



Michael Rabin plays Bruch's Violin Concerto and Virtuoso Pieces for Violin and Piano

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[Fanfare](#) (Anthony Feinstein - 2009.09.01)

fanfare Anthony Feinstein on Michael Rabin's Life and Later Recordings

[...] Audite's compilation of Berlin recordings made by Michael Rabin, both live (Bruch, 6/16–17, 1969) and in the studio (Wieniawski, Tchaikovsky, and Sarasate, 6/12/1969, and Saint-Saëns, 10/30/1962) claims to be complete (although DOREMI's pieces by Milhaud and Szymanowski, attributed to Berlin, don't appear here). It represents, then, another set of recordings to stand beside EMI's "Michael Rabin, 1936–1972," EMI 64123, 15:5, and occasional collections like "Mosaics" on EMI 67020, 22:5, Sony's "Michael Rabin: The Early Years"—with "Ossy Renardy Plays Sarasate and Paganini," Sony Masterworks Heritage 60894, 23:2, and DOREMI's collection of live performances (DOREMI 7715, 24:1 and the one under consideration in this review). Audite's note relates that the company's historical recordings come from original analog master tapes. The Bruch Concerto, also included in DOREMI's set, certainly sounds pristine, and Audite's effort presents it in cleaner, more vibrant recorded sound. Rabin had recorded Kroll's sparkling miniature (also a Heifetz favorite), Banjo and Fiddle, with Artur Balsam for Columbia in 1952. Sony re-released that recording in the collection mentioned above. Rabin must have liked Wieniawski's Caprice, op. 18/4, because he recorded it with Balsam at the same time as the Kroll encore in 1952 and later with Leon Pommers. The soaring reading of Tchaikovsky's Méditation, however, represents a new addition to Rabin's discography, available perhaps for the first time in the United States. Rabin's sound here has a somewhat sharp edge (as it does in all these later Berlin recordings), though its sumptuousness should still be identifiable.

Rabin had recorded the finale of Sarasate's Carmen Fantasy in 1952 for Columbia in the above-mentioned sessions, and that recording once again has been re-released in Sony's collection cited above. In Berlin, however, Rabin recorded the entire Fantasy, and it's a bracing reading, combining technical and tonal panache, recorded closely enough to reveal all the nuances of Rabin's tone and performance, by turns sultry, soaring, and startlingly brilliant. He'd recorded Sarasate's Habanera and Zapateado in 1959 with Leon Pommers, so the Berlin readings of the two works come just 10 years later (and include the Malagueña, which, once again, seems to be new to his discography). Malagueña sounds suave in its opening section, although perhaps a bit unstable rhythmically during the pizzicato section, though it is seductively smoldering overall. Sarasate himself recorded his own Habanera in 1904, but that quicksilver recording hasn't served as a model for the more aggressive

ones that have followed. In 1969, Rabin's overall approach seemed almost identical with that from 1959, and his running dash to the conclusion makes, if anything, an even more brilliant conclusion, perhaps because he's been miked more closely. Rabin makes a few unpleasant noises in Zapateado, but otherwise it's a spirited reading (one that, once again, recalls in its brilliance and expressive nuance, the earlier and more polished performance from 1959), with another mad dash in the final measures.

Rabin recorded Havanaise with the Philharmonia Orchestra on 6/12/1956, but the reading from 1962, with Broddack at the piano, reveals the piece in another guise, since the orchestral part seems so important texturally to the work's effect. Here, Rabin's sound dominates the discrete piano part as it almost did the orchestral accompaniment by Alceo Galliera and the Philharmonia Orchestra in 1958. Rabin had an insinuating way with Saint-Saëns's Spanish pieces, which he seemed to project with a grandeza that others missed.

Because the collection presents Rabin in repertoire in which many collectors may not have heard him, and because of Audite's pristine recorded sound, every admirer must acquire this collection, not least in search of the answer to the by now burning question: was Rabin making a comeback? Urgently recommended.

Finally, Rabin's followers will have to obtain Anthony Feinstein's biography of Rabin. As that great violinist slips into the past, his family members pass away, and the memories fade for those who once vividly remembered hearing the young virtuoso on the radio, it seems less and less likely that anyone will be able to write about Rabin more authoritatively than has Dr. Feinstein, a Guggenheim Fellow and a professor of psychiatry at the University of Toronto. A character study that might appeal to a broad cross section of readers, the book also provides a great deal of detail not only about Rabin's interaction with his demanding mother, but also about his relationships with Ivan Galamian and with the great violinists of his era, including an especially touching one with Zino Francescatti. And since collectors will find such a great deal of information about the provenance of the recordings they have treasured—and will treasure—the book could serve as an extended set of program notes for DOREMI's new release of live performances, as well as for the sets that Sony, EMI, and Audite have re-released on CD. In fact, the emergence of live performances from his later years makes the book particularly relevant anew, for it will provide listeners with evidentiary performances that will suggest answers to the eternal question about Rabin—did he really have a chance at reinvigorating his career? No longer need his fans, still grieving after 37 years, try to read between the lines of comments like Henry Roth's or Arnold Steinhardt's. And if these recordings don't answer the question with perfect certainty, reading the book along with them provides a richer context for decision making.

Violinists who write about themselves often neglect (or decline) to tell much about their playing and their recordings. Perhaps they've been discouraged from doing so by publishers. And perhaps they're just weary of shop-talk, even if it's about themselves. That's also a common shortcoming in books written by non-violinists: too much biography ("Then Harry said to Moe, 'Let's give this guy a contract.'") and too little information on violin-playing and recordings, which, even if they could elicit it, these writers often couldn't begin to understand. It's obvious that Feinstein appreciated Rabin's significance and that his appreciation led him through the book. It's also obvious that he consulted violinists and other musicians as conscientiously as he consulted family members, and analyzed their comments just as insightfully. If this isn't the best book about a violinist among the ones I've read, I don't know what is. Urgently recommended.