



Touching Colours - Organ & Orchestra

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Touching Colors is a short (13-minute) concerto for organ and orchestra in the best tradition of German Klangfarbenmelodie, which isn't meant to be amusing because it's really gorgeous, and some melodies have Farben that Klang better than others. It's an exercise in texture and color, with the organ fabulously well integrated into the sounds of the orchestra, and composer Frank Zabel's keen ear keeps you listening compulsively until the end. Certainly it's a better piece than Richard Strauss' trashy *Feierlicher Einzug* etc., the length of whose title is the most substantial thing about it. Still, if you enjoy imaginative orchestration this disc is worth hearing for Zabel's piece alone, and the other two performances are just terrific.

The program opens with yet another (three so far in the past year or so) excellent version of Barber's *Toccata Festiva*, this one featuring unusually clean and clear bass lines, largely the result of an organ that doesn't sound like a truck with a muffler problem whenever soloist Christian Schmitt hits the pedals. But the real treat here is a surprisingly fine account of Saint-Saëns' *Organ Symphony*. Indeed, save for a slight bit of heaviness in the finale, this is as fine a version as any. The strings play with admirable lightness and unanimity in the opening movement (and at a good clip too). Conductor Johannes Wildner makes sure that every detail of the lovely orchestration (soft timpani, stopped horn tones in the finale) makes its presence felt, and the way he phrases the slow movement is simply lovely. The scherzo also has plenty of energy, and the slowish tempo for the closing pages clearly stems from a preference for grandeur over speed, not from any sluggishness of attack or tiredness from the players.

Sonically this is a mixed bag, though. First, it's recorded at an extremely low level. In stereo, this doesn't matter so much: you can simply turn it up. As an SACD, however, the recessed acoustic and super-wide dynamic range makes the music sound notably diffuse and lacking in impact despite really superb balances between organ and orchestra and plenty of differentiation of bass frequencies (timpani, organ pedals, basses, and bass drum all register clearly and cleanly). Here's yet another SACD that I greatly prefer in its stereo format, where it would rank an easy 9/9. But as an audiophile product it's a 9/7. I realize that some of this will be a matter of philosophy: there are listeners who will find the sound here supremely natural given the cathedral acoustic, especially on high-end equipment. Others won't want to see the lights in their city go dim just because their neighbor wants to play the *Organ Symphony*. I'm one of those.