BEETHOVEN The Violin Sonatas • Barbara Govatos (vn); Marcantonio Barone (pn) • BRIDGE 9389
(4CDs: 229:01)

With so many recordings of these sonatas to choose from, starting with the first complete set (I believe) by Fritz Kreisler and Franz Rupp in 1935, listeners have been both seduced and disappointed by the various versions that followed. Yehudi Menuhin? The most sensuously beautiful tone in all of violin-dom. To my ears Louis Kentner on his early EMI set is prosaic while Wilhelm Kempff on the 1970 set, as usual, overplays his hand and is all over the place musically. (Menuhin and Glenn Gould left us an impressive recording of Sonata No. 10, but that’s the only one they did together.) David Oistrakh? I can’t think of a better overall violinist, but in his case the pianist (Lv Oborin) underplays his part. So too does Brooks Smith with Jascha Heifetz. Gidon Kremer with Argerich? A nice try, but for all his drama I can’t take Kremer’s wiry, inconsistent tone. In all my experience, I’ve only heard two sets that have really pleased me, Arthur Grumiaux with Clara Haskil (Decca) and a very personal favorite of mine, Pamela and Claude Frank (Music & Arts).

Now we can add Barbara Govatos and Marcantonio Barone, and in certain ways they surpass both my favorite sets. Not necessarily in violin tone: Govatos, who has been a first violinist of the Philadelphia Orchestra since 1982, has the kind of timbre one normally associates with a lead violinist in an orchestra: very bright, with a cutting sound à la Heifetz, which on records occasionally comes across as hard when in person it does not. But Govatos is, without question, one of the most interesting and intense interpreters of these supremely challenging works I’ve ever heard, and I’m willing to overlook occasional hardness for the sake of her incredible musical intensity and intelligence. To put it colorfully, Govatos simply eats these sonatas up. She pounces on every phrase with the intensity of a cat cornering its prey; she knows how to inject elegance and drama when needed, and more importantly, she also understands Beethoven’s peculiar galumphing sense of humor. And without those occasional touches of humor, the drama falls flat. Grumiaux and Menuhin also understood this, but Heifetz did not: For him, everything was pretty serious.

I no longer have the Grumiaux-Haskil set for comparison, but playing the Franks side-by-side with Govatos and Barone one is left speechless by the latter’s accomplishments. I always found the Franks very fine in capturing the dynamic range of this music, but Govatos and Barone are almost always more dynamic. It’s like seeing a favorite movie that one knew in color suddenly spring to life in 3-D, and of course much of this is owed to Barone. With the exception of Leonard Shure, whose live performances of the violin sonatas are available with an OK but not great violinist (Henri Temianka), I can’t recall having heard the piano parts of these sonatas (I’m speaking now of complete sets, not individual recordings) played with such intense and intelligent phrasing and control of dynamics. In brief, Barone maintains such a consistently high standard in his playing that it rises above the function of mere accompaniment to become an equal partner in the continuing drama, and the duo employs a generous amount of rubato which will keep listeners on the edge of their seats. With both musicians functioning on such a consistently high level, everything falls into place. I’m not ready to say that their performance of the “Kreutzer” Sonata comes up to the level of intensity achieved by Bronislaw Huberman, particularly in his second (1930) recording with Ignacy Friedman, but then again neither does anyone else. More to the point, Govatos and Barone give us something a bit more valuable, a true representation of this sonata as defined by Beethoven in its original title: “Sonata for the Piano and an Obbligato Violin, written in a very concertante style, almost like that of a concerto.” Long-winded, yes, but a much more accurate description of the music than “Kreutzer Sonata,” which in fact it was not. It was originally written for and premiered by the mulatto violinist George Augustus Bridgetower, only dedicated to Rodolphe Kreutzer—who hated the music and never played it—when it was published.

Perhaps one means of judging the supremely high quality of this set is not from the more famous sonatas but rather from those that normally make very little impression. A good example is the fourth sonata, op. 23, in A Minor. This is probably Beethoven’s most lyrical and least dramatic violin sonata, a work that has a difficult time making its mark. Govatos and Barone retain the required lyricism in their phrasing (in fact, in this work her tone is at its sweetest and most exquisite), yet there’s a smoldering intensity in the first and last movements, suggesting that the composer’s own emotions were somehow reined in during its composition but still present. (The liner notes tell an amusing anecdote by Beethoven’s pupil, pianist Ferdinand Ries, who was asked to play this work for the composer. Ries...
was so nervous about trying to get the feeling of this music right that he balked, offering to play any other sonata but that one, but Beethoven was adamant. Surprising even himself, Ries passed muster with the notoriously demanding Beethoven.) Another of my favorite test-pieces is the Eighth Sonata (op. 30/3), which I have in a superlatively version by Fritz Kreisler (not from the complete set) with Sergei Rachmaninoff. Govatos and Barone not only equal them in terms of phrasing and energy, but find an even greater dynamic and emotional range in virtually every movement.

The liner notes also give us a fascinating glimpse into how these two superb musicians got together. It seems that Govatos and Barone first met as 18-year-olds who won prizes “in different divisions of the same concerto competition in Philadelphia,” and liked each others’ playing, but it wasn’t until five years later that Barone had the chance to reconnect Govatos by phone on behalf of a mutual friend. Apparently, both had the same idea: You know what? I really liked your playing...let’s perform chamber music together! And they’ve done so as recital partners since 1985.

Yet another excellent reason for owning this set: All the sonatas are presented here in chronological order. Now, how hard is that, really? Especially since they fit easily onto four discs in that order. (In fact, to be honest, this set could have come out on three CDs, even though the third would have been 80:15 long...lots of modern-day CDs are a shade over 80 minutes, some actually around 81 minutes.) This set sells online for only $5 more than either Grumiaux and Haskil (Decca 886502) or Pamela and Claude Frank (Music & Arts 1143, once on Music Masters 67197 which sold for around $50), but you’re getting much more realistic sound than the former and livelier performances than the latter. Highly recommended. Lynn René Bayley

* * *

Barbara Govatos plays with the Philadelphia Orchestra: This is the first recording of hers I can find a trace of. It’s an impressive set that will go alongside my LPs of Arthur Grumiaux with Clara Haskil, the Szeryng with Ingrid Haebler, and the slightly mannered Gidon Kremer recording of op. 12 with Martha Argerich. Marcantonio Barone doesn’t quite reproduce the hush of Clara Haskil’s delicate opening of the second movement of the Kreutzer, which seems to me perfect in its way, as does Grumiaux’s typically elegant entrance. Govatos and Barone are more outgoing, more sensual. Of course they are also recorded more warmly and with more presence. Still, I think it’s their temperament as well. Their Beethoven is lively, even cheery at times. They have admirable rapport, which one hears in the subtle shifts in dynamics, shared accents, and in slight adjustments of tempo. That rapport is evident from the beginning with the aggressive opening phrases of opus 12/1. They share the bold opening statement and all the subtle retreats and, as Shakespeare would say, little alarms later. Again, on these difficult early works, the pair is more forward than intimate, openly sensual in tone and likely to take lively tempos. The recorded sound is forward and clear. The performances are excellent in their boldly extroverted way. This is a welcome set and the beginning of what one hopes is a long recording career for this duo. Michael Ullman

* * *

Barbara Govatos and Marcantonio Barone enliven their complete set of Ludwig van Beethoven’s violin sonatas with an attention to minute detail that nevertheless doesn’t lose sight of the forest for the trees, either in individual sonatas or, perhaps more important in such an undertaking, in the set as a whole. In fact, it’s as easy to trace the composer’s development through Govatos’s and Barone’s sensibilities as through the fussier readings of Anne-Sophie Mutter. In particular, Barone’s bright-toned pianism not only makes the murky clear but conceals a world of thought in each articulation. So does Govatos’s darker violin playing—all her considerable, well-thought-out detail in dynamics and articulation emerges swathed in the rich tone of the 1619 Brothers Amati on which she plays. Almost every movement from every sonata brings something fresh, and does so with such commanding urgency that it’s impossible not to pay attention. It’s like seeing a movie for the first time in high definition. But the duo collaborates with a warmth and alertness that goes well beyond simple definition. In the foreboding sense of mystery they bring to the opening of the Sixth Sonata, for example, the duo probes the limits of their range, proving that their tool kit of expressive
devices and manners includes more than a fine-tooth comb. And they rumble impressively in the Ninth Sonata’s outer movements—even at the appropriate places throughout the 10th—but also in the Eighth, in which their razor-sharp articulation raises goose bumps. The lifelike recorded sound gives listeners the sense of being present at the creation. And then there’s the mellifluous tone—and unsentimental but generous sensibility—Govatos discovers in the slow movement of the Fifth.

Barone’s booklet notes provide historical and analytical detail in a way that’s analogous in its penetration and insight to similar perspicuity in the performances themselves; he discusses various harmonic procedures (as well as motivic ones) in a semi-technical manner that should appeal to musicians but remain, if barely, comprehensible to general readers as well.

There can be no question about the craftsmanship or the technical and intellectual preparation the partners demonstrate. So the recommendation? Ah, there’s the rub. For despite the high quality throughout, the set should appeal most strongly to those who have followed the duo’s live performances, although it can also be recommended, despite its cost as a complete set (why not individual CDs that allow listeners to pick and choose the sonatas they wish to hear?), as a more than safe bet to specialists who have finished collecting complete sets by Joseph Szigeti, Jascha Heifetz, Zino Francescatti, David Oistrakh, Arthur Grumiaux, Aaron Rosand, Itzhak Perlman, Pinchas Zukerman, Augustin Dumay, and, more recently, Kristóf Baráti (Klára Würtz on Brilliant 94310, Fanfare 36:4).

Robert Maxham