

JACOBI: Orchestral, Vocal, Chamber, and Solo Pieces

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Wolfgang Jacobi CD Edition [4 CD] 233 minutes

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This privately issued, scrupulously produced and documented four-disc set includes a good portion of the extant music of Wolfgang Jacobi (1894-1972), an “almost forgotten” German composer who deserves to be rescued from obscurity. His career flourished at first, but was ruined when the Nazis came to power in 1933 and banned his music, and took another terrible blow when the Allies bombed his house and destroyed many of his manuscripts. After the war he took an academic appointment but by that time – as happened to many others who have since been recognized as worthy of rediscovery – his by-then-old-fashioned language seemed dated, and he never regained much popularity. The set devotes one disc to each of four categories: orchestral, chamber, solo, and vocal music.

Jacobi esteemed tradition and used classic forms and procedures, but didn't slavishly adhere to outdated conventions. He has something of the contrapuntal vigor of Hindemith, the swirling tumult of Ernst Toch, the clean-lined forward drive of Frank Martin, the bite and pungency of Kurt Weill, the sturdy-but-rich muscularity of Honegger. Like them Jacobi displays unassailable structural logic, inventive instrumental combinations, and an astute mix of motive-derived unity, long-lined lyricism, and incisive (at times bitonal or modal) harmony. Jacobi often sounds less German than American, especially in his more energetic and optimistic orchestral music, sometimes recalling the sumptuous panoply of such mid-century Americans as Diamond, Piston, Creston, Kurka, and Goeb.

Certainly that's the kinship that struck me most strongly when I listened to Jacobi's remarkable 1959 *Divertimento for Orchestra*. In four movements, and with a prominent piano part, this urbane, exciting, and brilliantly-scored showpiece is really a 20-minute concerto for orchestra with all the dazzle, movement, and color that implies. I is a furiously agitated prelude, roiled with calls-to-arms and whirling ostinatos, that powers forward with fierce polyphonic inevitability, while II is a lush, swaying, ardent barcarolle. III, more hedonic but no less energetic, is a giddy, melodious waltz. The work is topped off by an exultant fugal *moto perpetuo* that accumulates momentum and *élan vital* as it surges on to an imposing climax and brief, unexpected attenuation. The performance, recorded in 1960 by the Bavarian Radio Symphony, is excellent—more than good enough for the glory of Jacobi's work to shine through strongly—though the thin sonics and somewhat distant acoustic perspective make one wish for the state-of-the-art sonics that would fully transmit the intoxication this music must induce.

Also impressive and invigorating is Jacobi's 1954 *Capriccio for Piano and Orchestra*, a single 15-minute-long movement that is considerably darker and fiercer than one might expect from its title. One notices some affinities with Prokofieff in the lean and steely piano writing, but even more apparent is the work's tightly-controlled violence and grim verve, evoking a sort of Lisztian, post-World-War “*Totentanz*”. This mood comports well with Jacobi's typical interest in unusual instruments, and I wasn't surprised when a mocking, sultry saxophone took up a duet with the piano, or a quivering vibraphone finished off a quiet cadence.

The orchestral program is completed with two works that employ the accordion, one for accordion and orchestra, and one for (Heaven help us!) a whole orchestra of accordions. These are somewhat simpler works, as befits the clunky squeeze-box, and I suspect written as Jacobi was struggling to get some of his music accepted by publishers (and earn a living as a composer). The craftsmanship is never compromised, however, and though the sonority of the instrument repels me (at least in concert music) it may well please other listeners. Indeed these works will be of special interest to those seeking out appealing, well-made repertoire for the accordion.

The vocal program comprises four pieces, each about a quarter-hour long. They are unfailingly beautiful. Two are secular – Baroque Songs is for tenor and orchestra, and Petrarch Cantata for choir and string orchestra – and two, both for a cappella singers, are on sacred subjects: Il Pianto Della Vergine and Laude. Though texts are not supplied there's no missing the skill, variety, and dramatic force of these works, movingly brought to life in these splendid performances, all of them captured in very good sonics. Jacobi's orchestral accompaniments are marvelous – supple, poetic, imparting fluent motion as needed while adding all sorts of arresting filigree. The mood and materials vary as befit the texts, and the profane songs are seductive and catchy, as in the clever number titled 'Lasst uns tanzen' ("Let us dance") from Baroque Songs. The sacred works are more austere, modal, and cantorial, but their solemnity is imbued with a depth of passion that Ernst Bloch would have appreciated. Jacobi's chamber music is represented by his 1950 Piano Trio, 1951 Music for Two Pianos, Chamber Music for Two Accordions, and two duo sonatas, both with piano: his 1930 Saxophone Sonata and 1946 Viola Sonata. All are very well performed and recorded. Not that I'm the best judge of accordion virtuosity; still it's obvious that Jacobi's duets for the instrument exploit the instrument's clown-like proletarian mix of vernacular comedy and pathos very cleverly and effectively.

Listening to Jacobi's Piano Trio aroused a bewildering sense of déjà vu until it dawned on me that I actually had heard this music before: his orchestral Divertimento is an orchestration of this trio. Of course this is mentioned in the notes, but I hadn't bothered trying to plow through them as everything except the biographical sketch is auf Deutsch. At any rate I got the chance to enjoy this music again in this new guise and also to admire Jacobi's adroit scoring of the Divertimento, a work I never would have suspected wasn't originally conceived for full orchestra.

Music for Two Pianos – like several of Jacobi's other pieces – has a distinctly "American" sound. Here, however, the source of this rather odd kinship is suggested by the discovery that the first movement is a plangent toccata and chorale on a modal hymn-tune, "Durch Adams Fall", which recalls the early-American anthems and fuguing-tunes that Henry Cowell was fond of using in his sonatas and symphonies. II is a spacious and richly harmonized aria, III yet another embodiment of the waltz from the 1950 Piano Trio. The two duo-sonatas are a bit more Hindemithian in character, the Viola Sonata notable for its eloquence and thoughtfulness. Both exemplify Jacobi's expressive power and impeccable craftsmanship, with each phrase carefully shaped, every instrumental texture lucid and telling.

The fourth disc gathers four very-well-played works for solo instruments: a sequence of three choral preludes for organ, a (mercifully) short capriccio for accordion, and two piano sonatas. Of these I single out Jacobi's marvelous 1936 Second Piano Sonata for my highest praise. This compact, not-wasted-note composition brims with vitality yet is perfectly balanced and formed, its fluid cascades dancing between restlessness and tranquility, sophistication and mystery, logic and surprise, directness and nuance. Sonata 3 is more expansive, and unfortunately not given the excellent sonics afforded the earlier sonata, so it doesn't come off quite as well.

Jacobi's art has the modesty of an artist selflessly devoted to his craft. Ideology, whether reactionary or innovative, is utterly foreign to his temperament. Despite heavy misfortunes he achieved the only goal that mattered to him: to write music worthy of the great traditions he so deeply revered.

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