



Beethoven

Triple Concerto in C major, Op. 56

Rudolf Serkin (pf)

Jamie Laredo (vln)

Leslie Parnas (cello)

Marlboro Festival Orchestra

Alexander Schneider

Recorded May 1962 at Columbia 30th Street Studio, New York

Producer: Thomas Frost

Recording Engineers: Ed Michalski and John Johnson

Remastered by Masterdisk, New York

Speakers Corner 180gm LP: MS 6564



Bizet

Carmen

Carmen: Marilyn Horne

Don José: James McCracken

Escamillo: Tom Krause

Micaëla: Adriana Maliponte

Frasquita: Colette Boky

Mercédès: Marcia Baldwin

Zuniga: Donald Gramm

Remendado: Andrea Velis

Morales: Raymond Gibbs

Dancaire & Lilas Pastia: Russell Christopher

The Manhattan Opera Chorus

The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Children's Chorus

Leonard Bernstein

Recorded 22 September to 13 October 1972 at the Manhattan Centre, New York

Producer: Douglas W Mowrey

Engineer: Günter Hermanns

Remastered by Masterdisk, New York

Speakers Corner: 180gm, 3LP set: DG 2709 043



Mozart

Serenade in B flat major, K.361 'Gran Partita'

Stuttgart Winds

Recorded in October 2012

Producer and Recording Engineer: Andreas Spreer

Tacet 180gm vinyl: TACET L209



Schumann

Kreisleriana, Op. 16

Variations on a Theme by Clara Wieck, Op.14 (Andantino from Sonata No. 3)

Vladimir Horowitz (pf)

Recorded February 5 & 14 and December 1, 1969 at CBS 30th Street Studio, New York

Producer: Richard Kullough

Engineers: Ray Moore and Fred Pluat

Remastered by Masterdisk, New York

Speakers Corner 180gm LP: Columbia MS 7264

Until now these vinyl features have usually concentrated on remasterings derived from master-tapes supplied by Decca, Deutsche Grammophon etc, however the German company Tacet produce new 180gram recordings using valve/tube technology, which are also released on DVD audio, SACD and Blu-ray. The latest of which is a performance by the Stuttgart Winds of Mozart's Grand Partita, which fits very nicely onto an LP, even with all the repeats observed, as here. The use of valve microphones, cutting-head amplifiers and the like is certainly interesting and presumably dictated by the liking many audiophiles have for recordings produced up until 1969 using such technology (as to whether they *are* better than solid-state. or a combination of the two. is an entirely different matter).

Mozart's Gran Partita is scored for pairs of horns, bassoons, oboes, clarinets, basset horns and a double bass. but there is some confusion about the number of French horns used in this performance; an album photo shows three, but the sleeve lists four players, while one's ears say there are two and one presumes Stuttgart Winds follow the score; The performance is sophisticated and urbane; the players produce a weighty, elegant sound, often create a seamless legato and avoid extreme tempi. They are not afraid to take their time in the opening Largo, the Molto Allegro has bounce and wit, the ensuing large-scale Menuetto's two contrasting Trios are seamlessly integrated into the whole and there is a quiet sense of refined elegance (much the same can be said of the later Menuetto). Today you will rarely hear the opening of the Adagio played with such Romantic breadth of phrasing, or made to sound so much like the beginning of The Blue Danube; indeed all of the seven movements are full of such felicities, along with some beautifully characterised solo playing (although the double-bassist is too self-effacing). Just occasionally the

performance can sound a little slick - the substantial Romanze is rather bland and the final Molto Allegro needs more attack and vitality - but there is no perfect performance of this work and the Stuttgart Winds are as good as any.

The sound is fascinating, the lacquers were cut using half-speed mastering (which is said to improve the accuracy and quality of the groove profile) and the players are placed just behind the speakers, there is an excellent sense of depth that appears to mirror the album photo mentioned above (with the double-bass slightly to the left) which shows them seated in two rows, however the notes say they were – for some reason - sat in a closed circle, and being analogue, you can hear the acoustic space around the performers. Definition and clarity are exemplary (although the double-bass sounds slightly tubby) every instrument can be clearly heard, and the internal balance is perfect. Analogue sound does have a weakness, in that the dynamic range has to be reduced to stop the cutting head mistracking, or being damaged, but rightly or wrongly the range does seem a little *too* constricted. Nonetheless if you want this work in analogue sound – and who wouldn't – this is the version to go for, and one can only hope the Stuttgart Winds turn their attention to works for wind band by say Gounod and Dvorak.

If you were to glance at the Beethoven Triple Concerto sleeve you could be forgiven for thinking that it was actually a disc of Piano Trios, as the name of the conductor and orchestra are relegated to very small print on the front cover, presumably because CBS felt that they weren't likely to encourage people to buy the disc, unlike Rudolf Serkin, who merits the biggest billing. You could also ask why one of the world's great pianists appeared with two musicians who have not gone on to become household names. The answer to which appears to be twofold. First, Jamie Laredo was making his way as a soloist and appearing with some of the big orchestras, and the slightly older Leslie Parnas was similarly trying to forge a solo career. Second, this was very much a matter of Rudolf Serkin using his position as Director of the Marlboro Festival to promote their careers (they were Festival regulars) and the Festival itself, hence the choice of orchestra and conductor (Alexander Schneider was a talented violinist and conductor and staunch supporter of the Festival).

The performance itself is very interesting. Schneider ensures that the short orchestral introduction is suitably terse and incisive, the tempo a true allegro, and yet when one remembers the stunning accompaniment (partnership is a more appropriate word) that Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic provided for Serkin in the Fifth Piano Concerto, you know that it could be done better. Laredo and Parnas are eloquent in the first subject but sound more like chamber musicians and throughout the movement one is constantly drawn to Serkin, with them playing a subordinate role. Effectively if you have one of the great Beethoven pianists on the platform you need musicians with as bigger personalities to match, which Laredo and Parnas don't have. That said Parnas does sing the start of the sublime Largo very beautifully, as does Laredo when he takes the theme over, and the movement flows serenely by. The Rondo finale's main subject is in Polonaise rhythm, here the two string players really seem to catch fire, the whole movement has real bounce and panache, and despite the misgivings, this is a performance I will return to, in the final analysis it has a very life-affirming quality that is far more than the sum of its parts.

As two previous Speakers Corner remasterings of 1950s CBS LPs - featuring Gershwin and Prokofiev, conducted by Bernstein and Mitropoulos - demonstrated, CBS didn't always (as thought by most audiophiles) produce bad sound, but this Beethoven disc is far from ideal in both new and old masterings. In the orchestral introduction there is little definition, clarity, or sense of depth, and the violins seem to have lost – when compared to a first label US pressing – their upper register and sparkle, which further deadens the sound. The treble on the Speakers Corner remastering of Serkin and Ormandy playing the two Mendelssohn Piano Concerti had exactly the same problem, it is as though the top has been filtered and/or the master-tapes were compromised (one can only hope that the remastering engineers don't suffer from that terrible modern disease, the totally unnecessary desire to eliminate background hiss). Whichever recording of the Triple Concerto you listen to there is a problem in balancing what is in effect a piano trio with the rest of the orchestra,

CBS's solution is to let the soloists fill the entire foreground of the image with the orchestra somewhere in the background, which further compromises the sound, and this is the same on both new and old. On the positive side, the overall balance is excellent, the new remastering has greater weight and presence, and once again if you want perfect copies that are readily available then Speakers Corner have to be the first port-of-call.

The Bernstein Carmen was based on the 1972 Metropolitan Opera production, which featured the same cast, and - quite rightly - used spoken dialogue, not recitative. The performance is dominated by Marilyn Horne's Gypsy who treats men as disposable play-things. Needless to say, as probably the greatest coloratura mezzo-soprano of all-time, every note is perfectly in-place, there are no aspirates, the voice is even throughout its huge range, the vocal and dynamic shading are exemplary, and while some might not like her aggressiveness and in-your-face sexuality, for others (this listener included) she is the finest of all Carmens. James McCracken is suitably torn and anguished as Don José, and frighteningly intense in the final scene; but in his laudable desire to sing the rise to the B flat in the Flower Song pianissimo – as marked – lapses into falsetto, and some of his note-values are approximate.

Tom Krause is a powerful Escamillo, Adriana Maliponte's Micaëla is beautifully sung and characterised, the smaller roles are all well taken, the choral singing (the children are wonderful) and orchestral playing magnificent; which brings us to Bernstein, whose conducting garnered decidedly mixed reviews. Certainly some of the tempi are slow (the Toreador's Song especially so), and very fluid, but far more importantly, he is not afraid to spring and drive home the rhythms (the dead-weight of the forte chords is exceptional), beguilingly – and when necessary, searingly - phrase the glorious melodies, and only Carlos Kleiber has brought such dramatic sweep and power to the score; so, all-in-all, a great Carmen.

In terms of sound, this set is the only Deutsche Grammophon recording featured in the celebrated Harry Pearson, The Absolute Sound (TAS) list. The overall balance is middle-distance, there is tremendous depth to the sound-picture, and despite the resonant acoustic, the sound doesn't boom. Every instrument is beautifully captured (listen to the percussion in the Habanera and the close of side 1) the strings have real body, the double-basses excellent definition, the woodwind both as group and individually have projection and character (there is however a degree of spotlighting - try the Act 2 Entracte - that will worry some more than others) the brass cut through and really snarl in the Toreador's Song.

Unsurprisingly, given the above, soloists and chorus have exceptional presence, it really is a pleasure to hear all the individual timbres so faithfully presented, exactly the same can be said of the chorus, who have rarely been captured with such body and clarity in this work, and the children's choir of Urchins on side 1 are vividly captured, although as they exit, the resonant acoustic and distancing effect sound unnatural.

When compared with a first label German pressing, the new set has more weight and attack, although the upper-strings seem to have lost a little of their brilliance. Nevertheless, despite the cost, the new one is the one to go for. With regard to presentation; why doesn't Speakers Corner use inner-sleeves with a window? At this price, it shouldn't be necessary for buyers to take the LPs out of, or mark the sleeves, to see which is which.

Vladimir Horowitz recorded the Schumann in December 1969, when he was 66, and the playing belongs to the gods. The Andantino from the Third Sonata opens with crushed velvet, legato phrasing, at the first forte there is no sense of effort or harshness, the sound simply expands gloriously, the rubato is exquisite, the tempo variation belongs – alas – to a world that is long gone (as does the use of split-hands) and in the more agitated passages the sense of conversation between the hands is palpable (indeed you could be forgiven for thinking the time-signatures are different).

Kreisleriana is theoretically in eight movements, but Schumann's mercurial genius makes it sound like a free fantasy on a series of themes that no-one else could possibly have written. Needless to say as the last true Russian Romantic, Horowitz revelled in this diversity. In the section marked *Sehr innig und nicht zu rasch*, the theme is sung at a flowing tempo, with deep *innigkeit*. In the more violent interludes the range of dynamics is startling - the piano really does seem to explode – and yet the control is absolute. The second *Sehr Langsam* episode's gorgeous melody is moulded with a kaleidoscopic palette of *pianissimo* tonal and dynamic shading, and yet everything is profoundly felt. Horowitz ignores the *Schnell* marking in the finale, which enables him to spring the theme in the most delightfully cheeky, elfin fashion, thereby demonstrating his total command of rhythm, and the final bars die away exquisitely. So a Schumann master-class that it has been a privilege to listen to.

Despite being recorded in 1969 the disc wasn't released until 1972, and given the marvellous sound quality, it is difficult to believe that more-or-less the same time, CBS could produce such emaciated rubbish for say Glenn Gould; although to be fair, there is a huge difference in the quality of the piano playing. For comparative purposes a first label US pressing has been used. Both have a fairly forward balance, the instrument fills the entire space between the speakers, being analogue there is a tangible, vivid sense of space around the instrument. As mentioned above Horowitz's dynamic range was huge and at both ends of the spectrum much of this has been captured without any sense of overloading. Every register is full and perfectly balanced, which means that the pianist's marvellous sense of balance and exceptional tonal palette are never compromised, and clarity and definition are exemplary.

All of these qualities can be heard on the original, but the new transfer brings added weight and power, and an even greater sense of presence. Indeed this is the finest piano sound I have heard from a CBS tape, it is also – one suspects – the finest example of the Horowitz sound available, and puts the Sony Classical Horowitz Edition CD to shame.