audite

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

aud 95.592

EAN: 4022143955920

4 0 2 2 1 4 3 9 5 5 9 2 0

Fanfare (Jerry Dubins - 01.03.2008)

Little need be said about this 1963 radio broadcast of the Brahms First with Karl Böhm, other than the fact that it is a quick-paced, no-nonsense, well-played, and quite decent sounding performance. But then this should come as no surprise. Böhm's Brahms has long been a proven quantity, well documented in recordings he made with the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics, as well as with other first-rate ensembles. His reading of the score on this occasion gives us an urgent, forward-pressing first movement, a beautifully paced and lovingly shaped Andante sostenuto, and a bracing finale.

The more interesting item on the disc is Henri Vieuxtemps's Violin Concerto No. 5 with Romanian-Belgian violinist Lola Bobesco, also from a 1963 broadcast. Bobesco (1921-2003) gained international recognition after having won the Eugene Ysaÿe contest in 1937. In 1958 she founded the Orchestre Royal de Chambre de Wallonie, and in 1971 and again in 1993 she was a jury member at the Queen Elizabeth competition. Bobesco's recording activities were not extensive, though she did commit to disc the violin sonatas of Beethoven, Brahms, Franck, Fauré, and Debussy.

Henri Vieuxtemps (1820-1881) was a famous violinist and composer who, like other Belgian musicians of the time (César Franck, for example, Vieuxtemps's exact contemporary) found French soil more fertile. Like a number of other virtuoso violinists competing for recognition and acclaim – Pierre Rode, Charles de Bériot, and Henryk Wieniawski – Vieuxtemps turned to composition, writing dazzling, death-defying works of derring-do. Much of his music, to be forgiving, is of interest mainly to violinists as contest pieces or as audience-wowing debut repertoire, and to students of the evolution of the violin and string-playing technique.

Of Vieuxtemps's seven concertos, the No. 5, however, has achieved a level of enduring popularity undeserved by its musical content, as a result of a jaw-dropping recording of it made in 1962 by Heifetz and Malcolm Sargent. Though the current catalog contains a number of recordings of other works by Vieuxtemps, I doubt that many are known beyond those with a keen interest in virtuoso violin music and its players. His Fifth Concerto, on the other hand, appears to have as many as 14 recordings, and I know for a fact there were once others, since the Philips CD I have with Arthur Grumiaux is no longer listed.

Bobesco was an accomplished fiddler – she would have to be to take on so technically challenging a work – but the reality is that she was technically challenged by it. Her playing can become labored and her bowing rough, as at 4:22 in the first movement; and her tone can turn abrasive in multi-stopped passages and pinched high on the G-string, the latter difficult for any violinist to make sound particularly

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

alluring.

In short, Bobesco negotiates the treacheries of Vieuxtemps's high-wire act without any fatal slips or accidents, but not with a great deal of graceful ease. Personally, I've never found much grace in Heifetz's performance of the piece either, but if it's sailing through it with ease that you're looking for, he's your man. For grace, to the extent it's possible under such duress, I'll take Grumiaux, and for unperturbed, if a bit bland aplomb, I'll take Zukerman in his 1969 recording with Mackerras and the London Symphony Orchestra.

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