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CD Review by Henry Fogel

JOSEPH FUCHS: Vol. 1 • Joseph Fuchs (vn); Yuko Washio¹ (vn); Arthur Balsam (pn); Robert Dan¹ (va); Barbara Stein¹ (vc) • YVES ST-LAURENT 327 (2 CDs: 94:21) Live: Alice Tully Hall, New York 11/29/1971

MESSIAEN Theme and Variations. BARTÓK Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 2. MOZART Violin Sonata in a, K 526. CHAUSSON Concert in D for Violin, Piano, and String Quartet

JOSEPH FUCHS: Vol. 2 • Joseph Fuchs (vn); Joseph Villa (pn) • YVES ST-LAURENT 328 (2 CDs: 95:53) Live: Washington Irving High School, New York 1/8/1972

MOZART Andante Cantabile, K 306. Violin Sonata in A, K 526. BACH Violin Partita No. 2: Chaconne. BRAHMS Violin Sonata No. 3. MENDELSSOHN Lieder ohne Wörter, op. 62/1. KREUTZER/KAUFMAN Étude-Caprice. RAVEL Habanera. GLUCK Orfeo: Melodie. BASSINI Étude de concert. ERNST Rondo Papageno

It was unfortunate for Fuchs that he played at a time when active violinists included Heifetz, Kreisler, Elman, Milstein, Stern, Oistrakh, Kogan, Francescatti, and a great many others. Fuchs may have lacked the flash and charisma of some of his contemporaries, and he also spent 14 years as concertmaster of the Cleveland Orchestra (1926–1940) before truly pursuing a solo career. And, he also devoted much of his time to teaching at the Juilliard School. For all of those reasons, he never achieved the popularity among general audiences of a number of his contemporaries. But he was greatly admired by his peers, and by professional musicians of all stripes. He also was an advocate for new music, much more so than many of his colleagues, commissioning and premiering works throughout his career. Fuchs had to retrain himself after muscular tissue between two fingers of his left hand atrophied and he underwent experimental surgery to repair it. The result was successful. After leaving the Cleveland Orchestra he was first violinist of the Primrose Quartet (Josef Gingold, William Primrose, and Harvey Shapiro being the remaining players) from 1941 to 1943, made a solo debut in Carnegie Hall in 1943, and began touring Europe, Asia, and the U.S. extensively.

Fuchs played well even in his late years. He was born in 1899, so both of these recitals were given when he was in his early 70s. Both show him with undiminished technical skills and with great imagination in a huge range of repertoire. The biggest problem with both recordings is a balance that favors the piano and places the violin somewhat in the background. This is particularly unfortunate in the encore pieces from the Washington Irving recital, many of which really should highlight the violin more than is the case here.

Nonetheless, these two sets are extremely valuable. They document the playing one of the important violinists of the 20th century, caught in actual performances that demonstrate the breadth of his musical sensibilities. A highlight is the Chausson, sometimes called *Concert* for Violin, Piano, and String Quartet, and sometimes (including here) *Concerto*. I tried to do some research on the matter; the result has me leaning toward *Concert*, but not definitively so. In any case, the work is one of Chausson's masterpieces, and this performance brilliantly captures its unique blend of late Romanticism and Impressionism. The audience is so enthusiastic that the performers repeat the Sicilienne from the *Concert* as an encore. This piece can seem shapeless in some performances, but here it has spine and firmness in equal proportion with a perfumed atmosphere.

One of Fuchs's strengths is his sense of proportion and architecture. Messiaen's Theme and Variations is always headed somewhere, connections between the variations made very clear, and Bartók's Second Sonata maintains both its gypsy elements and its structure. In comparing the two performances of Mozart's A-Major Sonata, the fact of different pianists seems to make little difference—Fuchs's rhythmically vital performances are very similar.

In the more virtuosic encore pieces on Volume 2, we hear that Fuchs also has a sense of humor. You can feel him smiling, even chuckling, in Heinrich Ernst's *Rondo Papageno*. Fuchs also announces each of the encores, and in the most demanding of them his technique is clearly intact.

I heard Fuchs play in concert, and have heard studio recordings of his, and the one problem here is that the issue of recorded balance does not do justice to his tone, which even in the early 1970s was still richer than what comes across these discs. But we should still be grateful for their existence, because they document one of the masters of the violin of the middle and late 20th century in performance, and lovers of the instrument will surely want to obtain these. If you were interested in obtaining one to get a better idea of his playing, I would recommend Volume 1, because of the uniquely beautiful recording of the Chausson and the rarely heard Messiaen. As is usual with Saint Laurent Studios, the quality of the transfers is superb, and there are no program notes. These discs are available at Norbeck, Peters & Ford. **Henry Fogel**

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