

BEST RECORDINGS OF MUSIC BY JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

In general the artists mentioned below can be recommended whatever they are playing - I've never heard an insensitive performance by the likes of Andrew Parrott, Philippe Herreweghe, Gustav Leonhardt, Cantus Colln, Andrew Manze or Masaaki Suzuki. As far as record labels are concerned as a general rule you can also trust Harmonia Mundi, BIS, Hyperion, Glossa, Channel Classics, Carus, Virgin Veritas, Naive and DGArchiv.

My choices are all on original instruments - I simply prefer the clarity and brightness and particularly love the sound of period winds - baroque oboes, bassoons and flutes - so different from their modern counterparts. I can hear the individual contrapuntal lines so much better with smaller forces and prefer the light dancing quality to the stodge of a large 19th century type orchestral line up. Individuals artists like Kennedy - and some pianists - Angela Hewitt, Andras Schiff, Murray Perahia, etc. can bring their unique skills to the music with great effect and Glenn Gould's Goldberg and Pablo Cassals' cello Suites are more than just fascinating historical records. I can't help thinking that JSB would have written different music if pianos had been around - they really are an utterly different instrument - pianos hammer and harpsichords pluck!. In general instrumentalists seem to have taken 18th century performance practice on board more readily than singers - especially soloists.

Many conductors still seem to choose voices which are at variance with their instrumental accompanists - in terms of embellishments and phrasing and, most of all in the crucial matter of vibrato.

CHORAL

By far the majority of the weekly Cantatas I play on Gloria are in the hands of 5 conductors - Masaaki Suzuki, Ton Koopman, Philippe Herreweghe, Sigiswald Kuijken and John Eliot Gardiner. with an occasional look back to the first complete cycle - from Gustav Leonhardt and Nicolaus Harnoncourt and, since the completion of the cycles of Suzuki, Koopman and Gardiner, a look forward to those beginning their journey, the most impressive being Belgian Philippe Pierlot on *Mirare* (see below) and Canadian Eric Milnes on *Atma*. If I had to choose just one Cantata series it would be Suzuki on BIS.

All the top conductors have also recorded the major choral works. For the *St Matthew Passion* I choose Paul McCreesh with his *Gabrieli Consort* and a splendid Evangelist, Mark Padmore, Rene Jacobs on Harmonia Mundi and I often return to Gustav Leonhardt's 1989 recording with Evangelist Christoph Pregardien, our own John Elwes and a gentle almost personal feeling from the boys of the *Tolzer Knabenchor* - and some stunning obligato playing from members of *La Petite Bande*.

For the *St. John* however I'd go for a relative newcomer, John Butt and His *Dunedin Consort* on the Scottish label, Linn. I'm a great fan of tenor Ian Bostridge - he is a fine Evangelist on Hyperion with Stephen Layton and Polyphony with the *Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment* and again I wouldn't be without the Japanese forces - Gerd Türk narrates - and counter-tenor Yoshikazu Mera must be heard. They have also done a DVD with Gerd Türk again and the splendid Robin Blaze instead of Mera.

For the *B Minor Mass* the choir is all important - I love the light dancing quality of those astonishing choral fugues with the *Taverners* under Parrott and his minimalist forces but Masaaki Suzuki's recording gets my top vote - see my *Desert Island choice* - along with a wonderful recent Hyperion release from Arcangelo under Jonathan Cohen. This is a very exciting ensemble well worth looking out for.

A recording of the 6 Cantatas that make up the *Christmas Oratorio* is on the Dutch Channel Classics label - they are superb and are the most sumptuously produced boxed set I've ever seen. The lovely *Magnificat*, together with a *Lutheran Mass* - and an excellent DVD - is performed by Philippe Pierlot and his *Ricercar Consort* on *Mirare* - with a splendid soprano Maria Keohane - Swedish - with an Irish father.

The motets are the top of the choral tree for me - and there are so many good recordings - from New College, Oxford under Edward Higginbottom, again Suzuki, Herreweghe, Gardiner, Frieder Bernius and the Stuttgart Chamber Choir on the excellent German label, Carus, the Hilliards + guests on ECM, the Sixteen on Hyperion's mid price imprint, Helios. "Komm, Jesu Komm" and "Jesu meine Freude" with the Trauer Ode Cantata make up a superb programme from Andrew Parrott's Taverner forces on Sony - I choose this along with the Flemish Radio Choir under Bo Holten on Glossa and Gardiner on his own SDG label.

Cantatas - Suzuki - BIS

Magnificat, Missa BWV541 - Pierlot - Mirare - MIR102 +DVD

St. Matthew Passion - McCreesh - DGArchiv - 4742002, Jacobs - Harmonia Mundi - HMC802156/7/8, Leonhardt - SONY/DHM 8869786642-2

St. John Passion - John Butt - Linn - CKD419, Suzuki - BIS 921/2 - DVD Euroarts 2050396, Layton - Hyperion CDA67901/2,

B Minor Mass - Suzuki - BIS1701/2, Arcangelo - Hyperion CDA680251/2, Parrott - Virgin Veritas - 561998-2

Motets etc. - Parrott - Sony SK60155, Gardiner - SDG716, Bo Holten - Glossa - GCDSA922205.

KEYBOARD

The German company Hanssler have issued a Complete Works at mid-price. My first dip into the choral and orchestral area did not impress - new knowledge of baroque performance practice seems to have passed them by - but I loved Wolfgang Zerer's Little Organ Book and Trevor Pinnock's Partitas. I'd go for this and, from Christopher Herrick's excellent series on Hyperion, the trio sonatas on a glorious Metzler instrument and Malcolm Proud's *Clavier-Übung III* on Maya.

Pierre Hantai's Goldberg Variations sparkles with style and plenty of warmth - and I've returned often to Angela Hewitt's 48 on the piano. Bach's lute repertoire is small but Nigel North's playing is so good that one of his four CDs for the Scottish company Linn must also be included.

Keyboard

Little Organ Book - Zerer - Hanssler CD92.094

Clavier-Übung III - Proud - Maya MCD0803

Organ Trio Sonatas - Herrick - Hyperion CDA66390

Goldberg Variations - Hantai - Opus111 OPS30-84

48 Preludes and Fugues - Piano - Hewitt - Hyperion CDA67301/2/3/4

Lute works - North - Linn CKD013,029,049,055

CHAMBER

For the Violin Sonatas Andrew Manze with Richard Egarr on Harmonia Mundi have a sense of sparkle and surprise which I love. At the 2015 Kikenny Arts Festival Maya Homburger played the solo violin Sonatas and Partitas at a mystical late-night concert in the Black Abbey (and a lot more sublime Bach too)

The solo cello spot belongs I think to Jaap ter Linden - I know of no more beautiful cello sound on CD than this and he too is an impeccable period player. Stephen Isserlis is wonderful too.

The Trio Sonatas, including those originally written for organ, have been recorded by flautist Wilbert Hazelzet and friends - to great effect.

Violin Sonatas - Andrew Manze - Harmonia Mundi - HMU907042

Violin solo - Maya Homburger - Maya - MCD0301,0802,1101

Cello suites - ter Linden - Harmonia Mundi HMC907216/7, Isserlis - Hyperion - CDA67541/2

Trio Sonatas - Hazelzet - Glossa - GCD920805

ORCHESTRAL

Ton Koopman's readings of Bach are of considerable interest - though his complete Cantatas and his organ works are not always totally pleasing. It's his 1997 recording of the orchestral suites with the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra which I'd choose as his representation in this shortlist. The Freiburger Barock on Harmonia Mundi are also excellent. Rachel Podger has recorded a series of splendid violin works on Channell Classics - her recording of the Concertos gets my vote.

As the recording of the Brandenburgs by the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment with Malcolm Proud has been reissued on Virgin at budget price this is the winner for these most popular works. Pierre Hantai's recording of the harpsichord concertos "swings" wonderfully. For a "starter" box of Orchestral Bach I recommend a fine 5 CD collection by Sigiswald Kuijken and La Petite Band - on Sony/DHM including the Brandenburgs, Suites, the Violin Concertos *and* the wonderful Musical Offering.

Collection - 5CDs - Kuijken - SONY/DHM 8869768385-2

Suites - Koopman - Erato - 0630-17868-2, Freiburger Barock - Harmonia Mundi - HMC902113/4

Brandenburg Concertos - OAE, Proud - Virgin VBD561552

Violin Concertos - Podger - Channel Classics - CCSSA30910

Harpsichord Concertos - Hantai - Astree E8523

I'd like to add how excellent I find Malcolm Boyd's book on Bach in the Oxford Composer Companion series. This is in the form of a dictionary - it's my constant companion - together with a denser but no less fascinating account of Bach's life and works by the foremost Bach scholar, Christoph Wolff - also OUP - entitled Johann Sebastian Bach - the Learned Musician.