



Portrait Johanna Martzy

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EAN: 4022143234247



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www.musicweb-international.com (Stephen Greenbank - 2015.06.01)



Recording of the Month



The violinist Johanna Martzy isn't that well known today. Other female violinists, like Erica Morini and Ida Haendel, whose concertizing was contemporaneous, have maintained a higher profile. Collectors, especially those from Japan and Korea, where Martzy has been elevated to cult status, have been at the forefront of promoting her legacy, with her LPs exchanging hands for large sums. Japan has seen the issue of a six-CD set 'The Art of Johanna Martzy', and a thirteen disc box of the complete recordings she made for DG and EMI has been released in Korea. In the UK Testament have made a valuable contribution, and Coup d'Archet issued six CDs of live recordings several years ago, long since deleted.

Romanian by birth, Martzy took up the violin at the age of six, later becoming a student at the Franz Liszt Academy, Budapest. Her teacher was Jenő Hubay (1858-1937), the Hungarian violinist and composer, whose students included Szigeti, Telmányi, Székely, Geyer and Sándor Végh. She made her début at the age of thirteen and graduated from the Academy in 1942. In 1947 she won first prize in the Geneva Competition. Starting her recording career with DG, she was later brought under the wing of EMI by Walter Legge. Her commercial recorded legacy is slender, and her international career was short-lived. In 1969 she married the wealthy Daniel Tschudi and thereafter seemed to lack the financial incentive to continue in an active role. She died of cancer in 1979, largely forgotten.

Martzy's brief recording career began with DG, and lasted only three years. On 8 June 1953 she was scheduled to make a RIAS studio radio broadcast recording of the Dvorak Concerto with the Hungarian conductor Ferenc Fricsay. In addition, due to worries about the future of the orchestra at the time, a commercial recording was made for DG two days later (10-12 June), with the same forces and in the same venue, in order to strengthen its finances. A projected Tchaikovsky Concerto with the conductor was also on the cards for 1953, but never materialized. Like Martzy, Fricsay was not blessed with a long life, succumbing to cancer at the young age of forty-eight in 1963.

The Dvorak Concerto is the most substantial offering on this set. It is a compelling performance, technically accomplished, standing comparison with the best in the catalogue, especially that of Josef Suk/Czech Philharmonic/Neumann which heads my list of favourites. The work is an amalgam of Czech national music and folksong. In the first movement, Martzy lovingly caresses the more lyrical moments, imbuing them with a sense of longing. In the slow movement, which forms the emotional heart

of the Concerto, there is fervour without over-sentimentality. The Finale is rhythmically engaging, and permeated with a Czech flavour. Everything is kept buoyant and dance-like. Comparison between the DG commercial recording and this version reveal no interpretive divergence, however the violin is more forwardly positioned and consequently more prominent in the former.

The violinist's only solo contribution in this set is the Bach Violin Sonata No. 1 in G Minor, BWV 1001. Martzy recorded the complete Sonatas and Partitas for Columbia in 1954-55 at Abbey Road Studios in London. This radio broadcast from 4 May 1962 has had a previous incarnation on Coup d'Archet (COUP CD007). Comparing the two side by side, the Audite transfer is a slight improvement. Noticeable is some slight background distortion on the Coup d'Archet transfer. Another live performance of the Sonata from the Redpath Hall Montreal dated 1960 on the Doremi label (DHR-7753) is in less than ideal sound. I have always enjoyed Martzy's solo Bach for the beauty of tone, spotless intonation and richness of colour she draws from her Carlo Bergonzi fiddle. Especially distinctive is the precision of the counterpoint and clarity of articulation she brings to the fugue.

It was when performing at the Dutch Radio Station VARA that Martzy met Jean Antonietti (1915-1994), the director of music there. He is the pianist in the remaining works, and became a regular partner. Though starting off as a soloist, Antonietti's career eventually became concentrated in accompanying, working with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and the cellist Tibor de Machula. Martzy and Antonietti appeared for the first time together in February 1949 in Amsterdam.

The Brahms and Handel Sonatas were set down at the same session as the Bach, in the RIAS Funkhaus – Studio 7. The Brahms Sonata is marked by warmth and elegance and the outer movements never sag. It's a lyrical work, and the players are expressive in the account they deliver. Beauty of tone is a distinctive hallmark of the Handel Sonata. It is a performance of refinement and nobility, with both players demonstrating a great affection for the music.

The Vivaldi Sonata has, surprisingly, been arranged by Respighi, and is a piece new to me. Nevertheless, it is a tastefully performed delight. The remaining four small encore pieces from April 1955 have already seen the light of day on Coup d'Archet (COUP CD006). The Beethoven/Kreisler Rondino is loaded with Viennese charm, without sounding in any way schmaltzy. The de Falla Danse Espagnole was recorded commercially for DG by Martzy and Antonietti in 1951. Again it is a Kreisler arrangement, dispatched brilliantly with suavity and elan.

This is a smartly presented, elegant gatefold digipak. Excellent, informative booklet notes by Rüdiger Albrecht, in German and English, provide a biographical portrait of the violinist and discuss the context and provenance of the recordings. Audite have done a wonderful job re-mastering these original analogue tapes from the RIAS archives, and sound quality throughout is top-notch. Though not stated, all the recordings are in mono.