



The RIAS Bach Cantatas Project

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A groundbreaking pilgrimage

CD Review's Andrew McGregor explores an undeservedly forgotten JS Bach Cantata project

When it comes to JS Bach's Cantatas on disc, the deservedly famous Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Gustav Leonhardt series for Telefunken was first to finish. But it turns out they weren't the first to set out on that richly rewarding journey. In post-war Berlin, conductor Karl Ristenpart was tasked with directing music for the new RIAS broadcasting corporation (Radio in the American Sector). His most ambitious enterprise was the RIAS Bach Cantatas Project (Audite 21.415; 9 CDs): recording, performing and broadcasting the complete Cantatas with the new RIAS chamber choir, chamber orchestra and boys' choir. In 1946 they began recording Cantatas for Sunday mornings. Those first performances were deleted, but better quality recordings and soloists for the Bach anniversary in 1950 meant that Ristenpart's Cantata efforts from late 1949 onwards have survived.

The 29 Cantatas chosen here are fascinating. Ristenpart pioneered many of the enlightening ideas of Harnoncourt and Leonhardt's series: small forces, a well-drilled choir sometimes with boys' voices, a focus on detail, and emotional engagement with the texts. The soloists are well chosen, and one name leaps out: Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, just a couple of years into his career. He's immediately recognisable. The set's only tenor, Helmut Krebs, has the timbre and communicative qualities of a German Peter Pears. The pick of the eight sopranos is Agnes Giebel, who makes a lovely job of her duets with the virtuoso oboe soloist in one of Bach's wedding Cantatas, BWV202, while the Actus Tragicus is seriously moving. Wachtet auf is urgent and theatrically potent: a success. While some movements might be on the slow side for today's authentic performers, others are brisk and crisp. The recordings are sometimes shockingly good for their age, and these performances stand apart from anything else around for a good 20 years. Changes at RIAS brought this revelatory project to a premature end in 1953, but at least this intriguing box should ensure that Ristenpart is restored to his rightful place as a Bach pioneer.