

Jorge Bolet: The RIAS Recordings, Vol. 1

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Gramophone (Jeremy Nicholas - 01.12.2017)

GRAMOPHONE

As the booklet essay reminds us, Jorge Bolet's ascent to the top was painfully slow. Throughout the late 1940s and '50s he had a raw time of it, and it was not really until his legendary 1974 recital in Carnegie Hall (mercifully preserved for posterity) that he was finally admitted to the ranks of the alltime greats.

Almost everything by Bolet is worth acquiring, but this collection is particularly valuable, coming from the period just after he had finally attracted some attention for his Liszt-playing (on behalf of Dirk Bogarde) in the 1960 biopic Song Without End. Few pianophiles, I suspect, will be aware of the existence of these radio broadcasts from the early 1960s (the sole exception being the 1973 Chopin Fantasy) recorded in Berlin, licensed from Deutschlandradio and presented here by kind permission of Donald Manildi of the International Piano Archives at the University of Maryland.

Disc 1 opens with Bolet on top form: the first six numbers from the first book (Suisse) of Annees de pelerinage, concluding with an intense account of 'Vallee d'Obermann' that ends more in despairing torment than rapturous ecstasy. The piano and sound (1963, in the Siemensvilla) are superior to those in the selection of six of the Etudes d'execution transcendante that follows (1962, RIAS Funkhaus). Bolet was at his best in front of an audience and, as with the Annees de pelerinage, though there is none, there's a 'live broadcast' feel to the playing. Despite a number of finger slips and smudges, the performances (but not the piano or sound quality) are preferable to the selection of nine Bolet recorded for RCA in 1958 or the 1970 Ensayo complete set recorded in Spain.

The second CD is the USP of the set. Apart from superb versions of some Bolet favourites (Rhapsodie espagnole, 'Widmung' and Moszkowski's 'En automne', there are all three of Liszt's Nottornos, the set which concludes with the ubiquitous Liebestraum No 3 and demonstrates why we rarely hear Nos 1 and 2. Best of all are the three Godowsky numbers – a luminously voiced 'The Swan', 'Le salon' (a little charmer from Triakontameron, still in Bolet's repertoire in 1988, two years before his death) and, most desirable of all, his Die Fledermaus Symphonic Metamorphosis. This comes, unusually, with all but two repeats observed (he cuts one of these in his scarcely less masterly live account from 1973 on Marston) and, despite a rather exposed incorrect F natural instead of G flat at 7'27", goes to the head of my leader board in this heady concoction – nearly 11 minutes of truly great piano-playing.

The same can be said of the F minor Fantasy that opens disc 3 (featuring more Bolet favourites), a muscular, magisterial rendition so characteristic of this great artist yet by no means devoid of introspection and sensitivity. All four of Chopin's Impromptus follow, a real joy (listen to the rapid scale passages towards the close of No 2) even if



I prefer No 3 at a slightly quicker pace. The 'Minute' Waltz ends in cheeky thirds (a la Hofmann). Bolet then moves to Debussy and a selection of four from each of the two books of Preludes. No wishy-washy Impressionism (despite the veiled, beautifully graded colours in 'La cathedrale engloutie') but a sequence of individually defined tone poems that I personally responded to more readily than versions by some Debussy specialists. Try 'Feux d'artifice', which concludes this essential addition to any pianophile's collection.



Jorge Bolet

'The RIAS Recordings, Vol 1'

Chopin Étude, Op 10 No 5. Fantaisie, Op 49.

Fantaisie-Impromptu, Op 66. Three

Impromptus. 'Minute' Waltz, Op 64 No 1

Debussy Préludes (excs) **Godowsky** Symphonic

Metamorphoses on Themes by Johann Strauss

- No 2, Die Fledermaus. Triakontameron - No 21,

Le salon **Liszt** Années de pèlerinage - Année 1:

Suisse, S160 (excs). Études d'exécution

transcendante, S139 (excs). Liebesträume, S541.

Rhapsodie espagnole, S254 **Mozzkowski**

En automne, Op 36 No 4 **Saint-Saëns/**

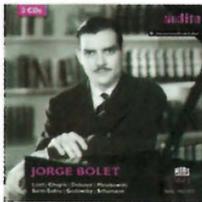
Godowsky Le cygne **Schumann/Liszt**

Widmung, Op 25 No 1 (S566)

Jorge Bolet *pf*

Audite © 3 AUDITE21 438 (3h 6' • ADD)

Recorded 1962-73



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