

REPLAY

Rob Cowan's monthly survey of historic reissues and archive recordings

Růžicková's Bach legacy

A box of wonders: a harpsichordist whose Bach-playing transcends fashions and dogma

Listening to the noble Bach-playing of harpsichordist Zuzana Růžicková while reading the tragic details of her biography makes for a humbling experience. Born in Pízen, Czechoslovakia, Růžicková, who hailed from a Jewish background and who this month celebrates her 90th birthday, originally intended to study with the legendary harpsichordist Wanda Landowska. That was before the Nazi invasion of her homeland and the implementation of the Nuremberg Race Laws made her dream impossible. Thereafter, things went from bad to worse, with spells in the concentration camps at Theresienstadt, Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, slave labour in Hamburg and, post-war, the horrors of Communist anti-Semitism. Beyond the Stalin era, Růžicková was able to record her beloved Bach for international distribution and after the 'Velvet Revolution' she could reclaim her title 'Professor'. Although now retired as a public performer she remains active to this day.

Růžicková's association with Bach is equalled in our era (or thereabouts) only by the symbiotic Bach-performer relationships involving Rosalyn Tureck, Glenn Gould, Helmut Walcha and, in more recent times, Angela Hewitt. When Stephen Plaistow reviewed Book One of Růžicková's *Well-Tempered Clavier* (Erato) in December 1971 he commented on her widely employed propensity for contrasting colours, her dramatic changes of registration within fugues (also the 'echo' effect she brings to bear in the very first Prelude) and her liking for rhetorical *ritardandos*. He also observed that the two E flat Fugues had each been 'married' to the Prelude from the 'wrong' book. This of course is absolutely correct but as Růžicková-pupil Mahan Esfahani points out in his excellent booklet-note for the current reissue Růžicková 'does not shy from applying sometimes avowedly modern aesthetic choices to the music of Bach, a

most obvious example being her choice to pair the E flat major Fugue from the Second Book with the Prelude from the First Book (a decision also made by Busoni in his celebrated edition). She justifies this in lessons by arguing that the grandeur of the Prelude from the First Book is mismatched with the playfulness of its Fugue. An argument based on completely 19th-century ideas, perhaps, but an interesting one in the context of modern concert presentation.'

It's perhaps worth noting that Růžicková honoured exactly the same practice on her equally engaging but occasionally more expansive 1995 recording of the '48' (Panton); also her choice of contrasting harpsichords for the two books, a more brilliant instrument for what she describes as the 'onomatopoeic' Book One and a more robust, even organ-like instrument for the more 'philosophical' Second Book. Comparisons are instructive: take the G major Prelude and Fugue from Book Two, for example, where the Erato recording, with its higher pitch, conveys a palpable sense of sparkle, whereas the Panton option, although conceptually similar, is set lower pitch-wise and sounds somewhat darker. Do read Esfahani's note, which offers many fascinating insights into the intellectual rigour of Růžicková's teaching methods, as well as details of the instruments used.

So how will modern listeners hear Růžicková's Erato '48' in particular? I'd say as a grandiloquent reverberation from Landowska's age, majestic, expressive, with a 'generous response to the humanity and nobility of the music' (SP's phrase) and a marked liking for 16-foot tone (doubling a note an octave below the one specified). The *Goldberg Variations* are played mostly without repeats but with an abundance of tonal variety, but perhaps the grandest and most joyous of her performances as presented here are the seven keyboard Toccatas (BWV910-916) and various solo

concertos, music that seems almost to have been composed with Růžicková's outgoing but strictly ordered brand of virtuosity in mind.

The sonatas with strings are especially memorable. Pierre Fournier's warm, loose-limbed playing in the gamba sonatas suggests deep musical compatibility while Josef Suk contributes tonal lustre to the sonatas with violin. The *French* and *English Suites* imply formal rather than relaxed dance routines – although often viscerally exciting these tend to be forceful, strict-tempo affairs – and the six Partitas (plus the larger-scale French Overture) replicate the dance element on a grander scale, a transformation that suits Růžicková's epic view of them. By contrast she revels in such miniature masterpieces as the *Sinfonias* and *Inventions* and the shorter Preludes. A personal favourite among the remaining works is the *Capriccio on the departure of a beloved brother*, which Růžicková invests with the sort of characterisation, pathos and vivid spirit that Landowska herself brought to it many years earlier (RCA).

Landowska's well-known quip 'you play Bach your way, I'll play him his way' fits the agenda here more or less perfectly. There's a sense of rightness to Zuzana Růžicková's Bach that transcends fads and fashions and the deadening impact of scholarly dogma. Some might find it just a mite too stately, its persistent propensity for shifting colours and registrations intrusive. 'In your face' is the appropriate modern phrase I suppose, but there isn't a musical face in existence I'd rather confront than Bach's and I thank Zuzana Růžicková for this sublime close encounter.

THE RECORDING



Bach The Complete Keyboard Works **G**
Zuzana Růžicková hpd
Erato © (20 discs)
9029 59304-4



Zuzana Růžicková: the harpsichordist's characterful Bach recordings are gathered together by Erato this month

Jacqueline Eymar

Once again we can turn to Melo Classic for a CD devoted to a remarkable but little-known pianist, though Jacqueline Eymar did at least make a handful of LPs (Brahms, Fauré and Debussy). A pupil of the fabled Yves Nat she was celebrated in *Le Figaro* for keeping alive 'the tradition of her master: a profound touch without sentimentality, conceptual architecture in her performance, dynamic transition thanks to her combined hand, wrist and forearms.'

Nowhere is this more evident than in a hair-raising account of 'Scarbo' from Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit*, or her sensitively phrased and crisply turned Mozart (K283, K311 and K332/300k, the *Adagio* of the latter being especially beautiful). Like Rachmaninov many years before her Eymar emerges from the gentle trio section of Chopin's 'Funeral March' to re-join the main theme triple *forte* then, at the close of the movement, drifts into a scarily ethereal *presto*. Her Fauré (Nocturne No 1, Barcarolle No 2) unfolds its narrative with directness and emotional candour – here we're approximately in Germaine Thyssens-Valentin territory – and her 'late' Brahms trades rhetoric for Gallic poise and vivid colouring.

She offers a brilliant *Appassionata*, combining scintillating fingerwork, fast tempos and sensual textures, and her Schumann (*Kreisleriana* in this instance), although far from note-perfect, seems to relish the music's constant shifts in mood. Try sampling the closing *Schnell und spielend* which is delightfully whimsical. A splendid programme, generally well recorded.

gramophone.co.uk

THE RECORDING



Mozart, Chopin, Ravel, Fauré, Brahms, Beethoven and Schumann
Jacqueline Eymar *pf*
Melo Classic (M) (2) MC1037

Daniil Shafran

Of all the great cellists to make recordings none in my experience is more consistent than the Russian Daniil Shafran. On disc he plays a relatively small repertoire and Melo Classic's Karlsruhe recital from 1959 can happily serve as the ideal Shafran primer. It opens with an account of Schubert's Arpeggione Sonata that to my mind is second only to Feuermann's with Gerald Moore, with endlessly varied vibratos, lightly chattering faster passages (as deft as Heifetz playing the fiddle), intensely expressive phrasing, a burnished, full-bodied tone, singing lines and artfully employed *rubato*.

Debussy's Sonata features strongly plucked *pizzicatos*, the work's finale both assertive and playful. Rostropovich with Britten (Decca) comes pretty close, but doesn't quite level with this. Brahms's Second Cello Sonata features an heroic opening *Allegro vivace* and a warmly drawn *Adagio* and there's the Shostakovich Cello Sonata, a Shafran speciality, a lyrical and witty reading, especially in the finale where the principal theme is pointed with pin-sharp precision. Pianist Walter Bohle serves Shafran as an excellent duo partner and the mono sound is excellent. If you do decide to shell out, play the last track first, Granados's *Danza española* No 5, as good a sampling of

Shafran's seductive art as you'll hear anywhere and a certain spur to play the rest of the programme without delay.

THE RECORDING



Brahms, Debussy, Schubert, Shostakovich and Granados
Daniil Shafran *vc*
Walter Bohle *pf*
Melo Classic (M) MC 3012

Manfred disc premiere

Fabien Koussevitzky, a nephew of the more celebrated Serge Koussevitzky, wisely decided to shorten his surname to 'Sevitzky' in order to avoid inevitable confusion with the Boston Symphony's maestro. He was chief conductor of the Indianapolis SO between 1937 and 1955 and among his few recordings is the first complete recording of Tchaikovsky's *Manfred* Symphony, which dates from 1942 and would remain the work's sole representative on disc until Toscanini made his NBC version some seven years later.

Sevitzky's performance is striking in a number of respects. Firstly, the conductor favours a very dramatic manner of orchestral attack, something that strikes you in all four movements. The second point worth mentioning is that some of the tempos are unusually slow. Take the Trio of the second movement, especially at the start (3'05" into track 6), and then the opening of the third movement which breathes its phrases more expansively than on any other version I've heard, though Sevitzky is by no means inflexible when it comes to manipulating the pace within a movement. The finale is excellent, especially as it rushes towards the coda.

Also included are various shorter Russian works by Glinka, Rimsky-Korsakov, Liadov and more Tchaikovsky, the Waltz from *Eugene Onegin* which is very neatly shaped and phrased. When reviewing Somm's 'Elgar Remastered' set (A/16) I suggested that 'there are "historic" releases that make the grade because they are just that, historic, and there are releases that make history because they are musically overwhelming.' This I would suggest is for the most part in the former category, though the *Manfred* has much musical merit. Mark Obert-Thorn's transfers are first-rate. **G**

THE RECORDING



Tchaikovsky Manfred
Symphony, etc
Indianapolis SO /
Fabien Sevitzky
Pristine Audio (P) PASC479

GRAMOPHONE JANUARY 2017 99