



The RIAS Bach Cantatas Project

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REVIEW: RIAS Bach Cantatas Project, Berlin, 1949-1952

On the strength of an enthusiastic BBC Radio 3 review by the much respected Nicholas Anderson, I lashed out and bought this 'Audite' boxed set: 9 CDs (29 Cantatas in all) for around £ 50 (Audite 21.415). If you're interested in this repertoire – or, indeed, in the post-war development of "Early Music" performance – you'll find this set a real eyepener, I think.

I did already have a few 'historic' Bach Cantata recordings, including some fascinating (if incomplete) performances recorded in Leipzig's Thomaskirche under the direction of Karl Straube in 1931 (the year when I was born!) The style may sound a bit quaint to us, now, but it affords an interesting glimpse into the past. I also have some recordings made by the Thomanerchor in the early 1950s under its post-war Kantor, Günther Ramin, but they too seem of little more than historical interest today. So – it was a big surprise to put on these newly-issued Berlin CDs, remastered from tapes which date from around 1950, and to discover how "modern" and thoroughly enjoyable many of the performances sound.

Following Berlin's almost total destruction at the end of the war, its radio stations had to start from scratch. RIAS stands for 'Radio in the American Sector'; the RIAS-Symphonie Orchester was formed in 1946, the RIAS-Kammerchor two years later. From 1946 onwards, Karl Ristenpart started directing regular Sunday broadcasts of Bach Cantatas, using a chamber orchestra drawn from the RSO. Recordings of his very earliest performances no longer exist, but from the end of 1949 until the Project ran out of steam in 1952, we have tapes of 29 Cantata performances, now superbly transferred to CD in this boxed set.

The overall quality of performance is truly remarkable, with some first-class vocal soloists, outstanding amongst whom are Helmut Krebs (as good and incisive as any Bach tenor I know) and a young baritone then just making his mark: Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. In 1950, when the majority of these recordings were made, he would have been just 25. In May 2012, of course, we were all saddened to learn of his death at the age of 86. To hear him in the superb opening aria of Cantata 88 (Siehe, ich will viel Fischer aussenden) is an absolute delight, and the orchestral accompaniment is of admirable quality, too. In Cantata 52 (Falsche Welt, dir trau ich nicht), soprano Agnes Giebel is very stylish, the high horns sounding fine in the opening Sinfonia (borrowed from Brandenburg I). But the real hero of the hour is unquestionably Karl Ristenpart himself; he has a happy knack of finding, nine times out of ten, what Bach calls the tempo giusto.

There are some infelicities, of course. Most of the female soloists (Giebel apart) do favour the use of a fairly heavy vibrato – that was the accepted style at that time. The choir is enthusiastic, but not very subtle – it's at its best in high-energy numbers like the opening chorus of *Wachet auf*, which fairly dances along in a most enjoyable way; occasionally, though, it goes well over the top (try Cantata 176: *Es ist ein trotzig und verzagt Ding* – the text does suggest desperation and obstinacy, but the oft-repeated word *tro-o-o-o-o-otzig* still sounds pretty laughable). The four-part Chorales are sung with great gusto, but JSB will [may CB] have expected his congregation to join in, so he probably wouldn't have been too dismayed by that.

The keyboard continuo instrument used is a harpsichord, whose tone-quality does sometimes remind one of Sir Thomas Beecham's unkind description: 'two skeletons copulating on a tin roof!' Fortunately, it's kept well back from the microphones. No 'shortened' continuo accompaniment, of course – the cello is often left sustaining very long notes on its own, as was normal up until the 1960s or thereabouts. But, overall, the instrumentalists are extremely good – for example, some superb violin obligati, a terrific first trumpeter, some lovely flute-playing in *Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele* and delightful recorders in *Brich dem Hungrigen dein Brot*. The oboes do sound a bit under-nourished (as they often did, in those pre-Helmut-Winschermann days) but that's a small price to pay for some revelatory recordings from a vanished era. Strongly recommended