



Best's Bach

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EAN: 4022143926630



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International Record Review (Peter Lynan - 01.04.2012)

William Thomas Best presided for almost 40 years at the large Willis organ in St George's Hall, Liverpool, where he helped to define the role of the civic organist in Britain by playing weekly recitals and developing a repertory of 'straight' organ music and transcriptions of works originally composed for other instruments. His enthusiasm for Bach was evangelical. He is reputed to have been willing to play on request any of Bach's organ works in his Saturday recital, given notice by the preceding Thursday. He also made a complete edition, from which most of the works on this disc are played.

Anyone expecting Best's Bach to be the organ equivalent of Leopold Stokowski's phantasmagorical orchestrations may be surprised. His editions aren't scholarly in the modern sense, but Best was a careful, even sensitive editor, resulting in performances that are often fairly modest and restrained rather than extravagant. Of course, they are overlaid with the interpretative values of the day, and it's in these details – the registration, articulation and tempos, for example – that the interest lies.

The chorale preludes can sound quite lean. In Liebster Jesu and Herzlich tut mich verlangen there is less rather than more ornamentation of the melody to be relished – it all sounds a little plain, in fact – and the former is taken much faster than it is usually played nowadays. Elsewhere, too, less often does seem to mean more for Best. The great Passacaglia is played not with organo pleno throughout but as a series of differently coloured, often delicate variations that, to Best at least, must have seemed the most effective way to elucidate the work's structure. This is much the same approach as in his well-known arrangement of the Chaconne in D minor, originally for violin, which in this context now appears less a oneoff piece of showmanship than a serious study of musical form.

Best's interpretations transform familiar works in a way that can sound strange to modern ears. To hear the Passacaglia and the Toccata and Fugue in D minor fading away on soft flue stops is very odd indeed, the unexpected, quiet endings becoming a means of dissipating the preceding fugal tensions rather than fulfilling their more familiar climactic function. The 'little' Prelude and Fugue in E minor too is quite understated, its fugue turned into a meditative afterthought for flutes and undulating strings.

Unless listening with Best's editions to hand, it will sometimes be difficult to disentangle the interpretational input of editor and performer. Carsten Wiebusch follows most of Best's suggestions to a T, but I detect a few (minor) departures from the score. He ignores the different flat and natural upper notes of the long trills in the fugue of the Toccata and Fugue and some of his tempos don't match Best's recommended metronome marks. Best doesn't articulate the usually swinging 6/8

fugue subject of the Toccata, Adagio and Fugue as if in 3/4, but that's how Wiebusch plays it, and the result is square and awkward.

Wiebusch pre-empts criticism of his choice of instrument by citing Best's interpretative freedom as justification: he sees it as no disadvantage that the Klais organ of the Christuskirche, Karlsruhe, has a tautness and tang to its tonal qualities that are a world away from the luscious, orchestrally conceived town hall organ Best played. He seeks authenticity in Best's ideas rather than in trying to reproduce more precisely Best's sound, which he argues does not lie at the heart of the matter. I'm sure there are those who would disagree, given that Best's ideas must have been informed at least in part by the type of organ he played. Some of the differences are regrettable, such as the Clarinet solo in the Adagio of the Toccata, Adagio and Fugue, which is assigned to a rather thin-lipped reed with mutation overtones in the absence of a nice rounded orchestral clarinet. Nevertheless, putting aside tricky questions of authenticity, the Klais is a fine, enjoyable instrument with some lovely, fresh-sounding voices, and it is very well recorded.

This is a curious disc. While I'm intrigued to hear Best's take on Bach (or should that be Wiebusch's take on Best), neither the instrument nor the arguments in its favour really win me over, and I'm left wondering how close to Best this recording really brings us.