audite

Rafael Kubelik conducts Bartók: Bluebeard's Castle

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Fanfare (Huntley Dent - 2019.02.01)

The ongoing series of historical recordings from the Lucerne Festival has been unusually well selected by Audite. The label's access to original radio tapes has also been a key factor, and as a result, these releases are on a par with Orfeo's issues from the Bayreuth Festival. The illustrious Russian violinist Nathan Milstein is probably undervalued today. Born in 1904, he appeared at the Lucerne Festival starting in 1949, in contrast with postwar Germany, where in response to the crimes against the Jews, he refused to perform until 1966. The Mendelssohn and Dvořák Violin Concertos were staples of Milstein's repertoire, so these performances from the 1953 and 1955 festivals are duplications. The notes inform us, however, that the works are new to the discographies of the two conductors, Igor Markevitch and Ernest Ansermet.

Markevitch and Milstein manage to make the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto an event, no easy thing. Straightforward and no-nonsense aren't terms of praise from me, which is why Milstein, who often displayed both qualities, hasn't been a favorite over the years. It was a surprise, then, to hear how much inflection he brings to the Mendelssohn, combining freshness with authority. The soloist is placed far forward but not so much so that the orchestra becomes sonic wallpaper. The mono sound is good enough to bring out the color in Milstein's tone. I like old-fashioned readings of this concerto, which places Isaac Stern's live account with Leonard Bernstein and the Israel Philharmonic (Sony) high on my list for its warmth and big heart. (The performance appears on an album titled Isaac Stern: Keeping the Doors Open, released to commemorate his successful efforts in the 1960s to keep Carnegie Hall from being demolished.) Milstein-Markevitch are just as impressive.

My mental stereotype was shattered completely in the Dvořák Violin Concerto, where Milstein gives the utmost in expression, feeling, and intensity. It's remarkable that Ernest Ansermet, not known for Romantic warmth and by no means famous for his Dvořák, should play an equal role. But together they deliver a reading so full of energy and conviction that I haven't heard its like before. The finale, which can sound squeaky and insubstantial, comes to life with earthy robustness here. Played as if it is a masterpiece, the Dvořák Violin Concerto becomes one. The recorded sound is essentially the same from 1955 as two years previously, but Milstein is placed farther back and, perhaps from deterioration in the tapes, his tone becomes a little gritty. The ear quickly adjusts, however, and the rest is pure pleasure.

As nice as it is to be surprised by two excellent performances that haven't been released before, even better was to have Milstein rise in my esteem. By all means this CD deserves serious consideration from general listeners and collectors alike.

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