

SIDNEY FOSTER, w. Aaron Copland, Maurice Abravanel, John Barbirolli & Michiaki Okuda Cond.: Rediscovering an American Master, incl. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt, Hummel, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Grieg, Franck, Debussy, Weber, Moszkowski, Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, Bartók, Paderewski & Dello Joio. 7 CDs Marston 56001, recorded 1941-73, Live Performances. Transfers by Ward Marston. Notes by Alberto Reyes.

CRITIC REVIEWS:

“We tend to place pianists neatly into pigeonholes. Flashy virtuoso. Introspective poet. Master colorist. So what to do with American pianist Sidney Foster (1917–1977)? Foster defies easy categorization by virtue of the remarkable breadth of his interpretive personality; he contains equal portions of each of those qualities. It is hard to understand why a pianist of this caliber had no recording career to speak of (except for two discs for the Musical Heritage Society) and a somewhat limited performing career. He was an important pedagogue at the University of Indiana, Bloomington, and he was known by piano connoisseurs. Ill health played a role in limiting his concertizing, beginning with a heart attack at the age of 38, going on to a broken leg at age 50 and most crucially, a bone marrow disease (myeloid metaplasia) that weakened him considerably, ultimately killing him at 60. Were I to compare him to any other American pianist, it would be William Kapell; they have similar virtues.

My first exposure to him was hearing ‘Ovation’ to Sidney Foster, a two-disc album published by the International Piano Archives at Maryland, culled from recitals given at Indiana University. Now Ward Marston has produced a remarkable documentation of Foster’s work with this generously programmed 7-disc compilation (the timings average out to just under 80 minutes per disc).

The majority of tracks derive from Indiana recitals, recorded with a single mike hung in the auditorium. One stereo original is the Tchaikovsky Concerto #1 with Maurice Abravanel and the Utah Symphony from 1966 (despite a brief episode of the right track missing, which Marston has saved remarkably well by using the left track for both channels). As the first piece in the set, it started out a bit underwhelmingly, but one soon realized that Foster and Abravanel were holding back in order to build to some ferocious climaxes, with brilliantly flying octaves. At the same time, the poetry in the second movement is unusually lovely and intimate. As one listens to this set one appreciates more and more what a special talent Foster was. He seems to play everything with an intense concentration, displaying an immense range of dynamic shading. Lyrical passages are exceptionally poetic, with a legato that contradicts the reality that a piano is a percussion instrument. When virtuosity is called for, he displays it almost to excess. The tempo for the first movement of Beethoven’s ‘Waldstein’ Sonata is very fast, but you never have the sense that this is for display purposes. In general Foster leans toward fast tempos in fast movements and more deliberate ones in slow movements. Everything, though, is unified by an overall concept and by the careful way he shapes the line. Foster also understands the principles of tension and release, using that principle to heighten dramatic impact. The contrast, for example, between slow and fast tempi in the finale of Beethoven’s Op.110 Sonata are extreme, but the movement is held together because of the carefully judged shifts from one to the other.

Some of the best examples of the combination of qualities that make Foster’s playing special are found in the Liszt Sonata. We hear muscular drive and fierce drama, but right alongside it is the most ethereal and delicate sense of poetry. In his Chopin, too, Foster clarifies the contrapuntal writing, creates a huge range of color, and never lets us forget that Bellini was one of Chopin’s favorite composers. The two sonatas and the f minor Fantasie are gems, but it is the group of four Etudes that totally dazzles. He again clarifies all the inner voices with a perfect ear for balance and

sonority, while always maintaining a focus on the sheer beauty of the pieces.

There are four concerto recordings in this set, the only surviving performances by Foster with orchestra. The earliest is the 1941 New York Philharmonic broadcast, with John Barbirolli on the podium, of the Beethoven Third Concerto. Foster was the winner of the very first Leventritt Competition, and the prize included a New York Philharmonic concert. The long ovation after the first movement makes clear that this was a genuine success for the young pianist, a success confirmed by great reviews. He plays his own cadenza in the first movement, and the performance has the fire and intensity of youth. But even in his mid-twenties he had the maturity and poise to probe the interior of the music, particularly in the middle movement. The Tchaikovsky concerto also blends incendiary virtuosity with quiet poetry.

The Schumann Concerto from 1962 is not quite as successful; there are a few technical bobbles on Foster's part early on, though he settles in after the first eight or ten minutes. Michiaki Okuda and the Japan Philharmonic accompany him well enough without bringing anything special to the performance. The transition from the second to the third movement is a bit clumsy. The last of the four concertos (not chronologically but in terms of where it is placed in the set) is Bartók's Concerto #3, a 1965 performance with the Boston Symphony under Aaron Copland. In the 1960s Copland built a bit of a career as a guest conductor, directing his own music and other works as well. There is a gentle lilt about this performance that closely matches the recording the composer's widow, Ditta Pásztory-Bartók (for whom the work was written), made under Tibor Serly's direction in the 1960s. There is an intense sense of communication between Foster and Copland, and I found the performance very engrossing and beautiful.

In fact, what keeps coming back to me as I think about everything in this set is the way Foster's playing holds you, commands you to listen. All but forgotten, Foster is a major discovery. Thanks to Marston's transfer skills and musical instincts, the art of an important American pianist has been kept alive. The superb booklet contains a penetrating essay by Alberto Reyes, a student and colleague of Foster's. It goes without saying that the sound quality is superb considering the variety of sources and range of dates."

- Henry Fogel, FANFARE

"He is everything the connoisseurs claim he is: an interesting original pianist, the master of tonal shading, and an artist."

- Harold C. Schonberg, THE NEW YORK TIMES, Oct., 1963