

BEETHOVEN, The Five Piano Concertos; MOZART, Piano Concerto No. 25, K. 503; Leon Fleisher, piano; The Cleveland Orchestra; George Szell conducts; Columbia M3K 42445 (3 CDs)

Writing in a recent issue of High Fidelity, Thomas Hathaway (the intelligent and cranky music columnist for Queen's Quarterly) offered the opinion that Murray Perahia's new recordings of the five Beethoven piano concertos (with Bernard Haitink and the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam) represent the current standard in the way that Leon Fleisher's performances with the Cleveland Orchestra did in the 60s and Arthur Schnabel's readings did a generation before that. This is a somewhat silly statement, not only because all three performance styles are quite different, but also because there is no such thing as a benchmark standard for musical performances. The playing of music is a fleeting act of human communication, not a striking out for technical perfection, though Murray Perahia's Beethoven might suggest that the latter goal should have top priority. Schnabel's Beethoven has achieved fame not because he played the scores according to any one set of correct rules, but because he exhibited such wonderful musical imagination, and in the process brought the vital, dynamic spirit of the composer to life in a way that suggested the kind of exploratory venture that composition is. It is the nature of music that scores are subject to interpretation, and the possibilities for realization are many, limited only by the power of the artist to convince the listener.

Likewise, the renditions of the five piano concertos of Beethoven recorded in the early 1960s by Leon Fleisher and George Szell have held their allure not because they represent exacting, precise statements of the scores, but because they are so marvelously musical. Although these performances have never been out of the catalogue, it is quite wonderful to have them now on compact disc, newly engineered so that they sound more ample than the old Epic discs (which usually lacked decent bass) on which they first appeared. When the separate releases were re-boxed in the 70s, Columbia dropped the recording of the Mozart 25th piano concerto with which the Beethoven Fourth was first paired on Epic, and also dropped the extensive, erudite liner notes of Klaus George Roy. For this compact disc box, the lovely Mozart reading has been brought back as a "filler" for the third CD (each disc runs well over an hour), but liner notes are even more truncated, with not one word about Leon Fleisher included. (It is also interesting to note that nowhere on the outer box does CBS give the original recording dates.)

I have enjoyed these performances for over twenty years, and continue to revel in their beauty. No doubt one could describe their assets in many ways: by calling attention to the ensemble precision that Szell had trained into the Cleveland Orchestra, by referring to the complete agreement on tempos and phrasing between soloist and conductor, by pointing to Fleisher's strength

and extroverted character held in balance by a poetic sensibility and a scrupulous attention to detail. But what continues to impress me most about these performances is their singing quality. Toscanini, it is said, always urged his orchestra to think of expression as an act of singing, and most certainly Fleisher and Szell never, even in the most tumultuous passages or in the most meditative moments, lose sight of the cantabile line. This Beethoven flows like a river--now rushing, now gently--and one gets carried along by the momentum of the music, in other words, by the creative spirit of the composer. It has often been said that Szell was a rather "bloodless" conductor, and perhaps this was often true; but here, the sternness is not only appropriate in many ways but also is mollified by the warmth and vigor of the young Leon Fleisher.

I have dozens of recordings of the Beethoven piano concertos that I cherish for their different insights, attitudes, personalities, and styles; none of them try (as Perahia and Haitink seem to be doing) to carve out the "perfect" performance. This Fleisher/Szell set is certainly one of the finest; it has no idiosyncratic quirks to mar its appeal, simply superb skill and musicianship and energy. I recommend this CD re-issue without hesitation, and suggest (and hope) that you will live with it happily for years to come.

ROUSSEL, Suite in F major, Op. 33; Bacchus and Ariane, Op. 43; Orchestre de Paris; Charles Dutoit conducts; Erato ECD 75348 (CD)

Although he was much honoured in his seniority as one of the major composers of the first half of the 20th century, Albert Roussel (1869-1937) is not a well-celebrated composer today. This is a pity, for his music, if not profound, is immensely captivating, complex in its construction but direct in its meaning, energetic, diverse, and entertaining. Happily, the French Erato label has put Charles Dutoit to the task of recording Roussel's music, and he is a good man for the job.

After an education in mathematics and several years in the French navy, Roussel rented a small flat in Paris and began his musical studies under the organist Eugene Gigout. At the Schola Cantorum, he became a favourite of d'Indy, and while still a student was made a professor of counterpoint. In his earliest works, he showed a preference for rather esoteric subjects (e.g., an opera based on a Hindu heroine, Padmavati, and a ballet inspired by Fabre's Studies of Insect Life) and for a meticulous impressionism that perhaps revealed, in its refinement and detail, Roussel's second love, mathematics.

Having already achieved a healthy reputation, Roussel in 1925 altered his style, abandoned his Orientalisms, and became, like Stravinsky before him, a neoclassicist. It was at this time that Serge Koussevitzky, conductor of the Boston Symphony, commissioned the Frenchman to write the Suite in F that had its

Boston premiere on January 21, 1927. The three brief movements--prelude, sarabande, gigue--amply reveal Roussel's sardonic and aristocratic wit, his fertile imagination, his love of spirited rhythms, his rich, almost Tchaikovskian orchestration. This is music that constantly surprises, yet seems to progress with a kind of boisterous inevitability. One can imagine it as the soundtrack to a Jacques Tati film satirizing modern civilization.

Bacchus et Ariane is one of Roussel's three major ballets, and it was first staged at the Paris Opera in 1931; it had a short run and has seldom been staged since, but the composer made from the score an orchestral suite, first performed in Paris in 1936, under the baton of Charles Munch. Since the musicologist Harry Halbreich has very neatly described this music, I shall quote him: "Bacchus and Ariane brings together all the best qualities of Roussel's mature style, both dionysian and aristocratic, long and sinuous curves, a harmony both astringent and refined, enthrallingly vigorous rhythms...colourful and dazzling orchestration, with that red gold in the brass which is uniquely his, all of which merge into a triumphant celebration of life, joy, and sunshine."

Roussel's music is intensely visual, and frequently while listening to these lively scores, images appeared to me from Paul Klee, Picasso, Lyonel Feininger, Stuart Davis, Duchamp, Kandinsky, Andre Masson--a mixed group to be sure, but one perhaps suggestive of the creative fervour of the period. Roussel's music is a good antidote for a surfeit of German Romanticism, and it's sure to knock the cobwebs out of your ears. Dutoit stresses the splash and colour of the music, but he also ably coordinates the intricate cross-rhythms and mercurial tempos that animate the two scores. Erato's engineering has exciting dimension and precise sound-staging; thus all in all this is a very fine presentation of two rarely heard but excellent French compositions.

--Richard Perry