

Homage au Pianiste Francis Planté, 1839-1934. Francis Planté, pianist. Association des Amis de Marquèze A.A.M. 1 (mono), 130 FFr. plus shipping. (Available from the Association des Amis de Marquèze, Bureaux de l'Ecomusée de la Grande Lande, 40630 - SABRES, Paris, France.)

BOCCHERINI: Quintet in E, Op. 13, No. 5--Minuet (arr. Planté). BERLIOZ: Le Damnation de Faust--Méphisto's Serenade (arr. Redon). GLUCK: Iphigénie en Aulide--Gavotte (arr. Planté). MENDELSSOHN: Scherzo in E minor, Op. 16, No. 2; Songs without Words--in A, Op. 19, No. 3; in A, Op. 62, No. 6; in C, Op. 67, No. 4; in E, Op. 67, No. 6. SCHUMANN: Romance in F-sharp, Op. 28, No. 2; Romance in D Minor, Op. 32, No. 3; Am Springbrunnen, Op. 85, No. 9 (arr. Debussy).

Some of the most valuable instrumental 78s are the recordings of Francis Planté, made at the pianist's home in 1928. They are certainly important relics of an earlier age of piano playing, and despite some obvious limitations they open a window for us into the performance style of the nineteenth century.

Planté undoubtedly had the longest performing career of any musician. He was born in 1839, gave his first public performance in 1846, and continued to play in public until a few months before his death in 1934. Planté played his first Paris concert three years before the death of Chopin; there is no documented contact between them, but he could have been the only pianist to make records who heard Chopin play. Among his friends and musical associates were Berlioz, Rossini, Mendelssohn, Liszt, and Debussy.

In May of 1928, celebrating his 90th birthday a bit early, Planté gave two recitals in a single day, benefit performances for a hospital. His student Irving Schwerké convinced Planté to make his first recordings at that time, which the pianist agreed to do only if the records could be made at his home. And so they were, over a period of two days (July 3-4). Planté evidently found the making of records fatiguing, and he refused to do any further recording, even though nearly five years of concerts lay ahead for him.

The listener unaccustomed to the style of nineteenth-century pianists will find Planté's playing puzzling and unsatisfying. To be sure, age had certainly taken its toll on Planté's technique. The overpedalled, rushed version of the Boccherini transcription, the strange rhetorical pauses in the Chopin Op. 10, No. 4, and other obvious lapses could hardly have been characteristic of the pianist in his prime.

Nevertheless there is much to treasure here. On the whole, I find the Chopin Etudes the most rewarding. In general, Planté's tempos are much slower than we are used to hearing today. Listening to the first three of them on side two, one might be forgiven for wondering if the slow tempos were dictated by the pianist's age and failing fingers. But

then along comes Op. 25, No. 1, played very quickly and with superb control, Chopin with the most lovely floating poetry (and with interesting changes of emphasis when passages are repeated). It becomes apparent that Planté could still do pretty much what he wanted to, and that tempos are slow because that was how he wanted to play. Some long-lived pianists and commentators indicate in their writings that the tempos at which pianists played the Chopin Etudes tended to speed up as the nineteenth century progressed. Planté's tempos may be those of Chopin's time. And once you get used to them they make excellent musical sense, allowing the pianist to make his points, to emphasize lines in the left hand which are usually ignored, to make some fascinating rhetorical changes which would not be convincing at faster tempos.

Some of the other performances are also wonderful. I love the delightful swagger of the Berlioz transcription, the fine contrasts (at a relatively slow tempo) of the Mendelssohn Scherzo, the awareness of polyphony in the Mendelssohn Op. 67, No. 4. If we can put aside our late-twentieth-century ears, there is still much that the old master has to offer.

The current LP edition is the second of Planté's recordings. International Piano Library IPL 101 had superior documentation of the recordings themselves, some excellent background information on Planté (from which I have drawn in this review), and more accurate identification of the music played. (A.A.M. does not identify the transcriber of the Berlioz piece and gives only vague identifications of some of the other music.) However, A.A.M.'s dubbings are slightly superior to IPL's. And, best of all, the record is a current issue, although it won't be for long. The edition is limited to a thousand copies, which is not nearly enough!

A.A.M.'s package is quite elaborate. The record comes in a hardbound foldover album, and it includes a booklet with numerous pictures and reproductions of letters to Planté from Rossini and Liszt. There is only a paragraph of English, but if your French is even as good as mine (which is poor!) you will still find the booklet fascinating.

As an appendix, this LP includes a Planté piano roll of the Chopin Etude Op. 25, No. 2, placed directly after the dubbing of the 78 recording. It was made in 1910 and supposedly shows Planté's virtuosity at an earlier age. To me, it is just a good example of the way piano rolls drain the personality from a performance; heard immediately after the actual recording, it provides a devastating contrast. I won't listen to it again, but I will be listening to the old master's recordings and sharing them with musician friends very often, as I have done since the IPL record was issued.

Leslie Gerber