label Genuin Classics, has been presented to you by Raoul Mörchen.

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