



Bach-Reger Transcriptions for Piano Duet: Brandenburg Concertos Nos. 1-6 & Organ Works

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Gramophone (Jeremy Nicholas - 01.12.2019)

GRAMOPHONE

Concertos date from the early 1900s. They were so well received, so we are told, that they had to be reprinted only two years later. Who was buying them? I can't believe they were intended for musical suburban husbands and wives so they had a bit of Bach to belt out on their Bechstein. The technical demands are well beyond the reach of the average amateur but, like many another duet arrangement, offer a completely new perspective on the originals.

Reger's main preoccupation as a Bach transcriber was, of course, with the organ works and it is his profound knowledge of counterpoint that makes these Brandenburg arrangements so successful. Moreover, while a couple of Brandenburgs is usually quite enough at one sitting (for this writer, at least), here, once I started I couldn't stop. It's many a long year since I enjoyed this marvellous, life-enhancing set so much. Who knew that Reger could be such fun?

A great deal of this is down to the immaculate pinpoint ensemble of Norie Takahashi and Björn Lehmann and the rhythmic buoyancy of their execution. With properly brisk tempos, the outer movements bubble along with an insatiable joie de vivre. They use a minimum of pedal, too, so the complex voicing is always crystal-clear, underpinned by a springy, resonant bass line, while the upper treble, which so often in present-day recordings flies off into a different airier acoustic, here is firmly linked to the lower registers. The piano sound is, to my taste, ideal. All the concertos are recorded on a splendid Yamaha with the exception of No 5. That is played on a Steingraeber in a barely noticeably different acoustic/location.

As far as Reger's organ transcriptions are concerned, Takahashi and Lehmann offer us two works (the ubiquitous Toccata and Fugue in D minor and the St Anne Prelude and Fugue) which Reger also arranged for piano solo, together with his (only) version of the mighty Passacaglia, BWV582. These provide a judicious contrast to the boisterous Brandenburgs.

Here, in short, is a pair of discs to return to often. In fact, my one complaint about the whole enterprise is the deathless prose of its prolix booklet.