The RIAS Bach Cantatas Project

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Recording of the month

Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750): The RIAS Bach Cantatas Project

These recordings form a remarkable part of the immediate post-war musical legacy in what was then West Germany. The background, which is related more fully in the booklet notes, is worth summarising. At the end of the Second World War, when Berlin was occupied, the Soviet forces annexed all the musical recordings that had belonged to the former Reichsrundfunk. The authorities in the sector of Berlin controlled by the Americans sought to establish a new broadcasting entity, which within a short time became known as RIAS (Rundfunk im amerikanischen Sektor). However, the new radio station had to start from scratch; for one thing, it had no recorded musical material at its disposal. The conductor Karl Ristenpart (1900-1967) was amongst those entrusted with building up the musical resources of the fledgling radio station. Amongst other things, Ristenpart decided to record all the cantatas of J S Bach and to perform some of them publicly. Sadly, the project was never completed, for reasons explained in the booklet, but here we have 28 cantata recordings plus one cantata by Telemann that for many years was attributed to Bach.

The very thorough notes in the booklet relate the whole story behind these recordings in good detail. In all 78 cantatas were recorded between October 1946 and February 1953; in fact, 107 recordings were made but some recordings were subsequently duplicated. The recordings were made for a wider use than the 'merely' musical; they were broadcast during a Sunday morning religious programme on RIAS when the cantata appropriate to the day would be heard after a sermon. Quite a number of the earlier recordings were 'wiped' and I infer from the essay by Rüdiger Albrecht that, regrettably, what we have in this box is all that survives. It will be noted that many of the cantatas here included are not among the cantatas that are better-known, even today. Also, there are frustrating gaps. There is no BWV 147, for example, and I noted that one of the earliest recordings was a performance of BWV 82 by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau; what one would give to hear that!

It must be remembered that at the time of these performances the Bach cantatas were far from being widely known, so this project was hugely enterprising and the driving force behind it was Karl Ristenpart. His career was focused principally on chamber orchestras – he founded his own ensemble as early as 1932. It appears that he was unsympathetic to the Nazis – which would have made him acceptable for RIAS – although he did agree to take his orchestra to play for the troops at the front during the war years. He set up the RIAS Kammerorchester and when policy changes at RIAS brought about the demise of that orchestra – and the Bach cantata

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project – in 1952 he moved to Saarbrücken to work for the radio station there, setting up another chamber orchestra, including some of his Berlin players. During his fourteen years there, however, the emphasis was on orchestral music so no more Bach cantatas were forthcoming.

In many ways Ristenpart was ahead of his time, especially in using fairly small forces to perform Bach. That's one reason why these performances are of such interest to Bach collectors. We aren't told the approximate size of either the choir or the orchestra but both are clearly smaller than the ensembles used by Karl Richter in his Bach recordings for DG Archiv. Another attraction lies in the roster of soloists. Many of the names will be unfamiliar sixty years or so later but three names stand out. Among the sopranos was Agnes Giebel (b. 1921) then starting out on her career. Though Ristenpart engaged several singers in the other three voices he used just one tenor, at least on these recordings, namely Helmut Krebs (1913-2007). Krebs was a soloist at the Deutsche Oper at this time. A few years later he recorded a good deal of Bach with Fritz Werner but here we find him in younger voice. Incidentally, Agnes Giebel was another luminary of those fine Werner recordings of Bach. It's a joy to hear so much of these two excellent Bach singers but the set is invaluable also because we can hear a good many examples of the young Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. Born in 1925, Fischer-Dieskau would have been in his mid-twenties when these recordings were made. News of the great singer's death was announced while I was evaluating these discs and much has been spoken and written – and very rightly so – about his immense stature as one of the foremost singers of the second half of the twentieth century. Like Krebs, he was at this time a soloist with the Deutsche Oper but Bach's music was a constant thread throughout his career and it's thrilling to have so many examples of his early work in this box; one can readily understand why his singing caused such a stir from the very start of his career for he is in consistently magnificent voice.

Let me discuss some highlights from this engrossing set and start with one of the finest performances of all, that of Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme, BWV 140. This is, quite simply, an outstanding Bach performance. The opening chorus is impelled forward most excitingly. When the choir first enters their call of 'Wachet auf' is a true wake up-call; and what an inspired decision by Ristenpart to have the boys of the RIAS Knabenchor joining the soprano line and lending the cutting edge of their tone to the melody! There's real enthusiasm and urgency here. Ristenpart's tempo seems ideal to me and he takes 6:24 over the movement. Out of curiosity I put on Karl Richter's 1978 DG Archiv recording, to which I hadn't listened in a long time. Oh dear! His tempo is insufferably slow in this movement – he takes 9:38 – and in his hands the music sounds turgid and uninspiring. Fritz Werner too is pretty stately – he takes 8:14 but at least he's not as leaden as Richter. I revelled in Ristenpart's reading which, frankly, would not sound out of place among today's 'period' performances. In the following recitative Krebs sounds like a clarion herald. In the famous tenor chorale movement Ristenpart uses the whole tenor section from the choir – which I prefer. Richter uses his soloist, which is perhaps understandable when you have Peter Schreier on hand to do the honours but again a lethargic speed rules out this version while Ristenpart seems to get it just right. The soprano soloist for Ristenpart is Gunthild Weber who is an effective partner to Fischer-Dieskau in the two duets. Fischer-Dieskau also sings for Richter. There he's partnered by the enchanting Edith Mathis. I prefer her to Weber but I prefer Fischer-Dieskau's singing on the Ristenpart recording. Although there are many satisfying cantata performances in this box this one, I think, takes the palm.

Another conspicuous success is Agnes Giebel's account of the solo Wedding Cantata, Weichet nur, betrübte Schatten, BWV 202. She's in wonderful form here, singing the opening aria with fine expression – and partnered by a good oboist. She's

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delightfully eager-sounding in the second aria, where a perky bassoon obbligato also gives much pleasure. The late Alfred Dürr says that the third aria “strikes a more elegiac note”. Far be it from me to dissent from the view of such an expert but I don’t hear elegy in this music and certainly not in Giebel’s warm, radiant singing of it. The fourth and final aria, decorated by a pert oboe part, sounds smiling and happy here and the concluding gavotte movement is charming.

There’s another solo cantata in the set, Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen, BWV 56, which features Fischer-Dieskau. Here, in 1950, we find him in wonderful voice, even throughout its compass and with a lovely ease at the top of his register. He recorded it also with Richter, in 1969, and I prefer Richter’s slightly more flowing tempo in the opening aria but, on the other hand, I prefer the smaller band employed by Ristenpart. Fischer-Dieskau’s tone is superb in 1969 but in that later version he is more emphatic in his enunciation of the words. The cantata includes the joyful aria ‘Endlich, endlich wird mein Joch’. Both performances are excellent but I find Fischer-Dieskau sounds just a bit more natural and spontaneous for Ristenpart.

What of Helmut Krebs? He’s splendid throughout no matter what tests Bach sets him and no matter what emotions he’s required to convey. A stand-out moment for me is the aria ‘Ermuntre dich’ in BWV 180. This is a very demanding aria but Krebs is quite outstanding – and the flute obbligato is jolly good too. Krebs’ voice is light and keen and the rhythms dance irresistibly. His articulation is tremendous and I love his light, ringing tone. This is an outstanding piece of Bach singing by anyone’s standards. In BWV 19 there’s a very different test for a Bachian tenor in the aria ‘Bleibt, ihr Engel, bleibt bei mir’. Krebs sustains the long lines excellently and I admire his control very much. That said, even he doesn’t match the wonderful way in which James Gilchrist, a very different singer, floats the line at a daringly expansive tempo in Vol 7 of Sir John Eliot Gardiner’s Bach Cantata Pilgrimage. For me, Gilchrist and Gardiner capture the essence of this music in a way that’s very special. Krebs appears in every one of the cantatas that require a tenor and his singing gives unfailing pleasure. Not only that, he is a stylist and, additionally, a singer who cares about the words and knows how to put them across. His heady, distinctive tone and consistently clear diction are a delight to hear.

The other soloists aren’t quite so well known, at least not in 2012, but there are few weak links. One or two of the sopranos aren’t really to my taste. Edith Berger-Krebs (the wife of the tenor?) sings in BWV 42, where she duets with Helmut Krebs and, quite honestly, isn’t in his class; her tone sounds rather pinched and shrill. Lilo Rolwes is somewhat tremulous of tone in her aria in BWV 31 and in BWV 21 Gerda Lammers sounds to me to be striving a bit too much for expression and, as a result, the line is rather choppy. The altos are all effective. I particularly enjoyed the contributions of Ingrid Lorenzen – she gives a fine account of the extensive alto aria in BWV 42, for instance – while Charlotte Wolf-Matthäus has a good focus to her voice as she shows, for example, in BWV 22. Walter Hauck and Gerhard Niese have to stand retrospective comparison with Fischer-Dieskau, which is a bit unfair, but both acquit themselves well in their various assignments.

The singers of the RIAS-Kammerchor make a strong contribution. Sometimes the sound is a little fuzzy but I wonder if this is as much to do with the recordings as the singing itself. I’ve already mentioned their excellent contribution to BWV 140. Another place where they feature to particularly good effect is the dramatic opening chorus of BWV 19, which they deliver with plenty of energy and punch. They give a good performance of BWV 4 as well – I liked the lively tempo and good choral response in the first chorus. Richter in 1968 has better sound, of course, but his choir is bigger – some may prefer, as I do, the smaller ensemble – and yet again Richter’s speed is steadier than Ristenpart’s. Incidentally, in the fourth chorus of this cantata Ristenpart

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gets all his basses to sing whereas Richter uses a solo voice (Fischer-Dieskau). I think Richter's decision is the correct one but against the pleasure of hearing Fischer-Dieskau sing the piece we must set yet another leaden tempo by Richter, who lingers over the movement for 4:36 against Ristenpart's much more satisfactory 2:45.

The RIAS-Kammerorchester plays well for Ristenpart although those schooled on 'period' performances will need to adjust their ears for the string vibrato and the legato style of playing. There's some good obbligato playing and it's a pity that the players concerned aren't named; I suspect there isn't a full record of who played in the orchestra.

The presiding genius is Karl Ristenpart and these recordings show him as a Bachian of perception, style and good taste. I'm a great admirer of Eliot Gardiner in the Bach cantatas – and of Fritz Werner too. Eliot Gardiner can be brisk in his tempi but I can recall very few instances in this set where I felt Ristenpart was too slow. In any event, tempo is about more than speed; it's about finding the pace that's right for the music and, in vocal music, for the sentiments expressed in the words. Here I think Ristenpart's judgement is pretty well always spot-on. I said at the start of this review that he was ahead of his time and this is especially true of his determination to use slimmed-down forces at a time when this was far from being the norm. This, together with the fact that he articulates rhythms so well brings to his performances a fine clarity of texture and excellent energy.

As to the recorded sound, I think it's astonishingly good, especially when one considers that these recordings were made sixty or more years ago. Clearly the RIAS engineers knew what they were doing. Audite's re-mastering engineers, Ludger Böckenhoff and Karsten Zimmerman, who have worked from the original tapes, deserve plaudits for such fine work. Their skill has been vital in allowing today's listeners to experience so satisfactorily the integrity, dedication and sheer excellence of Karl Ristenpart's performances.

These performances constitute a major addition to the discography of Bach's cantatas. Their reappearance after all these years is a cause for rejoicing. This is one of the most important Bach issues for many years and the set is urgently commended to all who love Bach's cantatas.

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