

Bach at Naumburg

Robert Clark (organ)

rec. June 2001, St Wenzel Kirche, Naumburg, Germany.

Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750)

SELBY ABBEY ORGAN MASTERS SAOM010 [2 CDs: 152:47]

With the big labels having all but pulled out of the CD market long ago, the doors are open for the smaller labels to fill the void. After all, despite all that the prophets of doom and gloom would have us believe, there is still both a need and a market for the CD. That the CD is becoming more and more of a niche market, however, is evident from the growth of small labels created on the back of music organisations which, historically, have not had much first-hand experience of producing and marketing commercial recordings. First we had the choirs (think CORO), then the orchestras (think LPO), after which came the concert halls (think Wigmore Hall Live), other famous venues (think Kings College Cambridge), and, most recently, ecclesiastical foundations have joined in the fray. Their purpose seems to be as much to promote the establishment as the music presented, and have developed distinct characteristics in their CD releases to help them stand out in the market. In the UK, the Ad Fontes label promotes Buckfast Abbey in Devon and, more widely, the music of the Roman Catholic church, in releases which are sumptuously and lavishly packaged, while Selby Abbey in Yorkshire has its Selby Abbey Organ Masters label, which celebrates the Abbey's magnificent organ in recordings which are notable for the vivid feel they have for the acoustical context of the instrument.

It is that focus on the instrument and its acoustic environment which makes this latest release on the Selby Abbey Organ Masters label less incongruous than it might at first sight seem. Why else would they have thought it appropriate to issue a recording made 20 years ago of an American organist playing a German instrument, if it were not for the fact that the recording gloriously evokes the unique sound of organ and building above either the music or the player.

The music needs no introduction – here is a generous package of Bach works which, so far as is possible, sidesteps the more obvious choices – but for many outside the US, the player will be rather less familiar. Robert Clark, who died in 2017 at the age of 85, had been a significant figure in the world of historic organs and historic organ music, and had been instrumental in the restoration of the organ in St Wenzel Kirche, Naumburg. This Bach recording (originally released on the American Calcante label) was the first made of that newly-restored instrument, and by way of pointing to its many aural treasures, Clark's registrations for each work are detailed in the wonderfully comprehensive booklet which comes with Selby Abbey Organ Masters' two-disc set. The organ itself was built by Zacharias Hildebrandt, and was approved by Bach himself, who was asked to compile a report on the new organ following its completion in 1746; it is said to be the largest organ Bach ever played. Over the intervening centuries various rebuilds changed the instrument somewhat, but in 1992 a decision was made to restore it as much as possible to the condition it was in during Bach's time, and a complete restoration, made by the firm of Eule, was completed in 2000. It is, in the light of the organ's physical magnificence and the beauty of the building in Naumburg, disappointing that the photographs in the booklet are largely confined to grainy black-and-white images which do not begin to do justice, and one can only wonder what the designers of the Ad Fontes label booklets might have done to provide a more impactful visual impact to this release.

There is no question that Jonathan Wearn's vivid recording captures the true sound of this marvellous and unique instrument, and while we might find the pedal Contra-Posaune overbearing in BWV651 or the distinctive "chuff" of some of the flutes a little too obvious (as in BWV717 and the opening movement of the BWV596 Concerto), the overall sound is nothing short of mesmerizing. Clark's performances may not be at the cutting edge of Bach interpretations - sometimes they come across as laboured (BWV545 Prelude), rhythmically wayward (BWV1092), and concerned more with exploiting the heady sound of the organ and acoustic than closely following the musical argument (BWV544 Fugue) – but Clark knew and understood the organ and its response to the building in which it was housed, and every moment of this extensive programme reveals the scintillating glories of a truly magnificent organ captured in full-bodied and vividly realistic sonic splendour.

Marc Rochester