Jorge Bolet: The RIAS Recordings, Vol. I

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Though he won the Naumberg Competition in 1937, Jorge Bolet wasn't to achieve a modicum of fame until he 'stood in' for Dirk Bogarde in Song without End, the 1960 Liszt film which finally saw Bolet's name in the credits. Even so, it wasn't until the mid-70s, when he was in his late 50s – specifically his 1974 Carnegie Hall recital – that witnessed greater widespread fame. Thus, these Berlin broadcasts, which span the years 1962 to 1973, and are taken from the original taspes, run from the years immediately after that film to the year before his breakthrough New York recital. They catch him in top form, the kind of form that inspired critic John Gruen to ask rhetorically in his 1973 New York Times portrait of the pianist: 'Where have you been, Bolet?'

He performs excerpts from Liszt's Années de Pèlerinage and Études d'exécution transcendante in 1962-63. La Chapelle de Guillaume Tell is nobly chorded, Au lac de Wellenstadt deeply evocative and digitally superb, Orage powerfully projected and Valée d'Obermann variously delicately nuanced and dramatically expressive. The sound quality in the 1962 Études is slightly less impressive than in the Années de Pèlerinage but interpretatively things are on much the same level; deeply musical, and never overbearing with the thrills and spills of a live performance fully conveying his vision. The second disc includes more Liszt; the three Nottornos, of which Liebesträum No.3 is the obvious favourite – it's played with chaste lyricism and no straining for effect – but which witnesses a lovely performance of the seldom encountered No. 1. Rhapsodie espagnole is dispatched with bravura. Thereafter one encounters Moszkowski's En automne, a Bolet favourite, a skirling character study, the Saint-Saëns-Godowsky The Swan and the delicious Godowsky Le Salon. A truly beautiful performance of Widmung and an exceptionally vivid Godowsky Symphonic Metamorphosis on themes by Johann Strauss 'Die Fledermaus' brings the second disc to a fully contrastive conclusion.

The final disc is given over to Chopin and Debussy. The Fantasia in F minor possesses poetry and repose as well as drama and romantic authority. The Impromptus were recorded in March 1964 and are unaffected and refined and technically highly distinguished. There is the bonne bouche of the Minute Waltz and Etude Op. 10 No. 5. His Debussy is taken from the Préludes and he plays four from each book. These are conceived on much the same scale as the three overlapping performances (New York City, 1974) preserved on Marston 56003-2. Though taped earlier these Audite readings are immeasurably better recorded and preserve Bolet's readings in far more agreeable sound. The performances are full of vivid detail and defiantly un-Gieseking like in their interpretative and sonic stance; no pedal wash.

This is a most accomplished set; well chosen, excellently engineered and finely documented with excellent photographic reproductions. Bolet aficionados should not hesitate and neither should lovers of great pianism.

Jorge Bolet (piano): RIAS - Volume 1
rec. 1962-73, RIAS, Berlin
AUDITE 21.438 [3 CDs: 186:26]

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