

BUSCH, BACH AND BRAHMS

BACH: The Four Suites for Orchestra: No. 1, in C, BWV. 1066; No. 2, in B Minor, BWV. 1067; No. 3, in D, BWV. 1068; No. 4, in D, BWV. 1069. Adolf Busch Chamber Players, Recorded October 27 and 28, 1936, World Records Retrospect Series SHB 68 (Two Discs, Mono)
The Same. EMI Pathé Marconi 2C151-03960/1 (Two Discs, Mono)

BRAHMS: Chamber Works. Adolf Busch Chamber Ensembles, Recorded 1931-1949, World Records Retrospect Series SHB 61 (Seven Discs, Mono)
Piano Quartet No. 1, in G Minor, Op. 25; Piano Quartet No. 2, in A, Op. 26; Piano Quintet in F Minor, Op. 34; Clarinet Quintet in B Minor, Op. 115; Trio for Horn, Violin and Piano, in E Flat, Op. 40; String Quartet No. 1, in C Minor, Op. 51, No. 1; String Quartet No. 3, in B Flat, Op. 67; Sonata for Violin and Piano, No. 1, in G, Op. 78; Sonata for Violin and Piano, No. 2, in A, Op. 100.

In recent years, British EMI have honored the late Adolf Busch (and music lovers in general) with reissues first of some of the Busch String Quartet's Beethoven recordings and, more recently, all of the violinist's Schubert performances (World Records SHB 53). The project continues with Bach's Orchestral Suites (with the Brandenburgs, once reissued in the COLH series, promised in the near future) and a near complete resurrection of Busch/Brahms (with eight records rather than seven, room could have been found for the Busch Quartet's A minor Quartet, Op. 51, No. 2 and the Serkin/Busch Trio's C major Trio, Op. 87--the latter recorded for American Columbia and presently available on American Odyssey 32 16 0361; a later performance of the Clarinet Quintet, originating from a live American performance and also featuring Reginald Kell, has just surfaced on a Discocorp/Bruno Walter Society release--I have not heard it). And as can be seen from the above heading, the Bach Orchestral Suites have also appeared in France.

Busch made his name as an interpreter of Bach, but from our present vantage point, we can see that his nineteenth century roots and classical (as opposed to baroque) austerity brought him much closer to Beethoven, Brahms and Schubert. Thus while we can admire the sincerity and structural integrity of the Bach suites, I suspect that a goodly number of present day listeners (used to greater transparency of sound and authenticity of instrumentation and embellishment) will be alienated by a mixture of tonal opacity (a piano is used for the continuo!) and Romantic anachronism. In addition, honesty compels me to add that a certain vein of stiff pedantry also occasionally pervades this otherwise compassionate musicmaking; it is, if you will, a little Toscanini-like, but without the great Italian Maestro's bracing cantabile. One could call them transitional interpretations from a time when the need for--as opposed to the results of--Bach scholarship began to be appreciated. There is little to choose from between the English and French pressings; both are

undoubtedly closely related, but perhaps the French have filtered more liberally while the British prefer to include a bit of background in the interest of slightly greater presence. Both incarnations are excellent.

Some of the same gritty austerity also pervades a few of the performances in the Brahms album, making one or two (such as the A major Sonata) a bit pale and unlyrical. But in the main, it is that very quality, combined with a rare sense of structural integrity, that serves as a welcome reminder that Brahms considered himself a classicist, not a romantic. One would search far and wide for a more apt (and satisfying) account of the Clarinet Quintet. The Busch/Kell collaboration gives us, for once, a first movement that is truly a hardhitting Allegro, and even the slow movement is permitted to agitate as well as ruminate. With the sense of basic pulse so well in hand, the musicians are able to employ a rubato phrasing without sacrificing either strength or forward motion. Kell, who was sometimes criticized for using excessive vibrato, keeps his inclination under restraint, although modern listeners--used to the more colorful playing of such artists as Harold Wright, Karl Leister and Richard Stoltzman--may be disappointed by the typical coloristic constriction favored by most British clarinetists with their soft reeds (today exemplified by such players as Gervase de Peyer and Thea King).

Both of the piano quartets and the piano quintet have previously been transferred to long play but these transfers force a re-evaluation. The dub of the A major Piano Quartet, in particular, is much improved over the scratchy murky transfer from German Da Capo. In reviewing that set for High Fidelity, I opined that the sonics were far below what might have been expected from a European recording, vintage 1939; as it happened (and as I ought to have known), Da Capo had given the wrong date; here it is correctly listed as having been recorded 21 September 1932, but ironically sounds well enough to have passed for a much more recent product. Some listeners may still take mild exception to the degree of portamento in the string playing, but by any standards, this is a lean, fast paced, beautifully proportioned account of a work in which it is very easy to lose one's way. The Serkin/Busch ensemble absolutely refuses to linger, and the dramatic contours are regally set forth.

In the case of the much more recent G minor Piano Quartet (by 1949, Hugo Gottesman had replaced violist Karl Doktor), I tend to prefer the better equalized Da Capo pressing. At that time, English EMI were evidently experimenting with wider range microphones and their freewheeling boost to high frequencies along with a presumable deterioration in Busch's violin tone resulted in an unpleasantly wiry, strident sonority. The German version slices just enough off the top to produce a burnished, pleasant sound, but the American Odyssey pressing (presumably closely related to the original American Columbia LP of thirty years ago) produced hollow muffled tones (that, however, respond surprisingly well to a mid-frequency boost from a resourceful modern equalizer); the newest World

Records set gives us something akin to an urtext transfer, and again, with a little juggling of knobs, can be made to sound much like the German counterpart. The interpretation, uncommonly severe and metrical, is at times more Prussian than Zigener, but presents a reading of great integrity and power.

The F minor Quintet, more cleanly registered than on the serviceable but scratchy Turnabout disc, now makes an impression favorable to the later Serkin/Budapest CBS account. Tempos are a little faster, phrasing tauter and more metrical, but in its patrician, intense way, the earlier performance has as much rectitude and eloquence as the later.

Also familiar from before, the Horn Trio similarly benefits from the cleaner, more centralized reproduction of the new transfer. Aubrey Brain's natural Waldhorn has a burnished glow, and the alto-ish Busch violin sound delineates the pungent harmonies. Serkin plays more literally here than on his later Marlboro account with Myron Bloom and Michael Tree but completes an ensemble of magnificent integration.

The performance of the C minor String Quartet bristles with energy and sounds well enough to compete with much more recent recordings of the same work. But the stridency noted in the 1949 G minor Piano Quartet again becomes problematical in the Quartet, Op. 67 (recorded at the same time). Thus, while one can admire the strong pulse and general musicianship, the stereo Budapest account offers a markedly similar interpretation with far more agreeable tone. As already intimated, the A major Violin Sonata is something of a letdown, but the G major Sonata is played with rare discernment by both Busch and Serkin. This last performance, incidentally, dates from May 1931 and is the oldest recording in the set.

Harris Goldsmith

GIESEKING, MOISEWITSCH AND NAT REISSUES

DEBUSSY: Piano Works. Walter Giesecking, piano. HMV Treasury RLS 752 (153-03 862/3M) (mono) From EMI originals, recorded 1953-54. Preludes, Books I and II; Estampes; Images (Series I and II)

Walter Giesecking (1895-1956) was as much of a classicist when he played Debussy as when he attempted Mozart, Schubert and Beethoven. This became especially apparent in the later years of the German pianist's career when his coloristic sense became even greater (or was it simply that the wider range recordings of the period allowed one to hear more of it?) and when the rugged contours he occasionally displayed earlier had been softened considerably. But even to the last, Giesecking was capable of a biting, tensile individuality; a sharp inflection; even a disagreeable flippancy (e.g., the slightly heartless way he negotiated that turn in the tema of Beethoven Op. 109's last movement). Like them or not, these details made Giesecking's artistry compelling and distinctive. (And those who heard him live undoubtedly marveled at the incongruity of seeing this huge hulk of a man swooping condor-like over the keyboard--extracting sounds of miniscule bejeweled refinement!)

The performances reissued here are from the late period and if they lack some of the weight of the earlier Giesecking interpretations, they delight with prismatic hue and subtly gauged tempo relationships. Actually the performances are all of a piece interpretively, and if I find the results uneven, that verdict comes from my looking for different things in the Images than from, say, the first book of Preludes.

To my way of hearing, the Images need greater power and energy than Giesecking supplies here; certainly Mouvement, to cite a notable example, ought to suggest the huge aggressive angularity of machinery; it is the musical counterpart of what the futurist sculptors wrought; Giesecking reduces this motion to that of a child's yellow pinwheel! But in the Preludes, the sophisticated playing is not only memorable, it is something close to definitive (though of course Cortot and Arrau, to name just two, make as much from the music in a more expressionist style). One detail in Giesecking's interpretation has always stuck in my mind's ear and sounds just as notable on rehearing: the brisk transition in the middle part of La Serenade interrompue makes a uniquely volatile effect. The Estampes are a bit small scaled but work better than the Images.

HMV Treasury's reissue has compressed to four sides what used to occupy six, but a comparison with the original Angel pressings show that the sound, if anything, is a bit brighter and more translucent than before and just as high in volume. Surfaces are agreeably quiet.

RACHMANINOFF: Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, No. 2, in C Minor, Op. 18; Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 43. Benno Moiseiwitsch, piano; Philharmonia Orchestra, Hugo Rignold, cond. E.M.I. World Records Retrospect Series SH 380 Recorded in 1955, Concerto mono; Rhapsody appears in stereo for the first time

Benno Moiseiwitsch (1890-1963) was one of the Russian emigre keyboard lapidaries who had the misfortune of being somewhat overshadowed by his incandescent older compatriot, Rachmaninoff. Yet the two men were on friendly, even intimate, terms and Moiseiwitsch was recording this music at a time when it was still--on records and in the concert hall--very much in the domain of its composer.

As may be noted in the heading above, the performances of the Concerto and Rhapsody here reissued are remakes of versions Moiseiwitsch previously recorded with the L.P.O. under Goehr and Cameron, respectively. (And an even later Moiseiwitsch performance of the concerto's first movement was issued on an obscure Capitol potpourri some years ago). Since Moiseiwitsch retained much of his impressive finesse to near the end of his career (a few less fortunate American recordings at the end are exceptions and suffer additionally from the lackluster sound of the antediluvian Baldwin instrument he used for those sessions), the wider range and smoother technical work of the newer recordings is much appreciated in these distinguished performances which memory proclaims to be the equal of their predecessors.

In general, Moiseiwitsch cultivates some of the same nuance and singing line that Rachmaninoff espoused, but his style is less dynamic and his tempos tend to be slower, more spacious, and unpressured. Among reasonably modern versions of the Second Concerto, this loving account takes a distinguished niche alongside the Richter/Sanderling and the Rubinstein/Ormandy; and his low-keyed, unpressured way with the Rhapsody provides an equally distinguished alternative to the tenser, ultra-brilliant accounts of Kapell/Reiner, Graffman/Bernstein and Rubinstein/Reiner.

Presumably both performances were originally taken down in stereo but only the two-channel masters of the Rhapsody seem to survive.

SCHUBERT: Moments Musicaux, Op. 94, D. 780. SCHUMANN: Faschingsschwank aus Wien, Op. 26. Yves Nat, piano. EMI Pathé Marconi PM 322 2 C 051-73033 (mono)

This recording by Yves Nat will have even greater appeal to connoisseurs than the late French pianist's Brahms anthology which I recently reviewed in this journal. Both of these performances are of notable interpretative value and each has its own particular point of interest, the Schubert as the only work by that composer M. Nat recorded, and the

Schumann as one of the all too scarce examples of this fine artist at something close to his fluent, technical prime.

As noted in the Brahms review, Nat more or less abandoned his performing career in 1934, devoting the final 22 years of his life to pedagogy. Although he recorded a considerable discography for Discophile Francais in the early 1950s, most of those performances--for all their impressive interpretive artistry--betray a certain lack of professional polish; it is not merely that certain miniscule lapses of marksmanship and articulation are amateurishly overlooked, but also such factors as an unresonant studio and an obviously out-of-adjustment instrument are allowed to remain. (It is doubtful that a Perahia or an Ashkenazy would be permitted to record on a piano whose una corda causes two notes to be struck simultaneously as happens to Nat in the second Moment Musical.) Although dead studios were very much in vogue at the time of the Schumann Faschingsschwank recording in 1938, the older sound there--while obviously more restricted in dynamic range and frequency response--has more depth than that of the 1952 Schubert, and Nat's own playing is more polished and fluent, obviously that of a musician still used to being an active performer.

But for all that, the Schubert vignettes are movingly characterized with a narrative edge that infuses the pieces with a Beethovenian asceticism. Tempos, except for the deliberate, hulking No. 5 in F minor, tend toward brisk severity, and the cycle as a whole has points in common with Schnabel's recording (and also, if memory serves, with a live performance some years ago by Mieczyslaw Horszowski; any reader familiar with my admiration for both those artists will recognize this analogy as high praise indeed). Some interesting details deserve commentary. Nat, who generally observes most of the repeats, omits the one in No. 5, thereby circumventing the controversy of whether or not to include the maggiore coda in the bypassed repetition; and in No. 6, he at one point follows his own dynamic scheme in place of Schubert's but remains spiritually true to the essence (by maintaining new contrasts between ff and p). In sum, these are wonderful, perceptive performances with a keen sense of polyphony and more than a modicum of patrician delicacy.

The Schumann is sounded with keen rhythmic values and with an executive command able to sweep through the hurdles with almost militaristic efficiency. But for all the rigor, the requisite charm and lyricism are equally well served. The Faschingsschwank, incidentally, was not included in Nat's five disc Schumann anthology (Pathe 2C 153-10960/4) which makes the release of it here all the more welcome.

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