Jorge Bolet: The Berlin Radio Recordings, Vol. III

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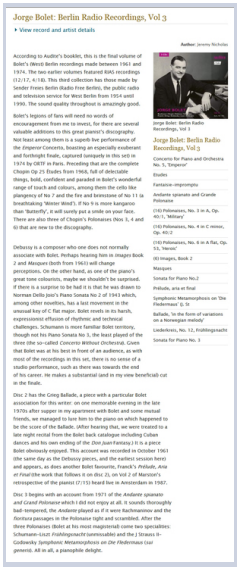
According to Audite's booklet, this is the final volume of Bolet's (West) Berlin recordings made between 1961 and 1974. The two earlier volumes featured RIAS recordings (12/17, 4/18). This third collection has those made by Sender Freies Berlin (Radio Free Berlin), the public radio and television service for West Berlin from 1954 until 1990. The sound quality throughout is amazingly good.



Bolet's legions of fans will need no words of encouragement from me to invest, for there are several valuable additions to this great pianist's discography. Not least among them is a superb live performance of the Emperor Concerto, boasting an especially exuberant and forthright finale, captured (uniquely in this set) in 1974 by ORTF in Paris. Preceding that are the complete Chopin Op 25 Études from 1968, full of delectable things, bold, confident and paraded in Bolet's wonderful range of touch and colours, among them the cello like plangency of No 7 and the fire and brimstone of No 11 (a breathtaking 'Winter Wind'). If No 9 is more kangaroo than 'Butterfly', it will surely put a smile on your face. There are also three of Chopin's Polonaises (Nos 3, 4 and 6) that are new to the discography.

Debussy is a composer who one does not normally associate with Bolet. Perhaps hearing him in Images Book 2 and Masques (both from 1961) will change perceptions. On the other hand, as one of the piano's great tone colourists, maybe we shouldn't be surprised. If there is a surprise to be had it is that he was drawn to Norman Dello Joio's Piano Sonata No 2 of 1943 which, among other novelties, has a last movement in the unusual key of C flat major. Bolet revels in its harsh, expressionist effusion of rhythmic and technical challenges. Schumann is more familiar Bolet territory, though not his Piano Sonata No 3, the least played of the three (the so-called Concerto Without Orchestra). Given that Bolet was at his best in front of an audience, as with most of the recordings in this set, there is no sense of a studio performance, such as there was towards the end of his career. He makes a substantial (and in my view beneficial) cut in the finale.

Disc 2 has the Grieg Ballade, a piece with a particular Bolet association for this writer: on one memorable evening in the late 1970s after supper in my apartment with Bolet and some mutual friends, we managed to lure him to the piano on which happened to be the score of the Ballade. (After hearing that, we were treated to a late night recital from the Bolet back catalogue including Cuban dances and his own ending of the Don Juan Fantasy.) It is a piece Bolet obviously enjoyed. This account was recorded in October 1961 (the same day as the Debussy pieces, and the earliest session here) and appears, as does another Bolet favourite, Franck's

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Prélude, Aria et Final (the work that follows it on disc 2), on Vol 2 of Marston's retrospective of the pianist (7/15) heard live in Amsterdam in 1987.

Disc 3 begins with an account from 1971 of the Andante spianato and Grand Polonaise which I did not enjoy at all. It sounds thoroughly bad-tempered, the Andante played as if it were Rachmaninov and the fioritura passages in the Polonaise tight and scrambled. After the three Polonaises (Bolet at his most magisterial) come two specialities: Schumann-Liszt Frühlingsnacht (unmissable) and the J Strauss II-Godowsky Symphonic Metamorphosis on Die Fledermaus (sui generis). All in all, a pianophile delight.

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View record and artist details

Author: Jeremy Nicholas

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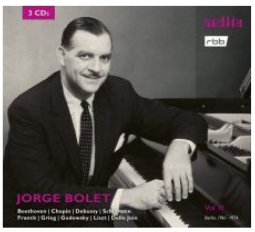

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- Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 5, 'Emperor'
- Etudes
- Fantaisie-impromptu
- Andante spianato and Grande Polonaise
- (16) Polonaises, No. 3 in A, Op. 40/1, 'Military'
- (16) Polonaises, No. 4 in C minor, Op. 40/2
- (16) Polonaises, No. 6 in A flat, Op. 53, 'Heroic'
- (6) Images, Book 2
- Masques
- Sonata for Piano No.2
- Prélude, aria et final
- Symphonic Metamorphosis on 'Die Fledermaus' (J. St
- Ballade, 'in the form of variations on a Norwegian melody'
- Liederkreis, No. 12, Frühlingsnacht
- Sonata for Piano No. 3

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