

From Bach to Bach

Webster reveals that the word "parody" is derived from the Greek "*para*" ("beside") and "*oide*" ("a song")—"A writing in which the language and style of an author, or poem, or other work, is closely imitated or mimicked." Johann Sebastian Bach, through his long and fertile composing life (especially in the post-Cöthen years), indulged in a musical kind of parody, or adaptation of his own music for various occasions. Two releases from Nonesuch provide an interesting glance at these practices—his Four Short Masses (HC-73020, \$8.94) consist almost entirely of parodies of earlier cantatas, and his secular cantata, *Hercules auf dem Scheidewege*, (H-71226, \$2.98) was later reworked into the more famous *Christmas Oratorio*.

These masses and cantatas date from the mid-1730s, from Bach's Leipzig period as cantor of St. Thomas's School. As annotator Joshua Rifkin points out, Bach "looked less to external resources and more to his own. . . . By the late 1720s, Bach's production of new music had started to decline, and he turned increasingly to self-adaptation." Controversy has raged over Bach's ability and prudence of fitting secular music to religious texts and vice versa. Schweitzer writes:

It is also incredible that the same artist who insisted so strongly on characteristic expression in music could at another time constrain his music so barbarously to fit an alien text. . . . Even the hearer who does not exactly know how the adaptations have been made will feel that the words and music do not agree. This makes full artistic enjoyment impossible.

History may have proved Schweitzer correct, for the four masses—consisting only of the "Kyrie" and "Gloria" of the Protestant service—have been the victims of neglect. Between 1735 and 1740, Bach virtually stopped writing sacred music and turned back to previous religious cantatas ranging from BWV 17 to BWV 233a. Historians doubt that these Catholic masses were intended for Bach's duties in Leipzig—Geiringer says they were probably destined for Count Franz Anton von Sprock of Bohemia, while Rifkin says they may have been intended for the Electoral court at Dresden, capital of

Saxony. The latter assumption is based on the fact that Bach had applied to the Elector of Saxony (and Polish king) for the honorary title of Court Composer, and to demonstrate his abilities (as well as loyalty) had presented him with a grand-scale *Missa* (this was eventually to be expanded into the B-minor Mass), and that possibly these four reduced-scale *Missas*

were written either to renew his efforts to gain the post, or in gratitude for already having received the title. Bach was finally awarded the title in 1736.

Although Schweitzer holds the masses in rather low opinion, the listening rewards are often plentiful. The Mass in A major (BWV 234) is a beautiful work, full of unusual touches, beginning with the flowing, graceful canonic opening "Kyrie," and the alternation of the fervent chorus and more reflective solo passages in "Gloria in excelsis." The fugal "Kyrie" of the G-major Mass (BWV 236) has an extraordinary impact, while the gentler F-major Mass (BWV 233) interestingly fuses the "Kyrie eleison" of the Gre-

The repertoire dazzles. Vivaldi's Gloria. "Oh, Susanna." Bach's Cantata BWV.4. The chorus from Tannhäuser. "O, Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie." Motets by Palestrina. "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child." Magnificat Primo by Monteverdi. Choral music of the Spanish New World between 1550 and 1750. "Polly Wolly Doodle." Vaughan Williams' Mass in G minor.

These represent merely 11 of the more than 34 albums recorded by the Roger Wagner Chorale over the years for Angel and Capitol. The range of these selections tells one part of the Chorale's spectacular story.

Critics and peers tell another. Martin Bernheimer of the *Los Angeles Times*: "At this point in history the virtuosity of the Roger Wagner Chorale is a matter to be taken for granted." Theodore Strongin, *The New York Times*: "A sense of involvement, of enjoyment prevails throughout." From abroad, during one of the Chorale's many triumphant S. Hurok tours, *The Hague Courier* exulted: "... the great musicality, homogeneity, vitality and pureness of the Roger Wagner Chorale we find nowhere else. Such musical fire and spontaneity!" And perhaps the ultimate compliment from Eugene Ormandy: "... the finest chorus I have ever conducted."

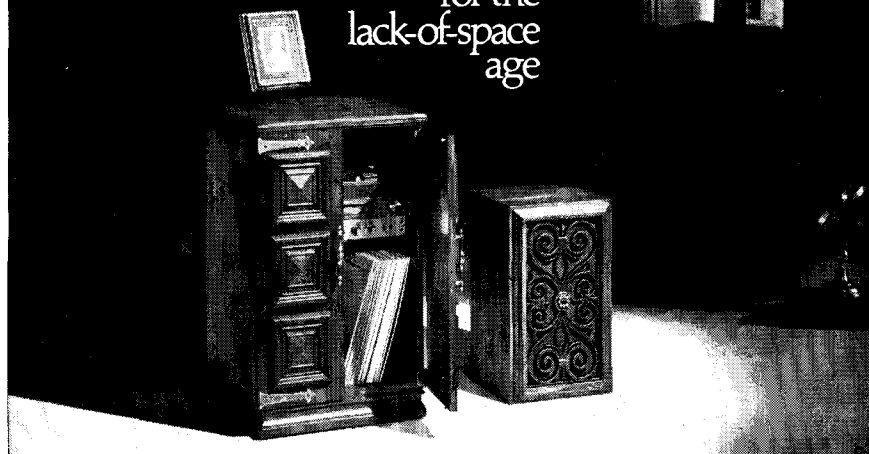
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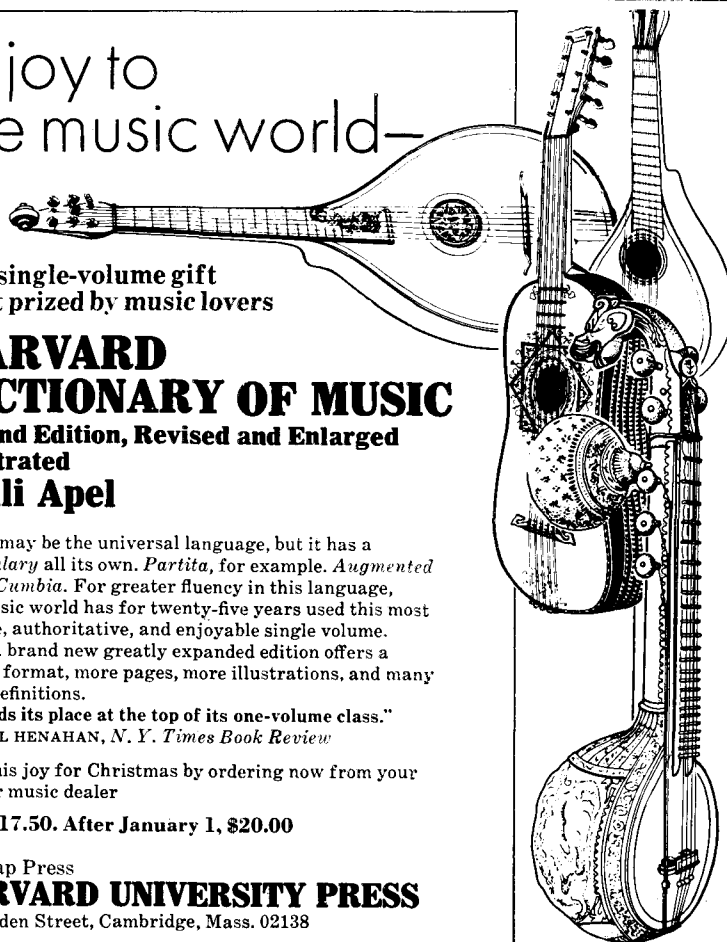
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gorian Litany contrapuntally with the Lutheran chorale, "Christe du Lamm Gottes."

The performances, under the baton of Helmuth Rilling and incorporating the Gächinger Kantorei, Bach-Collegium of Stuttgart, and the Chorus of the Gedächtniskirche, do not utter the last word in flexibility, rhythmic pulse, and ensemble unity. Perhaps the terms "solid" and "workmanlike" best apply here. Yet the recording has a warmth of tone (weighted on the bass) and a sense of intimacy advantageous to the effort, giving prominence to the vocal solos and the highly effective instrumental solos. The singers are, at best, variable, with bass Jakob Stämpfli (in the F-major and G-major Masses) bringing notable flexibility and lightness to his contributions; and tenor Kurt Equiluz giving fresh, controlled sound to the G-minor "Qui tollis." Soprano Elisabeth Speiser lends an appropriately instrumental quality to her singing and is particularly fine in the ethereal "Qui tollis" (A major), accompanied by the unison flutes, violins, and violas. Both altos—Ingeborg Russ and Hildegard Rütgers—labor under the demands of the music.

Hercules auf dem Scheidewege ("Hercules at the Crossroads"), too, is related to Friedrich August II, Elector of Saxony. In 1720, Bach had become conductor of the University's Collegium Musicum (which had been founded by Telemann), and for this group he had composed a number of secular cantatas first heard at Zimmermann's coffeehouse, several in honor of the ruling house—despite the Elector himself not often being present in Leipzig. *Hercules* was performed on September 5, 1733, in honor of his eleventh birthday, using an allegorical poem (or *dramma per musica*) by Picander in which the mythological Hercules symbolizes and glorifies the baroque ruler.

Conductor Rilling leads the Chorus of the Gedächtniskirche and the Stuttgart Bach-Collegium with the warmth and spirit well suited to this charming, lyrical music. His soloists are well-nigh perfect. Soprano Sheila Armstrong has a lovely quality in the exquisite "Schlafe, mein Liebster," while alto Hertha Töpfer, though somewhat too mature of sound for the youthful Hercules, has the evenness of voice and intensity for Bach. The always admirable Theo Altmeyer, as the tenor Virtue, is expressive and expansive in his singing, and bass Stämpfli is impressive in Mercury's summing up recitative that leads into the joyous chorus of praise. Praise is also due to the delightful echoing oboes of Alfred Sous and Klaus Ebach in the "Treues Echo" aria.

—ROBERT JACOBSON.

Bread and Lollipops

by HERBERT WEINSTOCK

In an era during which too-frequent rehearsals—in concert, by radio and even television, and through recordings—of established masterpieces of music have deprived many of them of every element of surprise, what could be more natural than for jaded performers and listeners to turn, for the refreshment of adventure, to smaller music not yet or no longer hackneyed? The torrents of performed and recorded music by baroque composers of every size and shape that began a few years ago to answer this question now appear to be receding a little. They too (for too greedy, or gourmand, listeners) have begun to sound hackneyed, the “one concerto six hundred times” of a vicious but not entirely baseless jest about Vivaldi’s output. More recently, some performers have begun to explore instead that long-démodé era, high nineteenth-century (or baroque) romanticism, and particularly the most despised of its constituents. We have begun to hear such almost troglodytic-sounding names, particularly in solo-piano music and the concerto, as Anton Rubinstein, Kalkbrenner, Pixis, Thalberg, Henselt, D’Albert, and Tausig. Columbia Records has instituted a long-term program for recording several varieties of the music of their period; its guide will be Raymond Lewenthal, who has been largely responsible for bringing back the music of Alkan and of Liszt’s operatic transcriptions. We are, it seems, to be permitted to indulge in entertainments that delighted our great grandparents.

Who, for example, was Xaver Scharwenka? Answer: a Polish-German-American pianist of international renown and a minor composer of stylish glitter whose name preceded Rachmaninoff’s in being known for both pianism and composition. He was born in unpronounceable Szamotuly in 1850 and died at Berlin in 1924. Now the protean Earl Wild, with Erich Leinsdorf conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra, has recorded the B-flat minor Piano Concerto that Scharwenka wrote as his Opus 32 when he was twenty-seven. Played for all it is worth, it provides genuine relief from our long-clotted, immobile repertoire. Foolishness would enter in only if someone were to try placing this alternately virtuosic and sentimental, but always craftsmanlike, concerto near the high-

est level of musical creation. Taken on its own terms, it surely *on occasion* can supply a very welcome replacement for the trillionth hearing of Tchaikovsky’s First, Rachmaninoff’s Second, even—dare one say so?—Beethoven’s Fifth, Schumann’s Only, and Brahms’s Both. Leinsdorf’s conducting and the playing by his Bostonians match the bravura of Mr. Wild’s remarkably clean, highly controlled, many-shaded pianism. As lagniappe, the recording (RCA, LSC-3080, \$5.98) tosses in Mr. Wild’s solo performances of Balakirev’s Lisztian “Reminiscences of Glinka’s Opera *A Life of the Tsar*,” Nikolai Merdtnner’s *Improvisation* (Opus 31, No. 1), and Eugen d’Albert’s *Scherzo* (Opus 16, No. 2), of which only the Merdtnner sounds uncomfortable in Scharwenka’s company.

The somewhat American contribution to the era of baroque romanticism was, of course (as Vera Brodsky and Harold Triggs and Jeanne Behrend and a few others taught those who were listening), Louis Moreau Gottschalk of New Orleans and the world (1829-1869). From Desto we now have (DC 6470-73, \$19.92) Alan Mandel’s performance of forty of Gottschalk’s odd, seductive semi-salon piano pieces. Because Mr. Mandel lacks Earl Wild’s total control of the immediate, even the abrupt, nuance, his playing a little exaggerates the too-muchness of forty lollipops in succession—though, admittedly, some of the Gottschalk pieces he plays are more nourishing than lollipops and only a reviewer would be insane enough to listen attentively to forty of them at one sitting. Particularly, the “Latin American” pieces here were of extraordinary originality when composed; nor is it to be charged against Gottschalk that such of his other pieces as *The Last Hope* and *The Dying Poet* begot descendants among salon pieces for lesson-taking ladies. In this recording, the piano tone sounds a little queasy (the recording process? the piano used?), but Mr. Mandel’s manipulation of it is almost invariably informed by a sharp sense of style. The fact that his earlier recording contained all of the piano music of Charles Ives may mean that music, ever a few years behind the other arts, is catching up. For to say Gottschalk and Ives is like saying Millet and Jackson Pollock or Ouida and Samuel Beckett. The minor composers of the mid-nineteenth century are upon us.

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