

FANFARE MAGAZINE BY ROBERT MAXHAM, FEBRUARY 2012 ©

MOZART VIOLIN SONATA IN G, K 301. BEETHOVEN VIOLIN SONATA NO. 9, "KREUTZER." BRAHMS VIOLIN SONATA NO. 3
URSULA BAGDASARJANZ (VN); LUCIANO SGRIZZI, BRUNO F. SALADIN (PN)
GALLO 1352 (68:35) LIVE: 1964

The fifth volume of Swiss violinist Ursula Bagdasarjanz's collection of studio and live recordings on the Gallo label contains three sonatas, one each by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Johannes Brahms. She and pianist Luciano Sgrizzi recorded Mozart's Sonata in G Major in Studio Lugano in April 1963; the engineers surrounded the duo with very little reverberation and Bagdasarjanz sounds very close up, but the realistic recorded sound virtually places a listener in the room (or places the listener in a virtual room) with the musicians. In general, Bagdasarjanz combines rhythmic incisiveness with almost period starchiness tonally and stylistically. But her vibrant sense of and fidelity to what she obviously believes to be the music's rhetoric combine to make her reading of Mozart commanding and, ultimately, convincing — especially in the first movement, in which she reveals an unsuspected urgency. Not so suave in Mozart as Arthur Grumiaux or so sharply focused on detail as Catherine Mackintosh, she combines the best aspects of both approaches and deserves on the basis of this reading to be mentioned alongside them on any shortlist of Mozart interpreters.

The live performances of Beethoven's and Brahms's sonatas with pianist Bruno F. Saladin come from 1964, approximately the same date as the studio recording of Mozart. Caught at a greater distance in them, her tone loses some of its edge and her reading correspondingly loses some of its detail, but there's enough left for any normal recorded sound. Her reading of the "Kreutzer" Sonata takes a very different tack than that of Jascha Heifetz or Zino Francescatti, whose performances set a sort of benchmark in white-hot intensity; Bagdasarjanz seems from the first notes of the introduction warm rather than hot. Her reading, for example, of what I've called the Janissary theme doesn't rollick with whipped-up frenzy, but presents a different and, again, as in Mozart, a convincing, though kinder and gentler, view. Not that the reading lacks the passion that might inspire a novel, but it's diverted through calmer and more amiable streams. Bagdasarjanz plays the theme of the variation movement with a warmth, subtlety, and geniality that sound like Fritz Kreisler's — except that Kreisler himself played the theme more straightforwardly and with greater rhythmic springiness. That geniality continues through the first two variations (Bagdasarjanz sounds particularly silvery in the second of them), but she and Saladin dim the lights for the minor variation. The following *maggiore* serves in this reading almost as a Hegelian synthesis of the preceding two, while the *Molto adagio* sums everything up in a penetrating synopsis. If the somewhat slow tempo at the finale's opening makes the reading sound less urgent at its outset, her tonal weight and general storminess still generate plenty of driving force.

Bagdasarjanz soars in the first movement of Brahms's sonata; her reading never seems undesirably light in weight or tone (an analogous predication in the terms of scholastic phi-

osophy). In fact, her tone, though pure and mercurial in the upper registers, remains almost seductively dusky in the lower ones. In the slow movement's opening passages, it oozes with honeyed richness. Only very occasionally does security falter in the third movement (but it's a live recording); on the other hand, the brisk reading of the finale sweeps everything before it with concerto-like massiveness.

Bagdasarjanz's recital, assembled from various sources, makes a satisfying whole, not least because of the violinist's integrity and insight into each of the styles she channels. Very strongly recommended as playing of the very first order, in music of the very first order: a wonderful way of encountering Bagdasarjanz, either for the first time or on a repeat visit.

FANFARE: Robert Maxham