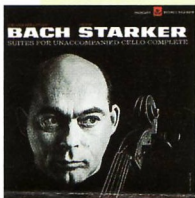


HOT WAX

A subsection exclusively for reviews of new vinyl releases

Bach: 6 Cello Suites. Janos Starker, cello. Mercury Living Presence/Speakers Corner AMER 39016A (three 180-gram LPs). Music: ★★★★★ Sonics: ★★★★★ 1/2



Until 13-year-old musical prodigy Pablo Casals came across them on a trip with his father to a dusty little Barcelona music store in 1889, the Cello Suites of Johann Sebastian Bach had languished as mere curiosities—too dry, dated, and difficult to be played in concert (without accompaniment). Though he found them anything but dry, Casals himself did not play a Suite in public until he was 25, after better than a decade of daily practice and study, and did not feel ready to record them in their entirety until 1936, when he was 60!

Casals' 1930s recordings set the mold for modern performance of the Suites, both in technique and interpretation. Discarding the old-fashioned slides (glissandos) that late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century cellists used between widely spaced notes, he substituted stretches and “leaps” of the left hand to clarify what is now called the “voice leading” of each line of the counterpoint. But it was the warm romanticism of his playing that marked the real turning point in the performance history of the Cello Suites. For Casals, Bach expressed “every feeling: lovely, tragic, dramatic, poetic...always soul, heart, and expression.

“Let us,” said he, “find that Bach.”

Finding *that* Bach—the deeply expressive Bach—has ever since become a critical crux. The trouble here is that Bach was a Baroque composer (*the* Baroque composer) and, in Tim Janof's words (“Interpretational Angst and the Bach Cello Suites”): “The goals in Baroque music are often very different [than those of music of the Romantic period. In some ways you could say that Baroque music is much more formal and

formulaic. It's something that's not only found in the music, it's a sign of an era.”

Hitting the right balance between Baroque and Romantic, between head and heart is the challenge for all cellists who essay these suites. Since he recorded them in brilliant stereo for Mercury in December 1965, Hungarian-born cellist Janos Starker's performances have been considered a singular model of this balance—sharp, muscular, extraordinarily lucid and virtuosic, but also intensely expressive.

Starker, who before becoming a soloist was the principal cellist for Dallas Symphony Orchestra, and (with Reiner) the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and the Chicago Symphony, has near Heifetz-level technical chops. If there has been a knock against him it is somewhat similar to the one leveled against Heifetz—that he is too much the Apollonian virtuoso. In neither case is the criticism fair. All one has to do is listen to this three-disc Bach set (or in Heifetz's case, say, the Rózsa Violin Concerto) to know how unfair. This is sublime music-making—widely acknowledged to be one of the great performances of the stereo era.

The sound on this Speakers Corner reissue, mastered by Willem Makke at Universal's Berliner facility in Hanover, from Harold Lawrence's original three-track mastertapes, is superb. The cello, situated to the right of stage center and back a bit from stage front, is gorgeously rich and full in tone color; dynamics are exceptionally impressive. My only caveat—no fault of Speakers Corner—are the occasional extraneous noises, the odd thuds, scrapes, and buzzes of faulty connections to mike or tape deck. (Listen midway through the Sarabande of Suite No. 2, for example.) The glitches, however, are few and far between.

There is music for occasions, and there is music that creates a world to dwell in, rather than merely visit—Bach's Cello Suites are quintessentially the latter. This is a set that all music-loving audiophiles should own. JONATHAN VALIN
FURTHER LISTENING: Brahms: Sonatas for Cello and Piano (Starker/Sebok) (Mercury); Kodaly: Sonata for Cello Solo (Wispelwey) (Channel Classics)