

Bruckner - Mass No. 3 in F Minor (1868)

Psalm 146 (1858?) and Organ Works:

Bruckner's Bad Ischl improvisation sketches 1890, completed as "Festmusik" by Erwin Horn [8:35]

Andante in D minor (WAB 130) [1:49]

Postlude in D minor (WAB 126) [4:07]

Prelude and Fugue in C minor (WAB 131) [5:54]

Fugue in D minor (WAB 125) [3:58]

Prelude in C minor (WAB 129) [2:06]

Ania Vegry (soprano); Franziska Gottwald (alto); Clemens Bieber (tenor); Timo Riihauen (bass);

Philharmonischer Chor München, Philharmonie Festiva/Gerd Schaller

Gerd Schaller (organ)

rec. live July, 2015 (Mass & Psalm), September, 2015 (organ), Abteikirche, Ebrach

Texts for Mass (Latin and German) and Psalm (German only) provided in the booklet.

2 CD Set - PROFIL PH16034 [60:21+56:48]

RECORDINGS OF BRUCKNER'S last and greatest Mass are not exactly scarce but this most recent live performance from the celebrated Ebrach festival has claim to being regarded as special not just for its own considerable merits but also as it is presented by Profil in a double CD package in tandem with the barely known Psalm 146 and the further bonus of conductor-musicologist and performer Gerd Schaller playing six works on the Eisenbarth organ in the Abteikirche.

The first great merit here is the sound quality: there is an angelic aureola of warmth about it, excellent balance between the mighty forces deployed, tremendous dynamic range and no loss of detail despite the reverberance of the venue. None of the comparable recordings from Jochum, Barenboim and Celibidache can compete for recorded sound: Jochum's is over fifty years old and fine for its era but decidedly wiry to modern ears; Celibidache's live recording, although digital, is marred by audience coughing – whereas there is barely a sound here.

Barenboim's soloists are excellent, especially the ethereal Margaret Price, but the performance as a whole comes across as rather stolid and plodding; he does not in general achieve the kind of nobility and impact we hear in excelsis from Schaller here. Celibidache's tempi could of course have seemed lugubrious had he not been able to infuse proceedings with such grandeur. Jochum has perhaps the best soloists of all, but Schaller's, too, are first class, even though I would have preferred a more robust, pharyngeal tenor rather than Clemens Bieber, who sings feelingly but whose tone can sometimes whine and sound a little windy; Haefliger for Jochum brings more resonance to his sol in the "Credo". Soprano Ania Vegry is rather more febrile than Price and infuses her every utterance with great emotion. Both the alto and bass are admirable in the strength, depth and steadiness of their singing.

The highlights for me, however, are in the singing of the Philharmonischer Chor at key points such as the impassioned and monumental opening "Kyrie", which emerges as a genuinely supplicatory in its plea for mercy, and the truly thrilling "Et resurrexit", central, in every sense of the word, to the Mass. All the performers here seem inspired and galvanised by the occasion, such that at times they are almost too demonstrative, but that involvement underlines the truly dramatic nature of the Catholic liturgy and its emphasis upon salvation. One thinks here of the argument surrounding how visceral and "operatic" Verdi's Requiem should sound but certainly Bruckner seems here to be embracing the same sense of the dramatic that we hear in the liturgical works of predecessors such as Beethoven's "Missa solemnis" and Berlioz' "Requiem and "Te Deum" – works with which Bruckner was familiar.

The "Credo" assumes the sonic landscape characteristic of a battlefield, the choir's war-cries of "Credo" punctuating the restless, scurrying semiquavers of the underlying instrumental figures; this is Bruckner at his most stirring. Despite the pitiless demands he makes upon his performers in sustained fortissimo passages, there are also moments of repose and tranquillity to be savoured, and I concede all credit to the choir and orchestra that they are able to ratchet down the tension in order to embrace the tenderness of the "Benedictus"; both the singing and instrumental playing display enormous flexibility and virtuosity.

In terms of mere timings, just as he does when performing Bruckner's symphonies, Schaller finds the just milieu between others' extremes. Barenboim and Jochum are more sprightly at 58 minutes and as such not as imposing; Celibidache, at 77 minutes, is to some ears excessively languorous. In my judgement, Schaller finds just the right balance at one hour precisely, conjuring huge weight without undue ponderousness.

The Psalm is a decided rarity. Were it not for the fact that we have Bruckner's manuscript score, published as recently as 1996, I would defy anyone without foreknowledge of its composer to ascribe it correctly, it is so

wholly uncharacteristic of his oeuvre; indeed, it positively reeks of Mendelssohn's oratorios at their most blithely insouciant.

Once again, the choral singing is the glory of this piece; the choir's energy and conviction ensure that instead of regretting the absence of Brucknerian numinosity, the listener revels in the sheer exuberance of the melodies and comforting, richly Romantic harmonies, yet the rhythmic vitality of the counterpoint in the double chorus "Gross ist unser Herr" confirms that the baroque world of Handel and Bach is never far away. Soprano Ania Vegry has a vibrant, sometimes almost over-bright tone and handles the frequent melismata in her music with aplomb. She is well matched in the "Arioso" by Franziska Gottwald's warm alto, with delightful individual contributions from solo flute, oboe and violin. Especially uplifting is the fugal "Alleluia" concluding the work, introduced by a splendid brass fanfare and extending over nine minutes to provide a spectacularly confident testament to the fruits of Bruckner's formal studies with Sechter.

The programme is completed by a recital from Gerd Schaller demonstrating Bruckner's famed improvisatory powers as an organist and his command of fugal form. This is probably music appealing to a more specialised taste than that of the average Bruckner aficionado but Schaller expertly and sensitively exploits the extraordinary range of stops of the mighty Ebrach organ to suit the varying demands of the six pieces here.

Ralph Moore

