CD Reviews

Beethoven

Violin Concerto in D major op. 61
Romanze for Violin and Orchestra no. 1 in G major op. 40
Romanze for Violin and Orchestra no. 2 in F major op. 50

Anne-Sophie Mutter *vn*
New York Philharmonic
Kurt Masur
DG 471 349-2 (65 minutes: DDD), £16.99
Notes and translations included.

Do we really need another recording of the Beethoven Violin Concerto, especially one as traditional as this? The piece enjoys a curious afterlife – cherished by audiences and performers, yet patronized by the scholars as a rather overrated work, rushed, and a little thin on material (a fate which it shares with the equally cherished, rushed, and overrated Seventh Symphony). Actually, this is a pretty nice CD. The photograph on the cover says it all: of the 18 images of the superstar scattered through the issue, the one which the producers foreground has Anne-Sophie pouting from the window of a sleek German car. And this is a BMW of a performance – precision-engineered, ultra-professional, plush, frictionless. Mutter is sensitively supported by Kurt Masur, who is, for my money, the most interesting German conductor of his generation, and one whose understated musical persona is often overlooked. Although the orchestra here happens to be the New York Philharmonic, one can detect the same warmth and intelligence which Masur has cultivated during his long association with the Leipzig Gewandhaus. The three movements are held together very convincingly. The tempo of the first is a little too stately for my liking, but this serves to underscore the speed of the finale in a way which suggests that Beethoven's design anticipates the end-weighted works of the late period. However, the performance 'thread' seems always to be Mutter's circumspect rubato, which Masur shadows quite deferentially. Most of the ritardandos and ad libitums Mutter plays are not indicated in the score, yet fall well within the performance practice described by Beethoven's theorist-pupil Carl Czerny. So every bit of passage-work sounds like a mini cadenza, never more so than the solo entry from bar 89 (the 'Emperor' is not the first concerto to begin with a cadenza). The (unmarked) huge 'rit.' at the end of the exposition, bar 201, is slightly alarming, but otherwise most of these are tastefully done. One of Mutter's trademarks, of course, is the quality and range of her tone. The tone of her first entry is absolutely gorgeous, and yet, miraculously, she conjures up extra sweetness for Beethoven's *dolce* marking for the first subject (bar 102). This is interesting from a formal standpoint, since one associates interiority with cadenzas, and yet the melody of bar 102 sounds even more *innig* than the preceding passage-work. Beethoven is always staggering structural markers in

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this concerto, a device he develops from its sister-work, the Cello Sonata in A op. 69 (the sketches for the two works are found side by side). Mutter is also very good at saying more with less, as in her habit of drawing back to a muted, un-vibrato, flautando sound for moments of greatest expression. She marshals this effect strategically: the 'flautando' is deployed exactly twice in the first movement, in the astonishing tonal swerve from C major to B minor at bar 301 for the *minore* ritornello of the first subject, and at bar 331, for the enigmatic mid-development G minor theme (an exact analogue of the mysterious E minor 'new' theme from the 'Eroica' development). This bespeaks cunning architectural thinking. Sometimes it can sound contrived. Mutter's standard trick, it seems, is to institute this effect at the beginning of a 'vibrato curve', starting off plain and heaping up the expression to a climax. This is done most obviously – even crudely – in the middle of the slow movement, from bar 45. Mutter misfires here, and surprisingly (for such a technician) *for intonation reasons*. The cantabile ritornello of the Larghetto romance at bar 45, which Mutter plays as Beethoven directs 'sul G e D', is preceded by passage-work of such wide vibrato that the sudden wrench to colourless flautando makes the G of the melody sound horribly flat, even like a bad F♯. On the other hand, this is the first performance which made me realize that Beethoven reserves most of his double-stopping for the finale; the *tinta* of the concerto is shaped this way.

Regarding dialogue, it is surprising how deftly the full orchestra keeps up with Mutter's tempo changes. A nice case in point is the long violin trill at the end of the exposition (bar 205), which Masur uses as a pivot for picking up speed again. Once the orchestra is settled on the long chords of bar 216 ff., Mutter waxes rhapsodic and speeds up, so the tutti of bar 224 reins in the tempo. One of Masur's mannerisms, however, is dramatic hairpin swells at moments of climax. At the glorious reprise of bar 365, he does something rather questionable: he ignores Beethoven's ***sf*** markings for the downbeats, takes them actually *lower* than the upbeat hammer-blows, and then swells alarmingly through the sustained chords. The sound is of someone twiddling with the volume control. But these are quibbles. For my taste, the finale could have danced and laughed more, but this is a fine recording any way you cut it. And it is appropriate that the concerto is matched on the same disc with the justly popular Romances (which are much more than mere apprenticeship pieces). Obviously, this is not an interpretation which goes down the road of the authenticity movement, and it would be invidious to make comparisons. Moreover, for most people who already own a version of the concerto, I would be hard pressed to recommend this CD as an extra purchase. But for those who unaccountably do not own a traditional recording (actually, like me!), they could hardly do better than Mutter and Masur.

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