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Review by John Miller - February 19, 2016

Lawo Classics LWC1087 (2 discs)

Stereo/Multichannel Hybrid

Classical - Instrumental

Bach: Toccata and Fugue in D minor, BWV 538 (Dorian); Trio Sonatas BWV 525-530; Trio in D minor, BWV 583; Toccata, Adagio & Fugue, BWV 564; Canzona in D minor, BWV 588

Kåre Nordstoga (organ)

Arp Schnitger organ, Hauptkirche, St. Jacobi, Hamburg

Another double SACD in Kåre Nordstoga's ongoing nine releases of JS Bach's organ music, played on historical instruments of Europe (discs are not issued in order; this is the fourth double). Nordstoga is the organist of Oslo Cathedral and a wide-travelling concert organist. His duo of the Schübler and Leipzig Chorales ([Bach: Schübler & Leipzig Chorales, Canonic Variations - Nordstoga](#)) has been widely applauded, and this new disc confirms the breadth of experience and deep knowledge of Bach's music which inform his readings of the composer.

The chosen organ for this issue is the famous baroque organ of St Jacobi in Hamburg, by Arp Schnitger. It was restored in 1926-1930 and 1993 from the disasters of history, including World War 1 when the all the case-pipes (those inhabiting the ornamental encasement of the organ, usually for display only) had to be handed over to the army. At the onset of World War Two, all the functioning pipes were removed and stored for safe-keeping. The organ case itself was destroyed by bombing of the church.

Bach, as a professional tester for new organs, was well aware of Schnitger's innovations in organ building in Northern of Europe. In fact, as a 15 year old, he had a job from 1701 in Lüneburg and often walked the 30 miles to St Jacobi's church where he played the organ. He was pleased enough with the organ to follow up an invitation to be the new organist in 1720, but he refused on discovering that the organist of the St Jacobi parish was expected to donate a major sum of money to the church, as a sign of gratitude on taking the post.

Since the Lawo booklet has little to say about the Schnitger organ, I include a short account here. The Schnitger is sited in the west gallery of St Jacobi (alongside a modern large organ) and it has about 4000 pipes, divided into 60 registers (or stops), the oldest dating back to 1512. There is no swell door to make changes in dynamics, and this function means that the organist has to change volume up or down by setting combinations of soft and loud pipes. The four manuals, displayed on the console, are attached to their respective sets of registers, and these are disposed around the organ loft, for example the Rückpositiv division hangs off the upper gallery, the Brustwerk pipes are immediately above the console and the Pedal pipes are in the two Pedal towers at each side of the casement. The organ follows Schnitger's original tuning, an unequal temperament voicing of the pipes, which makes some beautiful sounds in some keys whereas some notes might sound slightly out of tune. The ear will mostly get accustomed to the slight off-keys, although listeners with perfect pitch may have more difficulty.

The crown of Kåre Nordstoga's 2-disc programme is JS Bach's set of six trios for organ, BWV 525-530, placed 3 to a disc. They are top and tailed by the Toccata and Fugue in D minor, BWV 538 ("Dorian") and Trio in D minor BWV 583 (songful in the French mode, suggesting composition by a gifted pupil of Bach) for Disc 1. Disc 2 starts with the ebullient Toccata, Adagio and Fugue in C major, BWV 527 and finishes with the Italianese Canzona in D min BWV 588 (also probably not by JS Bach).

The organ Trio Sonatas are one of few complete sets which Bach made. During the later days of his tenure in Leipzig, however, he felt the need to set down for posterity his expertise in various musical forms. In this case, this collection was also intended to be a rigorous exposition of all the techniques required by first-class organists, probably to pass techniques on to his son WF Bach, who eventually had a full career as an organist. Each of the three-movement sonatas contains individual challenges in technique and expression, mostly expressed in 3 lines of polyphony tied artfully to two manuals and pedals.

Most of the 18 movements are made of material from a wide range of Bach's previous output, only 5 appear to be newly composed for the project. Bach's brilliance in re-using this material is amazing, making these trios not just cold exercises. They are disarmingly attractive and immediately appealing to the listener with their splendid melodies, despite some ferocious interpretive and technical demands for players. Many commentators, from Forkel (Bach's first biographer) to modern musicologists, have praised the Organ trios as outstanding, timeless perfections in Art. The Trios are certainly one of my musical favourites, capable being listened to time after time, delighting and always revealing something new.

Throughout these discs Nordstoga's love of his selections, particularly marked in the Six Trios. His timing of movements are often slower in general than those of two of my favourite exponents of the full set of trios, Viggo Mango ([Bach: Organ Sonatas BWV](#)

[525-530 - Christopher Wrench](#)) and Ton Koopman (RBCD, Archiv). But there is no indication of slowness in Nordstoga's playing, instead he always gives a feeling of forward impulse which is exciting. This also reveals the fluidity of Bach's masterful polyphony, over which Nordstoga has complete technical mastery. He also demonstrates his control over the Schnitger organ, selecting from the many tempting registrations to provide himself with a limited group of colours which give continuity between movements, but from time to time he adds a solo with more exotic tones which tickles one's musical palate. This is particularly effective for Nordstoga's rendering of Bach's stream of conscience melodies, which are common in the Trios and are revelatory. The 32' stops are used sparingly, making their entry only at crucial moments, which increase the tension and excitement, especially in vigorous passages for pedals.

Sound Engineer Thomas Wolden and Producer Vegard Landaas have excelled themselves in producing sonics of amazing realism and detail. In 5.0 surround, the listener is placed ideally before the organ, with the location of groups of speaking pipes around the organ loft (mentioned above) clearly defined, even revealing their perspective front-back place in the acoustic. Sitting on a low rumble from the blowers, the rich ambience truly surrounds you, and you can even hear the dying reflections at places in the Toccatas where great full organ chords are followed by "silence", which Nordstoga expertly holds until the reflections almost die away. Stereo is very good but less dense in deep regions, and of course lacks the true surround effect of 5.0.

Packaging in a double plastic jewel box is attractive, the booklet with an informative essay on the history of the Organ Trios - but otherwise rather sketchy, there being little about the organ itself, except a list of its registrations.

A peerless recording of performances which are lively and technically magnificent, on a Baroque organ especially fitting for the carefully selected musical programme. It shows a fine relationship between organ, organist and the hosting of St Jacobi's acoustics. If you haven't yet made friends with the Six Trios for Organ, then here is an excellent opportunity to snap up this duo.

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