

Brandenburg Concerti receive Grand Prix

By Ray Ergas

There is a new recording set out which should appeal to musical purists. It is a recording of the six Brandenburg Concerti of Bach (BWV 1046-1051) on the original instruments for which Bach wrote the concerti. The performance is by the Concentus Musicus of Vienna under the direction of Nikolaus Harnoncourt. This "first recording" (Telefunken SAWT 9459/60-A) won a Paris Grand Prix du Disque.

The award is certainly well deserved. The Concentus Musicus plays in the finest European chamber music tradition, with elegance and virtuosity. They have a very mellow sound that is often missing in American chamber groups. However, there is a point where mellowness becomes fuzziness, and there are places in the recording where this occurs.

Antique instruments

Among the instruments used are viola de gambas, blockfloeten, querfloeten, clarin trumpets, and naturhorns. A viola de gamba is slightly smaller than a cello and has a peculiar sound because of its ornate shape. Blockfloeten and querfloeten are eighteenth century recorders and wooden flutes respectively. The most interesting instruments of all were the brass. Neither the trumpets nor horns had valves in Bach's day, and what was played is similar to a bugle or hunting horn. Such instruments are extremely limited in the number of notes they are able to play. It is also very difficult to play them, as anyone who has heard a bugler play "Taps" will recall. In fact, these instruments are limited to the notes C-C-E-G-B (flat?) -C-D-E-F-(sharp?) -G-A-B flat-B-C. The question marks indicate notes which are not quite in tune with the scale used in music today, and they give the music a rather charmingly sour turn at times.

Bach makes it hard

Given these difficulties, it would seem that Bach would write simple parts for these instruments. Not Bach. They are at times as intricate as solo violin parts. Hearing a clarin trumpet execute one of these parts (with trills no less!) is an amazing and worthwhile experience. The sound of these valveless instruments is quite different from ordinary brass. The first valve was not invented until 1824, and composers like Mozart (4 Horn concerti) and Beethoven (Horn Sonata in F) wrote for the valveless horn. Even Mahler (Symphony No. 3) calls specifically for it.

In any case, we shall soon have an opportunity to hear these instruments. The Concentus Musicus is scheduled to be at Sanders Theatre, Harvard, on Nov. 13, sponsored by the Cambridge Society for Early Music. More information should be available in the near future.

The MIT Dramashop will present two one-act plays in the Little Theatre of Kresge at 8:30 Friday and Saturday evenings. Eugene Ionesco's "Jack or the Submission" and Bertolt Brecht's "The Measures Taken" will be presented with a critique and refreshments following.

exhibition of American and European photography is now showing in Hayden gallery. The selection of 85 works by 75 photographers will run through November 10.

Richie Havens will perform at Kresge Friday October 18. Havens will be performing songs from his album "Something Else" in his own folk style.

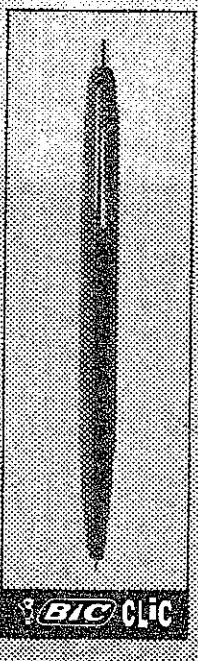
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