



Pierre Fournier plays Dvořák, Saint-Saëns and Casals

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This is, quite simply, an absolutely stunning disc, with a “wow” factor off the charts. While Pierre Fournier made landmark studio recordings of both of the concertos featured here (two apiece, with Kubelík and Szell in the Dvořák, and Susskind and Martinon in the Saint-Saëns), and also has other live performances of the Dvořák available (conducted by Colin Davis and Szell), these renditions immediately assume very special places in the cellist’s distinguished discography, even with the occasional rough moments that studio recordings would correct.

The performance of the Dvořák B-Minor Concerto preserved here is utterly unique in that work’s discography. I make no secret of my absolute adoration of this work; the Fournier/Szell recording on DG is the one from which I learned and fell in love with it, and along with one of the great Rostropovich recordings (the ones with Talich, Khaikin, and Karajan) it has remained my benchmark for evaluating all other versions. What makes this one so remarkable is the conducting of István Kertész. As the booklet rightly notes, the conductor’s untimely death (he drowned while swimming off the coast of Israel) deprived the world of the studio recording of this concerto that rightly should have supplemented his still nonpareil cycle of the Czech master’s symphonies, and so this live performance fills a major discographic gap—and how! The score is susceptible to a number of interpretive approaches from the conductor as well as the soloist: youthfully ardent lyricism, soulful contemplation of nature, melancholic homesickness, and even (Rose/Ormandy) dark introspective brooding. But what I have never heard before now is the one Kertész provides here of full throttle, heaven-storming drama, full of fierce impetuosity and headlong impetus. From the very first fortissimo outburst, one knows that no prisoners will be taken and no quarter shown. The orchestral part is played on a positively Wagnerian scale, with thunderously roaring brass making epic declamations. (Did you ever before take note of the bass tuba part in this work? You will after hearing this performance!) That is not to say that rapturous songfulness is absent or slighted; instead, it too is heroic and larger than life in its ardor. At first, one would think that all the sound and fury (signifying a great deal more than nothing) would overwhelm Fournier, a performer known for the dapper elegance of his playing; but instead the soloist vs. the conductor and orchestra provide extraordinarily effective contrasts that heighten the dramatic climaxes all the more. A comparison that keeps coming to mind is to Wilhelm Furtwängler’s 1942 Berlin Philharmonic performance of the Beethoven Ninth Symphony; both performances are totally outsized, taking huge risks to interpretive extremes and pulling them off with stunning success. While neither one could be designated a desert-island choice—they are too unrepresentative of the norms for that—both rightly occupy unique niches in their respective discographies as renditions which absolutely must be heard.

Of Fournier’s two studio recordings of the Saint-Saëns, I much prefer his earlier

monaural version with Walter Susskind over his stereo remake with Jean Martinon; the latter strikes me as overly cautious and restrained, almost tepid. But with Fournier and Martinon together in concert, matters are altogether different: from the opening orchestral chord and solo declamation, they are off to the races in an account of the score that is fleet of foot and dramatically taut, but also stylishly elegant. Soloist, conductor, and orchestra negotiate all the hairpin turns in the score with nimble alacrity, and in the process also put paid to the ill-judged dismissals of it in some quarters as superficial. This is a terrific interpretation.

Back in 38:1 I reviewed a debut disc by the young Spanish cellist Pablo Ferrández, which likewise featured the Dvořák Concerto and the Casals El Cant dels Ocells. While judging Ferrández to be not yet ready for prime time (fine technically but too green interpretively), I praised his rendition of the Casals as being “played with deep feeling.” But the heart-rending tenderness Fournier brings to this slight souvenir puts Ferrández completely in the shade. I could not possibly ask for a better illustration of the difference between a promising but inexperienced novice and a seasoned master than to play their respective recordings side by side. In a brief spoken introduction (in French; the booklet unfortunately provides no translation), Fournier dedicates his performance to the memory of his distinguished colleague and frequent predecessor at the Lucerne Festival, cellist Enrico Mainardi, who had died a few months before. As usual, Audite provides a first-class remastering from first-generation archival radio broadcast tapes, and a fine trilingual (German-English-French) booklet with a lengthy essay and numerous historic photographs. My list of candidates for the 2015 Want List is already bursting at the seams, so I haven’t made my final cuts for that; but if this release doesn’t make it into that top five, it won’t be because it doesn’t deserve the recognition. This is truly extraordinary on every count; don’t let it get away from you! Highest possible recommendation.