Robert Schumann & Johannes Brahms: Cello Concerto, Op. 129 & Piano Concerto, Op. 15

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Fanfare (Lynn René Bayley - 2014.01.27)

This CD presents the first-ever releases of the Berlin Radio Symphony concert of March 1963, in which 18-year-old Jacqueline du Pre; and 22-year-old Bruno Leonardo Gelber made their German debuts. I must confess that Gelber's name was unknown to me prior to auditioning this disc, even though he is still with us. An Argentinian pianist who made his public debut at the precocious age of five, Gelber (according to ArkivMusic) has but a few recordings in the current catalog, among them a CD of Bach transcriptions which he split with Alexis Weissenberg on EMI, and a couple of discs of Beethoven (the Emperor Concerto partnered with the Moonlight and Pathetique sonatas, and the Second Concerto under Klaus Tennstedt). His playing is described as nimble, gentle in tone in one review, unmannered but unremarkable in another.

But of course, the real focus here is du Pre and to be honest, either she wasn't in her best form or the recording isn't particularly good. She sounds slightly flat in places and the tone is particularly muddy, a quality which is the antithesis of every other recording and performance I've ever heard by her. Yet at times, the string section of the orchestra also sounds a little muddy, not so much as du Pre's own playing but not terribly clear, either; and since the sound of her cello clears up after the first six minutes or so, I would put the blame on the tape. An anonymous reviewer on ArkivMusic website claims that this performance seems more vivid and contains greater contrasts even than her later recording of the work, but unless you're willing to tolerate the peculiar sonics (which I find tolerable only in really old broadcasts of pre-World War II vintage) I would not recommend this disc. If you love this Concerto, and particularly du Pre's unique way with it, try to track down the superb 1967 Avery Fisher Hall performance with Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic. (I didn't much like her studio recording of this work; the tempo sags in the second movement to the point of musical collapse.)

Regarding the Brahms First, I'm reminded of Toscanini's famous dictum: Germans always conduct their music too slow! Well, not always: there were Erich and Carlos Kleiber, Fritz Busch, and several others who didn't normally do so, but Albrecht's tempos and particularly his phrasing are positively leaden. Consider: this performance clocks in at 50:33, almost a full five minutes longer than the superb recording by Artur Rubinstein with Fritz Reiner on RCA/BMG! Within this uninspiring and uninspired framework, however, Gelber gives a good account of himself. His playing is lightweight but elegantly phrased and with some subtle nuances.

Thus, a split review of sorts. If you're a Gelber fan, you might wish to add this to your collection despite Albrecht's uninspired conducting, but the rest of us can safely skip it.

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