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## Zuzana Ružicková's Legendary Bach Cycle

By Jed Distler

Zuzana Ružicková is a remarkable artist with an extraordinary life story. As a teenager she was interned in multiple concentration camps during World War II and forced to perform slave labor. Her health hung by a thread at the time of her liberation from Bergen-Belsen in 1945, but she miraculously rallied, married the composer Viktor Kalabis, and soon became established as post-war Czechoslovakia's main harpsichordist. Between 1965 and 1974 Ružicková recorded Bach's complete original solo keyboard works for Erato, which were bundled together in a deluxe 21-LP boxed set (released in 1975) that quickly became a collector's item. To commemorate Ružicková's 90th birthday in January 2017, Erato has reissued her Bach cycle for the first time in the West on CD.

The sound quality holds up well, although some of the performances are closely engineered to a fault and a little dry. In contrast to many of her contemporaries who sought out period instruments, Ružicková generally preferred modern harpsichords that had multiple stops capable of diverse timbres and colors. She had no qualms about mixing and matching sonorities or changing registers in rapid succession, and this makes her interpretations consistently interesting, whether or not one agrees with her ideas.

To give just one example, in the Well-Tempered Clavier Book I's famous C major Prelude, Ružicková plays the first half of each measure's repeated phrase with one set of stops, and the second half "echo" with a relatively lighter registration. The effect may grow predictable, but few other harpsichordists manage to give each and every Prelude and Fugue in both books a singular voice and point of view.

The Goldberg Variations emerge as individual character pieces as a result of Ružicková's broad textural palette and unpredictable game plan regarding repeats (for some strange reason Ružicková opts for all of Variation 2's repeats but does not play the first endings as indicated; instead she plays the second endings twice). On the other hand, Ružicková's "colorizing" lends considerable variety and dimension to more discursive works like the independent Preludes and Fugues, the Vivaldi concerto transcriptions, and the Toccatas, and similarly enhance her animated, incisive conceptions of the Italian Concerto and the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue.

Her Two- and Three-Part Inventions abound with character and totally transcend their didactic roots: purists may tear their hair out when listening to Ružicková's monumental unfolding of the F minor Sinfonia, but what gravity, what harmonic tension, what pathos she conveys! Notice also how Ružicková's finely honed distinctions between legato and detached phrasing in the Four Duets prevent her steady tempos from lapsing into what used to be called "sewing machine Bach". Needless to say, you won't find the fussy agogics and jerky rhythmic distensions that certain historic-minded keyboard practitioners with one tenth of Ružicková's talent trot out in the name of "style".

Ružicková fully understands, internalizes, and communicates the dance elements throughout the Partitas, English Suites, and French Suites. If anything, her B minor French Overture (the "unofficial" Seventh Partita) operates on a higher level of imagination and dramatic contrast (sound clip); she doesn't seem to arpeggiate two chords identically, while the ornamentation is so free and unfettered yet so aesthetically spot-on at the same time, as if Ružicková was channeling Bach.

Filling out the cycle are Ružicková's marvelous performances of the violin sonatas with Josef Suk and the viola da gamba sonatas with cellist Pierre Fournier. Flutist Jean-Pierre Rampal joins Suk and Ružicková for a vibrantly moving A minor concerto BWV 1044. Their Fifth Brandenburg features superbly balanced second and third movements, but the sedate, slightly heavy-handed first movement never gets off the ground, and neither does Ružicková's surprisingly held-back cadenza, where one would have expected her to let rip.

Ružicková's former pupil Mahan Esfahani contributes a lovingly perceptive and informative booklet essay about his mentor. With this welcome and much-anticipated release, one hopes that Ružicková's interpretive genius will get the international attention it deserves. She truly lives up to her legend.