

Although Grieg, Dohnányi, and Chopin, are of substantial fame, their works offered on this recording are rarely performed. That Ronald Leonard and Ya-Ting Chang bring these pieces to light is a gift to listeners and to the repertoire for cello and piano.

Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

Sonata for Cello and Piano in A Minor, Op. 36

Allegro agitato

Andante molto tranquillo

Allegro; Allegro molto e marcato

The A Minor Sonata for Cello and Piano is not the Grieg of *Peer Gynt*. The composer himself disparaged that famous work in a letter of 1878 to his friend Frants Beyer: “I’ve written something for the scene in the hall of the mountain King—something I literally can’t bear to hear because it reeks of cow-pies, exaggerated Norwegian nationalism, and trollish self-satisfaction.” He confessed he had been “stagnating...on account of too much popularity.” By tackling chamber music, he said, “I shall find myself again.” And indeed he did in the Sonata for Cello and Piano of 1883. That he became more abstract and universal in the Sonata, however, is not to say that he was less emotionally effective and lyrically expressive in the work. To these profound qualities he also added a wonderful balance of instruments with virtuosic demands equally matched.

In the first movement *Allegro agitato*, Grieg offers an intense opening statement with equal duties for both instruments. A slower development section of great warmth follows in which Grieg assigns passages to the cello we might more easily associate with the violin. The lyrical beauty of the movement gives way to rising tension and dramatic descents. This emotionally rich movement ends with a final intense rush to the conclusion.

A solo moment for the piano opens the second movement *Andante molto tranquillo*, but the piano is soon joined by a rich and poignant statement from the cello. The piano returns to a brief solo moment but does not disturb the balance of the instruments. The heights and depths of the cello are fully explored. This movement has a solemnity about it that we might not always associate with Grieg.

After a slow opening from the cello in the third movement *Allegro*, the piano enters playfully. Both instruments then take up a spirit that resembles a folk dance, albeit a dark one. A variety of tempos color the movement, and there are virtuosic moments for both instruments. A repeated motto unifies this full-blown movement that comes to a dramatic climax and a lovely dénouement.

Ernst von Dohnányi (1877-1960)

Sonata for Cello and Piano in B-flat Major, Op. 8

Allegro ma non troppo

Scherzo: Vivace assai

Adagio non troppo

Tema con Variazioni: Allegro moderato

The towering influence of Dohnányi as a composer is sometimes mitigated by accusations inferring a lack of originality. As a pianist, conductor, teacher, and administrator, he would seem without question except that he was plagued with criticism for almost everything except his pianism. Grove, however, refers to his “unassailability on musical or ethical grounds.” Indeed, he culminated the Romantic spirit expressed in Classical form and was a champion of musical taste in his native Hungary where, as conductor of the Philharmonic Orchestra of Budapest, he would program as many as 120 concerts a year. He was also the teacher of such musical figures as Georg Solti and Géza Anda. Furthermore, despite his own Romantic leanings, he championed the music of his fellow countrymen Zoltán Kodály, Bela Bartók, and Leó Weiner. Politically he was indisputable in his anti-Nazi activities between 1939 and 1941 when he retained Jewish members of the Budapest Philharmonic despite the German occupation of Hungary.

If Dohnányi’s youthful Sonata for Cello and Piano of 1899 is a bow to Brahms, that can hardly be considered a fault. Furthermore, it has been suggested that Dohnányi bears a certain ease of composition that we do not always associate with his more famous predecessor.

The first movement *Allegro ma non troppo* opens with a unison statement from the instruments which then emerges into an intense and highly-charged section that offers much lyricism from both instruments. A

solemn transition leads to a return to the opening statement but with new developments and energy. Piano and cello echo the thematic statements, and both instruments have thrilling moments before Dohnányi offers a quiet closing to this richly-developed movement.

The second movement brings a lively and forceful *Scherzo* with dramatic and virtuosic tremolos for the cello while the piano explores the full dimensions of the keyboard. A slower trio section of considerable solemnity offers a contrast before a return to the spirited *Scherzo*.

A brief but effective *Adagio* follows. The piano opens with a chorale-like statement before the cello offers a moving song. Lyricism is then traded back and forth between cello and piano throughout this beautiful movement.

The last movement *Tema con Variazioni* gives clear definition of Dohnányi's compositional genius. Cello and piano state the theme, and then Dohnányi develops nine wonderful variations offering a myriad of moods and culminating in a brilliant conclusion. To be reminded here of Brahms' gift for variation form is an honor without accusation of imitation.

Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)

Étude Op. 25, No. 7 in C-sharp Minor, arranged for cello and piano by Alexander Glazunov (1865-1936)

Certain pieces of music call for transcription because of their unforgettable themes that translate to almost any instrument. An important degree of responsibility, however, remains with the transcriber whose own compositional excellence must play out in the work he addresses. Glazunov took on that challenge in his arrangement of Chopin's Étude Op. 25, No. 7 for cello and piano. In many ways, it seemed like a natural coming together of genius. Glazunov's attraction to Chopin is obvious in the many translations he made of Chopin's works for his ballets *Les Sylphides*, which was originally conceived as an orchestral suite entitled *Chopiniana*. In the full ballet version, Glazunov used eight of Chopin's works, but the Étude Op. 25, No. 7 was not one of them. His arrangement of that work came as a separate inspiration and remains remarkable in its treatment. How much Glazunov is responsible for that is an interesting question since Chopin himself wrote beautifully for the cello in such works as his glorious Cello Sonata of 1846, his last published work.

The heartfelt melody of the C-sharp Minor Étude, one of the twelve of Op. 25 published in 1837, is a natural for Glazunov's talent for the late Romantic. He gives much of that melody to the cello, but the piano holds its own ground in the triumphant accompaniment that is integral to the work. Nor does Glazunov's arrangement lose any of Chopin's dramatic impact. Could it be that Glazunov enlarged upon it?

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