



Sergei Prokofiev: Violin Concertos

aud 97.733

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If the superb violinist Franziska Pietsch is largely unknown in America, history has played a mischievous part. As a rising young star, she was called “the Anne-Sophie Mutter of East Germany” before sharp dislocations took place, and her career bounced around. Pietsch’s father escaped to the West in 1984, which turned government support of her into a boycott. After coming West herself in 1986, she continued her studies in various places, including Juilliard under the legendary Dorothy DeLay. For decades Pietsch has been variously a concertmaster, chamber musician—she helped found the estimable Trio Testore in 2000—and soloist. After she left the Trio in 2015, the year she turned 46, a new recording phase began.

Audite has released three recitals for violin and piano, and when I reviewed the one devoted to Prokofiev’s two violin sonatas in Fanfare 40:6, only limited space in my 2016 Want List kept it from being included. What was true then applies equally to this new release of the two Prokofiev violin concertos: “In this new release the intensely serious violinist Franziska Pietsch expresses a strong personal connection with the pieces.” The PR blurb notes the same personal connection here, because the Russian influence in East Germany acquainted Pietsch early on with this music, and now she comes full circle to record it.

I’ve never quite understood why the Second Violin Concerto is more popular than the First—they are both unmistakably from the same musical imagination, although Concerto No. 1 was written during Prokofiev’s Neoclassical period in Russia in 1917 and Concerto No. 2 while in exile in 1935—they bookend his exile, so to speak. (As a curious historical note, when the First Violin Concerto was premiered in a Parisian concert led by Koussevitzky, Stravinsky made his conducting debut on the same occasion, leading his Octet for Winds.) Whatever the Neoclassical label tells musicologists, the earlier concerto feels bold and abrasive, if that’s the tack the soloist wants to take, as Lydia Mordkovitch did on her dark, rebellious recording with Neeme Järvi (Chandos). I wouldn’t want to be without that recording, and now Pietsch becomes a must-listen in the same unsettling vein: She turns the Scherzo, which is innocently marked *Vivacissimo*, into a furious hornet’s nest. Conductor Cristian Măcelaru is of the same mind, making a stronger contribution to the collaboration than Järvi does. Nothing is innocent about this reading, and Pietsch has the skill to make her violin express every jab and regretful sigh.

Bringing intensity and a strong personality to Concerto No. 2 was carried to extremes by the wild-child violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja (does anyone else play concertos barefoot?) in a gritty recording with Vladimir Jurowski (Naïve). Their assault is all the



more startling because the later concerto is considered more conventional and lyrical than the earlier. It takes a tolerance for scraping and scrappiness to love that reading. Pietsch is just as imaginative, her tone just as varied, her phrasing just as personal, but we are pulled in to appreciate the nuances where Kopatchinskaja dares us to hang on for the ride. For an exhibition of pure, sweet sound, one can turn to Gil Shaham's acclaimed DG recording under a rather stolid André Previn, and for many the rounded luxury of Oistrakh's tone is indispensable.

The full-to-bursting discography of both Prokofiev concertos doesn't daunt this newcomer. Pietsch is a fascinating artist, and the fast-rising Măcelaru is someone to watch, having won the Solti Conducting Award in 2014 and moving up from assistant conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra to conductor-in-residence. He gets beautiful playing from the Deutsches Symphony of Berlin, and everything has been captured in exceptionally clear, beautiful sound. I find myself wanting once more to write two Want Lists for the year.

PROKOFIEV Violin Concertos Nos. 1 and 2 • Franziska Pietsch (vn); Cristian Măcelaru, cond; Deutsches SO Berlin • AUDITE 97.733 (Streaming audio: 49:51) <https://www.naxosmusiclibrary.com/catalogue/item.asp?cid=Audite97.733>

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