

John Swan on Recordings Which Should be Reissued on CD

It would be easy to assume, given the avalanche of reissues on CD of pre-digital performances, that everything that should appear on silver eventually will. Maybe so - unlike, say, football or political prognostications, these predictions have behind them the fervent hope that they are wrong. Even in the LP era, however, the shellac past received haphazard attention, lavish in some areas, spotty in others. Now, when the "installed base" - loathsome phrase - of earlier recordings is vastly larger, it is inevitable that an even greater number of worthy, even great performances are being left behind. This is even more apparent when the influence of economics and opportunism on the current reissue market is factored in. For instance, the notoriously accommodating Italian copyright laws - which are under considerable pressure to change because of GATT and other developments in international trade - have led to a flood of live performance broadcast reissues which began in the LP era, but which has multiplied in the environment of high CD profit margins. Meanwhile, many commercial recordings, not so conveniently vulnerable to piracy, go neglected, whatever their quality. Here are a few particularly important orphans in the digital storm.

J.S. Bach, Suites for Viola, Nos. 1-6. Suite No. 1 in G Major, No. 3 in C Major. Decca (U.S.) DL 9914; Suite No. 2 in D Minor, No. 6 in D Major. Decca DL 9544; Suite No. 4 in E flat Major, No. 5 in C Minor, Decca DL 9660. With Lillian Fuchs, viola.

This is not the only recording of the Cello Suites on the viola; there is even a current CD featuring a performance by Ulrich Koch of the 6th Suite on the "viola pomposa," the instrument for which it was putatively written. These LPs are, however, unique in that they document Bach and viola playing of a quality that is simply unmatched in the recorded literature. To many violists, and not enough others, Lillian Fuchs, sister of violinist Joseph (and cellist Harry), is a legendary figure, both as interpreter and technician. These performances, beautifully recorded in mid-fifties mono, fully confirm the legend. Indeed, they are arguably equal or superior to any recordings of these works ever made on the cello. They are marked by a breadth and a warm expressivity, and an unerring sense of line. Fuchs' tone is always responsive to that line, at times powerful, at times delicate, always resonant - never succumbing to the honking or rasping that can emerge from this sometimes acoustically intractable instrument, even in capable hands.

In the heroic prelude of that monumental Sixth Suite, she doesn't strain after the tonal resources of the cello, but manages to convey its full stature through masterful rhythmic control. That same sense of rhythm enlivens the dance movements of all the suites.

The enlightened CD firm that excavates these treasures shouldn't stop here. In that same period American Decca released many glorious recordings of chamber music, among them Lillian and brother Joseph in Mozart and the superb Martinu Madrigals, written for this team. There are wonderful performances of trios by Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Roussel, and Debussy involving the Fuchs and such stellar accomplices as Reginald Kell, Julius Baker, Frank Miller, and Horszowski. Then there is the marvellously spirited traversal of the Handel Sonatas by Baker and Sylvia Marlowe, and also the Beethoven Sonatas by Joseph Fuchs and Artur Balsam. And what about the great clarinet-piano legacy (and an unequalled performance of solo Stravinsky) of Reginald Kell on Decca?

Bartok, Divertimento for String Orchestra and Hindemith, Mathis der Mahler Symphony. Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Constantin Silvestri. Angel S 35643.

Often controversial, always stimulating, the Romanian conductor and composer Constantin Silvestri left behind a largish body of recordings that just may be - at this point - the greatest collection of neglected orchestral performances of the LP era. Although he made many splendid records for Middle European labels, his central accomplishment in this area was the remarkable batch of performances made for EMI/Angel in the late monaural and early stereo era, mostly with the Philharmonia. This particular disc may be the best of them. Silvestri is the only conductor I know who took the *non troppo* of the opening *Allegro non troppo* of the great 1939 *Divertimento* to heart. The loose-limbed (but precise: all the recorded evidence argues that Silvestri was a masterful technician) insouciance of his approach makes all other recordings sound over-wound in comparison. Furthermore, no one plumbs the melancholic depths of the *Adagio* the way Silvestri does, or brings quite the same surge and spring to the Finale. There is stiffer competition out there for the great symphonic suite which Hindemith concocted from his opera, but Silvestri and the Philharmonia, then still in its golden age, more than hold their own. The spaciousness of the interpretation and the sheer beauty of the playing make for a performance that urgently deserves digital recirculation.

This goes for many other recordings of the same era - and for that matter, beyond into his Bournemouth Symphony tenure, with whom he produced a brilliant rendition of Elgar's *In the South*. Silvestri's interpretations were often highly individual; a hearing of his approach to the triplets in the opening fanfare of Tchaikovsky's *Fourth Symphony* will confirm that this was one artist who was not intimidated by convention. Of course, many critics are intimidated, or at least defined by convention, and Silvestri's recordings were treated accordingly. (A revealing exercise is to compare listings in the Music Library Association summaries of record review edited by Kurtz Myers; you may well come away with the impression that, say, Ormandy was a greater conductor than Mengelberg, and if you believe that, you may not believe anything else here.) But there are numberless felicities in all three of the Silvestri-Philharmonia performances of Tchaikovsky's last three symphonies, and the Dvorak Eighth from the same combination is my choice as the greatest recording of the work. His versions of

the Seventh and Ninth with other forces are also magnificent, as are his recordings of Debussy, Liszt, Franck, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Stravinsky, his collaborations with Kogan and others. EMI has done more than he deserves for Karajan of the same period in the way of CD reissues. They should now turn to a truly great original.

Bruckner: Symphony No. 9 in D Minor and Overture in G Minor. “Vienna Orchestra” conducted by F. Charles Adler. SPA 24/25.

A friend of mine once said, “The first movement of Bruckner’s Ninth should take a month”. The last I heard of this friend, he was a member of Hare Krishna, serving in a soup Kitchen in Calcutta. Whatever else this means, I take it as evidence of a strong metaphysical bent, a prime qualification for the appreciation of a masterwork dedicated to the glory of God. And he had a point: the building blocks of that first movement are so broad, the harmonic columns so massive, that its forward motion should be the measured tread of a colossus. In any case, my friend and I agreed that this performance, particularly in the final pages of the first movement, conveys that titanic nature more completely than any other. This is true despite the choice, “for artistic reasons,” of the Loewe edition of the score (Knappertsbusch made the same choice, but in his performances Loewe’s instrumental and harmonic emendations, and especially his dynamics, seem more intrusive). The Scherzo and the Adagio are also full of virtue, the latter radiating a deep serenity fully commensurate with the heroic scale of the first movement.

The Society of Participating Artists, Inc., of Saratoga Springs (SPA, get it? - although the connection between a bunch of Vienna-based musicians and the Eastern New York resort town remains obscure to me; a search of the public library and its archives turned up no mention of SPA) released a number of very important recordings, many with Adler at the helm. His Mahler Third, Sixth, and Tenth (first and “Purgatorio” movements) Symphonies were the first recordings of all these works, and in many ways they are still unsurpassed. His Bruckner Third is also deserving of reissue (and the First, released originally by Unicorn). The Somerset CD label does carry the wonderful Adler recording of Beethoven’s piano version of his Violin Concerto with soloist Helen Schnabel, which raises the hope for the reemergence of another SPA original, Artur Schnabel’s knotty, interesting Piano Concerto, also performed by the composer’s excellent daughter-in-law and Adler’s forces. The reissue history in the LP era of a number of these great Adler-SPA performances was inventive enough to suggest that they are vulnerable to CD opportunism. As with all these so-far-buried treasures, however, it is unfortunate that we have to think in these negative terms of property rights. They are all performances that should belong to the ages, and until the next medium comes along, that means the age of compact disc.

John Swan, a distinguished author, music critic and reviewer, died January 26th, 1994. A longtime member of ARSC, and a regular contributor to the ARSC Journal, John was Head Librarian at Bennington College, Bennington, VT. An acknowledged expert in the field of classical music, he remained active in his work and writing. This article was submitted for publication only a few days before his untimely death. The Editor wishes to express his personal gratitude to the author’s widow, Mrs. Susan Swan, for her cooperation in making possible its publication.
