

THE ART OF SEGOVIA -- THE H.M.V. RECORDINGS: 1927-39

THE ART OF SEGOVIA: BACH: Gavotte BWV 1006, Courante BWV 1009, Prelude BWV 1007, Prelude BWV 999, Allemande BWV 996, Fugue BWV 1001; PONCE: Suite in A; SOR: Theme varie, Op. 9; DE VISEE: Sarabande, Bouree, Menuet; FROBERGER: Gigue; TORROBA: Allegretto (from Sonatina); MENDELSSOHN: Canzonetta (from Quartet No. 1, Op. 12); MALATS: Serenata; TARREGA: Recuerdos de la Alhambra; Study in A major; CASTELNUOVO-TEDESCO: Vivo ed energico (from Sonata); ALBENIZ: Granada and Sevilla (Nos. 1 & 3 from Suite Espanola); TORROBA: Fandanguillo (from Suite Castellana), Preludio and Nocturno; TURINA: Fandanguillo; GRANADOS: Danzas Espanola Nos. 10 & 5, Op. 37; PONCE: first and second movements from Sonata III; Postlude; Mazurka; Petit Valse; and Theme, variations and fugue on "Folies d'Espagne".  
Andres Segovia, guitar (recorded 1927/1939)  
HMV Treasury RLS 745 mono; 2 records

When I reviewed HMV Treasury's 1979 release of Segovia's 1949 recordings my enthusiasm for the album was somewhat restrained. While the reissue was worthwhile, the performances still were not those of Segovia as a young man, when his technique and spirit were most different from the artist we know today through his many Decca and RCA recordings made since his sixties. In my review, I expressed the hope that HMV would continue their commendable efforts and "give the music world a truly satisfying glimpse of this guitarist as few know him" by reissuing his earliest 78s, a few of which I had heard at the time. This new collection is the answer to that request and I can report with great pleasure that it is a marvelous set, filled with superb performances, two major pieces previously unavailable, and all of this graced with excellent sound (the result of much first-rate engineering). There is very little that can be said to detract from the immense enjoyment this album should give to general music lovers, rare record collectors, and, particularly, guitarists/guitar aficionados.

Most of the music on this album can be found on Segovia's Decca records, although many of the pieces appear on several of the earliest and hardest to find of those. Therefore, this album, besides its other merits, now makes available many difficult-to-locate recordings. Segovia's chief Decca Bach collection includes only the Gavotte and Prelude BWV 999 (DL 9751), the Fugue is on DL 9795, the Courante appears on DL 9638, the Allemande on DL 710167 (currently in print), and the Ponce version of the 1st Cello Suite's Prelude BWV 1007 is on DL 9633 and was recorded again for RCA ARL1-0864 (also in print). Much of the Bach has also been available on several non-Decca/RCA albums: the Prelude BWV 999, Courante, and Fugue on MGM E 3015 (or Heliodor HS 25010), the same substituting the Gavotte for Fugue on Ultraphonic 1422, Sine Qua Non 101 and Saga XIX 5248 (and, minus the Prelude, on Everest EV 3251E).

The other music that Segovia later re-recorded: movements from

Ponce's Suite on DL 9633 and 9734; Sor's Mozart Variations and the entire de Visée Suite on DL 9638; the "Froberger" Gigue on DL 710039; the Torroba movement on DL 9751 and RCA ARL1-0485; the Malats on DL 9734; both Tarrega pieces on DL 9794; the entire Castelnuovo-Tedesco Sonata on DL 710034; Albeniz' Granada on DL 710063 and Sevilla on DL 710160 (both on Decca A-384 or DL 8022); Torroba's Fandanguillo and Nocturno on RCA ARL1-0485 (the latter piece also on DL 9733); the Granados Danzas on Decca A-384 or DL 8022 (also No. 5 on DL 710063 and No. 10 on DL 710034 and 710160); and the complete Ponce Sonata and the Mazurka and Valse on DL 9795 (the latter also on DL 710160). So, the music that was previously unavailable in Segovia performances is Torroba's Preludio, Turina's Fandanguillo, and two substantial works by Ponce, his Suite in the style of S. L. Weiss, and his Variations and Fugue on Folies d'Espagne (and a variation from that entitled, here, Postlude). Incidentally, HMV's reissue mentioned earlier (HLM 7134) contained the fandanguillos of both Turina and Torroba.

The engineering job that has restored these recordings to listenable condition can only be described as fabulous. While there remains a very faint hiss in most of the tracks (a few have less, fortunately none have more), it is extremely listenable, and the main impression one receives is of the strong and clear presence of the guitar. Congratulations to Fred Gaisberg, David Bicknell, Edward Fowler and Keith Hardwick!

And now--at last--to the performances. Segovia made these recordings when he was thirty-one and then forty-six years old, and what comes across is a passionate yet controlled musician, with no shortage of virtuosic energy and ability, and a distinctly 19th-century romantic musical temperament (that occasionally verges on the sentimental). But more important than any label I can use to describe Segovia's "approach" is a certain general quality found in his playing which I think most music lovers would find almost irresistible: an intense identification with the music he is playing that breathes life and gives character to every note and phrase. Occasionally (or perhaps frequently, particularly with Bach) we may find the character inappropriate, due to changing taste and/or musicological evidence, but with Segovia the intention is always utterly sincere and deeply felt. On top of these basic qualities of Segovia as a performer add the relative youthfulness of the performer at the time, the highly responsive gut strings in use then, and the challenge presented by the new technology of making 78s, and you have a partial explanation for the marvelous performances contained in this album. And, of course, there is Segovia's miraculous tone; throughout, with very few and small exceptions, it has all those qualities which guitarists theoretically all search for: warmth, depth, volume, consistency, and the elusive aspect of the human voice.

With few exceptions I would opt for listening to these recordings over later Decca or RCA ones. Some of the highlights: Sor's warhorse, his Variations on a theme from the Magic Flute, whose most difficult moments are tossed off at breathtaking (really!) speeds; a gorgeous rendering of Tarrega's famed tremolo study Recuerdos de la Alhambra; the

casual, almost offhanded, yet blazing virtuosity of the guitarist's performances of Albeniz' Sevilla and Torroba's Fandanguillo; and a technical display that would put the best guitar wizards of today to shame in Ponce's Postlude.

Those few cuts where I prefer later recordings are Malats' Serenade, Torroba's Nocturno, and the Bach Fugue, all of which strike me as being better controlled elsewhere. As for overall preferences in performances I find Segovia's interpretations of those works composed for him (i.e., Torroba, Ponce, etc.) indisputably the most convincing, although for my taste Turina's Fandanguillo somehow seems to have eluded him (instead I suggest either Angel Romero's performance on Angel S 36094 or Michael Newman's superb direct-to-disc tour de force on Sheffield Lab 10). For the Albeniz and Granados a more up-to-date perspective (though not necessarily more correct) is revealed in the alternately elegant and fiery playing of Manuel Barrueco (Vox/Turnabout TV 34738). I find John Williams' Sor Variations are overall more smoothly paced and less distorted (Columbia MS 7195) and Julian Bream's rendition of de Visée's very attractive Suite (RCA LSC 2878), though overly Bream-ish, is no doubt more in character than Segovia's. As for the Bach, if you find Segovia's style objectionable, or if you just prefer a more contemporary (either in the 18th or 20th century sense) approach, recordings by Williams (Columbia M2 33510), Bream (the above one), or Christopher Parkening (Angel S-36019) are recommended.

A special comment is due on the two large pieces previously unavailable by Segovia on LP. Ponce's Suite (in the style of Baroque lutenist Sylvius Leopold Weiss, 1686-1750) is a wonderful composition, both as an exercise in Baroque writing and in its own right (the pianist Benedetti Michelangeli was so fond of it that he arranged his own piano version!) For years this work was passed off by Segovia as authentic Weiss (a la Kreisler) and it eluded publication until it was transcribed from 78s by several guitarists. Despite this, it has been recorded at least twice, by Laurindo Almeida (Capitol SP 8638) and Nicolas Alfonso (Vega C 30 S 121). Segovia's performance is much better than either of these, although it suffers from similar qualities as are found in his Bach. Still, it is a pleasure to have the entire suite in a performance that does it real justice.

The Variations (originally twenty-two) and Fugue on Folies d'Espagne by Ponce was his first and most ambitious guitar composition. Until recently it was virtually forgotten by performers, dismissed as either too difficult or excessively lengthy. Perhaps a case might be made for the latter complaint; however, Segovia solves that problem (in a characteristic way) by deleting 12 variations. (I find this an improvement--and I like Ponce's music). As for technical difficulties, the piece has recently been recorded by John Williams (CBS M 35820), the young Spanish virtuoso Diego Blanco (BIS LP-33), and the American phenomenon Eliot Fisk (Musicmasters MM 20008); all of these are marvelous performances, differing mainly in the tone qualities of the guitarists (ranging from thick to thin, from Blanco to Williams to Fisk). Segovia's recording

is completely equal on a technical level, is superior in tone and (probably) interpretation, but is an abridged version. The choice is yours.

As on the first HMV Segovia reissue John Duarte's extensive program notes are informative about the guitar's repertoire and the specific music at hand. The issue of Segovia's performance of Bach is lovingly handled, and some general considerations about the making of these recordings and the effect of their absence from the catalog is presented. Of course there are mistakes in the titles; the corrections are as follows: only the Bach Prelude BWV 1007 is a Ponce arrangement; the Ponce/Weiss Suite is in five movements--Prelude, Allemande, Sara-Gavottes, and Gigue; the Gigue attributed to Froberger is actually another Ponce counterfeited (although Parkening labels it de Visée!); the Mendelssohn transcription is actually Segovia's revision of Tarrega's arrangement; Tarrega's Study in A major is actually his version of a piece by the 19th century violinist Dionisio Alard; and, the most serious fault of this entire album, no information is given as to which tracks are from 1927 and which are 1939 (although Duarte mentions the brand of guitar used at both times!). Like the earlier HMV album this one includes a small but beautiful photo of Segovia (on the inside) while the front cover has a not terribly attractive painting made from that photo session in 1928 by Raul Ibarra Cocina.

All in all, this is a splendid album, a must for all guitarists and a treat for everyone else. HMV has completed a great service to the music world by putting these recordings together. I would say the next important project for the guitar of this type would be a reissue of the Paraguayan virtuoso Agustín Barrios Mangore's many South American 78s; in view of the excellence of the present collection, I'm optimistic.

Gregory Dinger