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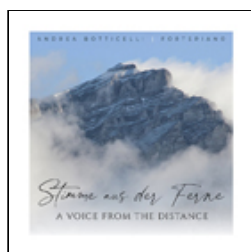
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Andrea Botticelli: *Stimme aus der Ferne - A Voice From the Distance*
Céleste Music

Certainly one of the things that makes this debut album by Andrea Botticelli so rewarding is the way three critical elements—programme, instrument, and musician—seamlessly converge. Smartly curated by the Toronto-based pianist, the material is rendered all the more compelling in being performed on a Graf fortepiano by a musician deeply attuned to its features and the repertoire in question. Indicative of the conviction she brought to the project, Botticelli consulted original scores and contemporary editions, familiarized herself with early recordings to become better informed about nineteenth century performance traditions, and studied original tempi, pedal markings, and expressive indications in the scores. Remarkably assured interpretations result that command attention at every moment.

The title carries with it multiple meanings. It literally references a marking written in the score of *Novelletten, Op. 21* by Robert Schumann but also to how the sound of the fortepiano evokes an earlier period. Built by Rodney Regier in 2014 and replicating a typical Viennese fortepiano from the mid-nineteenth century built by Conrad Graf, the Graf fortepiano sounds magnificent on the release, which was recorded at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity. In accompanying notes, she identifies some of the features that distinguish the instrument, such as subtle differences in sound quality between its registers and an action that allows for exceptional nuance in sound and shaping. In addition to a 6.5-octave range, the instrument has three pedals, a damper, an una corda, and a third called the moderator, which can soften the sound to a whisper and thus imparts an additional layer of intimacy to a lyrical passage. Composers of the period naturally wrote for the instrument with its expressive potential in mind, and consequently works by Czerny, Schubert, and the Schumanns prove to be superb choices for this project.

Schubert's three-movement *Sonata in A major, D. 665* seduces from the start when its opening allegro features a yearning melody voiced gracefully by Botticelli. Whereas the slower central movement arrests for the poise and control of her execution, as well as her sensitivity to dynamics, the concluding allegro engages for its exuberance and blithe spirit. As pleasing is Czerny's seven-part *Variations on a Theme by Rode, Op. 33* ("*La Ricordanza*"), whose range of expression is well-served by the bright sparkle of the fortepiano and its upper register in particular. Following an introductory statement of the theme, variations thereafter include passages of stunning virtuosity (the third and fifth two examples) as well as moments of elegant rumination. Similar in structure, Robert Schumann's *Papillons, Op. 2* follows its own introduction with twelve concise parts, many of them waltzes, and again broad contrasts in style, dynamics, tempo, and tone are present—compare, for instance, the delicate lyricism of the "Waltz—Semplice" with the rousing figures of the "Polonaise." In all cases, Botticelli's close attention to detail and refined execution elevate the treatments.

As engaging as the three opening performances are, the album's rendered most memorable by its closing selections, respective movements from Clara Schumann's *Soirées musicales, Op. 6* and Robert's *Novelletten*. In a fascinating musicological move, Botticelli sequenced the two deliberately so as to reveal the closeness of the couple, specifically in the way the lyrical melody in her "Notturmo" reemerges in his "Sehr Lebhaft," her theme ostensibly becoming a "voice from the distance" that perhaps seeped into his own consciousness during the writing process. It's not the only time a theme by Clara surfaces in her husband's music, but in juxtaposing the movements Botticelli accentuates directly the connection between them. Whereas "Notturmo" sustains its tender tone for the full movement, Robert's progresses through multiple episodes, a number vibrant and declamatory, before eventually reaching the 'Clara' section.

In alternating between dramatic episodes and ruminative lyrical passages, contrasts of mood and dynamics are abundant on the release, and the recording encompasses the full range of human emotion. In addition to elegance of phrasing and fluid handling of tempo, *Stimme aus der Ferne - A Voice From the Distance* is marked by clarity in both Botticelli's articulation and the sound produced by the instrument. It is, put simply, an immensely poised debut by the Canadian pianist.

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