

Sergio Fiorentino, Vol. 3 = Works by BACH; FRANCK; R. STRAUSS – Yves St-Laurent

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St-Laurent Studio 

**Sergio Fiorentino, Vol. 3 = BACH: French Suite No. 5
in G Major; FRANCK: Prélude, Aria et Final; Moment
musical in F Minor; R. STRAUSS (arr. Fiorentino):
Waltzes from Der Rosnkavalier – Yves St-Laurent
YSL T-1219 (2 CDs: 47:44; 44:54)**

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This sound document, issued in 2012, from a live recital 17 June 1994 from the town of Erwitte, Germany, features the extraordinary playing of pianist Sergio Fiorentino (1927-1998), and the disc shall be overlooked no more. Fiorentino had made his American debut in 1953 and seemed guaranteed a meteoric career, but an airplane lowcrash in 1954 derailed his ambitions, and he retired from the concert stage for 20 years to devote himself to teaching, having rebuilt his technique through physical therapy. Only after persistent encouragement from an amateur enthusiast and record collector, Ernest Lumpe, did Fiorentino decide to emerge from exile, in 1996, at the Newport Music Festival. Consider that the legendary piano virtuoso, Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, had said of Fiorentino, "He is the only 'other' pianist."

Except for the identity of the recording location, the State Gymnasium in Erwitte, Yves St-Laurent provides no details about this concert, but the limited volume of the enthusiastic applause tells us of an intimate setting. The piano sound, however, lushly captures Fiorentino's rounded, velvet sonorities in their crisp, thoughtful articulation. His ability to accelerate either the tempo within a piece or between pieces, as in the opening Bach *G Major French Suite*, takes one's breath away, given the piercing attacks which no less carry the musical line aloft in singing terms. While the explosive *Courante* recalls Glenn Gould, the succeeding *Sarabande* has a sensuously breathed contour reminiscent of Lipatti. I must jump ahead in the recital, if only to lavish unbridled praise on Fiorentino's Schubert *B-flat Sonata*, grand but unmannered, lyrical and even anguished in the astonishing second movement, *Andante sostenuto*, which plays in a manner between Kempff and Rubinstein.

If the shadings and dynamics of the Bach have not already convinced us of Fiorentino's color palette, Franck's 1886 ***Prélude, Aria et Final***, with its persistent shifts in meter and melodic flow, attest to his control of refined tension. Marked *Allegro moderato e maestoso*, the extended Prélude evolves from a march into Lisztian chorale, stentorian and resolute, then subsiding into a contrapuntal meditation that soon surges in passionate reverie. The melodic line flows in an Italian manner, this despite Franck's "Germanic" impulse to polyphonic solemnity. If the *Aria* vacillates between fantasia and chorale, its measured pulse from Fiorentino once more imposes a martial, Lisztian affect that we might ascribe to Jorge Bolet. The last movement, *Allegro molto ed agitato*, hurls fire in thick texture, with Fiorentino's setting a momentum worthy of Sviatoslav Richter, but with a softer percussion. At its dizzying height, the swirling, frenzied intensity approaches Scriabin as well as Liszt. The passion relents, and Fiorentino's graduated *pianissimo* becomes his last word.

Fiorentino's two encores resort to his equally generous capacity to charm: the little F Minor *Moment musical* from Schubert's beloved Austria segues in the Strauss evocation of Mozart and Old Vienna in an abridged piano version of the *Rosenkavalier* waltz sequence. This recital has granted us bravura, architecture, and poetry in sterling fashion, and I urge collectors of piano mastery to seek it out.

Gary Lemco

