

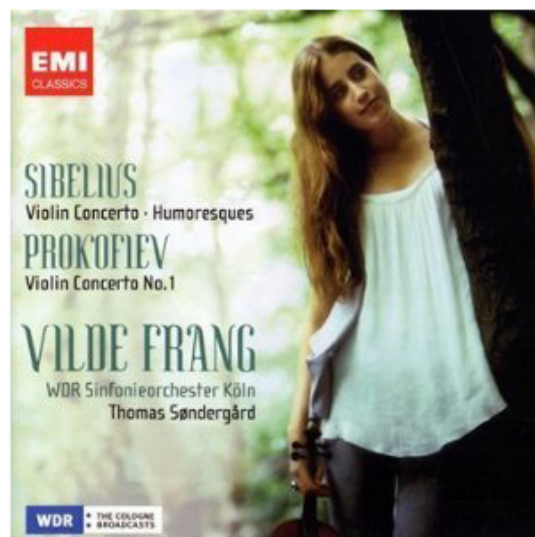
CD REVIEW 36

SIBELIUS Violin Concerto
PROKOFIEV Violin Concerto no. 1
SIBELIUS Humoreskes Op 87 nos 1, 2 and Op 89 no. 3.

Vilde Frang, WDR SO. Köln, Thomas Sondergard
EMI Classics 6 84413 2 (DDD) (63.56)

I must confess to being put off this disc since the soloist refers to the Sibelius Concerto as ice and fire. Such comments can be deterrents.

There is also the problem that Ginette Neveu's performance of this amazing work is still the best from the point of violin playing. She reigns and will continue to reign supreme. However, I have to say that the Cologne Orchestra on this CD is stunning.



Vilde Frang was born in Norway in 1986 and made her debut at the age of ten with the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra and, two years later, was invited to perform with the Oslo PO under Mariss Jansons. She has played throughout Europe and the Balkans and toured the USA with Anne-Sophie Mutter. She has also appeared with fine soloists such as Marta Agerich and the superlative Gidon Kremer as well as the eccentric Maxim Vengerov who, like Lang Lang, is unbearable to watch.

Frang graduated in 2002 from the Barratt-Due Institute of Music in Oslo and went to study with Kolja Blacher in Germany in 2003. She has won many prizes and awards and deservedly so, and made her debut with the London PO under Vladimir Jurowski in 2007.

Let us not be mistaken. She is a very fine violinist and has received a great amount of support from both the gracious Anne-Sophie Mutter and Dame Mitsuko Uchida who is a brilliant pianist in Mozart and the magnificent concerto by Schoenberg.

This is her Frang's first recording, but fire and ice?

She is at her very best in the slow movement of the Sibelius with a gorgeous variety of tone but she is also very good in the outer movements. I love the purity of her high notes. She tends to attack in some places where it is not specified and she occasionally lingers over a phrase which, obviously to her, has a beauty that she feels needs to be emphasised. She really has the measure of the finale but there are a few portamenti which seem out of place. Sometimes her double stopping seems strained and as if she is making too much of it. The timing is at risk a couple of times.

I wish to repeat that the orchestra is superb. Lots of detail and the conductor is premiere league. Very impressive. The sound could not be better.

There are many moments when you want to throw your hat in the air, shout Bravo and applaud non stop. It is a very moving and exciting performance. The rhythmic vitality is stupendous and I have never heard the rhythmic motive on the timpani before.

Sibelius is unique. He wrote many masterpieces. All his symphonies are different and I consider the Symphony no. 6 to be a supreme work. Then there is Pohjola's Daughter and Tapiola, Rakastava, the Karelia Suite and the Swan of Tuonola. And what a fine orchestrator Sibelius was.

These minor reservations of the Violin Concerto must not deter from a performance that is often staggeringly good. The joy in this music is infectious and this recording has an inimitable therapeutic value.

She is even better in Prokofiev's Violin Concerto no. 1 in D, Op 19. Here she does show her maturity with a sweet tone in the opening Andantino. The variety she brings to this work and her amazing pizzicato would have made Prokofiev proud. Her double stopping is controlled and effortless here. Again the orchestra is magnificent. Listen to it at 7.45 and then when the flute and violin tessituras enter. Magical.

The scherzo is marked vivacissimo and is just that for most of the time. Her pizzicatos and quasi glissandi are quite amazing as is her contrast of tone. The speed is breathtaking and the playing nothing short of sensational.

The finale, Moderato-Adagio, has a strange opening and you are left feeling, Can this be serious? But it soon improves although the music remains rather naive until 1.58 when it settles down somewhat, but the jagged character is still there. Again the orchestra and the sound is excellent but it is a personal opinion that this finale was not one of Prokofiev's successes. Is it sarcastic one moment and serious the next? The final two minutes seem to redeem the movement.

The great Ida Haendel introduced me to the Sibelius Humoreskes and they are little gems. Two make up Op 87 and there are both here and Op 89 has four. The Op 89 no. 3 is the most famous and understandably so.

A fine violinist, a superb orchestra and conductor, wonderful sound and a rewarding musical experience.

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