
Chandos has added a worthy addition to the catalogue of super-audio CDs with this issue of Bach transcriptions played by the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Leonard Slatkin. If ever full and rich orchestral recorded sound were needed, it is on a disc such as this, and with its ample acoustic All Saints' Church, Tooting, has proved the ideal venue.

Following the success of Slatkin's previous Chandos disc of Bach orchestral transcriptions (CHAN 9835), made with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, this new programme is particularly imaginative. In an introductory booklet note, Slatkin explains that the choice of repertoire included a firm decision not to feature the work of Leopold Stokowski: 'We felt that he was amply represented on disc, not just by his own performances, but also by those that have been recorded by others.'

It is a tribute to Slatkin and his perceptive knowledge of the orchestral repertoire that he has put together such an interesting compilation, including several premiere recordings. There is just one piece orchestrated by each of the chosen conductor-arrangers, save that Henry Wood's Suite is taken from a variety of sources and forms six movements. It was intended as one of two companion pieces to the four great orchestral suites of Bach himself.
Wood shared with all the other conductors a profound knowledge of how the orchestra works, and how it works best when transcribing Bach. In that sense his Suite makes the best starting point for the musical agenda here, since it traverses all the wide range of moods and approaches that a six-movement work implies. Accordingly his source material includes pieces taken from the Well-Tempered Clavier, the Partitas and the English Suites, using different types of movement to bring contrasting approaches of style and tempo. The scoring is rich and full, or colourfully refined, as the case may be, and the BBC Symphony Orchestra relishes the opportunities to display both their corporate and their individual strengths. Just occasionally, in the fuller-textured music such as the finale of this Suite, one wonders whether an extra rehearsal session might have brought a tighter sense of ensemble, though there is never the slightest doubt that the playing is that of a top-flight international orchestra.

The programme opens with the famous D minor Toccata and Fugue, orchestrated by Stanislav Skrowaczewski in the early 1960s, when he was music director at Minneapolis. In a sense the rhetorical stance of this music does not transfer so readily to an orchestral delivery as some other Bach pieces do. This certainly seems to be so when one compares this piece to the G minor Fantasia and Fugue, which is so wonderfully scored by Dimitri Mitropoulos. In the latter the subtleties of line and texture are legion, and the orchestration brings them out with the utmost clarity. The Fugue develops strongly and moves to a satisfyingly blazing climax.

If these large-scale organ pieces represent an epic approach, many of the other items are refined, even delicate. The aria Bist du bei mir? is scored most effectively for a string orchestra by Otto Klemperer, while Barbirolli’s rendering of Sheep May Safely Graze, along with Ormandy’s of Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring, are sensitively arranged, and most sensitively performed too.

The point is that Bach is the most indestructible of all composers, in the best sense of the term. And as with all great music the work is always greater than any one performance of it, so these wonderfully imaginative reincarnations of Bach’s originals bring with them a great deal of satisfaction. Part of the intention in every case, surely, was to realise the nature of Bach’s music in new ways through the potential offered by a great orchestra in performance. In that crucial and important way Leonard Slatkin and the BBC Symphony Orchestra, along with the Chandos engineers, have triumphed.

How appropriate it is, therefore, that the closing item is Walter Damrosch’s version of the chorale A Mighty Fortress is Our God, which ends in truly uplifting fashion with orchestral
splendour and the sound of bells. ---Terry Barfoot, musicweb-international.com

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