



Bach and the South German Tradition Vol. II

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International Record Review (David Newsholme - 2012.02.01)

RECORD REVIEW
This release by Audite is the second volume to feature Bach's organ music played by Martin Neu (the first was reviewed by Marc Rochester in April 2010). In the first, Neu combines works composed by the great composer with those by two North German organist-composers, Dietrich Buxtehude and Georg Böhm. Here, the Toccata and Fugue in F major, the Magnificat Fugue and the trio sonata for organ in C major feature alongside pieces by four composers of the South German tradition, Georg Muffat, Johann Pachelbel, Johann Jakob Froberger and Johann Caspar Kerll.

Neu uses two different organs: the choir organ by Blasius Bernauer at Laufenburg in Switzerland and a modern instrument, conceived in Baroque style by Metzler in 2005 at Stuttgart-Obertürkheim. Brief information is given about both instruments in the accompanying booklet and for further information, including details of the registrations used on this recording, we are helpfully directed to the company's website. Perplexingly there is no indication in the booklet about which organ was used for which pieces or the reasons why. However, it is fairly easy to discern when listening to the disc; both pitch and temperament vary (the earlier pieces by Froberger and Kerll are both played at Laufenburg and the remaining works on the Metzler at Obertürkheim). Tenor Wilfried Rombach makes an appearance on the recording, taking the traditional role of the cantor as he very capably sings alternate versicles of Pachelbel's Magnificat versets.

Evidently, Neu views these recordings as informative documents; he writes in the accompanying programme notes that it is possible 'to clarify trends and offer an insight into existing interrelations [between Bach's music and that of the South German tradition]'. A glance at the track list reveals that the pieces are evidently chosen for the potential of direct comparison; there are three toccatas, one each by Kerll, Muffat and Bach himself. Additionally there are pieces based on the Magnificat by Pachelbel and Bach. Bach's setting is deliberately placed after Pachelbel's series of versets; we are told that it 'thus takes the position of the "Gloria Patri" which, according to Sigismund Theophil Staden, should stand 'mighty within the work'. However, it is clear that the interrelationships between the various pieces played on the disc are far more various and further-reaching than similarity of genre or melodic theme. Neu explores the similarities in compositional approach in his lucidly written notes, immaculately translated into English by Viola Scheffel. This is a programme that has clearly been well planned and researched.

Bach's Toccata and Fugue in F have been split and placed at either end of the disc; as Neu explains, they were probably written independently of each other and so there is justification for this approach. His performance of the Toccata glitters, featuring nimbly executed ornamentation in every register. One wonders whether the use of the pedal reed through the lengthy pedal points is perhaps a little

overwhelming in terms of balance. However, this shouldn't overshadow an otherwise very musical performance which demonstrates much poise, especially in some of the more agile pedal passages. The Fugue, a majestic double fugue, is played with a great sense of expansiveness without becoming ponderous, allowing the various polyphonic strands to be easily discerned by the listener.

Neu's renditions of the first and final movements of the trio sonata in C are lively, which befits the music. The tempos chosen work well; they are sprightly without being too fast for the generous acoustic of the building. The central movement is played steadily and with great musical integrity especially with regards to Neu's sensitivity of phrasing. In contrast, he chooses an upbeat tempo for the Magnificat Fugue, enabling the music to gather momentum leading towards the fabulous sounding of the subject in the pedal part at the work's conclusion.

Of the other works played here, the two performed on the historical organ at Laufenberg stand out. Kerll's Toccata is executed with a fine sense of clarity without sounding over-fussy and there is a good sense of forward movement in the passagework. Froberger's Capriccio is played with a suitable lightness of approach to articulation and using sprightly tempos, ensuring that the dance character of the music comes across to the listener. Undoubtedly both works benefit from performance on the Laufenberg instrument, with Neu exploiting the delicate and varied resources available to him. The change from one instrument to another and back again mid-disc feels slightly unusual when one listens to the recording as a continuous programme, though this should not be counted as a particular drawback. This is a fascinating, well-executed release that is recommended to anyone with an interest in music of this period.