



St Laurent Studio YSL T-1120

Live Performances, 1937-41, Curtis Institute of Music,
Philadelphia

Variations & Fugue in E-flat (Beethoven), Op. 35;
Intermezzo in E-flat; Intermezzo in b-flat (both Op.117) (Brahms);
Prelude in E-flat; Prelude in g-sharp (both Rachmaninoff);

JORGE BOLET with Students of Marcel Tabuteau: Quintet in E-flat, Op.16 (Beethoven)

“There is significance to the recordings here, most of them never before released. For those who love the art of Cuban-American pianist Jorge Bolet (1914–1990) and for those who are interested in the development of piano performance in the 20th century, these are remarkable documents. Bolet attended the Curtis Institute as a student and returned as a faculty member in 1939. He made his first officially published recordings in 1952 for the Boston label. Although a few early Curtis recordings made it into Ward Marston’s superb box set of live Bolet (including the Rachmaninoff Prelude in E-flat heard here), virtually all of this material is newly available, and it helps round out the picture of this fascinating artist. Many knowledgeable listeners have observed how much better Bolet was in live performance than in the studio. He evidently found it difficult to feel free while making a recording, either because of the lack of an audience, a fear of putting on disc a performance that would remain forever, or from the absence of tension when he knew he could always go back and correct things.

Thanks to a number of enterprising labels, there is now a great deal of live Bolet material available. What this disc shows us is that the combination of virtuosity, poetry, elegance, and thoughtfulness that were the marks of Bolet’s finest work were with him from the start. The two Rachmaninoff preludes were recorded in 1937, a month before his 25th birthday, and his mastery of the keyboard and his imagination for color are firmly established from the first notes.

The Beethoven Quintet for Piano and Winds was recorded in 1939, Bolet’s first year as a Curtis faculty member. He was already well known, having won the prestigious Naumburg Competition that same year. He is joined here by chamber music students of the great oboist and pedagogue Marcel Tabuteau, and they make music with Bolet as equals. One gets no sense of the star pianist being accompanied by students. Bolet engages in genuine dialogue with the other players, whose level of ability is what you would expect from the Curtis Institute - highly professional and deeply musical.

The highlight of the disc for me is the 1941 performance of Beethoven’s ‘Eroica’ Variations. Bolet lets go without restraint, reveling in his technical abilities while never just showing off. The playing is breathtakingly fluent, filled with contrasts and rhythmic energy. There are surprises in this music, and Bolet seems to be winking and smiling as they go by, resulting in an exuberant and deeply engaging reading. Some kind of hall

noise intrudes at the 10:49 mark, which sounds as if someone in the audience dropped a score or a bag of books, but this doesn't detract from the momentum and drive of the performance.

The two Brahms intermezzi from op. 117 are beautifully lyrical and carefully voiced, displaying Bolet's ability to integrate subtle tempo changes into a unified conception. It is clear that he hears these pieces as whole creations, and knows where he is going in every measure.

The recorded sound is surprisingly good for early live recordings made not by a commercial label but by an educational institution. Besides the kerfuffle in the 'Eroica' Variations, one hears other hall noises and a bit too much French horn in the Beethoven quintet. Obviously, you will need a tolerance for the limitations of historical recorded sound to enjoy this disc, which I recommend with unreserved enthusiasm. No doubt producer Yves St. Laurent had to do a great deal of work to restore the originals, and we owe him a debt of gratitude for expanding our knowledge of a very gifted and important pianist."

- Henry Fogel, FANFARE

