

BACH Concertos for Violin and Orchestra': ¹ No. 1 in A Minor, BWV 1041; No. 2 in E, BWV 1042. Concerto in D Minor for Two Violins and Orchestra, BWV 1043². Concerto in D for Three Violins and Orchestra, BWV 1064 (arr.)³. •

Elizabeth Wallfisch, violin ¹²³, conductor; Alison Bury ², Pavlo Beznosiuk ³, Catherine Mackintosh ³, violins; Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. • VIRGIN CLASSICS VERITAS 0 777 7 59319 2 1 [DDD]; 62:43. Produced by Nicholas Parker.

The participation of familiar names from London's unequalled pool of period-instrument virtuosos guarantees an expert, vivacious, and stylish recording. It also means it will resemble other releases in its adoption of what has become a period-instrument consensus approach. For example, Hyperion CDA66380 has Catherine Mackintosh playing the two solo concertos with the King's Consort, with Elizabeth Wallfisch in the Bach Double, and Wallfisch solo in the popular arrangement of BWV 1060 for violin and oboe (*Fanfare* 13:6). There's little to choose from between the two in terms of fine style (crisp articulation; swells, but not overdone; minimal vibrato, but some) and playing ability. Virgin Classics's bright, clear sound (recorded in 1990-91) is one advantage. Perhaps the precise and unsmudged bass line in BWV 1041, 1042, and 1043 results from the use of a violone (a double bass is heard in BWV 1064, which "used as the basis" the arrangement of the triple-keyboard concerto in the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe*). Virgin Classics places its soloists more in front of the orchestra than on some period-instrument recordings, giving more bite to the fiddles, but narrowing the dynamic range. Wallfisch plays the slow movements as truly slow—this is amazing bow control given the limits of the period bow. This a fine presentation of the music.

David K. Nelson

This article originally appeared in Issue 17:5 (May/June 1994) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

BACH Violin Concertos: No. 1; No. 2. Concerto in d for 2 Violins. Concerto in c for Violin and Oboe • Julia Fischer (vn); Sasha Sitkovetsky (vn); Andrey Rubtsov (ob); Academy of St. Martin in the Fields • DECCA 001249002 (58:51)

In her remarks, Julia Fischer describes Bach's violin concertos as Vivaldi-like

virtuoso vehicles, while the sonatas and partitas seem to her timeless and possibly adaptable to other instruments. Yet while Bach made arrangements of various movements from the sonatas and partitas for other instrumental forces, he also did so for his violin concertos, with some of the reconstituted violin concertos, such as the one in D Minor, even more virtuosic than the two standard ones included in Fischer's collection. Whatever the appropriateness of her view, she claims it has determined the way she approaches the concertos, with fast tempos and a sense of "fun."

Fischer's partner in the Double Violin Concerto, Sascha Sitkovetsky, plays a Guadagnini (as does Fischer: his from 1753 and hers from 1742). Their tempo in the first movement sounds fast, even compared to performances by, say, Nigel Kennedy and, more recently, Hilary Hahn (Deutsche Grammophon 000098602, reviewed by me as a CD in 27:3 and by James Reel as an SACD in 27:5—but while the tempos may be similar, Hahn sounds more suave and more nuanced, Fischer more lithe and more athletic); and the violinists and orchestra communicate a sense of bubbling energy. I've always wondered whether the slow movement could be taken quite a bit faster than it traditionally has been—whether accelerating it might glue it together more cohesively. The answer doesn't appear in Julia Fischer and Sasha Sitkovetsky's performance; but their collaboration reveals subtle articulation in the figural trees that such a focus on the forest might obscure. The finale returns with the rambunctious élan of the opening movement. By placing the soloists in the midst of the ensemble, the engineers have limited the potential for strong individual expression that a bright spotlight on them might have afforded. Julia Fischer continues the quick tempos, and the orchestra its buoyant orchestral support, in the First Concerto; the flowing account of the slow movement neither lags nor rushes and sacrifices neither zest nor profundity; while in the finale, Fischer makes the music skip without suggesting frivolity. The first movement of the Second Concerto seems somehow more foursquare in comparison with that of the A-Minor Concerto, though it's still influenced by Vivaldi, who wrote a theme very similar to Bach's opening one. Fischer trips along smartly in the bariolage, driving it along with strong rhythmic accentuation, as she does the last movement's passagework.

The Double Concerto with oboe, one of the most appealing of Bach's works for violin, offers an interplay of timbres that's no negligible advantage—especially, as in Fischer's collaboration with Andrey Rubtsov, in the slow movement, to which it contributes a special, almost Romantic, poignancy.

Many versions of these concertos have been recorded, but Fischer's should be competitive except for those who seek a larger collection with some of the reconstituted concertos (in G Minor and D Minor)—or a more strongly defined personality rather than a strongly defined concept. **Robert Maxham**

This article originally appeared in Issue 32:5 (May/June 2009) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

J.S. Bach: Violin concertos/Fischer

Review by: David Vernier *Artistic Quality: 10* *Sound Quality: 10*

Around five years ago a young Hilary Hahn made her debut with her new label, Deutsche Grammophon, with exactly these same concertos, and it was no accident that the well-prepared, extraordinarily talented violinist enjoyed a successful result. The same holds true here: this time the label is Decca, and the remarkable violinist is 25-year-old Julia Fischer, who already has several acclaimed recordings to her credit, including the solo sonatas and partitas of Bach, Russian violin concertos, and concertos by Mozart, Tchaikovsky, and Brahms. If you haven't heard these timeless works in a while, and especially if your taste has leaned mostly to period-instrument renditions, you owe it to yourself to re-enter the Bach violin canon with these splendid, scintillating, stylish performances that totally respect Bach's scores while reminding us that "modern" instruments can still play the daylights out of these pieces just as credibly as their most revered ancient ancestors. (I place "modern" in quotes because Fischer actually plays a 1742 Guadagnini!)

The first thing you notice—it's the famous "double" concerto—is not Fischer's playing but rather the wonderfully agreeable ensemble, how everything just fits so well together. And in this work that's just how it should be. Of course, we perhaps shouldn't be surprised because no orchestra is better at this sort of thing than the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields—and Fischer has carefully chosen her partner, "Sasha" Sitkovetsky, with whom she had previously performed and who had shown an obvious artistic/interpretive compatibility with her in Bach. There's absolutely nothing studied about these performances; the give and take between the soloists is easy and playful and fun—the way Fischer believes these concertos should be realized.

None of this is to suggest that Fischer is anything less than serious regarding her technique or interpretive decisions. She may play the fast movements of the A minor concerto slightly faster than some, but there is no sense of frenzy, nor is her tone ever coarse, and unlike many of her speed-demon colleagues, every detail—runs, rapid turns and bow-crossings—are absolutely clear, clean, and comfortably executed. The slow movements are lovely and lyrical and uncorrupted with any hint of inappropriate romantic mannerism. In fact, Fischer's Bach sounds as natural and effortless as if she were born to it—and given that she was playing the A minor concerto when she was five(!) and had a lesson in Bach playing from Yehudi Menuhin at age 11, that's not far from the truth! We've seen and heard our share of beautiful and very talented violinists during the last 10 years or so, and

most have quietly vanished from the spotlight; but given her obvious dedication and consistently impressive work so far, it's a good bet that Julia Fischer is going to be a major virtuoso presence for many years to come. [2/5/2009]

J.S. Bach: Violin Concertos Review by Stephen Eddins
AllMusic Review Rating: 4 1/2*/5*

Akiko Suwanai (born in 1972) is one of the brightest violinists to have emerged in the late 20th century, winning the **Tchaikovsky** International Competition, the youngest person to do so, in 1990. She has gone on to an impressive concert and recording career that encompasses both traditional repertoire and world premieres. Her 2006 album **J.S. Bach: Violin Concertos** was an instant success. Her performance is impressive: incisive, nuanced, and idiomatic. Her tone has an appealing warmth, but she remains true to the character of the music and doesn't lapse into Romantic tone quality or interpretations. She brings a high level of energy and momentum to the fast movements and her slow movements are sensuous with supple, elastic phrasing. **Suwanai**'s program is exceptionally attractive and includes the most popular of **Bach**'s concertos featuring the violin. Included are the Concerto for two violins in D minor, BWV 1043, and the Concerto for violin and oboe, BWV 1060, and the solo violin concertos, BWV 1041 and BWV 1042. Violinist **Volkhard Steude** and oboist **François Leleux** join her in the double concertos. She's accompanied with verve and sensitivity by the **Chamber Orchestra of Europe**, which plays without a conductor but is capably guided by concertmaster **Alexander Janiczek**. The sound on the beautifully produced album is clean and natural.

Johann Sebastian Bach: Violin Concerto No. 1 in A minor; Violin Concerto No. 2 in E; in D minor for Two Violins; Concerto in D minor for Oboe, Violin, Strings and Continuo, BWV 1060

Our rating: 2.0 out of 5 star rating

By **BBC Music Magazine**

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COMPOSERS: Johann Sebastian Bach LABELS: Philips ALBUM TITLE: J. S. Bach
WORKS: Violin Concerto No. 1 in A minor; Violin Concerto No. 2 in E; in D minor for Two Violins; Concerto in D minor for Oboe, Violin, Strings and Continuo, BWV 1060

PERFORMER: Chamber Orchestra of Europe/Akiko Suwanai (violin); with Volkhard Steude (violin), François Leleux (oboe)

CATALOGUE NO: 475 6934

This is Bach playing so smooth that you can almost see your face in it. Every note is polished to perfection, and it's almost as if the revolution of period instrument performance had never happened. I say almost, because there is sometimes a tendency to swell through long notes, and tempos are generally fast in the outer movements. Otherwise it's bland in the extreme – the first movement of the Double Violin Concerto purrs along like a well-oiled machine, and the Largo plumbs the depths of sentimentality with swooning rubato and dynamics. The worst comes in the finale with an overblown and truly dreadful cadenza by Joseph Hellmesburger, which revisits the themes of the work at great length and to no conceivable purpose.

In the solo concertos there's the same emphasis on beauty of legato sound at the expense of any life-giving phrasing, and even though the finale of the E major Concerto goes at tremendous lick, it's strangely lacking in energy. Nigel Kennedy, in his recording of the same four works, also favoured fast speeds, but at least he brought a real sense of articulation to the music, giving it an energy which eludes Suwanai. Things perk up a little in the Violin and Oboe Concerto, where Leleux turns some elegant phrases, but for most of the time this CD is the aural equivalent of a warm bath. Martin Cotton.