



Jorge Bolet: The RIAS Recordings, Vol. 1

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Fanfare (Peter J. Rabinowitz - 2018.07.01)

According to traditional lore, Bolet's Carnegie Hall concert on February 25, 1974, was, as Wolfgang Rathert puts it in the notes for this new set, "the definitive breakthrough" in his career. There's a certain truth lurking behind that belief, even if the causal implication is questionable. It's certainly the case that, despite a long string of spectacular concerts and recordings, Bolet's reputation really took off when Decca took him on in the late 1970s, in the wake of but not as a direct consequence of that concert. And those late recordings represent the bulk of his currently available catalog. As I've said often before, that's unfortunate for two reasons. First, Bolet was one of those performers who tended to be cramped by the recording studio, and Decca was not interested in live performances. Second, while Bolet was always a magician when it came to color, in these sunset years he tended to allow his tonal push to dominate his playing, which increasingly tended toward interpretive softness. If you want to hear him at his most imposing, you need to turn to his earlier performances, his concert recordings and broadcasts in particular.

Some of those have been lovingly resurrected by APR and especially Marston (see, in particular, Henry Fogel's and Marc Medwin's detailed accounts of Jorge Bolet: Ambassador from the Golden Age, Fanfare 38:5). Now Audite has launched a series drawn from RIAS archival broadcasts from the decade just before that Carnegie Recital, and it's another cause for celebration.

What are the primary virtues on display? Certainly, in terms of virtuosity, the pianism here is at the top level. In his paradoxically grudging rave of that Carnegie concert, Harold Schonberg commented that Bolet had "a technique equal to any in the world today." Listening to his dexterity in the Liszt Rhapsodie espagnole, you certainly wouldn't be moved to disagree. But while the performance is marked by the same kind of sizzling authority we hear from, say, Barere (see 13:3), it's got a lot more than muscle to recommend it—as do all of the other performances in this well-curated set.

Indeed, even more consistently striking than the virtuosity is Bolet's long-term rhetorical control. Despite the frequent rhythmic freedom, and despite the garrulousness of some of the works (you'd hardly charge Liszt's Vallée d'Obermann with concision), Bolet keeps us in his grip from first note to last, unfolding the music in a single emotional arc. Then, too, there's his iridescent play of color and articulation. That's true not only in such intimate music as his gracious "Danseuses de Delphé" but in larger works as well: Few pianists bring out the timbral implications of the changes of harmony in Liszt's "Harmonies du soir" as evocatively as Bolet does here, and few manage Chopin's Fantasy with such a paradoxical blending of plush and granite. Throughout the recital, ornamentation is artfully molded—and in



contrast to many of Bolet's late performances, accompaniments never turn sludgy. There's no trace, either, of the sobriety that sometimes reduces Bolet's later readings into lectures—indeed, the level of wit on this recital is deliriously high.

On the whole, I think you could say these are extroverted performances—the unflinching concentration in Liszt's "Chasse-neige," the stunning crescendo in the middle of Debussy's "La cathédrale engloutie," the barnstorming account of Godowsky's Metamorphosis on Fledermaus all remind us that we are in the presence of an artist who thinks big. On the whole ... but not wholly. For in contrast to Barere (and Lazar Berman, too), Bolet never brutalizes the music—and he's got a far wider interpretive range, coupled with far more responsiveness to the emotional differences among the pieces. In the end, for every moment of sheer bravura, there's another that caresses your ears. The free and innocent ardor of Widmung, the surprisingly inward opening of Chopin's Second Impromptu, the mercurial changes of voice of Debussy's Sérénade interrompu, the utter transparency of the counterpoint in Godowsky's arrangement of Saint-Saëns's "The Swan"—this set is dotted with moments of remarkable sensitivity, even in places where you might not expect it (say, the pockets of delicacy in Liszt's usually coarsened "Wilde Jagd").

Does everything work? Actually, pretty nearly. And in those few moments where you might demur, there's always something to compensate. The reading of Liszt's La chapelle de Guillaume Tell is slightly static in a way that looks ahead to the later Bolet, but the balance of the sonorities is a marvel; Moszkowski's En automne may be slightly pushy, but its prismatic filigree makes your slight sense of dissatisfaction seem churlish.

The engineering is superb, and the notes, while no competition for the essays in the Marston set, are informative and appreciative. All in all, a superlative contribution to the catalog.

JORGE BOLET: THE RIAS RECORDINGS, VOLUME 1 • Jorge Bolet (pn) • AUDITE 21.438 (3 CDs: 186:26)

CHOPIN Fantasy in f, op. 49. 4 Impromptus. Waltz in D♭, op. 64/1. Étude in G♭, op. 10/5. **DEBUSSY** Préludes: Book I: Nos. 1, 9–12; Book II: Nos. 6–8, 12. **GODOWSKY** *Le Salon. Symphonic Metamorphosis on Themes from Die Fledermaus*. **LISZT** *Années de pèlerinage I*: Nos. 1–6. *Études d'exécution transcendante*: Nos. 1, 2, 7, 9, 11, 12. 3 *Liebesträume*. *Rhapsodie espagnole*. **MOSZKOWSKI** *En automne*. **SAINT-SAËNS** *Carnival of the Animals: The Swan* (arr. Godowsky). **SCHUMANN** *Widmung* (arr. Liszt)

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