

American Record Guide

Bach: Violin Sonatas

Apollo Ensemble

Centaur 3527-66 minutes

I've liked this so much that I immediately bought the companion first volume (2014, not reviewed).

The older disc has Sonatas 2,4, and 6 for violin and harpsichord, plus the other version of Sonata 6 (S 1019a). This new one has the sonatas 1,3, and 5 and two of Bach's other sonatas with basso continuo (S 1023). The booklet for volume I had a digest of 35 quotations not 1021 and by famous men about the general aesthetics of Bach's music-informative but overwhelming. Volume 2 offers a more conventional movement-by-movement analysis of these compositions.

The Apollo Ensemble is based in the Netherlands. They have a larger pool of musicians for other repertoire, but these sonatas are for only two or three players. The core members here are Ukrainian violinist David Rabinovich and Dutch harpsichordist Marion Boshuizen. The American Cassandra Luckhardt joins them on viola da gamba for the two continuo sonatas.

The balance is just right. The interpretive profile is simple as they let Bach's music speak for itself. They project a generally introspective mood by, using moderate tempos and little ornamentation. It resembles the beautiful set by Pablo Valetti and Céline Frisch (2004, not reviewed), but with a more relaxed character in the fast movements. The Apollo performance makes me get up and move my body along with the music in long and gentle motions. It compels me to marvel at the compositions, not merely to listen for what the performers are doing to them. Rabinovich has a casual-sounding method of bowing that gives a very subtle inequality of emphasis to the notes. It makes them sound like the natural syllables of speech. He adds a mute for Sonata 5:1, and that sorrowful tone fits the piece perfectly. It gave me goosebumps.

Another recent recording I've liked is by Schayegh and Holubek (J/A 2016). Their approach is to impress the listener by taking risks, augmenting the compositions with their own creativity and vigor. Apollo's way trusts the listener to find the music in oneself.

Apollo's drab cover art by Paul Klee probably won't inspire many impulse purchases. This low-profile recording is for music lovers who don't need to be impressed by star names, glamour, or aggressive marketing. Seek and acquire it.

BLEHMAN