



- St Laurent Studio YSL T-831

## **Gyorgy Cziffra Vol. 1**

*Live Performance, 19 June, 1960, Strasbourg.*

### **Transfers by Yves St Laurent**

*“Astonishing! That is the first word that came to mind as I heard this recital. The Hungarian pianist Gyorgy Cziffra (1921-1994) possessed one of the most staggering keyboard techniques in history. It could sometimes lead him astray into truly wayward performances simply because he could. He also is not as well remembered today as he should be, in part because of the brevity of his career. Even before the death of his son, Gyorgy Cziffra Jr (a conductor with whom the pianist performed and recorded), Cziffra’s playing had become inconsistent. After his son’s death in a fire in 1981, Cziffra became deeply depressed, and never again played with orchestra. I engaged him to play a recital in Chicago in 1985, and the pianist I heard was a shadow of what he had been (although in its far more restrained mood it was still wonderfully musical, elegant playing).*

*From the mid-1950s through, perhaps, the late-1960s, Cziffra was at the peak of his powers, and that is what we hear on this 1960 Strasbourg recital. It is encouraging that St. Laurent Studio labels this ‘Volume 1’. I cannot wait to hear what is to come. The monaural broadcast sound is virtually ideal for its time: not too closely miked, nor too distant. This is how a piano would sound in a good room from about five or ten rows back.*

*From the outset, it is clear that this will be a remarkable recital. The opening Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach Andantino in b minor is beautifully sculpted, with an evenly produced cantabile and perfectly proportioned phrasing. In the three Scarlatti sonatas Cziffra really demonstrates that technique, although never beyond the bounds of taste. Repeated notes are articulated with almost shocking clarity and evenness of touch, passagework is crystal clear with each note in place and properly sounded. Some might find the fast tempos rushed, but to my ears they never crossed that boundary. Scarlatti did write this in part as showpieces, and Cziffra takes advantage of that but without slipping into vulgarity. This is possible because he has complete control of his fingers, so we don’t sense any sense of effort, or triumph over difficulty. The playing is completely natural.*

*This continues through most of this recital. Couperin’s ‘Le Tic-toc-choc’ is even quicker than Cziffra’s EMI recording, but again it seems in character with the music because the playing is so naturally shaped. Cziffra shows restraint and suppleness of line, along with appropriate wit, in the Hummel Rondo. Cziffra was not known as a Beethoven specialist, and he did not record a lot of the German Master, but his reading of the little F Major Sonata is delightful. The last movement is played with a real smile, which seems to me inherent in the music, and his tempo relationships in the first movement are very well judged.*

*The Liszt pieces are what you would expect from a Hungarian virtuoso who specialized in the composer. My only reservation about the performances here: the Hungarian Rhapsody #6 is so fast as to seem frantic. What he accomplishes at the keyboard is miraculous, and I must admit enjoying it as a display of out-and-out virtuosity. But some of the music's lilt and charm was lost. Do not, however, let that stand in your way. This recital features remarkable, uniquely great, piano playing. Liszt's 'Jeux d'eau a la Villa d'Este' alone might be worth the price of the disc. Cziffra's ability to allow you to hear each note in perfect proportion to each other note, his ear for color, the evenness of his articulation, and the sensitivity of dynamic shading, all make him one of the truly magnificent keyboard artists of his era. With the exception of the Hungarian Rhapsody, Cziffra's technical ability is married to real musicality and coloristic imagination to form a complete art. And even in that piece, one can justify the approach and marvel at the keyboard wizardry.*

*St. Laurent Studio offers good documentation and complete tracking information, but no notes. This company, available through Norbeck, Peters & Ford ([norpete.com](http://norpete.com)) is developing a sterling reputation for resuscitating live broadcast material that others have not found or chosen, and thus adding significantly to our knowledge of music performances in the 20th century. This is one of their finest efforts."*

- Henry Fogel, **FANFARE**