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Jean Martinon Vol. 2

“There was a time when major orchestra conductors who were not early-music specialists considered that the works of Johann Sebastian Bach belonged to them as much as to anyone, and who also felt that it belonged to general audiences. That day has largely vanished - I know this because in the years that I managed the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, it was difficult if not impossible to convince a major conductor to perform Bach. Georg Solti was one of the last willing to risk the wrath of the critics. But if you look at orchestra programs prior to the 1960s and 1970s, you find regular appearances of the Brandenburg Concertos and Orchestral Suites, not to mention Stokowski’s resplendent transcriptions of organ works. This disc under Jean Martinon vividly recalls that era and makes clear what we are missing by having allowed HIP specialists to claim a virtual monopoly on this music.

Bach’s DIE KUNST DER FUGE, or The Art of the Fugue, is famously just a set of notes on paper with no indication as to the performing forces. As a result it has been performed and recorded by everything from a saxophone quartet to an orchestra, most frequently on organ or harpsichord. This particular orchestration, by Claude Pascal and Marcel Bitsch, was created in 1967 and has been recorded before by Karl Ristenpart and the Saar Radio Orchestra. As you might expect, Ristenpart’s textures are leaner, his rhythms more incisive, and the tempos more strictly adhered to. And, of course, a level of vibrato is applied to string playing by Martinon that would not be expected today (but which, if I may admit it, I enjoyed hearing).

However, do not think that all of this means that Martinon’s reading is self-indulgent and overly romanticized. He approaches Bach with reverence but not with awe. Tempi are on the leisurely side, certainly, but they don’t drag. Phrases are generously filled out, and the French Radio Orchestra plays beautifully for him. One senses that the orchestra’s principal players are enjoying the opportunity to engage with Bach’s masterpiece, and much

of the solo playing is at a very high level. Textures are clear throughout, so the crucial element of Bach's contrapuntal writing is never slighted.

In those days Bach also appeared on subscription concerts of major American orchestras, and St. Laurent Studio fills these two discs out with excerpts from a 1966 Chicago Symphony concert. The highlight is Maria Stader's gleaming soprano sensitively shaping the 'Wedding Cantata', lovingly accompanied by Martinon and members of the orchestra, with particularly lovely oboe playing by Ray Still. By 1966 the Hungarian-born and later Swiss Stader had become an acknowledged Bach specialist, and her comfort with the style is complete. However, her artistry should not minimize the brilliance of Adolph ('Bud') Herseth's achievement in the Second Brandenburg Concerto on the same program. What always distinguished Herseth's playing was not so much his technical brilliance (though he surely had that), but his cantabile playing, his legato. He always said that his three musical idols were singers - Jussi Björling, John McCormack, and Frank Sinatra. Herseth and the other CSO principals here were in their prime; particularly notable is concertmaster Steven Staryk's lovely playing in the second movement. It is clearly the playing of a violinist trained in another era but none the less beautiful for that, if we can put aside our period-accustomed ears.

These two discs came as a total and very pleasant surprise to me. I have become so accustomed to today's way of performing Bach that I anticipated finding Martinon perhaps too heavy-handed and wayward. Instead, it turned out to be a bracing and invigorating experience. The recorded sound is very good broadcast quality. Applause after each piece has been retained but is quickly faded. As usual with this label, there are no notes or texts but full documentation about sources."

- Henry Fogel, FANFARE