

A SOLOMON ANTHOLOGY

- CHOPIN: Ballade No. 4, Op. 52 (rec. 1 Apr. '46); Etude, Op. 10/3 (rec. 3 July '45); Waltz No. 14, Op. posth (rec. 2 Apr. '46); Berceuse, Op. 57 (rec. 4 Sept. '42); Polonaise No. 6, Op. 53 (rec. 14 Dec. '32); Fantasia Op. 49 (rec. 2 Dec. '32); Nocturne, Op. 9/2 (rec. 4 Sept. '42); Waltz No. 5, Op. 42 (rec. 3 July '45); Etude Op. 25/1 (rec. 14 Dec. '32); Polonaise No. 3, Op. 40/1 (rec. 30 Nov. '32); Etude, Op. 10/8 (rec. 29 Dec. '34); Mazurka No. 47, Op. 68/2 (rec. 2 Apr. '46); Nocturne, Op. 27/2 (rec. 21 Aug. '42); Etude Op. 10/9 (rec. 18 Sept. '42); Etude Op. 25/2 (rec. 18 Sept. '42); Etude Op. 25/3 (rec. 29 Dec. '34)
- DEBUSSY: Préludes Book One: No. 2 Voiles (rec. 1 Apr. '46); No. 8 La fille aux cheveux de lin (rec. 2 Apr. '46); No. 10 La cathédrale engloutie (rec. 22 June '48)
- HAYDN: Piano Sonatas: Hob XVI: No. 35 (rec. 19 Aug. '52); No. 37 (rec. 1-2 Apr. '46)
- SCHUBERT: Piano Sonatas: No. 15, D.784 (rec. 3-4 Dec. '52); No. 14, D.664 (rec. 23 & 28 Aug. '56)
- MOZART: Piano Sonata No. 17, K.576 (rec. 9 June '52)
- BRAHMS: Piano Sonata No. 3, Op. 5 (rec. 19-20 Aug. '52); Rhapsodie, Op. 79/2 (rec. 20 Apr. '44); Intermezzo, Op. 117/2 (rec. 20 Apr. '44)
- BEETHOVEN: Sonatine, WoO.50 (rec. 22 June '48)
- SCHUMANN: Carnaval, Op. 9 (rec. 7-8 June '52)
- BRAHMS: Variations on a theme of Handel, Op. 24 (rec. July/Aug. '42)
- F. COUPERIN: La carillon de Cythère (rec. 22 June '51)
- D. SCARLATTI: Sonata, L.384 (rec. 20 May '48)
- BACH: Das wohltemperierte Klavier - Prelude & fugue, BWV.871 (rec. 15 Sept. '51)
- BACH/LISZT: Prelude & fugue in A minor (rec. 2 Dec. '43)
- DE SEVERAC: En Vacances No. 6 (rec. 2 Apr. '46)
- DAQUIN: Le Coucou (rec. 2 Apr. '46)
- LISZT: Hungarian Fantasia (with Philharmonia Orchestra/Walter Susskind) (rec. 27 Apr. '48); Hungarian Rhapsody No. 15 (rec. 16 Dec. '32); An-nées de Pèlerinage I - Au bord d'une Source (rec. 17 July '30); Etude de Concert No. 2 (La Leggierezza) (rec. 17 July '30)
- BEETHOVEN: Cello Sonatas 1 - 5 (with Gregor Piatigorsky) (rec. Oct. '54)
- Internationale Schallplatten (Stachus-Einkaufszentrum Laden 9, 8000 München 2, West Germany) IC 147-53382/9. DM 79.90

Slowly the realization is beginning to dawn throughout Europe, and perhaps elsewhere, that Solomon is the greatest pianist Britain has ever produced. In the past ten years or so a belated reassessment of his quite remarkable art has taken place, no doubt stimulated by a whole series of releases from EMI/UK. Now comes an eight-disc anthology from EMI/Electrola - the Germans always have demonstrated a discriminating awareness of the subtler pianistic talents - which duplicates very little currently available via the UK reissues. Only the Beethoven Cello Sonatas with Gregor Piatigorsky prove a bulky exception; performances

which are nobly restrained but somewhat marred by an unequalled partnership: time and again Piatigorsky is no stylistic or artistic match for Solomon. Otherwise this latest offering is of considerable significance containing, as it does, many items which have not previously appeared on LP and including several titles which have become almost impossible to obtain in their original format.

The anthology is an all-embracing one: confirming Solomon's established greatness in the classics, demonstrating his remarkably compelling way with the romantic repertoire and perhaps surprising us by his flair in the overt virtuoso pieces. The set opens with almost three sides devoted to Chopin. The opening ten items were included on an EMI/UK seventieth birthday tribute released in 1972 (and which largely went unappreciated such is the recent nature of the reappraisal of Solomon's stature); these are now complemented by a further six titles, thus comprising his entire Chopin recordings. Solomon's Chopin playing has a rarely encountered quality, a lyric strength which is free of icy rigidity on one hand and slushy sentimentality on the other. The opening Fourth Ballade, for example, is a classic demonstration of his approach and one of the greatest performances of this oft-recorded work. The ear instantly glories in the characteristic pellucid tone - though this is sampled to even greater effect in some of the later sonically superior recordings, for example the E major posthumous Waltz. Such an infinitely varied and subtle tonal palette places Solomon apart from all his contemporaries and amongst the legendary names of the previous generation alongside Lhevinne, Godowsky and Friedman. Interpretatively, there is the unique manner in which Solomon imbues the opening paragraphs with an improvisatory, searching quality, achieved by his acute awareness of pulse which creates the illusion of timelessness though the work's structure is never impaired. A further marvel is the perfectly balanced proportion between the melodic line and the accompaniment. In short, Solomon appears incapable of making an incorrect move. Even so, a special mention must be made of his reading of the Etude Op. 25/3 with its effortless delicate spinning of notes and a superb demonstration of leggierissimo technique, plus the Eighth Nocturne which, if it lacks the ethereal touch of Friedman's version, is sung in a seamless cantabile line and with a luminosity of tone which beggars description. The only cause for complaint in this Chopin collection is that the programme was not better assembled by the anonymous compiler(s) of the anthology.

The set continues with three of Debussy's First Book of Preludes (Nos. 2, 8 & 10), Solomon's only recordings devoted to this composer. The pianist here adopts, particularly in Voiles, a deliberate anti-impressionistic approach; a characteristic touch of individuality but, quite exceptionally, not entirely convincing. But we return to Solomon's home ground with three sides devoted to Haydn, Mozart and Schubert. Haydn's Thirty-fifth Sonata in C (Hob XVI) says it all: the infectious, gently bubbling humour, the decorative filigree work and pearly tone, and, in the central Adagio, a sublime purity and serenity free of erstwhile romantic overtones and current pseudo-classical severity. Indeed,

throughout his career Solomon remained untouched by the vagaries of musical fashions. Whilst the same superfine characteristics are brought to Mozart's Seventeenth Sonata, K.576, the Schubert A major and A minor Sonatas (D.664 and D.784 respectively) appear very different, no doubt because we anticipate Solomon's approach. The qualities he brings to Mozart and Haydn are, inevitably, to be heard in abundance but the intellectual power and drive of his argument is overwhelming. This is achieved via some uncommonly swift tempi and, as a result, Schubert's mental anguish is not emotionally re-lived but subtly implied and eventually exorcised. It is a blazingly original approach and, what is more, stupendously successful.

With such a colossal though unobtrusive technique and such an easy, unforced identification with the classics, it was almost inevitable that Brahms should play a vital role in Solomon's repertoire. Electrola's anthology includes all Solomon's published piano recordings devoted to Brahms--though we continue to rue the day that a poor recorded balance resulted in the destruction of the masters before publication of the Second Viola Sonata in which Solomon partnered the great Lionel Tertis. Possibly the most famous performance is that of the Handel Variations, long regarded as the finest 78 rpm performance (along with Egon Petri's very different account) a recording commenced in 1941 for Columbia but recommenced just over a year later and which comprised his first HMV release. Its qualities remain undimmed: each variation being granted a remarkable individuality and character, yet the work's overall structure held securely in sight: the formidable technical complexities are simply not apparent.

Of even greater acclaim is Solomon's 1952 recording of the Third Sonata, a towering interpretation which, unbelievably, has never been reissued anywhere in the world since its short-lived first release in the UK. (Readers may be interested to learn that this recording even eluded the memories of both Solomon and his wife, neither of whom could recall a commercial recording of this Sonata.) Once again one marvels anew at the range of tone color; the cultivated dynamic range with seemingly limitless contrasts between forte-piano and piano-pianissimo, and the superbly lithe and independent bass line - immediately evident from that stabbing accompaniment in the opening pages. For all its expansive gestures, however, Solomon's reading has an exceptional degree of radiant calm which is light years removed from the wild-eyed, youthful Brahms and more the kind of reading the composer might have given in his old age, a performance born of wisdom and maturity. It is an approach which emphasizes the work's musical content and eschews the obvious gestures without for one moment robbing the work of its inherent grandeur.

Another major recording of 1952 and which unaccountably remained unpublished until 1967 is Schumann's Carnaval. As with the Brahms Handel Variations, each of Schumann's Scenes mignonnes is clearly and characterfully delineated--often with remarkable freedom (e.g., Eusebius)--yet such is Solomon's masterly control that the piece becomes, quite

exceptionally, a coherent, cogent whole. It is difficult to recall any other recording of Carnival (even Cortot's compelling account which is discussed elsewhere in this Journal) which is simultaneously so sharply portrayed and such a convincing entity. (Rachmaninov's legendary 1929 recording is also not forgotten!) Propelled by a whirling, heady drive Solomon's Carnival is a perfect fusion of classical and romantic elements. The German pressing, incidentally, gives a slightly murkier, cloudier sound than the original UK release: a trend frequently found in this set.

We are also granted a side of Liszt. Solomon, the pianist of cultivated taste playing (amongst other pieces) the Abbé's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 15 and Hungarian Fantasia? Once again the resultant readings are of exceptional interest: full of flamboyant flair and brio, yet totally without trace of vulgarity and containing kaleidoscopic changes of moods and colors. The Rakoczy March in particular has a superb swagger, as well as some double octave thunder which can withstand comparison alongside Horowitz, and some exquisite leggierissimo playing.

Finally to a side of encores ranging from Couperin via Liszt/Bach to de Sévèrac. The gem amongst this fine collection is a 1948 recording of Scarlatti's F major Sonata, L.384, one of the great miracles of twentieth-century pianism. Somehow Solomon conjures from the piano timbres reminiscent more of the harpsichord whilst the deft grace and precision of his dexterity leaves his listener incredulous.

Electrola's presentation can best be described as "economic" with some aspects, regrettably, leaving considerable room for improvement. There is a brief but highly appreciative article (Genie und stenger expressionist) by Joachim Kaiser and then a reprint of many of the tributes bestowed upon Solomon on the occasion of the release of the EMI/UK seventieth-birthday tribute though ironically Lionel Tertis and Neville Cardus, possibly the two contributors who were best acquainted with Solomon's art have been dropped whilst some of the more inconsequential 'tributes' have been retained. It is, however, the actual documentation which leaves most to be desired: Mozart's D major Sonata, K.576 is described as "No. 18" and Chopin's A minor Mazurka, Op. 68/2 as "No. 47", though the majority of errors are to be found concerning recording dates. Michael Gray's Solomon Discography published in this Journal (Vol. X, No. 2/3 with additions and corrections in Vol. XI, No. 2/3) is here a necessary adjunct.

Solomon strode a unique and solitary path for forty-five illustrious years and when illness abruptly and cruelly terminated his career in 1956 he was still only 54. The selfless devotion to his art was demanding, far more so than the listener can possibly comprehend. But we remain the fortunates for we can continue to reap the reward in the form of his incomparable recordings, not least this endlessly rewarding anthology.

Bryan Crimp

## CORTOT PLAYS SCHUMANN

Piano Concerto, Op. 54 - London Philharmonic Orchestra; Sir Landon Ronald, cond. (DB 2181-84; rec. 12/13 Oct. '34); Etudes symphoniques, Op. 13 & Op. posth (DB 1325-27; rec. 6 Mar '29); Kreisleriana, Op. 16 (DB 2608-11; rec. 5 July '35); Carnaval, Op. 9 (DB 1252-1254; rec. 5 June/11 Dec. '28); Fantasiestücke, Op. 12 - Au soir (DB 3338; rec. 26 Oct '37); Scenes de la foret, Op. 82 - L'Oiseau-prohete (DA 1901; rec. 19 Mar '48); Papillons, Op. 2 (DA 1442-3; rec. 4 July '35); Scenes d'Enfants, Op. 15 (DB 6700-01; rec. 4 July '35); Davidsbündlertänze, Op. 6 (DB 3263-65; rec. 10 July '37) Pathé Marconi C153-10960/4.

Pathé Marconi have almost trumped their 1977 seven disc Cortot/Chopin collection with a three-record anthology of Cortot's electrical Schumann recordings. Delectable treasures are to be discovered on every side; certainly the combination of Schumann and Cortot is almost as irresistible and persuasive as Chopin and Cortot. Approaching the set in chronological order of recording - Pathé Marconi's presentation appears rather random being neither in order of composition or recording - we encounter first Carnaval recorded in June (at the Kingsway Hall) and December (at the Small Queen's Hall) 1928. At times Carnaval comes dangerously near to becoming Cortot's Waterloo with so many passages eliciting an over-abundant supply of finger slips. (Whilst wrong notes were as much part of Cortot's style as his distinctive rubato or his elegant phrasing, there are, it must be stated, far more wrong notes per Schumann page than in his Chopin recordings.) Even so, Cortot's intentions are so honourable and well intentioned that it requires little effort to forgive his fingers the error of their ways. Certainly each episode of Carnaval is meticulously characterized, if not quite with the restrained strength of Solomon's performance reviewed in this Journal, and the entire prone-to-ramble framework held together superbly well. Even allowing for the date of recording the dubbing, both here and elsewhere, proves to be marginally disappointing being not quite of the high standards previously established by EMI - all the dubbings appear to have been made in London, though there is no credit in the accompanying booklet (which is incidentally only in French). In both Carnaval and the Etudes symphoniques there are some slight pitch discrepancies between sides whilst the overall tonal quality is inclined to be glacial and hard, especially in the closer balanced recordings of the 1930's.

In March 1929 Cortot tackled the Etudes symphoniques (both published and posthumous) the resultant performance being amongst the most imposing of the entire set. The variations have an imperial command, free of bombast and that readily available (to so many of today's pianists) pseudo-severity which only serves to emphasize the squareness of Schumann's melodic writing. Inevitably there are some superb touches: the sudden accelerando at the conclusion of one variation which spills the listener, expectantly and full of excitement, into the next, or the

ravishingly delicate and improvisatory-like decorative work. Certainly the final variation, often a source of embarrassment to even the most devoted Schumann admirer, is here lithe, crisp and totally free of repetitiveness.

But the bulk of Cortot's Schumann recordings stem from the middle 1930's when his uniquely cultivated tone was captured to perfection. (Whilst commentators rightly continue to laud so many of Cortot's finest qualities, few fail to mention his extraordinary tonal palette, the result of that unique amalgam of the finest attributes of both the German and French schools of piano playing.) Due to a less examining type of recorded balance this palette is less evident in the October 1934 recording of the Piano Concerto with an accompaniment from the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Sir Landon Ronald. Concerto recordings did not feature prominently in Cortot's vast discography and so the performance is of particular interest, a reading long regarded by many connoisseurs to be amongst his finest achievements - it was one of the earliest candidates for transfer to LP during the early days of microgroove. The opening pages, however, still come as something of a shock with Cortot seriously over-emphasizing Schumann's maestoso marking, and though much of the first movement is admirably fluid there remains a nagging doubt concerning his interpretative ritardandi which are surely just a little too self-indulgent. For once (and how rarely can such a thing be said of him?) Cortot fails to convince. It is certainly difficult to recall a comparable miscalculation in any of his Chopin performances. There is also a worrying thickening of the left hand chords heard in both the outer movements whilst Cortot's gestures in the finale - set at an alarmingly fast tempo which results in far too many stumbles - are inclined to be over-expansive. Yet such is the caliber of the man, that even amongst such disappointments there are still so many intriguing moments, certainly more than enough to justify the restoration of this performance to the catalogue. One of its most fascinating aspects is the remarkably active support Cortot receives from Landon Ronald who encourages a considerable degree of interplay between orchestra and soloists, all achieved, incidentally with far greater freedom than heard today, even if this does result in some moments of less than perfect ensemble. In the final analysis, however, despite being a performance of outstanding flair and temperament which places it quite apart from almost any other recording of this concerto (and which certainly emphasizes the yawning blandness of recent versions by Ashkenazy, Gutierrez, Jaimes and Rogoff), the parts fail to equal the whole. Notwithstanding some cherishable moments, not least the first movement dialogue between clarinet and piano, the performance is not the equal of such disparate but valid statements by Haskil, Janis, Lipatti, Richter or Solomon.

During two blazingly inspirational days in July 1935, Cortot recorded Kinderszenen, Papillons and Kreisleriana, all of which stand amongst his very greatest achievements. Nowhere is his remarkable marriage of intellect and instinct heard to finer effect: the spontaneity of phrasing and rhythmic buoyancy equalled by a breath-taking

dynamic range and subtle tonal palette. It is playing of consummate elegance and cultivation yet shot through with mercurial flashes. Whilst it is pure indulgence to treasure Papillons above all other of Cortot's Schumann performances, it is surely excusable: a performance of sublime simplicity, unrivalled by any other version.

Two years later almost to the day, on the 10th of July 1937, Cortot essayed Davidsbündlertänze, originally released in the now famous sequence of British HMV DB coupling numbers (3261-69) which gives an idea of his astonishingly broad repertoire: Vivaldi, arr. Cortot, Bach, Mendelssohn, Schubert and Liszt! It is Charles Rosen who has rightly stated that Davidsbündlertänze "is Schumann's most private world"; a privacy so close and intimate that not even Cortot was able to fathom its deepest recesses. Its severe technical demands also stretch Cortot's technique to breaking point at times though not always the more technically complex character studies, (the sixth, for example, is superbly "held within itself" in accordance with Schumann's in sich hinein qualification). Yet who else could create such a natural simplicity as that found in the final Non presto section?

Two isolated movements complete the anthology, neither offering anything revelatory though neither proving a disappointment. In der Nacht from the Op. 12 Fantasiestücke recorded in October 1937 and Vogel als Prophet from Waldscenen recorded as late as April 1948, both remain more earthbound than ideally required. They would have undoubtedly taken wing if the performances had stemmed from recordings of complete works.

It would, however, be churlish to end on such a note, for Cortot's Schumann playing is rarely dull and consistently arresting and endlessly rewarding. Certainly those who regard Chopin as Cortot's province are in for a very favorable surprise. Pathé Marconi have provided yet another aspect of this ever remarkable giant amongst twentieth-century pianists.

Bryan Crimp