



Johann Sebastian Bach: Christmas Oratorio

aud 21.421

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My first Karl Ristenpart review appeared way back in Fanfare 2:5, actually before the magazine adopted its current method of identifying back issues. It was of a Nonesuch recording of Haydn's Morning, Noon, and Evening symphonies (Nos. 6, 7, and 8), for which I paid the late Sam Goody, rest his soul, the munificent sum of \$1.49 not necessarily the best buck and a half I've ever spent, but close. For you nostalgia trippers who have been with us long enough to remember, it was also my very first Classical Hall of Fame nomination. A decade or so later I welcomed Ristenpart's Brandenburg Concertos to CD. Ristenpart's Brandenburgs, on two Nonesuch LPs, had been my first stereo version – my third overall – some years before. I'm sure that price was a factor in that transaction, too, but I have no documentation of it. The Nonesuch LPs served me well, but by the time they were transformed into two Accord CDs the period-instruments movement was in full sway, and the Ristenpart versions had lost a little of their luster.

Ristenpart was a player in the transition from the traditional reverential and monumental Bach that held sway during the late 19th and early 20th centuries to the tighter, lighter, and brighter idiom that prevails today. Case in point: He sang through the fermatas that mark the ends of phrases in Bach's chorales. Rather than interpreting chorales as if they were miniature tone poems, he treated them more in the manner of congregational singing. His choruses, too, shed some of their massiveness. This Christmas Oratorio is, in a sense, an historical document. One can sense a change from the opening chorus of the first cantata to the later ones. Audite's notes cast a revealing light on the situation. The recording was made in 1950, just five years after the end of the War. The RIAS (Radio in the American Sector) Chamber Chorus of Berlin was a relatively new organization, so Ristenpart started the sessions cautiously, gradually picking up his tempos as his singers became more comfortable with them. Another hint of things to come is Ristenpart's reading of the famous pastoral Sinfonia in Cantata 2. It would be a surprise to me if Reinhard Goebel were to adopt Ristenpart's breathless tempo. The soloists were among the best of their time; I was especially impressed by alto Charlotte Wolf-Matthäus, but all were excellent. I can't recommend this set as a first Christmas Oratorio, but it's a valuable document, worth preserving, and rewarding on its own terms.

Ristenpart did benefit from the innovative marketing efforts of the then new and active minor labels. Caught between the older traditions and changes yet to come, he isn't well remembered today. He deserves better.