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**CD Review by Peter J. Rabinowitz**

**FARRENC** Variations on a Theme by Onslow, op. 10. *Variations brillantes on a Theme by Donizetti*, op. 15. *Air Russe Varié*, op. 17. *Grandes Variations on a Theme by Gallenberg*, op. 25 • Biliana Tzinlikova (pn) • PALADINO 0088 (53:02)

Theme and variations, especially for solo instruments, is a two-edged form. On the one hand, it can provide weaker composers with a scaffolding that saves a lot of structural, melodic, and harmonic labor; on the other hand, unless treated with skill, it can easily encourage redundancy. Even the greatest composers are sometimes stymied: Rachmaninoff's *Chopin Variations* probably go on too long, and while his *Corelli Variations* assuredly do not, the composer thought they did. (He was so afraid of sapping his audience's patience, in fact, that he abridged the Corelli set in performance, skipping a variation whenever the audience coughed.)

Farrenc, however, circumvents the sense of repetitiousness with her remarkable facility for shifting gears, bumping the dreamy up against the dramatic, the florid against the flowing, the wistful (especially in the Russian set, much admired by Robert Schumann) against the whimsical, the sensational against the solemn. Besides its variety, the music is notable for its clarity, too. There's plenty of brilliance here (this is virtuoso material, which may in spots remind you of Gottschalk or Herz), plenty of ornamental and contrapuntal



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creativity (especially in the Russian set, which builds to a fugue before its closing pages), plenty of *Sturm und Drang*—but the music always retains a post-Classical poise under the most extravagant of its early-Romantic gestures.

True, I'm not entirely convinced by the Gallenberg set, originally for piano and orchestra (or quartet) but played here with the pianist taking over the minimal orchestral parts: Assured as it is, the music is not as consistently inventive as that on the other three sets. Still, even this work nearly redeems itself with its dizzy ending—and the disc as a whole is an unqualified winner, especially given the imagination of the performances. Biliana Tzinlikova has gotten excellent reviews from Myron Silberstein and Scott Noriega for her Hoffmeister and Heller, and in this latest archeological dig (both the Gallenberg and the Onslow sets are plausibly advertised as premiere recordings) she reveals the kind of zest, color, sensitivity, and wit that fully justifies another round of praise. Good sound, too. Warmly recommended.

**Peter J. Rabinowitz**

This article originally appeared in Issue 42:1 (Sept/Oct 2018) of *Fanfare Magazine*.



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