Johann Sebastian Bach: Sei Solo á Violino senza Basso accompagnato

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Fanfare (Robert Maxham - 01.02.2019)

A passage in Norbert Hornig's notes to Christoph Schickedanz's readings of Bach's six sonatas and partitas for solo violin may give listeners cause either to toss the set out if they've already bought it, or to spend a week or two contemplating what history means before listening to it. The passage, in quotation marks (attributed to Schickedanz himself) declares that he (Schickedanz) could no longer "envisage" these works played in the manner of the older generation (the notes mention Joseph Szigeti, Nathan Milstein, Henryk Szeryng, and Arthur Grumiaux)—especially in the dance movements. Further along, Schickedanz disavows the importance of the instrument itself (he plays one made by Antonio Marchi in 1780) and, even later, of "scientific correctness." What's left that's important? Historical scholarship? If so the most profound ideas in Bach's works would seem to be held hostage to passing trends in historical performance practice—guarded so closely that Jascha Heifetz, for example, despite his breathtaking technical command and his searing emotional power, couldn't penetrate them. Does Schickedanz, resulting from his familiarity with the music-making of Nicholas Harnoncourt, have more direct access to the inner sanctum of Bach's imagination than these inspired violinists enjoyed or even could have dreamed of enjoying?

Open-minded listeners, who haven't read and pondered the booklet's challenges, on the other hand, may find in Schickedanz's brisk tempos (consider the First Sonata's Fuga) and lack of sentimentality (he playfully detaches phrases in the following movement) a refreshing change from readings embodying the perverse notion that slowing down tempos to almost half the familiar speeds will yield rich insights for those listeners who remain awake. He spits out the articulation in the Second Sonata's Corrente, reanimating a dance that might otherwise have sounded flat-footed—but still slyly realizes all Bach's subtly implied harmonies. The skittish double of the Sarabande could offer to skeptics a sort of apologia of Schickedanz's heady manner, which some listeners may nevertheless consider non-reverential (but not, even in the extreme case, irreverent). His approach turns to the darker side in the second sonata's Grave, but he recovers his bright sparkle in the Fuga that follows. Here, as in the First Sonata's corresponding movement, Schickedanz combines logic with and resonance to achieve a winning effect—and create an enduring impression. In a similar way in the Andante, Schickedanz combines a sharply pointed accompaniment with a discreetly, but effectively, ornamented melody. Schickedanz dices the phrases of the second partita's Allemande—curious listeners can find this procedure explicitly marked out in the second (illustrative) volume of Carl Flesch's comprehensive treatise on the art of violin playing.

It appears, then, that Schickedanz will admit influences that precede the period-instrument movement. While allowing these breath marks (of a sort) to be an influence, violinists could nevertheless follow them more covertly. Perhaps it will

become HIP, or even hip, to do so in the future. In any case, Schickedanz takes repeats, as in the Sarabanda, as an opportunity to insert his own two-cents' worth of ornamentation—many may find that it's worth infinitely more. His reading of the Chaconne lasts only 12:55, channeling the spirit of Heifetz rather than that of Szigeti, at least in the sense that he doesn't purport to commune with the infinite by taking infinite time. (Still, there's a powerful authority in Heifetz's playing that should be evident even to those put off by his manner.) The same's true of the first movement of the Third Sonata, which doesn't appear in Schickedanz's reading as such a leaden slog as it can be. The Fugue comes across with a similar vibrancy that depends—but not entirely—on the lively tempos he has chosen. Still, some listeners may miss the sweep that Milstein brought to the statements of the theme in double-stops during the episodes. The same is true in the finale, which, concerto-like as Schickedanz makes it, may not strike listeners as so majestic as Milstein's. At 3:26, Schickedanz doesn't exceed any speed limits in the Third Partita's Preludio, but he's brilliant enough on his own terms. His occasionally tart ornamentation makes the minuets especially invigorating.

Throughout, Schickedanz plays powerfully and has been captured in a resonant acoustic ambiance by Audite's engineers. Since I find so much to admire and so little with which to quibble in the set, I'd advise potential purchasers to listen to Schickedanz play but not to heed what he says: Don't discard Heifetz, Milstein, Grumiaux, or Szigeti. They're not old hat: Scholarship hasn't superannuated them (and nothing short of the kind of computer analysis that has exposed weaknesses in even José Raul Capablanca's chess playing ever can). But do acquire Schickedanz's set—he's the real thing.

I've lumped two sets of Bach's solo sonatas and partitas into one review not because of their repertoire or even because of similarities in the violinists' approaches (besides, Schickedanz plays a modern instrument, and Gottfried von der Goltz a violin made by Carlo Antonio Testore in 1720 but apparently strung up in the period way), but because of the strong whiff of condescension in the respective booklet notes of each. While Schickedanz can't "envision" playing Bach's music as Szeryng did, Dagmar Glüxam, in his notes to von der Goltz's set, makes it clear that he (speaking for von der Goltz or for himself?) thinks composers like Schumann and Mendelssohn found these works "baffling" enough to feel that piano accompaniments might enhance their effect. It follows in an absurd kind of way that, with my study of sort-of-modern musicology, I have a deeper insight into Bach's music than did one of the supreme musical geniuses of all time (Mendelssohn). History's a whole lot, but it isn't everything. Bach himself possessed a musical intellect that transcended time, and his output should transcend changing manners of performance and even advancing (or merely changing) scholarship (you can play Bach on kazoos—an ensemble formed to do it—or sing it—again, an ensemble made a name for itself doing just that).'s engineers. Since I find so much to admire and so little with which to quibble in the set, I'd advise potential purchasers to listen to Schickedanz play but not to heed what he says: Don't discard Heifetz, Milstein, Grumiaux, or Szigeti. They're not old hat: Scholarship hasn't superannuated them (and nothing short of the kind of computer analysis that has exposed weaknesses in even José Raul Capablanca's chess playing ever can). But do acquire Schickedanz's set—he's the real thing.

Von der Goltz distinguishes his performances not only by the inclusion of occasional ornaments (Schickedanz did that, too), but by a manner that I'll characterize as "pointed"—sharp articulation with pauses enough to separate phrases slightly. This emerges more strongly perhaps in the dance movements of the partitas than in the da chiesa movements of the sonatas. (The "period" sound he draws from his

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instrument isn't so nasal or so crunchy as to evoke a strong reaction.) Despite all this lively articulation, some of the dances, such as the Corrente from the First Partita, may strike some listeners as more manner than matter—more a collection of arch gestures than sustained oratory. They may find that, while Schickedanz consistently offers new things to consider, von der Goltz repackages older gifts with new paper and ribbon. There's a sort of irony in this more pro forma reading, because the notes to von der Goltz's recordings attempt to make a case that these works represent the entirety of the human soul. (Could the prodigiously talented Mendelssohn or the literary-poetic Schumann have been perspicacious enough to have understood this, despite their limited musicological backgrounds?)

As in the set by Schickedanz, after the darker Grave, the Fugue sounds crisp (though it seems to bog down more than Schickedanz's in morasses of polyphonic detail. Von der Goltz doesn't make the accompaniment to the slow movement's melody so staccato as did Schickedanz; and his reading sounds correspondingly less piquant. Von der Goltz plays the opening movement less predictably than does Schickedanz, at least it should seem less predictable to listeners familiar with Carl Flesch's suggestions about how to parse its phrases. The Chaconne, at 13:40 rather than Schickedanz's 12:55, sounds a bit more relaxed and even a mite less sharply articulated—his arpeggios build arguably with a correspondingly greater sense of purpose. The first movement of his reading of the C-Major Third Sonata may not strut along so jauntily as does Schickedanz's, but the succeeding fugue delivers its argument with an iron sense of inevitability. That sense of inevitability makes the finale especially cogent as well as brilliant. The Third Partita sounds straightforwardly brilliant, although von der Goltz's technical command creates art concealed by art (in this case, art concealed by artifice?). Von der Goltz invests the Bourée with an irresistible rhythmic drive, contrasting it with the Gigue, during which he relaxes into a more lambent playfulness.

Despite whatever pretensions readers may find unappealing in the notes, the performances, like those by Schickedanz, speak for themselves. Recommended.

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