



Pierre Fournier plays Dvořák, Saint-Saëns and Casals

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Pierre Fournier (1906–1986) has been called the “aristocrat of the cello,” and these recordings, remastered from original archival tapes of in-concert performances at Lucerne Festivals between 1962 and 1976, offer some of the best evidence in support of that claim. While I was never personally privileged to see and hear Fournier perform live, I’ve heard enough of his commercial recordings to be able to corroborate that he played with elegance and taste that were as refined as his technique.

Fournier was recorded many times in Dvořák’s B-Minor Concerto; at least 14 according to his complete discography at fischer.hosting.paran.com/music/Fournier/fournier_discography.htm. Best known among them, however, has long been his 1962 version for Deutsche Grammophon with George Szell and the Berlin Philharmonic.

The liner note to the current Audite release points out that this archival recording of the Dvořák with Fournier and István Kertész is of additional historical interest, due to the fact that the conductor’s tragically early death prevented him from making a studio recording of the Concerto. I’m not sure exactly why that imparts special historical value to this release. Kertész was a splendid conductor—his Dvořák symphony cycle with the London Symphony Orchestra is still highly regarded—but if you check the above-cited Fournier discography, you’ll find that a majority of the cellist’s recordings of the Dvořák Concerto come from live performances and/or radio checks, and are with other well-known conductors who, as far as I know, never made studio recordings of the piece either, whether with Fournier or any other cellist. Besides, even if Kertész had made a studio recording of the Dvořák, either with Fournier or someone else, it’s hard to imagine it surpassing this one for febrile urgency.

It’s interesting to compare this performance with the familiar Deutsche Grammophon Szell recording. Fournier/Kertész: 14:39, 10:59, 11:30; Fournier/Szell: 14:49, 11:28, 12:28. In every movement, Fournier/Kertész are faster; not by much in the first movement, and by only a bit more in the slow movement, but look at the last movement—just two seconds shy of a full minute’s difference. It’s not just the tempos, though, that make this performance so exciting. It has about it a feeling of risk-taking and ardency that the cooler Szell lacks. Maybe that’s attributable to the presence of a live audience, but despite the electricity Kertész and Fournier generate, control is not compromised by conductor or soloist. Fournier sings forth with his ever bright, blue-blooded tone, poised technique, and nobility of expression; while Kertész whips up the Swiss Festival Orchestra’s players to a fevered pitch and then moves them to caress the solo cello in a lullaby of soft, sweet embraces.

In prior reviews of Dvořák Cello Concerto recordings, I admit that I've questioned its popularity, wondering if it really was that great a work, compared, for example, to Elgar's Cello Concerto. All I can say is that, hearing this recording of the Dvořák with Fournier and Kertész, now I understand. If you never acquire another recording of the work, this is one you must hear and have; it's breathtaking.

To be honest, the Saint-Saëns Concerto doesn't rise to the same level. There are a couple of questionable moments in the intonation, and Fournier doesn't sound quite as technically secure in this 1962 performance as he does in the Dvořák five years later. But the two main problems, I think, are the conductor and the recording. You'd think that Jean Martinon would be the ideal Gallic interpreter of Saint-Saëns's French urbanity—his recordings of the composer's symphonies attest to that—and you'd think that in concert with a French cellist, there would be a perfect meeting of minds and spirits. But I don't sense much compatibility between conductor and soloist in this joint effort. Martinon seems to be holding Fournier back and dragging the proceedings down. The performance lacks a feeling of ebullience and élan. Perhaps the impression is due to the recording, which sounds bottom-heavy and muddy. In fact, on closer listening, I think the recording is the main culprit, for Fournier and Martinon joined forces with the Lamoureux Concerts Association Orchestra in 1960 for a much smarter Deutsche Grammophon recording of the Saint-Saëns Concerto, which in its original LP format was coupled with quite possibly the definitive performance of Lalo's Cello Concerto and a Bruch Kol Nidrei for good measure. Transferred to CD, the disc now also includes a fine version of Bloch's Schelomo.

Pablo Casals's *El Cant dels Ocells* (Song of the Birds) is immediately preceded on the current release by a one-minute-long dedication announcement in which Fournier (speaking in French, of course) pays tribute both to Casals, whose cello version of the old Catalan Christmas carol was an obligatory constituent of his concerts and a secret hymn for all refugees and emigrants longing for home, and to cellist/composer Enrico Mainardi, who had died only a few months previously in April, 1976. This 1976 concert—billed as a memorial on the centenary of Casals's birth year—would be Fournier's last appearance at the Lucerne Festival. Fournier plays the piece with aching, heart-throbbing beauty.

For the Casals and especially the Dvořák, urgently recommended.