



Johann Sebastian Bach: Christmas Oratorio

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Back to 2 I warmly welcomed a large Audite box containing the surviving recordings of Bach cantatas made between 1946 and 1953 by Karl Ristenpart. What I didn't know at the time was that a recording of the Christmas Oratorio had been made during the same period. Happily, the original tapes have survived and Audite, whose policy it is always to work from original tapes and no other sources, have now issued it on CD.

As I remarked when reviewing his cantata recordings, Karl Ristenpart (1900-1967) was somewhat ahead of his time in that he performed Bach's choral music with quite small forces, using a chamber orchestra and also a chamber choir comprised of professional singers. Furthermore, his tempi were often closer to those we're accustomed to hearing from today's Bach interpreters rather than those usually selected by conductors of Bach in the post-war years such as Karl Richter. The result of all this is that there's usually a most persuasive feeling of textural lightness to Ristenpart's Bach and though he can be judiciously measured in the speeds he adopts, the music rarely if ever drags. Whilst I'm wary of over-reliance on timings it's interesting to note that Ristenpart's overall timing for this work is not significantly longer than the timing achieved by Sir John Eliot Gardiner on his recording (150:04) or that of Stephen Layton on his brand new Hyperion set (151:49). However, it's not just a question of timings: one feels that Ristenpart is conveying the spirit of the music.

Ristenpart was discriminating in his choice of soloists and the quartet who sing for him here all featured prominently in his cantata series. It's worth saying at the outset that none of them ornament the da capo sections of the arias in accordance, I suspect, with the practice of the time. The credentials of Helmut Krebs (1913-2007) as a Bach singer do not need rehearsing here. He was a noted Evangelist and he was the only tenor used by Ristenpart in the cantata recordings that survive. He adds lustre to this performance. He sings the narration very well, the timbre of his voice ideally suited to Bach's recitative. The narration is often paced quite deliberately – though it never drags – and Krebs makes every word come alive, investing the text with meaning. The clarity of his diction is matched by the clarity of his vocal production so he makes a fine Evangelist. He also does the tenor arias very well indeed; in these numbers his light, athletic voice and an excellent technique are priceless assets. I particularly enjoyed his rendition of 'Ich will nur dir zu Ehren leben' where he's partnered by two equally incisive violinists.

Agnes Giebel (b. 1921) had at least as big a career as Krebs. Like him, she excelled in Bach - and in much else - and she makes a distinguished contribution here. The echo aria, 'Flößt, mein Heiland, flößt dein Namen' is charmingly done. The music is really suited to Giebel's voice and she sings it beautifully. She's aided by the

conductor's astute pacing and by the involvement of a fine oboist. Everything else Giebel does gives comparable pleasure. The name of Charlotte Wolf-Matthäus (1908-1979) is not quite as well known but I enjoyed her singing in the cantata set and she's on very good form here also. 'Bereite dich, Zion', taken at a pace which is quite steady, reveals not only her pleasing tone but also the conviction of her singing. Her voice is very evenly produced and I admire her sense of line. Equally enjoyable is her unaffected singing in the wonderful aria, 'Schlafe, mein Liebster'. I was fascinated to note here that Ristenpart, who adopts a very fluent speed, takes 9:55 for this aria; that's not appreciably slower than Gardiner, who takes 9:20. Layton, in his new recording, takes 10:47 and makes it sound more like a lullaby than either of them.

The baritone is Walter Hauck (1910-1991). He's another singer who I enjoyed in the cantata set though there he faced competition from the young Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. He's a good singer, though not in the same class as Fischer-Dieskau, even early in the latter's career. His tone is firm and his voice is consistently well and clearly produced. He's heard to good advantage in 'Großer Herr, O starker König', which is taken quite steadily. I've heard more imaginative accounts of this fine aria but Hauck gives a strong, un-histrionic reading of it. Later on he gives a good performance of 'Erleucht auch meine finstre Sinnen' though, once again, it's not the most nuanced rendition of Bach's music that I've heard. But Hauck is reliable at all times.

The orchestral playing is pretty good – there are some excellent wind players in the band – though the trumpets can be a bit fallible at times. There's one particularly sour piece of pitching from the first trumpeter on the last chord of the opening chorus of Cantata III. That's the chorus which is repeated at the end of the cantata and when the exact same flaw is apparent the second time round one doesn't need to be a super sleuth to deduce that the same take has been recycled. The singing of the RIAS-Kammerchor is decent but not outstanding. I suspect that Habakuk Traber is right to point out in his notes that the choir had not been in existence for all that long and had not been welded into an homogenous ensemble by 1950 – Ristenpart was not their chorus master, by the way. The blend is often not very good and the singing is not always ideally tidy. That said, the choir never lets the side down and they certainly sing with commitment – that's evident right at the start in a vigorous rendition of the opening chorus of Cantata I, though here one has the sense that the accent is more on demanding our attention rather than on rejoicing. I think the standard of singing improves as the performance unfolds and the choir makes a good job of the opening chorus of Cantata V and an even better fist of the corresponding movement in Cantata VI.

I found Ristenpart's direction stylish and convincing. Listeners familiar with 'modern' performances of the work may think at first that the opening chorus, 'Jauchzet, frohlocket' is somewhat steady. True, the music does sound sturdier than it does in the hands of, say, Gardiner. However, my firm advice would be that you should persevere. I don't think you'll be far into the work before the conviction of Ristenpart's view of the piece takes over. And, as I said earlier, I don't believe that he could never be accused of allowing the music to drag but he certainly conveys its spirit. One thing that slightly surprised me was the assertion in the notes that Ristenpart "chose swift tempi for the chorales." I don't really feel the chorales are taken all that swiftly, though they're certainly not turgid. To my ears they sound comfortably paced and I applaud the conductor's avoidance of pauses at the fermatas. Instead the chorales have a forward momentum and the phrasing makes sense of the words. I rather think the author of the notes had in mind that in Ristenpart's hands the chorales were taken more swiftly than was the prevailing practice at the time. There's one slight disappointment: I'm pretty sure that in Cantata IV Ristenpart has the horn parts

played on trumpets, probably for economic reasons.

Given that this performance was recorded sixty-three years ago, albeit under studio conditions, the quality of the recorded sound is bound to be an issue for collectors. All I can say is that Audite have done a splendid job with these transfers. The performers sound to be quite close to the microphones and in that sense the balance is rather up-front. Once or twice the closeness of the balance bothered me a little, one such instance being the soprano/bass duet, 'Herr, dein Mitleid, dein Erbarmen' (Cantata III) where both of the singers and the pair of oboes d'amore are all a bit too close for comfort – and occasionally Agnes Giebel is slightly disadvantaged in the balance. However, during most of the work the balance is satisfactory and never once did I feel the sound was an obstacle to enjoyment of the performance. That's a credit both to the original RIAS engineering team and to Ludger Böckenhoff, who has re-mastered these tapes and who was also one of the two re-mastering engineers behind the Ristenpart cantatas box.

Karl Ristenpart was a remarkable Bach conductor, truly years ahead of his time. This recording of the Christmas Oratorio, set down over a mere two days, is not flawless – not least because performing standards have risen so much during the last sixty years. However, it's stylish, wise and very well worthwhile hearing. I'm absolutely delighted that Audite have not just rescued this fine recording from the vaults but that they have done such an excellent presentational job in issuing it. Unfortunately, though, unlike the set of cantata recordings, no texts are provided. I suppose it's too much to hope for that there are any more Ristenpart Bach performances in the archives but this present issue is a most welcome addition to the discography of Bach's Christmas masterpiece.