

Feature Review: Speakers Corner LPs – Glenn Gould/Bach/Beethoven; Schubert Trout Quintet [Serkin, Laredo, Naegele, Parnus, Levine]; Mozart Requiem/Colin Davis; Mozart Music for Oboe/Heinz Holliger

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Written by Rob Pennock

Bach

Keyboard Concerto No.1 in D minor, BWV1052
 Keyboard Concerto No.2 in E major, BWV1053
 Keyboard Concerto No.3 in D major, BWV1054
 Keyboard Concerto No.4 in A major, BWV1055
 Keyboard Concerto No.5 in F minor, BWV1056
 Keyboard Concerto No.7 in G minor, BWV1058

Beethoven

Piano Concerto No.1 in C, Op.15
 Glenn Gould (pianoforte)
 Columbia Symphony Orchestra
 Leonard Bernstein [BWV1052]
 Vladimir Golschmann
 Recorded at Columbia 30th Street Studio, New York, May 1957 & 1967 and February 1969
 Fred Plant – Recording engineer
 Howard H. Scott & Andrew Kazdin – Producers
 Remastered by Masterdisk, New York
 Mono & Stereo 3LP 180-gram Boxed Set
 Columbia Masterworks: The Glenn Gould Bach Keyboard Concertos

Music from Marlboro

Schubert

Quintet in A for Piano and Strings, D667 (Die Forelle)
 Rudolf Serkin (pianoforte), Jamie Laredo (violin), Philip Naegele (viola), Leslie Parnus (cello), Julius Levine (double bass)
 Recorded August 1967 in Marlboro, Vermont
 E. T. 'Bud' Graham – Recording engineer
 Thomas Frost – Producer
 Remastered by Masterdisk, New York
 Stereo 180-gram LP from Speakers Corner: MS 7067

Mozart

Requiem in D minor, K626 [completed Süßmayr]
 Helen Donath (soprano), Yvonne Minton (mezzo-soprano), Ryland Davies (tenor) & Gerd Nienstedt (bass)
 John Alldis Choir
 BBC Symphony Orchestra
 Sir Colin Davis
 Recorded 19-23 September 1967 at Watford Town Hall, Hertfordshire, England
 Martin Vos – Recording engineer
 Harold Lawrence – Producer
 Remastered at the Emil-Berliner-Studios
 Speakers Corner 180-gram LP
 Philips 802862

Mozart

Oboe Quartet in F, K370
 Adagio and Rondo in C minor for Glass Harmonica, Flute, Oboe, Viola and Cello, K617
 String Quintet in C minor, K406
 Heinz Holliger (oboe), Aurèlet Nicolet (flute), Bruno Hoffmann (glass harmonica), Hermann Krebbers (violin), Karl Schouten & Judith de Monk-Gerö (violins), Jean Decroos (cello)
 Recorded January 1977
 Remastered at the Emil-Berliner-Studios
 Speakers Corner 180-gram LP
 Philips 9500197



The two CBS recordings are the first in what one presumes will be a series of remasterings from the copious archives of the American giant that is now part of Sony/BMG. In the past, Speakers Corner has always made exact copies of original discs, but here it has taken four LPs, omitted one of the works (Beethoven's Piano Concerto No.2) and condensed the rest onto three discs – with a booklet showing the front and rear of the original sleeves

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Vladimir Golschmann / Leonard Bernstein conduct the Columbia Symphony Orchestra



cases), with a booklet showing the front and rear of the original sleeves.

Few pianists divide opinion as divisively as Glenn Gould. For some he was a genius who stripped away layers of performing varnish from much of the repertoire, explored virtually unknown works by major composers (for example Sibelius and Grieg) and acted as an evangelist for the music of J. S. Bach. Others saw him as a fruit-cake who imposed his highly idiosyncratic views on the works he chose to perform (including some he didn't particularly like, but presumably felt he should give the public the chance to hear them). He could play marvellously, but equally often sound mannered, and in the case of late-Beethoven, play music he seemed to view with contempt, extraordinarily badly.

Bach's keyboard concertos are arrangements of one or more existing works, and Gould omitted No.6 (which is an arrangement of the Fourth Brandenburg Concerto, and would have required him to share equal billing with two

flautists) but included is Beethoven, which is regrettable, given that Gould was a very bad player of arguably the greatest of composers. In the C major Piano Concerto he provides a rather silly, totally incongruous, fugal cadenza for the first movement. This is a pity, given that within a fast tempo and lightweight Mozartean approach, he does bring considerable *élan* and energy to the rest. Unfortunately, though, he gives the impression in the finale that he would rather be elsewhere, and the whole thing becomes a mad scramble. Gould does play the great central Adagio with much beauty, if rather coolly. Vladimir Golschmann and the Columbia Symphony Orchestra are neat and efficient – if hardly memorable – accompanists, and one can only wish that Leonard Bernstein had been on the podium.

Gould's approach to J. S. Bach is remarkably consistent. First movements are taken at a brisk pace, there is some strictly controlled *rubato*, and dynamic variation. Interestingly, at the end of the development section of the opening movement of the First Concerto – which is the earliest recording – Gould inserts an expressive *rallentando* and *diminuendo*, but such Romanticism is banished from the later recordings. For some, the slow movements will be too fast (in the First, Edwin Fischer finds a humanity and depth of feeling that one suspects were not part of Gould's emotional make-up). The finales have panache and bounce, and the phrasing and rhythmic attack are clean and crisp. There is, however, an underlying sense of restless tension that – depending on mood – can become wearying. In terms of the conducting, Bernstein brings plenty of life and vitality to the Bach First, which makes Vladimir Golschmann sound – particularly in slow movements – rather foursquare; the string band is larger and vibrato more generous than would be considered acceptable today, but none the worse for that, and despite the caveats, Gould's Bach continues to command attention, carries immense conviction, and as such, remains as collectible as ever.

The mono sound is very good. The image has depth, reasonable width, is nicely recessed (without being too distant) and while the balance favours the piano, it is not too unnatural. Inevitably the dynamic and tonal range is restricted, but all-in-all, the sound is very pleasant.

Moving to the Beethoven and comparing it with Julius Katchen and the London Symphony Orchestra under Pierino Gamba, recorded by Decca in 1965 (SXL 6189) is a sobering experience. The CBS has reasonable weight and projection, the overall and internal balance is okay, but the image is congested, the piano tone thin and the sound is like something from a 1950s B-list production company. Whereas the Decca strings combine richness and attack, the woodwind timbres are beautifully caught, the brass and timpani cut through thrillingly, and the piano resonates beautifully throughout its registers. Nevertheless, when compared to a first-label American pressing, the Speakers Corner transfer has greater definition and presence.

Much the same can be said of the stereo Bach concertos. First-label German pressings (which are arguably superior to American ones) were used for comparison, and here the difference is slighter, with the piano sounding less tubular, the strings less emaciated on the new LPs, but neither is really acceptable given the recording date. Interestingly, when interviewing the former head of Classic Records (who made 180-gram remasterings of the RCA Living Stereo catalogue) Mike Hobson said that the CBS master-tapes bore no resemblance to the vinyl, and that, for whatever reason, CBS altered fundamentally the sound when cutting the lacquers. These remasterings don't support this idea, although we know that Gould liked to control every aspect of his recording sessions, so maybe we get what he intended. Unfortunately, one also cannot help but wonder what Air might have done with the tapes.

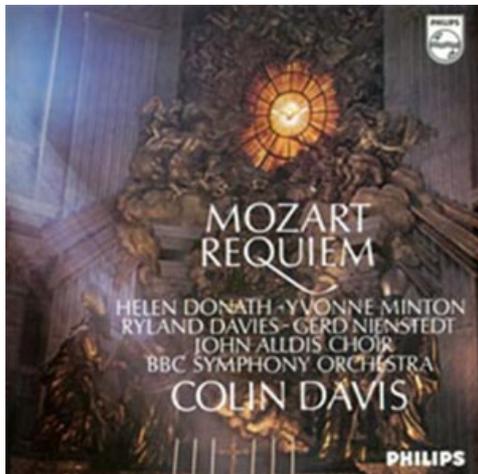
As always for Gould fans and audiophiles, who don't have everything, weren't born and/or old enough to be collectors when the originals appeared, finding good quality, reasonably priced originals (from whichever country) is well-nigh impossible, so this box is self-recommending. There are a couple of presentational niggles. The booklet shows the stereo discs with mono catalogue numbers, and as the inner sleeves have no window, you have to pull the LPs out, or number the sleeves, to identify them, which given the price, is not acceptable.

Unlike Gould, Rudolf Serkin's reputation is not in doubt. He was one of the 20th-century's greatest pianists, a teacher who was held in huge respect and affection by music-lovers and pupils, and, as Artistic Director of the Marlboro Music Festival (from which this performance derives), he nurtured and fostered the careers of many young musicians. As his studio and live recordings demonstrate, he had little interest in charm, prettiness or superficial beauty, so if that is how you like your 'Trout' Quintet, this performance will not be for you. The opening chord of the Allegro vivace is powerfully emphatic, the basic tempo flowing, but there is expressive *rubato*, tempo variation, a huge range of dynamics, beautiful singing tone from the string players, and, in the exposition repeat, subtle changes of emphasis and phrasing. In the development, the players bring a natural sense of ebb, flow and drama to the music, and seem to be engaged in conversation. It is also obvious that this is a partnership, not a celebrity-plus-acolytes. Nevertheless, Serkin does bring a sense of patrician authority to every bar. The tempo of the Andante is well chosen, to allow the strings to give their melancholy, suavely sophisticated song – Leslie Parnas's cello-playing is a joy – and for the piano to decorate the themes without any break in the line. You will probably never hear a more powerfully Beethovenian account of the scherzo. Forget Viennese lilt, every *sforzando* and accent is in place, the tempo is fast, the rhythms sprung, but in the trio there are some delightful changes of temp. A Schubert *Lied* – Die Forelle (D550) – forms the basis for the fourth-movement Theme and Variations. It is played slowly



and elegantly with old-world expressive largesse by the strings, every variation is exquisitely characterised, the tempo-relationships superbly managed. In the finale the speed is once again perfectly chosen to combine power and lyricism. This is a tremendously authoritative performance of a masterwork.

Compared with the Bach, the sound is much better. As the opening chords demonstrate, the overall balance is reasonably middle-distance, the image has width, depth and presence, the blend between the strings and piano is excellent, individual string instruments can be clearly heard, and all have excellent definition. When compared to an early British pressing the sound lacks sparkle, but the Masterdisk has greater projection and stability.



The Mozart/Süssmayr Requiem may lack the emotional depth and maturity of the settings of Berlioz, Britten and Verdi, but it does have its moments, and has fared well in recordings. During the 1960s and 1970s Colin Davis made a series of highly distinguished Mozart recordings for Philips, and this one dates from 1967 and first appeared on that company's plum label. The orchestra and chorus were chamber-sized, and the soloists, truly international. Davis was always a fleet-footed Mozartean, so you never get any of the elephantine tempos and phrasing that bedevilled many a pre-period-instrument reading. He makes sure the big moments have weight and power, and the BBCSO plays very sensitively; although the 'Kyrie eleison' and several other passages sound rather tired (as opposed to slow) and rhythmically stolid. The John Alldis Choir was a small professional body, so one presumes its numbers were augmented, or the engineers have played tricks with the balance. Whichever is the case, it sings magnificently, with immaculate ensemble, intonation and beautiful tone. The female soloists have similar control and are highly expressive (their use of variable vibrato puts most modern-day singers to shame). However, Ryland Davies's voice lacks the weight and projection of his partners, while Gerd Nienstedt has intonation problems.

The other Mozart disc features the composer

doing what he did best; creating tuneful, effortlessly charming light music of no great depth or significance. It also features some absolutely magnificent oboe-playing from that instrument's greatest ambassador, Heinz Holliger, and a group of distinguished musicians working in perfect harmony. There are slight *ritardandos*, expressive pauses, effortless *rubato*, beautifully judged tempos, and that quality that marks out all great chamber-music playing: a sense of conversation. The arrangement of the String Quintet – itself an arrangement of a wind serenade – simply substitutes the oboe for one of the violins, which works perfectly and seems to make the work more elegiac.

Like CBS, Philips was not noted for producing demonstration quality sound, but on both these LPs, in these remasterings, it did not do a bad job. The Requiem has weight and reasonable definition, the chorus and soloists are realistically placed, and, being analogue, the instrumental and vocal timbres are far more natural than on digital recordings (John Eliot Gardiner – also on Philips – was used for comparison). When compared to a Dutch first-label original, the Speakers Corner LP has greater clarity, the wind is more prominent (and thereby more realistic), the soundstage has greater presence and projection, and is slightly more forward. The Holliger disc appeared a decade later, and by this time Philips had moved to flimsy 90-gram vinyl, which meant that it struggled to capture anything that used large forces or a concert grand, and there were numerous examples of faulty discs, crosstalk, pre- and post-echo and the like. It does not, however, follow that the master-tapes contained similarly degraded sound, and when compared to an original pressing, this current mastering is a clear improvement. Whereas, before there was a lack of real weight and presence (the cello in particular sounded weak), and the level of background noise was high (often caused by producing too many discs from each stamper, and using an unacceptably high proportion of recycled vinyl), now there is an open soundstage, all of the instruments have excellent definition, greater richness (although compared to some other production companies the sound still lacks lustre and weight) and are locked in place irrespective of the volume level, and the overall balance is just to the rear of the speakers.



So, this is very much a mixed batch in terms of sound and performance. The CBS discs also raise a number of questions about the way the 180-gram vinyl industry operates, which will be addressed in the next article.

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- Feature Review: Speakers Corner LPs [Bach/Starker ... Shostakovich/Richter]
- The Vinyl Renaissance – Speakers Corner LPs: L'histoire du soldat [Markevitch] & Beethoven Cello Sonatas [Rostropovich & Richter]

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