Rebirth of a Classic

Speakers Corner
re-iss use the
Starker Bach 'Cello Suites

by Richard S. Foster

Janos Starker happens to celebrate his 80th birthday, as I write this, tomorrow, July 5, 2004. Starker was born in Budapest, Hungary July 5, 1924. He is a graduate of the Franz Liszt Academy of Music. During his career as an orchestral musician, he was a solo cellist at the Budapest Opera House and Philharmonic, The Dallas Symphony (under Antal Dorati), The Metropolitan Opera and then The Chicago Symphony (both with Fritz Reiner). He's maintained an active career not only as a soloist but a guest artist with Orchestras around the World. He teaches, he lectures, he founded the Eva Janzer Memorial Cello Center Foundation to honour his former teacher. He's published countless articles and many of his students are world-renowned.

He joined the School of Music faculty at the University of Indiana in Bloomington in 1958. Four years later he was awarded the title of Distinguished Professor of Music. His awards include the prestigious Grande Prix du Disque in 1948 for the Kodaly Suite for Unaccompanied Cello, Opus 8, first released on 78's in France on the Pacific label. Shortly thereafter, Pacific re-released this performance on LP. His justly famous recording of this heretofore thought-to-be-impossible-to-play work was recording again in the US by Period on SPLP 510. It was re-released on Period SPL 510 with Kodaly's Duo for violin and violoncello with Arnold Eidus playing violin.

In 1997 he won a Grammy Award for his performance of the Bach Suites for Unaccompanied Violoncello on RCA/BMG: compact disc only (61436). This was the fifth time he performed the Bach 'Cello Suites, however only four of the five sets are complete. He recorded four of
the six for the US company Period (released in the UK on the Nixa label), he then recorded a complete set for EMI on their Columbia label in mono only. The first stereo releases were in the mid 1960's for the Mercury Living Presence Label. In the late 1980's he recorded a complete set in digital on the Seefel label and as indicated earlier, the last time for RCA/BMG. He's premiered many concertos as well as other recital works. He's recorded chamber works for Decca (the Brahms Trios) as well as Bloch's Schelomo and Voice in the Wilderness with Mehta and the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra.

There is almost no information I have been able to uncover that suggests there is a work he has not performed or recorded.

Kodaly for Period (and the earlier Pacific release) was a stunning performance, he really began to establish himself under Legge. These records are highly sought after by collectors, but it appears his recordings for Mercury are some of the most coveted today - especially his Bach.

Starker has a great love for chamber recordings and made several as the cellist in a group called the Roth String Quartet. Later he began the famous Living Presence Stereo recordings with the Bach being among his last recordings for Mercury. All in all, he recorded four chamber works with his friend, the pianist Gyorgy Sebok, one record with Stephen Swedish at the piano, two with Dorati and the LSO, one with Stanislaw Skrowaczewski and the LSO and his Bach Suites for Unaccompanied Violoncello. Nine legendary recordings. (This of course does not include SR90370 which is a re-issue of two of the 'cello suites from the box set, SR3-9016).

When I began collecting these records I knew nothing, and I mean nothing about classical recordings, performances, etc., etc. We all have moments in time where we can recapture what we were doing when a certain event occurred. For me it was the first time I heard the Dvorak 'cello concerto with Starker.

There are even a half-dozen wonderful records on the STAR label (STARker?) released primarily as teaching aids rather than mainstream issues that have become cult classics. The original releases were pressed on beautiful translucent vinyl by JVC.

It was in 1948, shortly after he came to America from France (by Dorati's invitation in Dallas) where he first met Wilma Cozart. He moved to The Met shortly thereafter with Reiner and then in 1952 again with Reiner to Chicago. Based upon World events at the time, his plans changed as he had to get himself established, however he stayed an additional year with Reiner to help bring his parents to America.

Starker was at The Met when he made his first American recordings for Period. Following this brief relationship, he recorded several superb performances on a handful of records for Walter Legge. While his Dorati and the LSO, SR90303.

There was a time when you could purchase the right pressing and in the right condition from reliable sources - yes David it was you. When I cued the record, it was one of those experiences of sonic wonderment and although unbeknownst to me at the time, one of the greatest performances of this composition I would ever hear. Can you imagine? To be given the privilege of hearing
this work for the first time over a full range system was an event I will never forget. I remember quite literally, shaking as I turned the record over. Today I have heard many other performances of this work, some better, some quite inferior, but nothing will ever take the experience and memory of my first encounter with Janos Starker, Antal Dorati and his LSO - and the unbelievable Mercury Living Presence Sound.

Speakers Corner Records decided last year when their Mercury project began that they wanted to release the Bach Cello Suites. Starker had actually recorded the works in December of 1965 but they weren't to be released until February of 1966. There is not much to say about these performances that hasn't been said many times before. They are excellent, no, outstanding performances and offer exceptionally fine Mercury Living Presence Sound. These were recorded at Fine Studios in New York. While we've always been told Mercury used three omni-directional microphones for stereo and one for mono recording, upon hearing the re-issue, one famous mastering engineer feels that only two microphones were used for this stereo recording. He visualizes the two microphones on either side with the cello at the apex of an equilateral triangle. I cannot speak for this, but it makes for an interesting debate. I've owned these recordings in their earliest stereo issue: Gold Label Promos. I also own the set of originals in mono. (Why you ask? Because I'm crazy, that's why). I've since sold the Gold Label Promo set as I felt the mono was fine enough for me. That's until I heard what magic Mr. Makkee has wrought!

I can tell you with the utmost confidence, you will not believe what your ears will tell you when you hear the fabulous job Kai Seemann and Willem Makkee have done with this treasured set. Kai's idea was to release this on Mr. Starker's 80th birthday, but it seems they've come out about two weeks before. The set is a sonic marvel. Simply put, you will hear a cello as if you were sitting five feet from Mr. Starker. Now there will be those in the audience who will say, "The 'cello is too large." What I can say
to those nay sayers is quite simple. They have never been in a room/studio sitting close to a cellist playing their instrument. Two years ago while on a trip to Switzerland, I had the pleasure of sitting with my friend Juerg Schopper in the home of the great Swiss Violoncellist and teacher, Ms. Eva Pedrazzi. What I hear on the Speakers Corner re-issue is what I heard in Ms. Pedrazzi’s home.

You hear everything. His bow strokes, his fingering technique, everything, in glorious, glorious sound.

I’m going to stick my neck out right now and say that if this doesn’t win the HI-FI+ recording of the year... I don’t know what will. Readers, do not wait to make up your mind whether you should or shouldn’t purchase this set. It’s a total no-brainer. Rush to your retailer or favorite mail order company and buy it - now!

The re-issue also delivers more than the original in material terms. Not only do you get the original box. Speakers Corner have lovingly re-created the original insert. There is also a brief biography of Mr. Starker, a copy of the original Mercury press announcement as well as a commentary from Mr. Starker himself on Bach, the recording session and his relationship with Mercury, specifically written for this release in April 2004.

Now... just so you all know, there are two releases in North America. One is the same set that will be issued worldwide through Speakers Corner distributors and retailers. There is also a limited edition of 200 sets, individually numbered and signed by Mr. Starker. I don’t know how many are left, but the only distributor for these was Acoustic Sounds. If they are out of stock, perhaps they can assist you in obtaining a set. Why only 200 and why only North America? It reflects both the popularity of the box set on this side of the Atlantic, and an opportunity for Mr Starker to do a good turn. The signed sets cost around $100 extra, with funds raised going to the Eva Janzer Memorial Cello Center Foundation in Bloomington which provides two yearly student scholarships. Sorry... there are only 200 and when they’re gone... they’re gone. The records in both sets are absolutely the same, so if you do not obtain a signed copy, don’t despair. The three records you will own will be reward enough. This set is a treasure to own forever at an extremely affordable price. (Original promos have sold for several thousand dollars. Regular issues with low stamper numbers also hit the thousand-dollar range.) Take it from me - the re-issues are the ones to own. I am delighted to have this set performed by one of the great Icons of the 20th/21st Century. Not to be missed for any reason!