

## *SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1309*

HAROLD SAMUEL was born in London on 23rd May 1879, the son of Moses Samuel and his wife Victoria, née Mallan, the youngest child of a family little interested in music. He was educated privately, and his first musical studies were with Isaac Albeniz and Michael Hambourg. Later he became a pupil of the Royal College of Music, where he was taught piano by Dannreuther and composition by Stanford. He also had lessons from Mathilde Verne, a pupil of Clara Schumann, and a celebrated teacher in London. [She also taught Solomon.] At his début in 1894 at St. James's Hall he played Mendelssohn's Concerto in D minor. Samuel intended himself for a career as a soloist, and did indeed give some successful performances of some of the "show" pieces, but he soon recognised that sheer virtuosity was not his forté.

By 1900 he became seriously interested in the music of Bach. He eschewed the arrangements of D'Albert, Busoni, Liszt and Tausig; almost nothing else was heard then. Indeed the popularity of Bach's keyboard works today, and the relegation of the arrangers is in no small measure his achievement. Probably his performance of the *Goldberg* Variations, in the Steinway Hall in 1906, was the first time they were heard in London. In the same year, however, his father died, so that, needing to support himself, he turned to working as an accompanist. He was soon much in demand with such artists as Clara Butt, Ada Crossley, Ben Davies, Plunket Greene and Louise Kirkby-Lunn.

In 1919 he returned as a soloist with a programme entirely of Bach at the Wigmore Hall. This was, according to point of view, on two counts either courageous or foolhardy; the public did not consider that a pianist could properly double as accompanist and soloist, and there was little appetite for Bach; always excepting the afore-mentioned arrangements.

However, within two years Samuel was giving "Bach weeks" of six programmes on six nights, no work being repeated. Seats were sold out; the concerts became headline news.

Not surprisingly, Samuel became known rapidly as a Bach-specialist. He disliked this classification, but although his interests and repertoire were very wide, his mind and his hands were especially suited to Bach, and for such marathons he was considerably aided by his memory, which was phenomenal.

In the *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue* Samuel adds doublings here and there; but otherwise he plays as written. In performance of concertos, and similar structures on the one manual, he distinguishes tutti and solo passages not merely by changes in dynamics, but also by rubato, very sparingly used for the solo sections. Samuel asserted strongly that repeats should be played; but, presumably for reasons of record length at the time, not all are heard here.

During the 20th century the playing of Bach on the piano was at times fashionable, and at other times unfashionable. Why did Samuel in particular play Bach on the piano? Wanda Landowska heard him in New York. After complimenting him she lectured, in some accounts harangued, him on the virtues of the harpsichord. When she eventually paused for breath he quietly interjected, "But Madame Landowska, I don't like the harpsichord." By the end of the century, Madame Landowska's iron-framed instrument was itself heretical.

Whether Bach's music should, or should not, be played on the piano, Bach, himself was constantly, for purposes of study, teaching, or making them accessible, arranging and transcribing scores, his own and those of others, from and to all manner of instruments. We cannot believe that Bach would have complained about Samuel's use of the piano; we may believe that he would have admired the elegance and fluidity of Samuel's playing, and approved of the clarity of logic and structure in his performances.

Harold Samuel died in London on 15th January 1937.

In 1923 very little of Bach was in the catalogues. The "Double" Concerto played by Kreisler and Zimbalist springs to mind; also the first of "48" played by Busoni, with his own arrangement of "Nun freut euch". There were also untold numbers of "Air on the G String" and the E major Prelude by violinists, good and less good. Thus Harold Samuel's records, which are almost entirely of music by Bach, are for the most part first recorded performances.

By 1923 the acoustic, or mechanical, process was as fully developed as could be expected so that the examples in this album are remarkably good. In 1925 the new electrical process brought great improvement, even in the first year or two. However, during the late 1920s "H.M.V.", the company making records of Samuel, was using very gritty material. This becomes a particular problem when, as in these records, there are brief loud passages separated by long passages of quiet music. The most modern technology allows a great deal of noise to be removed before the music itself is damaged. Experience in preparing these transfers has been that the listener is quickly so immersed in the power and structure of Bach's music, as brought out by the mind and hands of Harold Samuel, that the remaining noise goes largely unheard.

In the Chromatic Fantasia, with noise reduced, some "pre-echo" from the original recording becomes apparent.

The English Suite is surely unique for being issued from records made in part acoustically and in part electrically. [It seems that the two Bourrée were recorded electrically, but the acoustic version was preferred].

The second Partita was recorded in 1931. The benefits of Blumlein's recent work on the electrical system, and Columbia's "Silent Surface" are readily audible.

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