

Instrumental



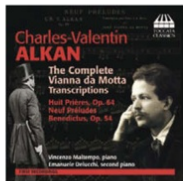
John Warrack reviews a Russian recital from Veronika Böhmová:
'It is all beautifully done, with flawless technique and great intelligence of perception'
► **REVIEW ON PAGE 76**



Jeremy Nicholas listens to a crop of new harp recordings:
'Magen seems destined to be the Zabaleta de nos jours, with a paintbox of colours allied to fabulous dexterity' ► **REVIEW ON PAGE 81**

Alkan

'The Complete Vianna da Motta Transcriptions'
Huit Prières. Nine Preludes^a. Benedictus, Op 54^a
Vincenzo Maltempo, Emanuele Delucchi pfs
Toccata Classics ㉔ TOCC0237 (84' • DDD)



I have yet to come across a masterpiece for the pedal piano (Schumann's Op 56 being an arguable exception) but there are plenty of entertaining and fascinating works that merit the occasional hearing. Here are more – but here transcribed for solo piano by the Portuguese Liszt pupil José Vianna da Motta (1868-1948), a labour of deep love by this early champion of Alkan. All are premiere recordings.

What strange, quirky and unpredictable things are contained in the *Huit Prières* taken from Alkan's 13 *Prières*, Op 64, for organ or pedal piano. No 3, for example, is the only piece of piano music I've encountered written on three staves all in the bass clef; No 5 (Alkan's No 8) is not a prayer at all but a contrapuntal march, made obstreperously obsessive by this close recording in a small acoustic. In the *Nine Preludes* arranged for piano duet from Alkan's 11 *Grand Préludes*, Op 66, and the *Benedictus*, Op 54, arranged for two pianos, Maltempo is joined by Emanuele Delucchi.

Throughout there is much to savour and admire – music and performances – on a disc that lasts an incredible 83'30". The essay by the late Malcolm MacDonald is worth the price of the disc alone. Maltempo is wonderfully well attuned to Alkan's unique voice and I'm grateful for the opportunity to hear these transcriptions, though there is no need for any further recordings of them. The fact is that they sound far more effective in their original form – as demonstrated by Kevin Bowyer, who plays all 13 *Prières* on the organ of Salisbury Cathedral, as well as the *Benedictus* and the complete Op 66 on the same ever-enterprising Toccata Classics label. **Jeremy Nicholas**

Prières – selected comparison:
Bowyer (5/89, 9/04) (NIMB) NI5089
Benedictus, Preludes – selected comparison:
Bowyer (1/06) (TOCC) TOCC0030

JS Bach

Die Kunst der Fuge, BWV1080
Cédric Pescia pf
Aeon ㉔ ㉔ AECD1333 (99' • DDD)



In his debut *Goldberg Variations* (Claves, 5/05), Cédric Pescia's pianistically oriented Bach-playing was vital and direct. It's now self-aware and pretentious. One telltale sign in *Die Kunst der Fuge* concerns Pescia's habit of beginning or ending specific lines after the beat behind the other voices. He plays Contrapunctus 1's opening subject slowly but picks up the tempo a little bit as the other voices enter. No 2's dotted rhythms are too rigidly articulated to march forwards effectively. Pescia italicises No 3's slithery chromaticisms with sighing *tenutos* and oily *legatos*. By contrast, the brisk and crisply shaped No 4 begins softly and builds to a gradual, uplifting climax. A fast, driving and arguably glib Canon at the Octave follows. No 5 is slow and spongy, in contrast to Charles Rosen's austere inner strength. Pescia's double-dotting in the No 6 'French overture' causes the music to bog down and stagnate. But No 7's expanding and contracting rhythms benefit from Pescia's gentle fluidity, and his unusual slowing down of the final measures makes plausible musical sense.

The Canon at the Tenth is slow, listless and buttery, capped by an uneventful descending minor scale that serves as the cadenza. Nos 8 and 9 lack suppleness, while, by contrast, No 11's dense textures and extraordinary harmonic invention sound newly minted via Pescia's understated animation. The four-voice mirror fugues transpire at a reverential crawl but the three-voice mirror fugues

skip their merry way. However, Pescia saves his crawl from hell for the usually amazing Canon in Augmentation and Contrary Motion: 10 minutes of unmitigated boredom. For *The Art of Fugue* on piano, Rosen (Sony) and Koroliov (Tacet) remain top-choice references.

Jed Distler

Selected comparisons:
Rosen (3/69^a) (SONY) SB2K63231
Koroliov (1/00) (TACE) TACET13

JS Bach

Schübler Chorales, BWV645-650.
Eighteen Chorales, 'Leipzig Chorales', BWV651-668. Canonic Variations on 'Vom Himmel hoch', BWV769

Kåre Nordstoga org
LAWO Classics ㉔ ㉔ LWC1056
(131' • DDD/DSB). Played on the Schnitger organ of the Martinikerk, Groningen, Netherlands



While there is no evidence to suggest that Kåre Nordstoga is embarking on a

complete Bach series, his second two-CD release presents another rich portfolio of the composer's remarkable organ chorales – arguably the least widely appreciated of his instrumental oeuvres. What is required to bring such music into the concert-giving domain was partly broached in Nordstoga's initial foray of Weimar concerto transcriptions and lesser-known chorale preludes (2/14).

This volume celebrates a potent cross-section of Bach's Leipzig organ music, the programme framed by *sui generis* works written close to the end of his life, the six Schübler Chorales from 1748, which Nordstoga delivers with a feeling for timbral definition and unhurried placement. So often over-ambitious and varied registrations can accentuate – dare one say – the more unwieldy features of these celebrated re-creations. Nordstoga allows them both space and subtle colorific variation to speak as a 'set', employing the

alluring warmth of the Schnitger organ in Groningen.

If ever there was a set of Bach's keyboard music that deserved greater dissemination among his followers, then it's the gloriously conceived set of so-called 'Leipzig' chorale preludes. As in his earlier release, one can admire Nordstoga's dignified control and studied consideration in those 'holy grails', such as *Schmücke dich* and *Nun danket alle Gott*, but often I longed for something of greater critical substance and character distinction: how one can 'open' these works out from the loft into new interpretative arenas, without reverting to rhetorical ticks. *O Lamm Gottes* is a case in point, where an eight-minute instrumental journey of breathtaking questing, drama, collapse and hope of salvation is bewilderingly stagnant and unexplored. It is one of those occasions where one fears for a work.

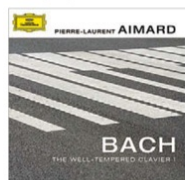
If Nordstoga's *andante* speed applies to almost all the chorale preludes, his reading of the Canonic Variations is surprisingly sprightly. Bach's often dry parlour-game of contrapuntal showmanship (presented to establish his 'scientific' credentials to Mizler's elite university society) is among the best performances of, generally, an admirable but disappointingly unadventurous new compendium.

Jonathan Freeman-Attwood

JS Bach

Das wohltemperirte Clavier -
Book 1, BWV846-869

Pierre-Laurent Aimard *pf*
DG ② 479 2784GH2 (113' • DDD)



As I've become better acquainted with it I've warmed to this recording, a little, but

I know I shan't often be revisiting it. How do you like to listen to Book 1 of the '48', these 24 pairings of preludes and fugues through all the keys? In its entirety, starting with C major and proceeding to its tonic minor (C minor) and thereafter by upward semitone steps all the way to B minor? The journey takes about two hours, and of one thing we can be certain: Bach would have had a fit at the thought of our listening to *The Well-Tempered Clavier* in this way. For him, the volume was a resource, an exemplary collection. For his pupils it was a vehicle for advanced study, both in keyboard-playing and in composition. The two went together. A compendious achievement, it had the aim of encouraging the student to

learn to play in all the major and minor keys, and in a wide range of styles, while offering to the nascent composer 'models', in both strict and free forms, of all the contrapuntal techniques.

Yet Pierre-Laurent Aimard's recording tempts me to risk the observation that in some countries their reception as 'models', to be handed down to students at institutions along with the teaching methods of such places, has been to the detriment of a more complete recognition of Bach's greatness. Might that not have been true in France and at the Paris Conservatoire? I hesitate to speculate further, since Pierre-Laurent Aimard is such a distinguished musician. But I do wonder, a bit: the finish in his account of Book 1 is near immaculate, if you can accept playing that never utilises the sustaining pedal and projects only the most restricted range of dynamics and light and shade. Yes, there is a little play of colour, but blink and you may have missed it. Clarity of texture and of part-playing are the virtues which predominate, plus a cool atmosphere. Whether or not we think of these as characteristically French, they do bring rewards in Bach, of course; and yet the impression Aimard conveys is of Book 1 as a monument, even a scholastic tract, in a time warp. The gamut of Bach's rhetoric is not suggested; nor is there enough of his delight in craftsmanship and inflections of expression. I miss too a singing style and an acknowledgement of the vocal inspiration that lies behind so much of his keyboard-writing. The notes are enough, Aimard seems to be implying. Do not expect me to offer a gloss.

Best perhaps to dodge about with him, rather than take his somewhat monolithic product uninterrupted. I respond with most enthusiasm when there is variety of sound and character (C sharp major, C sharp minor, A major, B flat minor) and exceptional clarity and technical address (D sharp minor fugue, E major fugue, E minor prelude, F minor fugue). Fugue is a texture and, as we know, the character of a Bach fugal movement derives from its subject. Here, in the longest fugues, when the subject is lengthy and delineated by Aimard a note at a time, with ungenerous shaping and only vestiges of phrasing, we're obliged to sustain ourselves with the effects of whatever build-up of inventive procedures and contrasts the composition may bring (B minor, and the A minor, which goes doggedly from beat to beat and cries out for more differentiation).

Dodge about also, if you can, in Edwin Fischer's pioneering recording of the 1930s, where there are wobbles and lapses

from grace but many marvels. Among modern versions I return most often to the one by András Schiff. Peter Hill's, on Delphian, is I daresay in danger of being overlooked. It is intimate and he communicates as if happy to be playing to friends. Hill is wonderful in Messiaen, as Aimard is, and I just wish Aimard was more interested in playing Bach as lyrically as Hill does. **Stephen Plaistow**

Selected comparisons:

E Fischer (EMI) 623074-2

Hill (DELPH) DCD34126

Debussy

'Beau soir'

Préludes - Book 2. Beau soir (arr Attwood).

L'isle joyeuse. Children's Corner - The Little

Shepherd. Danse (Tarantelle styrienne).

Elégie. Etudes - Pour les octaves.

Valse romantique. La plus que lente

Michael Lewin *pf*

Sono Luminus ② (CD + DSD) DSL92175
(69' • DDD)



Attractively entitled 'Beau soir', Michael Lewin's recital opens with an arrangement

by Koji Attwood of one of Debussy's earliest songs. A romantic plea 'to taste the charms of youth before it is too late', it is played with a *cantabile* full enough to make even Gérard Souzay (the song's most celebrated singer) envious. Elsewhere, in a wide spectrum ranging from Debussy's first evanescent magic to the greater abstraction of his final years, Lewin takes a firm if never less than musicianly hand to many of the composer's most fragile and intimate confidences.

Masterly and assured in such outgoing music as *L'isle joyeuse* or the 'Octave' Etude, sweeping away the cobwebs of a more misty tradition, he is less successful in works calling for the utmost in delicacy and evocation. The *Valse romantique* and *La plus que lente* are cases in point and a similar literalism blights many numbers from the second book of *Préludes*. In 'Brouillards', 'Feuilles mortes' and most of all in 'La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune', Lewin steps into broad daylight when he should retreat into the shadows. 'Feux d'artifice' is, predictably, a greater success, with an impressive descent before the ghostly sound of the Marseillaise. All these performances are admirable as far as they go but they are too one-sided to go far enough. Sono Luminus's sound is excellent and the expressive, warm-hearted notes are by the pianist himself. **Bryce Morrison**

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