Richard Strauss & Dmitri Shostakovich: Sonatas for Violin & Piano

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I'm at a loss whether to call this unusual juxtaposition of Strauss and Shostakovich balanced or schizoid—all the melodic rapture belongs to Strauss, all the deep tragic feeling to Shostakovich. In the Victorian era a violin sonata couldn't be all marzipan and sunshine without exhibiting post-Paganini virtuosity. Neither of these works complies. Strauss's Violin Sonata dates from the years, 1887 and 1888, when he was ready to burst forth with great orchestral tone poems, and at times, as in the opening piano flourish that aspires to be the opening of Ein Heldenleben, you can hear that Strauss needed a grander stage than chamber music affords. He doesn't particularly exploit the violin's ability to dazzle except in passing moments, so his Violin Sonata must fly on the wings of song, which is does quite lusciously.

Since I've never collected the work, I have no decided opinions about existing recordings, but to my ears the superb German violinist Franziska Pietsch and competition-winning Spanish pianist Josu De Solaun offer an ideal performance. I've admired every release I've heard from Pietsch, who has grown into a major interpretative talent from her beginnings as a child prodigy in East Germany. Her playing exhibits real command besides the expected tonal beauty, perfect technique, and musicality. Strauss wrote a solo-quality part for the piano, too, and De Solaun takes full advantage in bold, bravura style. Pietsch's equally bold, expansive approach gives the piece a dramatic dimension missed by even such stellar violinists as Gil Shaham and Gidon Kremer, both on DG.

If the Strauss came at the beginning of his golden triumphant years, the Shostakovich Violin Sonata belongs to a late period where acclaim and the end of any possible political persecution were counterweighed with bad health and flagging energy. In collaboration with David Oistrakh, the dedicatee, the sonata was completed in October 1968, and in keeping with the gray no man's land of the early Brezhnev years, it can be played for stark desolation, tight-lipped understatement, and bitterness. Even without editorializing, it's a work that gains its power, as with so much late Shostakovich, by staring life's grim realities in the face.

I sometimes wonder how violinists could discover any bright spots in the score; moreover, the famous and all-but-definitive Melodiya recording with Oistrakh and Richter seemed to extract the utmost in emotion, such as it was, that the score could offer. The piece's enervated expression calls for the passacaglia theme in the finale to be introduced in dry pizzicato by the violin, as if muttered on the verge of a refusal to speak. Pietsch and De Soluan are less existential than Oistrakh and Richter (we aren't invited to bring suicide pills with us, just in case). Pietsch uses a purer, less abrasive tone than Oistrakh, and long stretches are more meditative than despairing.

One advantage of a softened approach is that when Pietch's violin does cry out

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desperately, the gesture makes for a strong contrast, where Oistrakh and Richter can seem relentlessly dogged. Besides her great musicality, Pietsch is also a colorist, matching different tonal qualities to suit each passage. She unleashes an angry, acerbic outburst in the Scherzo, surpassing anyone I've heard before. She bows with a wildness almost shocking as the music's fury mounts. In the finale Pietsch and De Solaun inject interest, even mystery, into writing that can feel deliberately banal.

Altogether, despite the odd programming, this is an outstanding release and a must-listen for both works if you love them. The recorded sound is close, detailed, and very lifelike. The two performers have been a duo only since 2017—this is their debut disc together—and it is announced that they will make a series of recordings for Audite.

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