



Pierre Fournier plays Dvořák, Saint-Saëns and Casals

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Pierre Fournier made a number of appearances at the Lucerne Festival and this release provides examples of three such visits given over a 14-year period between 1962 and 1976. There's an excellently written booklet to go with it.

One of the works with which he was most associated was Dvořák's Concerto. His recording with Szell in 1962 for DG is probably the most well-known example, but those sympathetic to more intimate and introspectively collaborative rapport will probably gravitate to the less well-recorded but beautiful 1948 recording with Rafael Kubelík conducting the Philharmonia. There's compelling evidence that he habitually took the finale a notch or two faster in concerts than in the studio – for evidence turn to the Szell-directed Cologne broadcast of November 1962 (on MM028-2) or to the powerful reading with Georges Sebastian in Prague in 1959 with the Czech Philharmonic (Arlecchino 169). This Lucerne broadcast has the significant advantage of Istvan Kertesz directing one of the major works of the composer that he was never able to record in the studio. Fournier tended to establish tempi in the first movement, although Sebastian seemed to drive him fast in Prague – and whilst there was clearly some room for latitude elsewhere in the concerto, notably so with Szell in Cologne in the slow movement, this is a standard Fournier tempo. French cellists seldom fell into the trap of drawn-out sentimentality in this work; their approach was one of dignity, though never hauteur. No one was a more dignified exponent of this work than Fournier whose bowing remained supple and unshowy, and whose tonal resources were never placed at the altar of flamboyant display. Concentrated and focused, and warmly expressive there are a few metrical displacements that momentarily imperil co-ordination with Kertesz, but they are trivial in the context. The winds are forward, orchestral pizzicati register well and the sound-stage is excellently preserved. This isn't as intimate a performance as the one he recorded in 1948 but it has huge virtues of its own, not least the way Fournier, the great chamber player, responds to the wind soliloquys in the slow movement and fines down his tone in response to them. The brass is at its best in this movement as well. The finale works splendidly, with Fournier making a characteristic small but telling slide at the most apposite moment. Kertesz directs here, and throughout, with flair and authority.

There are no surprises discographically, either, in the next work, the Saint-Saëns A minor Concerto, with Jean Martinon in 1962. He'd recorded this back in 1947 with Walter Susskind in London, and it's one of the works to be found in retrospectives devoted to the cellist. The balance between solo cello and orchestra is a bit cruder here than in the Dvořák as it places the cello quite far forward. In the Dvořák it was more meshed with the orchestral sound, without ever being drowned. His tone, as a result, sounds just a bit more nasal than one is used to. Martinon directs the RTF well, though it sounds pretty much Fournier's show, with the cellist leading fluently into the central Allegretto with great facility. There's no sense of him coasting and a

very few cello squeals in the finale attest to his spirit of adventure. Audience applause is retained.

It's Fournier himself who introduces his Casals encore, given at the festival in September 1976. His playing is once again refined and avoids any hint of the overwrought. Fournier has the support of the Festival Strings Lucerne directed by Matthias Bamert.

Though these live performances are, in a sense, ancillary to his studio legacy they do represent some exceptionally fine performances. Additionally admirers of Kertesz will find he is as perceptive a Dvořákian in the concerto as he was in the symphonies and tone poems.

