



The RIAS Bach Cantatas Project

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Karl Ristenpart's recordings of a dozen or so of Bach's cantatas, dating from the late 1950s and early to mid-1960s, are probably well known to lovers of the repertoire. The contents of this box, by contrast, will be familiar only to radio-listening readers who were living in Germany in the years immediately following the Second World War. Although Ristenpart managed to record just about a third of Bach's cantatas between 1947 and 1952, thus running concurrently with Günther Ramin's radio recordings with the Leipzig Thomanechor (Berlin Classics), his aim to record them all was never realized, owing to a change in management at the broadcasting station RIAS Berlin. The whole sorry story is lucidly related by Habakuk Traber in an informative booklet essay.

Meanwhile, we must be grateful for the 29 cantatas, albeit one of which is by Telemann, which have been preserved and now most skilfully transferred to CD from the original analogue tapes, rather than 78rpm records. Listening to them has been a veritable epiphany, for not only did Ristenpart clearly have ideas well ahead of his time but also the discernment to engage what were probably the two finest German Bach Singers available to him. These are the late Helmut Krebs and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, not forgetting a very young Agnes Giebel. Krebs sings in all the cantatas requiring tenor voice, Fischer-Dieskau in comfortably over half of those containing recitatives and arias for bass.

Though I well remember an icy-cold day on a railway station platform in Berlin-Dahlem in 1977, when Krebs told me about these recordings, he never intimated that any of them were still in existence. I assumed they were not, and so this box of treasures has been affording particular delight, both for its element of surprise but, above all, for the pleasure generated by the imaginative and individual musicianship of Ristenpart, his soloists and instrumentalists.

Compared with those of Karl Richter and Fritz Werner, Ristenpart's choir is small, bringing with it effective degrees of lucidity and athleticism. The vocal diction is enunciated with clarity by choir and soloists alike, a feature by which Ristenpart evidently set some store. Internal balance is well maintained for the most part and it soon becomes apparent that textural transparency in which instruments and voices are allowed to converse without having to compete was of prime consideration. All this is par for the course nowadays, but in the late 1940s and early 1950s it comes as something of a surprise to hear such a light-footed, chambermusic approach to Bach. With only one or two exceptions Ristenpart favours brisk tempos; indeed his Christ lag in Todesbanden (BWV 4) knocks a full half-minute off Masaaki Suzuki's (BIS).

It is inevitable that in a sizeable clutch of cantatas such as this not everything will

come across uniformly well – the clipped articulation of the voices in some of the choruses is dated, though in Ristenpart's hands by no means inexpressive, as you can hear in the opening chorale fantasia of Herr Jesu Christ, wahr' Mensch und Gott (BWV 127). It is a pity, too, that occasionally da capos are shortened, but such instances are exceptions rather than the rule. Any other lapses are few and far between, often, I suspect, deriving as much from the limitations of recording technique as from any shortcomings in the artists themselves.

It is wonderful to hear Krebs in his prime. Seldom do we encounter recitatives sung with such urgent communication and such poetry as he had at his command, though just occasionally even he sounds uneven, as in the exacting tenor aria of Es ist euch gut, dass ich hingehe (BWV 108). In this lyrical piece it is Peter Pears who has the edge in an early recording with Karl Richter (Teldec-Warner). The youthful Fischer-Dieskau likewise seldom disappoints and then only with a hint of excessive vibrato, but almost entirely without the declamatory extravagances which occasionally caricature his later recordings with Karl Richter. Giebel's intimately expressed and radiantly coloured singing is already in place, though her voice is not fully matured and her performance of Weichet nur, betrübte Schatten (BWV 202) is less evenly controlled than her later version with Gustav Leonhardt (Teldec-Warner). There are other fine voices here aplenty, from among which I should mention soprano Gunthild Weber, who was a regular of Fritz Lehmann's (DG Archiv) in the early 1950s, soprano Johanna Behrend and contralto Charlotte Wolf-Matthäus, who made some notable contributions to the Bärenreiter-Cantate series of Bach's cantatas during the early 1960s. However, though listed among the soloists, soprano Edith Berger-Krebs does not, in the event, take part in any of these recordings.

In summary, here is an anthology which cannot fail to enchant most Bach enthusiasts. Readers will find cantatas which few if any other of the early pioneers committed to disc: BWV 88, for instance, with its twin images of the fishermen and huntsmen in its opening aria, sung with robust theatricality by Fischer-Dieskau. Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis (BWV 21) is among the most poignant that I know, Krebs and Fischer-Dieskau firmly impressing a stamp of immortality upon Ristenpart's performance. Likewise, Wachet auf! ruft uns die Stimme (BWV 140), whose opening chorale fantasia is as thrilling as any I can recall. What a pity that the booklet omits the name of every single instrumentalist. Surely some of them, at least, must be known and if so they certainly should be included here since they play such a prominent role in the music. Ristenpart, by the way, remains faithful to Bach's precise instrumentation almost without exception, only preferring flutes to recorders, doubtless for practical reasons, in the opening chorus of Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele (BWV 180).

Audite must be congratulated on this invaluable rehabilitation. At times one can scarcely believe the modernity of approach and in all but one or two instances the excellence of the sound. A revelation.