

for Mields, whose soprano tone floats above the accompaniment.

The bonus disc opens with a broadcast interview of Herreweghe by Stefan Lang of *Deutschlandfunk Kultur* and concludes with an interview of the orchestra's assistant principal violist, Andreas Schreiber. They are, of course, in German, but the booklet has an English translation. Between the interviews are selections from three earlier February 13 memorial concerts. From the 2014 concert, Christian Thielemann conducts excerpts from the Verdi Requiem. The complete performance is available on volume 46 of the series. Colin Davis directs the Dies Irae from the Berlioz Requiem from the 1994 concert (volume 20). Bernard Haitink presents an excerpt from Mahler's Second Symphony from the 1995 concert (volume 33). The Berlioz excerpt, recorded in the Dresden Kreuzkirche, struck me as lacking in presence compared with the Verdi and Mahler recorded in the Semperoper.

GATENS

**BACH:** *Cantatas 84, 170, 199; duet from 78* Sherezade Panthaki, s; Reginald Mobley, ct; Cantata Collective—Centaur 3930—67 minutes

This is the first volume in a series of Bach cantata recordings for the Centaur label by the ensemble Cantata Collective. Joshua Kosman, writing in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, describes the ensemble as "a group of SF Bay Area early music luminaries." The core ensemble consists of six period instrument players: two violins, viola, cello, bass, and oboe. Vocalists and other instrumentalists are included as the repertory requires. The group's mission is to present concerts of Bach cantatas free of

charge, and for that they depend on the generosity of donors.

This first recording consists of three solo cantatas. The program notes are by no less an authority than Richard Taruskin. In them he makes the point, with just a hint of condescension, that the devotional world of 18th-Century Lutheranism is very foreign to modern sensibilities. Even so, it is possible for us to participate aesthetically in the brilliance that Bach brings to these settings.

Indifference to the vanities and riches of this life is the theme of 84 (*Ich Bin Vergnugt mit Meinem Glucke*), a cantata for soprano. It was written for Septuagesima (the third Sunday before Lent) in 1727. The final chorale should be sung in four parts with instrumental doubling, but here the soprano soloist sings the chorale melody, leaving the lower parts to the instruments.

The alto cantata, 170 (*Vergnugte Ruh, Beliebte Seelenlust*), was written for the Sixth Sunday after Trinity in 1726. The text deplores the evils of the present world with a longing for deliverance in death. The score includes an obbligato part for the organ played here by Nicholas McGegan. The earliest work is 199 (*Mein Herze Schwimmt im Blut*), a soprano cantata for the Eleventh Sunday after Trinity in 1714 from the composer's years in Weimar. A text of more abject penitence could hardly be imagined.

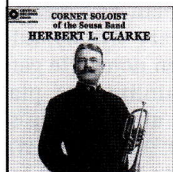
These are highly polished performances. Solo cantatas with accompaniment by one player to a part produce the intimate feel of chamber music. Taruskin reminds us that the word cantata at that time would most often have denoted a genre of secular chamber music for a solo voice and small accompany-



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ing ensemble, and that Bach rarely used that word for his liturgical pieces. Sherezade Panthaki has a very fine soprano tone for that idiom. There are times when she seems uneasy on higher notes, as if trying too hard to keep the tone straight, but for the most part her performances are stylish. Reginald Mobley is a highly accomplished countertenor. Very often male altos have inconsistencies of tone color between one register and another, but Mobley's tone is remarkably even.

To my ear, the tempos are generally well chosen for the size of the ensemble. For example, the gigue-like final aria of 199 is taken at a tempo that allows the music to sound gently cheerful rather than driven. On the other hand, the central aria of 199 ('Tief Gebuckt') is so slow that it lacks forward momentum. Midori Suzuki's performance of that aria with Bach Collegium Japan under Masaaki Suzuki (BIS) is a full two minutes shorter.

As an encore, this recording concludes with a delightfully lively performance of the well-known duet 'Wir Eilen' from Cantata 78. The vocal blend from Panthaki and Mobley is nothing short of astounding.

GATENS

## **BACH:** *Goldberg Variations*

James Richman, hpsi  
Centaur 3821 [2CD] 84 minutes

Peter Tomasz, p—MSR 1791—79 minutes

Harpsichord recordings of this piece vary widely. Some artists, like Diego Ares (Sept/Oct 2018), explore all kinds of articulations to wring emotional effects and intellectual points from every phrase. The improvised notes and carefully controlled rhythmic distortions emphasize details that no one else might have thought of before. What will the imaginative harpsichordist do next to make it radically different and new? Will the performance be coherent and satisfying? Others, like Peter Watchorn (July/Aug 2021) and Pieter-Jan Belder (Nov/Dec 2017), steer a middle course where their mild embellishments of the score are spontaneous emotional reactions to the music, not overt attempts to recompose it. Still others, like Kenneth Weiss (1996, not reviewed), find it sufficient to play Bach's notes and rhythms accurately as shown on the page, refusing to embellish them further. In a piece that is already this complicated, it is perhaps good enough merely to follow Bach's instructions and to keep the self mostly out of it. It's the difference between "Listen to me giving

you this great performance with my expert reactions to the score" and "Listen to this marvelous composition that doesn't need my help".

James Richman takes that latter approach in his 2-disc set priced like a single disc. He adds no rhythmic alteration or ornamentation to the text (except for inserting melodic leaps in variation 25 at bars 26, 27, and 29—where it could be argued that Bach's engraver may have forgotten to put them in). He plays all the repeats. His tempos are quick, and the music never bogs down. After I realized what he was doing (playing as neutrally as possible, but in a lively manner), it made me look for the details of the composition myself under the surface of his "pure" and scarcely-interpreted Bach. It made me pay attention differently. This style also invites extreme scrutiny of the recording.

Variations 8, 11, and 20 are outstanding in showing why piano renditions sound clunky or too staccato (where the hands would crash together on one keyboard). Richman's performance has relaxed grace here, the way I feel it ought to go. Because Richman isn't doing anything unexpected with his articulations, my mind and ears went to the enjoyment of this harpsichord's tone. The contrasting tone colors are interesting when the voices cross. It drew my attention to Bach's creativity as his performer disappeared.

In the extreme scrutiny, I notice a few missing notes that I wish had been corrected with a retake or overdub. In variation 6 (the second of the canons), when Richman goes back to repeat the first section, the high note of the treble voice starting the canon is absent from the first bar. When variation 23 starts its second half, one of the repeated bass notes doesn't speak. In variation 25, when Richman repeats the first section, the last bass note of bar 6 doesn't speak. These moments pass quickly, of course, and they don't damage the interpretation as a whole. Richman's clarity is so strong that I wanted to listen to and enjoy his performance many times, and that's what emerged—this short list of noticeable errors in the production.

I have compared Richman with Weiss from 1996. Weiss also plays very simply, adding almost nothing to the given notes. He gets the whole piece onto a 79-minute disc, playing faster in some variations and deleting some repeats from variations 13, 25, and 27. Weiss's single big dramatic moment is adding a fermata in variation 28. I like his lively articulation. There is nothing wrong with Richman's gener-