

audite

Deutschlandfunk Kultur



JORGE BOLET

Liszt | Chopin | Debussy | Moszkowski
Saint-Saëns | Godowsky | Schumann

RIAS
Vol. I

Berlin, 1962-1973



FRANZ LISZT (1811-1886)

Années de Pèlerinage. Première Année: Suisse, S. 160 (excerpts)

- I. La Chapelle de Guillaume Tell 6:44
- II. Au lac de Wallenstadt 2:56
- III. Pastorale 1:45
- IV. Au bord d'une source 3:34
- V. Orage 4:22
- VI. Vallée d'Obermann 14:06

recording: March 15, 1963 • Siemensvilla, Berlin-Lankwitz

Études d'exécution transcendante, S. 139 (excerpts)

- I. Preludio 1:00
- II. Molto vivace 2:46
- XI. Harmonies du soir 10:13
- XII. Chasse neige 5:09
- IX. Ricordanza 10:53
- VIII. Wilde Jagd 5:44

recording: March 22, 1962 • RIAS Funkhaus, Berlin – Studio 7

Liebesträume. 3 Nottornos, S. 541

- I. Hohe Liebe 6:44
- II. Seliger Tod 4:40
- III. O Lieb', so lang du lieben kannst 5:03

recording: January 5, 1966 Siemensvilla, Berlin-Lankwitz

Rhapsodie espagnole, S. 254 13:01
(Folies d'Espagne et Jota aragonesa)

recording: March, 9, 1964 • RIAS Funkhaus, Berlin – Studio 7



MORITZ MOSZKOWSKI (1854-1925)

En automne, Op. 36/4 2:16

recording: March 22, 1962 • RIAS Funkhaus, Berlin – Studio 7

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS (1835-1921)

Le cygne 'The Swan' / arr. Leopold Godowsky (1870-1938) 2:32

recording: March 22, 1962 • RIAS Funkhaus, Berlin – Studio 7

LEOPOLD GODOWSKY (1870-1938)

Le Salon 2:49

recording: March 22, 1962 • RIAS Funkhaus, Berlin – Studio 7

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810-1856)

Liebeslied, S 266 (Widmung, Op. 25/1) arr. Franz Liszt 3:44

recording: March 22, 1962 • RIAS Funkhaus, Berlin – Studio 7

LEOPOLD GODOWSKY (1870-1938)

**Symphonic Metamorphosis on themes by Johann Strauss
'Die Fledermaus' (The Bat)** 10:51

recording: March 9, 1964 • RIAS Funkhaus, Berlin – Studio 7

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN (1810-1849)

Fantasia in F minor, Op. 49 12:51

recording: October 8, 1973 • RIAS Funkhaus, Berlin – Studio 10



FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

Impromptu No. 1 in A-flat major, Op. 29 3:41
 Impromptu No. 2 in F-sharp major, Op. 36 5:49
 Impromptu No. 3 in G-flat major, Op. 51 5:15
 Fantasia-Impromptu in C-sharp minor, Op. 66 4:25

recording: March 9, 1964 • RIAS Funkhaus, Berlin – Studio 7

Waltz in D-flat major, Op. 64/I 'Minute Waltz' 1:55
 Etude in G-flat major, Op. 10/5 1:51

recording: March 22, 1962 • RIAS Funkhaus, Berlin – Studio 7

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

Préludes. Premier Livre

I. Danseuses de Delphes 3:39
 IX. La sérénade interrompue 2:29
 X. La Cathédrale engloutie 6:31
 XII. Minstrels 2:12

recording: January 5, 1966, Siemensvilla, Berlin-Lankwitz

Préludes. Deuxième Livre

VI. Général Lavine – eccentric 2:44
 VII. La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune 4:48
 VIII. Ondine 2:57
 XII. Feux d'artifice 4:08

recording: January 5, 1966, Siemensvilla, Berlin-Lankwitz

The last gentleman of the piano. On the art of Jorge Bolet

For anyone fortunate enough to experience Jorge Bolet in concert, this is the impression that will forever linger in their memories – not because there was any spectacular or theatrical stage presence to marvel at, as is so often seen today or even demanded by the audience. Bolet's charisma arose in a completely different manner, almost imperceptibly. Here was an artist who combined concentration and composure, nobility and understatement, temperament and grandeur so naturally and perfectly that he seemed the representative of a long-vanished world and culture. And this impression was juxtaposed with the paradoxical sensation that the man performing was not a pianist at all, but a distinguished businessman or senior diplomat who had slipped into this role. But the moment Bolet placed his hands on the keyboard, he brought forth sounds of an exquisite beauty unmatched by all but the rarest of pianists. The fascination he exerted and capacity to provoke were qualities he had possessed since birth. Endowed with the looks of a Hollywood star, the Cuban-born Bolet could easily have become a "Latin lover" of the piano, following in the footsteps of Liberace who, with his version of showmanship, enjoyed enormous success in Las Vegas and on American television after the Second World War. (To avoid any misunderstandings: Liberace, who was born Władziu Valentino Liberace as the son of Italian and Polish immigrants, was a phenomenal pianist!) Bolet, who won the prestigious Naumburg Competition in 1937, resisted this temptation. But ironically, it was Hollywood that launched his fame when he performed the piano scenes for leading actor Dirk Bogarde in George Cukor's 1960 Liszt film *Song without End*, with his name appearing in the credits. After this demonstration of stylistically-confident Liszt playing in which the greatest technical difficulties were mastered with ease, many concert engagements would follow, but much time still needed to pass before Bolet's greatness was recognized. Thus culture and music critic John Gruen entitled his 1973 *New York Times* portrait of Bolet "Where have you been, Bolet?," noting:

At 58, Jorge Bolet has only of late received major recognition. While he has been a pianist for 52 of his 58 years, his ascent has been painfully slow, and fraught with missed opportunities and frustrations. Were he a lesser man, or, indeed, a lesser artist, he might still be relegated to that demi-world of pianists whose names elicit a faint nod, or a blank response.

Looking back on the hard times he endured as a young pianist, Bolet himself offered the following comments in this article:

I will not deny it, I had some terrible years. There was great struggle. There was half-starvation. That all came in the late forties and fifties. I would not be here if it weren't for the kindness of my friends. They saw me through those ghastly, lean years. But you know, the human mind has the capacity of forgetting disagreeable things. It wants to remember only the good things.

The definitive breakthrough came one year later, at Carnegie Hall on February 25, 1974, when Bolet, in his very finest form, gave a sensational piano recital with works by Bach-Busoni and Chopin, Liszt's paraphrase of the *Tannhäuser* Overture, and the Strauss paraphrases by Carl Tausig and Adolf Schulz-Evler. The concert has gone down in the annals of piano history (and, thankfully, the recording has been preserved), securing Bolet's place among the elite company of the 20th century's greatest pianists. After four more years, at the age of sixty-four, Bolet signed an exclusive contract with DECCA. In the context of the music business today, where a soloist is no longer considered marketable by thirty, this seems nothing short of extraordinary, if not surreal. Bolet's belated fame, which lasted up until his death in 1990, was all the more prolific, as testified by concert requests throughout the world and the completion of his impressive discography. These recordings of major piano works by Chopin, Liszt, and Debussy along with virtuoso encores and arrangements, made for the RIAS Berlin between 1962 and 1973, are contributing further interpretative highlights to his legacy.

If we want to obtain a more detailed picture of Bolet's place among the great pianists of the 20th century and his artistic convictions, we are fortunate to have many documents at our disposal, including a series of interviews; four of these are cited below. Born in Havana as the eldest of eight children in the watershed

year of 1914, Bolet's musical talent quickly became evident to his family: as a five-year-old, he would look on attentively during his sister Maria's piano lessons (she was eleven years older), playfully learning to sight-read in the process. One of his parents' American acquaintances heard him play at a private house concert, and this set the ball rolling: she contacted Josef Hofmann directly, who was head of the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, with the result that the boy was permitted to apply. Bolet was accepted and assigned to the class of David Saperton, the son-in-law of another legend of the golden age of piano playing, Leopold Godowsky. The Polish-Jewish pianist, who had made his debut in Berlin in 1900, was appointed professor and Busoni's successor at the Vienna Academy of Music, had been living in the United States since 1915, and was regarded as the "Buddha" of pianism. Particularly with his arrangements of the Chopin Etudes, he had raised the technical and expressive possibilities of the piano to a new level. (Godowsky's hands were insured for one million dollars, an unimaginable sum at the time). The career of Saperton (originally Sapirstein), who was born in Pittsburgh in 1889, was somewhat less auspicious: a child prodigy trained by Liszt pupil August Spanuth, he ended his concert career abruptly in 1918 for unknown reasons. And though in addition to Jorge Bolet, he brought forth two other world-class pianists in Abbey Simon and Shura Cherkassky, he lost his teaching position in 1941. His remarkable 1952 recordings of the Chopin Etudes and some of Godowsky's Chopin and Strauss arrangements are his only surviving sound document that permits us to get a sense of the knowledge and technique he passed on to his pupils. Bolet – who was first named Rudolf Serkin's assistant and later himself became director of Curtis's piano department – spoke, in his typically dry manner, about a fundamental aspect of Saperton's teaching, namely correct body posture at the instrument:

*[He] always used to say that you should just take your normal position at the keyboard, drop your hands to your lap, relaxed, and then bring them up and put them on the keyboard [...] And I believe the body should be kept relatively still, too. The more you move around, the more you're asking for trouble. When you shift your body this way and that at the keyboard, you alter your position there. Such alteration increases the possibility and even the probability that you're going to be missing all kinds of notes and playing all kinds of stresses that you don't really want or that aren't in the music. What really gets to me is the pianist who occasionally lifts his head and looks to heaven. What are they looking for, God?*¹

Bolet's most important pianistic role model, however, was Sergei Rachmaninov, to whom he was introduced by Saperton at the age of fourteen. For Bolet, Rachmaninov's piano playing represented the perfect synthesis of stoic outer calm and dynamic inner movement: the energy of the whole body flows, practically without any loss, into the power of musical imagination, with nothing distracting from the actual – and only – goal of offering the most thorough account of the work possible, in which a different facet of the piece is also revealed with every performance. Even if Bolet was later marketed as the "last Romantic" among pianists, we should be careful not to be misled by this label. Bolet's universality is already attested to by his enormous repertoire ranging from Bach to Dello Joio. He not only urged his students to study all kinds of music, from Baroque to the avant-garde, but also to realistically assess the enormous risks of their profession:

*I tell them to study everything they can to broaden their mind and not to limit their whole life and whole existence to piano playing. Many pianists today are overpracticing and are very limited people as a result. Anton Rubinstein and Liszt and so many of their students were very worldly and men of very great spirit. [...] I often tell my student that they have chosen the world's most insane profession: The chances of success are perhaps one in ten thousand. And I think you have to be either extraordinarily gifted or extraordinarily misguided to go into something like that with your eyes open. But sometime one has the calling, and you go forth; and the whole piano literature awaits you.*²

Bolet was not interested in portraying vague "feelings," but rather in offering a view of the work that has been thoroughly examined and worked out in every detail – the precondition for any individual interpretive freedom. Bolet likened this to speaking to an audience:

¹ Mach, p. 31.

² Dubal, p. 85.

Performance is basically a form of speech. Right now, I have ideas that I'm communicating to you by means of words. That's exactly what you have to do in performance. You have to communicate to the listener what you're doing and at every turn you have to, in so many words, be telling the listener, "Listen to this. Isn't this beautiful? Now, do you remember the last phrase? Listen to the next one because it's entirely different." It's kind of a question and answer. You heard the question, now listen to the answer.³

Thus for Bolet, learning repertoire was a precise, extremely efficient, and organized mental and practical act which had the aim of producing a multi-layered and sparkling interpretation. Like Rachmaninov, the more "Romantic" and emotionally-charged the music, the clearer and more restrained his playing. But Bolet also put thought into the influence of acoustic phenomena, like the fact that the listener's distance from the sound source (the instrument) is inversely proportional to his perception of the playing speed. Thus in the very back row of a hall, the music is perceived to be faster than in the first! He was also interested in differences of construction between pianos, and was one of the few great pianists after 1945 who did not play on a Steinway, since he felt that its soft pedal was not sensitive enough. Globally, he also saw the work of the pianist as a continual act of self-criticism:

I have always had one big musical problem. And that is, in anything slow I have always had a tendency to dawdle; play too slowly. Whenever I play something like a Chopin nocturne, for example, I have to keep saying to myself: "Bolet, go on, go on, go on, don't linger, just keep it moving. That's a good boy. Keep it moving." Otherwise things start getting bogged down and stagnant. You lose your rhythmic propulsion. You start listening to yourself and listening to a particular phrase and thinking, "Oh, wasn't that beautiful." Before you know it you're not going on, you're stopping and savoring what you've already heard. That's always been one of my terrible failings. [...] I would say that ninety-eight percent of the time my practicing is musical. The one thing I keep telling my students is, especially in Romantic music, you cannot do the same thing twice. That is something that I find really lacking in so much playing that I hear today. They do something and then they repeat and play the next phrase and they do exactly the same thing. You have to strive to always have something happening, a variety of color, variety of sound, places where a melodic line comes to a rest.⁴

If we study Bolet's art of piano playing in these Berlin recordings, one thing we remark is that he tries to do justice, both stylistically and pianistically, to every work, and always with the very same thoroughness – in other words, to present it "aptly" (aptum), as classical rhetoric demanded of the orator in his use of devices. If Debussy's *Préludes*, for example, seem decidedly "old-fashioned," this should not be misunderstood as a lapse into outmoded Romanticism, but as an attempt by the interpreter to view the music – which is in this case distinctly classicist! – from a different perspective. Let us not forget what Bolet considered to be the defining quality of a musician:

I believe a musician is a person who, first of all, has an open mind about everything in connection with music. He is a person who is willing to listen to anything, regardless of how absurd it might appear on the surface; a person who is willing to study and consider all angles and approaches to music, open to all ideas, and sufficiently learned to make a choice as to what he wants to do and the road that he wants to follow.⁵

It is thus telling that in his rare moments of leisure, Bolet devoted himself professionally to photography from an early age, the art form which, time and again, couples faithfulness to reality with the desire to creatively reinterpret it. As testified by this CD box set, Jorge Bolet impressively demonstrated how to apply this approach to the score and his interpretation.

Wolfgang Rathert

Translation: Aaron Epstein

³ Noyle, p. 18.

⁴ Noyle, p. 17f.

⁵ Marcus, p. 86.



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recording engineer: Siegbert Bienert CD 2 track 1-3 / CD 3 track 8-15 / Heinz Opitz CD 2 track 4, 9 / CD 3 track 2 / Alfred Steinke CD 3 track 1

Deutschlandfunk Kultur

Eine Aufnahme von RIAS Berlin (lizenziert durch Deutschlandradio)

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photos: PAM / p. 24: Jorge Bolet

further reading: Bibliographical notes on the interview excerpts:

Dubal, David: The World of the Concert Pianist. London: Gollancz 1985, pp. 78-85.

Mach, Elyse: Great Pianists Speak For Themselves. New York: Dover 1991, pp. 21-41.

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Noyle, Linda J.: Pianists on Playing. Interviews with Twelve Concert Pianists. Metuchen: Scarecrow Press 1987, pp. 14-25.

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