



Isaac Stern plays Tchaikovsky: Violin Concerto, Op. 35 and Bartók: Violin Concerto No. 2, Sz. 112

aud 95.624

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Gramophone (Rob Cowan - 01.01.1970)

GRAMOPHONE Scarred but scorching

I've always thought of Isaac Stern as a sort of Marlon Brando among violinists, a punchy, intense, uncompromisingly direct player with a muscular tone, though the upper reaches of that tone can sound both sweet and serenely pure. Stern's Sony recording of Bartók's Second Concerto under Bernstein is a vintage classic. Whether or not you will (or can) respond to this flawed Lucerne Festival performance under Ansermet (1956) will depend on your ability to tolerate performing mishaps. Odd tuning problems abound (from both Stern and the Suisse Romande Orchestra) and there are places where it sounds more like a collision than an act of musical collaboration: for example, towards the end of the first movement, Stern's E string suddenly snaps. However, there are so many genuinely poetic passages and so many instances where Ansermet captures the work's dramatic drift that I will certainly want this recording in my collection. I wasn't in the least surprised when the audience responded with such wild enthusiasm: the performance truly is a battle fought and won. The Tchaikovsky Concerto under Maazel (1958) is something else again, suave, honeyed, warmly expressed and for the most part brilliantly despatched. Mind you, when Maazel cues the finale at what sounds like an impossibly fast tempo, Stern momentarily sounds fazed, though he soon regains composure and the Concerto's (cut) closing pages go off like a rocket. What's for sure is that this well-recorded document enshrines real performances that get to the heart of the matter, warts and all.