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Photo Jack Mitchell

ISRAELA MARGALIT

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CHANDOS RECORDS LTD, COLCHESTER, ENGLAND



SCHUMANN : PIANO CONCERTO
SAINT-SAËNS : PIANO CONCERTO NO.2

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS (1835-1921)

Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor Op. 22 (24:14)

- 1 I - Andante sostenuto (11:31)
- 2 II - Scherzando (5:42)
- 3 III - Presto (6:53)

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810-1856)

Piano Concerto in A minor Op. 54 (34:14)

- 4 I - Allegro affettuoso (16:55)
- 5 II - Intermezzo: Andantino (6:24)
- 6 III - Allegro vivace (10:51)

TT = 58:35 [DDD]

ISRAELA MARGALIT piano
LONDON PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA
Leader, David Nolan
BRYDEN THOMSON conductor

Few compositions are held in greater affection than the Schumann Piano Concerto. Its success is perhaps partially explained not only by a rare lyrical charm and inventiveness but by the union of a taut, if superficially free, structure with a rich vein of poetry. Virtually monothematic, there is also great variety of mood, and *Florestan* (the man of action) and *Eusebius* (the dreamer), — two of Schumann's most dearly cherished fictions — are in constant dialogue, opposition and accord. Once described as 'a genius struggling with the angel of tradition,' Schumann daringly opts for a positively Lisztian form of melodic recreation rather than classical development. The listener's sense of successful links and transplants, for example, is memorably reinforced by the principle subject's transmutation into a melting A flat episode where *Eusebius* is at his most magically communing and introspective, the rhythm of his speech subtly altered and sifted to suggest a pensive yet restless and questing nature. Less elaborately but no less remarkably, the second subject is simply the first, deftly changed into the relative major.

The first movement started life in 1841 as a *Fantasie*, and the second and third movements were born in 1845, their umbilical cord still firmly attached to their parent. The opening outburst (an inspiration for the later theatrical flourishes that commence both the Grieg and Rachmaninov's First Piano Concertos) is countered by one of Schumann's most assuaging melodies, already alive with rhythmic variety within itself and ripe for constant offshoots and variations. These include a cascading, foam-crested *animato*, volleys of octaves and an impassioned transformation of the principle theme, plangently and radiantly harmonised. The calming of such a heated argument is one of many masterstrokes and reminds us that this is essentially a musician's Concerto rather than a superficial pyrotechnical alternative. Past gladiators of the keyboard who rejoiced in note spinners such as Spohr or Ries must have been sadly disappointed by a work in which even the cadenza is strong, dignified and relatively restrained.

The Intermezzo's child-like simplicity is quintessential Schumann, the gentle patter of its principle subject contrasted by the cello's heart-easing melody, a far cry from *gemütlichkeit* or the complacency inseparable from inferior examples of German romanticism. This magical interlude closes with a cyclic reappearance of the Concerto's opening theme, and horns, combined with the piano's phantom trail of fifths, provide a remarkable transition to the finale's ebullient curtain-raiser. Music

of a refined energy and brio, the *Allegro vivace* is an idealisation of waltz rhythm and includes a second subject in E major syncopated to suggest that 3/4 has become 3/2. Such devices are part and parcel of a teeming inventive imagination which also provides enough awkward hair-pin bends to remind the pianistically unwary that the Schumann Concerto is technically as well as poetically demanding.

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Unlike the Schumann Concerto, Saint-Saëns's Second is unapologetically virtuosic and glitters with a wholly French wit, sophistication and style. Written and performed within three weeks it is a monument to Saint-Saëns's phenomenal facility, journeying with typical aplomb from Bach to Offenbach. The piano's opening and canonic ascent bursts with startling rapidity into a blaze of Lisztian rhetoric before the orchestra announces the first theme based on a *tantum ergo* by Saint-Saëns's teacher Gabriel Fauré. This is of exceptional quality though the halting, charmingly terraced second subject, double note elaboration and impassioned declamation that follow are a far cry from Fauré's serene and subtly complex genius. A storming development and an unusually ambitious and inclusive cadenza proceed to a hushed apotheosis of all that has gone before (virtuosity recollected in tranquillity, if you like) and the traditional and emphatic end in no way erases one's sense of an imaginative daring with which Saint-Saëns is rarely credited.

All seriousness or mock-seriousness is resolved in the *Allegro scherzando* which elevates Mendelssohnian, elfin dexterity to a new and sparkling height. The galumphing second subject, set within such an aerial and scintillating context, is an outrageous surprise and quickly sets the seal on the music's immediate and understandable popularity. With a sly echo of the timpani's opening rhythm the soloist concludes the music's fanciful flight with a delicate *leggerissimo* spray of arpeggios before joining the orchestra in two quick-silver grace notes; a Puckish and insouciant farewell.

The final whirlwind *Tarantella* may betray the speed with which it was written yet, like the second movement, it will set even the least susceptible heads nodding and feet tapping. The swinging minim chords at the close are a bold, resourceful stroke and so is the breathless race of events, something clearly designed to leave everyone — and particularly the pianist — breathless but elated. Few concertos

tingle with such irresistible *joi de vivre*, or show how levity can become elevated to such a seductive virtue.

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Israella Margalit's studies began at the age of six in her native Israel. She graduated from the Academy of Music in Tel Aviv and went on for further work in London and Munich. After her sensational Munich debut in 1967 she was quickly invited to appear with the major orchestras of Europe including the London Philharmonic, New Philharmonia, the Scottish National, the Berlin Radio Symphony, the Orchestre National de Paris, the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, the Munich Philharmonic, the Radio Orchestra of Rome and Milan, the Israel Philharmonic and the Tokyo Philharmonic.

Word of this outstanding young pianist reached the United States, and in 1970 she made her debut with the New York Philharmonic, followed by engagements with the Philadelphia, Cleveland, Boston Symphony and Chicago Symphony Orchestras.

In 1973 Israella Margalit began a 6-year sabbatical from the concert stage to devote more time to her two small children, during which time she studied philosophy, politics and literature and took up painting. She continued to play the piano privately and returned to the concert platform in the 1979-80 season, since when she has been busier than ever with a crowded schedule of concerts, recital tours and appearances on television music and talk shows. She has also found time to enter a new field: she has completed scripts for two television films on the life of Beethoven, in which she acts as narrator as well as performing with distinguished colleagues.

Israella Margalit is fluent in four languages and holds an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from Lake Erie College, Ohio.

Bryden Thomson is held in high esteem for his major contribution to raising the stature of British orchestras. He has held posts as Principal Conductor of the BBC Philharmonic, BBC Welsh and Ulster Orchestras, Associate Conductor of the Scottish National and Assistant Conductor of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra. He is currently Principal Conductor of the RTE Symphony Orchestra and Conductor Laureate of the Ulster Orchestra.

The increasing interest in 20th century British music owes much to Bryden Thomson, who has given premières of many important works by British and Irish composers and has done much to promote British music at home and abroad. He has championed composers such as Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Bax, Harty, Ireland and many others; his recordings of their music have won much world-wide acclaim and played a significant part in enhancing the reputation of both Chandos and the Ulster Orchestra, with which he began the complete cycle of Symphonies of Arnold Bax.

He maintains his interest in Scandinavian composers, including Sallinen, Holmboe, Nielsen and Sibelius, and he has been very active in the field of opera: as Conductor at the Norwegian Opera in Oslo, Royal Opera in Stockholm and at Scottish Opera. Television audiences will know him for his genial but straightforward manner in handling the young competitors in the BBC Young Musician of the Year Competition.

In 1984 the New University of Ulster conferred on him an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters in recognition of his services to music in Ulster, and he recently received an award from the Scottish Composers Society.

- **A Chandos Digital Recording**
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- Assistant Engineer: Philip Couzens
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