



Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750)

Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor, BWV582 [14:05]

Toccatina and Fugue in F, BWV540 [14:31]

Toccatina, Adagio and Fugue in C, BWV564 [16:04]

Fantasia and Fugue in G minor, BWV542 [12:17]

Prelude and Fugue in E flat, BWV552 [16:49]

Ashley Grote (organ).

rec. Selby Abbey, UK, no date given

SELBY ABBEY ORGAN MASTERS SAOM006 [73:44]

Hats off to Selby Abbey. The Abbey dates back over almost 1000 years, and for all its architectural magnificence, does not sit along the tourist trail that sees hundreds of thousands of visitors a year traipse around the UK admiring its great cathedrals. How is it, then, to attract the funding it needs to keep it going? Beyond its magnificent architecture and oodles of history, Selby Abbey does have one great treasure to which some people are willing to make the pilgrimage to this remote corner of England (I write as a native Londoner); its organ. Originally built in 1909 by William Hill, it is regarded as one of the finest romantic instruments in the country and the premier example of the peak of English romantic organ building. So remarkable is the instrument that back in the 1960s the great Italian organ virtuoso, Fernando Germani, chose to record a series of LPs for HMV on it, which inspired a whole generation of England's youth to take up the organ. (I know; I was one of them.) For us, a trip to

Selby Abbey was an essential pilgrimage. But we are a dying generation, and the magic of Germani's recordings has largely escaped that new breed of organists who have the good fortune to have been born into an age when great players and instruments from around the world are at their beck and call with the simple touch of button (or, as those of my generation might put it, a muddling and confusing sequence of impossibly puzzling artificial intelligence key-strokes!). Seeing its once elevated position in the hierarchy of English organs slipping away, Selby Abbey has had the inspired idea of releasing a new set of state-of-the-art recordings bringing the glories of this instrument back into widespread circulation.

But in the years 50 years since the Germani recording, the Selby Abbey instrument fell into a sad state of disrepair, as many of us who undertook the pilgrimage there in more recent years can testify. In 2013 an appeal was put out to collect funds to restore what one eminent organist referred to as a "national treasure", and although work continues, the organ was restored to much of its former glory in time for an opening recital in September 2016. Since then the Abbey has been releasing a series of recordings featuring eminent organists at the instrument. This latest – the sixth in the Selby Abbey Organ Masters series - features the current Organist of Norwich Cathedral, Ashley Grote, in a programme of major Bach organ works.

Grote himself, in his introductory essay to the recording, raises the spectre of legitimacy. Beyond exhibiting the organ, is it credible in this age of increased consciousness of authentic performances and instruments, to expect a programme of Bach on an archetypically English romantic organ to attract serious critical attention? "I would like to think that this most ingenious, brilliant and daring of all organists would have employed all the sounds at his disposal", is Grote's justification for his recordings.

In truth, though, Grote needs no justification, for his own playing and his highly imaginative use of the Selby Abbey instrument, are both utterly convincing. Once over the culture shock of hearing the opening bars of the great *Passacaglia* thundering out with a lumbering, elephantine tread, we are quickly absorbed into this colourful and majestic soundworld in which weight and grandiloquence proves to be a more than acceptable alternative to brightness and clinical clarity. Jonathan Wearn's fine recording superbly captures the full weight of the instrument with the vast depth of the pedal registers, in particular, vividly conveyed.

The programme gives us five of Bach's most powerful and famous organ works, and as such do tend to allow us a more than generous taste of the instrument's full-bodied full organ tone. Yet Grote is forever adding subtle shades of colour, not just in the *Passacaglia* – which offers a glimpse of some beautifully perky flutes - but also in the other works where he is never afraid to highlight structure through contrasted registrations. The *Adagio* of BWV564 provides the obvious moment in this programme when we can sample an extended bout of the organ's softer stops, and here Grote unearths a deliciously creamy right hand solo combination which does have something of the North German Baroque about it, even if the *célestes* which shimmy in just before the Fugue ooze pure romanticism. He also plays the ensuing Fugue as a kind of delicate dance, skipping happily along on gentle flute-flavoured registrations. His delightful flights of ornamental fantasy in the *Adagio* and elsewhere add a refreshing wittiness to music which so often is delivered with an unsmiling visage. It is, however, the statuesque qualities of the music which Grote complements most effectively with his own monumental gestures; there is latent drama in his proclamatory statement opening the *Fantasia in G minor*, while the E flat Prelude and Fugue unfold with a broadness of scope and expansiveness of gesture which is far more majestic than magniloquent.

Marc Rochester