Johannes Brahms & Henri Vieuxtemps: Symphony No. 1 & Violin Concerto No. 5

aud 95.592

EAN: 4022143955920

www.musicweb-international.com (Jonathan Woolf - 01.11.2007)

Audite's Cologne Broadcasts series has at its focus here Karl Böhm in performances given at the Funkhaus in April 1963. He conducted the Cologne Radio Symphony Orchestra, now better known as the WDR Symphony, in one work with which he was strongly associated – the Brahms – and in another with which he would have had, at best, only a fleeting acquaintance.

So let's start with the Vieuxtemps A minor concerto where he partners the Romanian violinist Lola Bobesco (1920-2003). Bobesco was best heard live when she brought a genuine intensity to her playing that even the best of her relatively small commercial performances could not quite reach. She left behind no studio recording of the Vieuxtemps which makes this survival all the more valuable to admirers. The sound can be a little congested and Böhm doesn't do all he could to clarify orchestral textures. One imagines him content with an all-purpose heavyweight sonority – and this he duly gets, one that lacks Mackerras's finesse for Zukerman and Sargent's for Heifetz (both recordings, 1947 and 1961). Some of Bobesco's passagework sounds a touch smeary under pressure but this is a live performance after all and compensation comes from her powerful commitment. In the final resort whilst Bobesco may lack the studio perfection of such as Perlman, Zukerman, Grumiaux or Menuhin (with Fistoulari) she digs deeply into the string and makes something valuable of the first movement cadenza. In a work that's barely eighteen minutes long there's not much time to stake one's claim but she assuredly does; and a rougher hewn one than all the players already noted. She plays the central movement with great lyric and tonal generosity – with more allure than the more aristocratic Zukerman for example – and is suitably dashing in the sliver of a finale.

There's not as much to be said about the Brahms. If you know Böhm's 1975 Berlin Philharmonic DG studio recording, or the contemporaneous Vienna traversal, then you will know what to expect. Maybe he relaxes just a fraction more in the Cologne opening movement but otherwise both tempi and more importantly tempo relationships are consistent. The BPO performance however is both better recorded and better played and various other performances – from Berlin in 1959 and the on-tour Vienna Philharmonic Tokyo reading - probably have as many claims on the collector as this one. Furthermore Audite blots its copybook by muddled banding. Band three includes the Scherzo and the Adagio opening of the finale, leaving band four to take over at the Piu Andante Allegretto of the finale. Bizarre!

The constituency for this will be mixed. Bobesco admirers have a new discographical entrant but it's conjoined with what will be for them an expendable Brahms symphony. Admirers of the conductor will find the performance of the symphony "straight down the middle" but will have an unexpected though not always insightfully conducted concerto adjunct to their discographies.

»audite« Ludger Böckenhoff • Tel.: +49 (0)5231-870320 • Fax: +49 (0)5231-870321 • info@audite.de • www.audite.de