



J S Bach *The Well-Tempered Clavier Book 1:*

Preludes and Fugues BWV 846-869

Pietro di Maria (pf)

DECCA 4811316, 2 CDs, 109 mins

J S Bach *The Well-Tempered Clavier Book 2:*

Preludes and Fugues BWV 870-893

Pietro di Maria (pf)

DECCA 481 2361, 2 CDs, 152 mins



For Schumann, Bach's 48 Preludes and Fugues were 'the work of all works,' a view confirmed by Pietro De Maria's recording, which is of a surpassing musical character and super-fine technique. He makes previous estimates of Bach as a contrapuntal machine seem absurd: in Russia, for example, it was once fashionable to view these pieces as mere fodder for the exam room. That was before the advent of pianists of the stature of Sviatoslav Richter, Tatiana Nikolayev and Samuel Feinberg. A passing reference to 'the old wig' with its suggestion that Bach's inspiration was too often depressed by too much learning, is countered by music that is forever glorious, holding the seeds of so much that was to follow. Everything in the 48 is of the here and now, a compendium of life and beauty.

There are, of course no lack of recordings of the 48, some of them (Tureck and Gould) of an iconic if controversial status. For many, Edwin Fisher's set stands out for its humanity, but this is now complemented by a pianist of another generation who brings all of Fisher's artistry to bear together with an impeccable overall technique.

De Maria has previously recorded the complete piano works of Chopin, in which you sense how his mastery and musicianship are grounded in Chopin's love of Bach: works such as the Fourth Ballade and *Polonaise-Fantasia* show an increasing delight in contrapuntal and canonic procedure. The first *Étude* (Opus 10) recalls Bach's first Prelude,

transforming its reflection into a dazzling curtain-raiser, an audacious runaway chorale with arpeggios extending over a previously unheard-of interval of a tenth. I mention this because the breadth of De Maria's repertoire means that he avoids the occasional pedantry of a pianist who claimed, 'when there is Bach, why play anyone else?' (Tureck), or Gould's more frequent eccentricity which tarnishes his undoubted genius with egocentricity.

Wherever you turn in De Maria's four-CD album you will hear a musical consistency which, while brimming over with zest, scorns exaggeration or the heavily personalised. How subtly he colours and inflects the first Prelude; how delicate and precise his part-playing in Fugue No 2 from Book 1. Fugue No 8 emerges like a voice heard from a great distance while Prelude No 15 is given with an open-hearted delight in its virtuosity. From De Maria, Prelude No 23 is like a glimpse of Elysium before the Fugue's robust reply. In Book 2, the insistent tapping of Fugue No 5 is made witty and engaging, and the lightly tripping Fugue No 11 is a joy.

The Géza Anda Competition struck gold when they gave the first prize to De Maria in 1994. His playing shows a combination of a character and integrity that always allows Bach his own voice, investing it with an abiding beauty and infinite variety.

These records should be in every serious music lover's collection.

BRYCE MORRISON