BRAHMS: Violin Sonatas (complete); Scherzo in c, WoO2 ("F-A-E") – Stephanie Sant‘Ambrogio, v./ James Winn, p. – MSR Classics

Fine readings of great finesse, rich coloring, and complete understanding.

I have pretty much liked everything that I have heard by Stephanie Sant‘Ambrogio (currently Associate Professor of Violin and Viola at the University of Nevada, Reno, and former Concertmaster of the San Antonio Symphony), so I am not surprised to enjoy this recording of the Brahms sonatas. Of course many have trod these waters before, and many have their favorite recordings, but I must admit that I have never been completely satisfied by any of the “big name” issues in this regard save one—Anne-Sophie Mutter, in her early first for EMI (though I am fond of her later DGG as well). The “classic” Perlman/Ashkenazy has always left me cold. The one I favor right now is that of Curtis Macomber and Derek Han on Bridge Records, but I know everyone has their preferences. Somehow those who have nothing to prove reputation-wise leave me cold while those who are brave enough to enter this highly competitive market often come across with new insights.

Sant‘Ambrogio does just that. This is not gutsy, take-no-prisoners Brahms, and that will upset those who feel that unadulterated masculinity must be present in every bar. No, she takes her own road in this music, exercising a sublime and intensely lyrical approach that suits the music very well and fully fits the function of song so explicit in several of the sonatas. Indeed, aside from a few moments in the last D-minor work, which harkens back to the “F-A-E” scherzo that Brahms wrote initially as part of a joint sonata project with Schumann and Albert Dietrich, showing his energy and passion in full, these are works of constant repose and reflection. Brahms himself suggested his First Sonata, actually written after three aborted (and lost) attempts, that “you would have to a have a nice, soft, rainy evening to give the proper mood.” This could be said for all of these subtle and easily misperceived pieces that reveal their secrets in the quiet of an evening glow instead of full sun at high noon. Sant‘Ambrogio seems to understand this intuitively, and though it cannot by any means be said that she lacks power when needed, those passages are always within the context of what happens before and after, and never from a sense of doctrinal purpose or predetermined cause as to how these sonatas actually “go”.

Her partner in this, James Winn, accepts and articulates this same vision with playing that supports, leads when needed, but most of all matches her in technical acumen and various shades of color, something often ignored in this music. This is a fine issue, deliciously recorded in the warm atmospherics of Wells Fargo Auditorium in Reno, and can be recommended without reservation and no little enthusiasm.

—Steven Ritter, Audiophile Reviewer