Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari – Violin Concerto op.26 Serenade for Strings (1996)

1. Violin Concerto in D, op.26 - I. Fantasia
2. Violin Concerto in D, op.26 - II. Romanza
3. Violin Concerto in D, op.26 - III. Improvviso *play*
4. Violin Concerto in D, op.26 - IV. Rondo Finale
5. Serenade for Strings in E-Flat - I. Allegro
6. Serenade for Strings in E-Flat - II. Andante
7. Serenade for Strings in E-Flat - III. Scherzo
8. Serenade for Strings in E-Flat - IV. Finale

Ulf Hoelscher: violin
Radio-Sinfonie-Orchester Frankfurt
Alun Francis – conductor

There are three astonishing things about this concerto. First, it was premiered in Munich in early 1944 when the flames of war were lapping all around; second, the soloist was an American national, Guila Bustabo, whose sympathy for the nazi regime (occasioned perhaps by her German born mother) subsequently ruined her promising international career; and third, given the date and circumstances of its compostion, this is an amazingly good violin concerto. For most people with a knowledge of classical music, Wolf-Ferrari is a one hit wonder, the hit being the intermezzo to act 3 of his opera Jewels of the Madonna, once heard never forgotten. In fact the whole opera is worth hearing (click on my reviews for my opinion of the one available recording)and so is this concerto. It's not cutting-edge stuff by the standards of the 1940s, the musical idiom is conservative-romantic, and if you listened to it with no prior knowledge you would doubtless identify as a product of about 50 years earlier. The work is immediately appealing. The opening brings to mind the haunting, ethereal opening of the Sibelius violin concerto, the first movement has a bitter-sweet tinge about it, and the finale has a brilliant and often breathless momentum. The performance is excellent although the violin tone is smallish and sweetish whereas I thought a juicier, more gleaming tone would suit the music better. But

it's a minor quibble. This is a major discovery, a work that should be in the repertoire of all the great fiddlers (but probably won't be.)

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