

E. POWER BIGGS TRIBUTE

HANDEL: Organ Concerto No. 13, in F--Allegro; DAQUIN: Variations on a Noël; PISTON: Prelude and Allegro for Organ and Strings (Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Serge Koussevitzky); RHEINBERGER: Organ Sonata No. 7, in f, Op. 127--Andante; BACH: Toccata in d, BWV 565; Toccata & Fugue in d, BWV 565; Passacaglia & Fugue in c, BWV 582; Cantata No. 208--"Sheep May Safely Graze;" Cantata No. 29--Sinfonia (Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra conducted by Hans-Joachim Rotzsch); FRESCOBALDI: Canzon Ternza; Canzon Quarta; Canzon Quinta (New England Brass Ensemble conducted by Richard Burgin); TELEMANN: Heldenmusik (New England Brass Ensemble); GABRIELI: Canzon in the 7th Tone for 8 Parts (Edward Tarr Brass Ensemble and Gabrieli Consort La Fenice conducted by Vittorio Negri); GIGOUT: Grand Chorus in Dialogue (brass and percussion ensemble conducted by Maurice Peress); SOLER: The Emperor's Fanfare; DUNSTABLE: Agincourt Hymn; FRESCOBALDI: 3 Galliards; F. COUPERIN: Fanfare; Rondo (Bruit de Guerre); ASTON: A Hornpype; SCRONX: Fantasia in Echo Style; ANON.: Organ Estampie; Packington's Pound; HANDEL: Il Pastor Fido--Allegro (Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Charles Groves); Aylesford Pieces--12 excerpts; MOZART: Sonata in C, K. 336; HAYDN: Organ Concerto No. 2, in C (both with orchestra conducted by Zoltan Rozsnyai); COPLAND: Symphony for Organ and Orchestra--Scherzo (New York Philharmonic conducted by Leonard Bernstein); RHEINGERGER: Organ Concerto in g, Op. 177--Finale (orchestra conducted by Maurice Peress); WIDOR: Symphony No. 5--Toccata; MACDOWELL: Sea Pieces, Op. 55--No. 3, A.D. 1620; SOUSA: Stars and Stripes Forever. E. Power Biggs, organist. BACH: Trio Sonata No. 1, in E Flat, BWV 525; SCHUBERT: Marche Militaire, Op. 51, D. 733, No. 1; TCHAIKOVSKY: The Nutcracker--Trepak; JOPLIN: Maple Leaf Rag; Binks' Waltz; The Entertainer. E. Power Biggs, harpsichordist. Columbia M4X 35180, 4 records (mono & stereo).

That the late E. Power Biggs was unquestionably the best-known American organist of his generation had perhaps less to do with his distinction as a player than with his effective seizing upon the promotional possibilities of the new media of radio and phonograph records. His name was "made," after all, by those famous CBS Sunday morning broadcasts from the Germanic Museum (later renamed the Busch-Reisinger) at Harvard, and by an unprecedented (and still unmatched) series of recordings from 1938 onwards. Related to his skillful use of the media was his penchant for genteel controversy, his advocacy of the orgelbewegung--the organ reform movement--insuring him a prominent place in the history of organ-building and organ playing in the twentieth century.

Columbia's "Tribute to E. Power Biggs" draws upon an impressive array of recordings covering a period of nearly forty years, all nicely arranged in categories of Biggs's special enthusiasms. The earliest performances, recorded in 1938 for Technichord, already reveal a distinctive style that was to be something of a Biggs trademark--a compelling

rhythmic drive and a lively approach to articulation. How different were his performances of Handel and Daquin from the somber, churchly approach of so many other organists of the time! There is also a 1947 recording with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Koussevitzky of Walter Piston's Prelude and Allegro for Organ and Strings, a marvelous work written for Biggs and eminently deserving of wider recognition.

The works performed with organ and brass--by Frescobaldi, Gabrieli, and Telemann--will not satisfy purists, but they do demonstrate a characteristic Biggs determination (and a healthy one) that old music need not be dry and dull. The arrangement of the Gigout Grand choeur dialogue for organ and brass is on similarly questionable ground as regards taste, but it is exciting. The second record includes some engaging performances with orchestra of music by Handel, Mozart, Haydn, Copland, and Rheinberger (isolated movements only in the case of the last three).

Biggs's greatest contribution was to have had the vision and energy to record the historic European organs whose sonorities and construction had so much sparked the activities of the twentieth-century organ reformers. How many of us, in fact, were introduced to the virtues of mechanical-action organs, low wind pressures, free-standing wooden cases, open-toe voicing, and classic specifications by Biggs's records? Would the names of Silbermann and Schnitger have become such household words among American organists without Biggs? And who but Biggs would have unearthed and performed music by so obscure a composer as Scronx? In any case, we are given here brief selections recorded on historic instruments in Spain, Switzerland, Italy, France, England, and the Netherlands, as well as a rather perversely spliced-together performance of the infamous D-minor Toccata of Bach, the individual sections of the piece actually performed on different organs.

The final two discs record some of Biggs's more recent enthusiasms, two sides being devoted to the pedal harpsichord built for him by the late John Challis. This particular development was born of the mistaken notion that a harpsichord with separate pedal strings had some historical validity, and of some misunderstandings concerning the instrument for which Bach's trio sonatas and C-minor Passacaglia were composed. The sound of the instrument was unutterably ugly (and unlike that of any historical model), but it stimulated Biggs's imagination until the very end, and he turned to it for his last recordings--of Handel's "Aylesford Pieces"--issued here for the first time. Even Scott Joplin, who surely deserved better, had his "holiday for harpsichord," as we're reminded by three selections. Another of Biggs's "cheap thrills" recordings--featuring the four organs of Freiburg Cathedral in West Germany--is represented by yet another performance (in quadraphony, of course) of Bach's D-minor Toccata. For Biggs, as for McLuhan, the medium might as well be the message.

The finest performance here is perhaps that of the Bach Passacaglia, recorded on the Schuke organ in the Leipzig Thomaskirche. (It was

exemplary of Biggs's widespread reputation that he was the first American to be invited to record in Bach's own church.) Here the "cheap thrills" are eschewed, as is folded-hands reverence, and the cadenza inserted at the fermata is of welcome exuberance. This is Biggs at his best, a performance to which one can return with genuine admiration.

Reflecting on the collection as a whole, I am reminded that Biggs was very much the incarnation of the anti-romantic spirit of the neo-baroque movement. He devoted so much energy to obscure baroque organs and composers because he did not really feel comfortable with romantic music--and simply because he enjoyed being unconventional. When he recorded romantic music he was entirely capable of choosing a patently unsuitable instrument--as when he played Widor and Vierne on the decidedly neo-baroque Möller at St. George's Church in New York. Even in eighteenth-century music he avoided the sensuous warmth of the mainline French instruments: His French recording tours took him only into Germanic Alsace, while the truly indigenous splendors of Poitiers and St-Maximin were studiously avoided. "Too rich for his blood," perhaps. Biggs was, finally, a dilettante and a popularizer. Remaining largely untouched by serious research into authentic performance practices, he went on playing old music pretty much as he wished, and the authenticity gap was nowhere more evident than in his wretchedly literal interpretations of the French classic literature. (Much of the music he played, in fact, was harpsichord literature anyway.)

For all this, though, Biggs was a seminal figure of enormous importance, and he had an incalculable effect on the modern history of the organ. Columbia is thus to be complimented for bringing together so representative a selection of his performances, and it is gratifying to report that the mastering is considerably better than that of most of the original issues. Gratifying, too, is the provision of an exhaustive discography and an account of Biggs's early years written with affection and humor by his widow Margaret. It's unfortunate, however, that the chronicle is not continued past 1937 (the recordings were presumably thought to complete the story), and for complete information on the individual recorded selections one must constantly switch back-and-forth between the rear of the record box and producer Andrew Kazdin's narrative in the enclosed booklet. A single contents list including information on the music, the organ used for each selection, and the date of recording would have been much more convenient.

Scott Cantrell