

John Scott Whiteley (organ)

rec. Selby Abbey

SELBY ABBEY ORGAN MASTERS SAOM002 [75:55]

This is the second release in the recent series devoted to organ music at Selby Abbey, scene of the famous EMI recording sessions with Fernando Germani in the early 1960s. The inaugural volume was an all-Bach one performed by Michael Overbury whereas the second is a more wide-ranging affair from John Scott Whiteley who, given his standing as a pupil of Germani (and also Flor Peeters), has decided to construct a programme around the pupils of Liszt. Those familiar with Germani's first Selby LP will recall that he recorded Liszt's BACH fantasia and thus Whiteley's decision has a certain compelling logic to it.

Liszt himself transcribed his own Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen variations for organ in 1863 and this all-encompassing performance, in which the wide dynamic range, from the refined delicacy of the opening to the powerful chromaticism later on, is not only calibrated with great sensitivity but also captured by the recording team without any loss of clarity and certainly without any distortion. The Bach theme is played with quiet dignity and the range and sheer colour of the William Hill organ emerges with great immediacy. The Theme and Variations in A flat by Louis Thiele is separately tracked - theme, five variations and finale - and offer more evidence of Whiteley's attractively shaped approach to rhythm, and his unflappable technique.

Walczyński was a Polish priest and wrote a series of miniatures, of which the Paraphrase on 'O Filii et Filiae' is an example. The Easter variations are modestly organised but attractive and well deserving of an occasional airing. Programmatically here it prefaces Liszt's Offertorium, described by Constantin Floros as a 'concert aria' - with a violin solo in the orchestral version - which is an ingenious four-minute piece. Brahms' Prelude and Fugue on 'O Traurigkeit, o Herzeleid' explores a melancholic vein whereas Raff's only published piece offers instead flowing themes and lyric romanticism. Whiteley ends with the virtuoso powerhouse that is Reubke's Sonata on the 94th Psalm. The composer's connection to Liszt is obvious - he was one of Liszt's favourite pupils - and here the full unfettered vehemence of grandiose mid-nineteenth-century splendour is unleashed. The sonic impression, as with all the best performances, is both unsettling and overwhelming.

The booklet is another plus feature, full of valuable musical detail and lovely colour photographs of the abbey and the organ and its specifications. One glitch, however, and that relates to tracking misfortunes. Because the Brahms Prelude and Fugue is separately tracked things have gone awry from track 12, which is the Brahms Fugue and not the Raff. Track 13 is the Raff (not the Reubke), track 14 is the Reubke Sonata and track 15 - which is not listed on either the jewel case or the booklet - is the Reubke Fugue. Other than that, this is a particularly valuable addition to the contemporary Selby catalogue.

Jonathan Woolf