



JOHN ATKINSON

J.S. BACH: *Brandenburg Concertos 1-6*

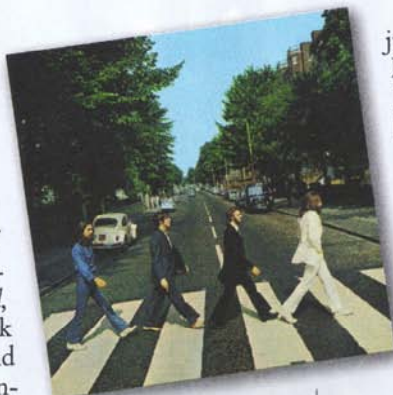
Richard Egarr, dir., harpsichord continuo; Academy of Ancient Music
 Harmonia Mundi HMU 807461.62 (multichannel SACD/CD). 2008. Robina G.
 Young, prod.; Brad Michel, eng., ed. DDD. TT: 96:20

One of the first classical LPs I bought as a teenager was of the 1959 modern-instruments performances, by Sir Yehudi Menuhin and the Bath Festival Orchestra, of Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos*. I literally wore that HMV album out; it left me with a love for what have been termed the greatest of all chamber-music works. As my tastes matured, I found myself increasingly attracted to "original instruments" versions such as Gustav Leonhardt's on Japanese RCA/Seon, the English Concert's on Arkiv, and Nikolaus Harnoncourt's on Teldec. But nothing had prepared me for the sonic assault and battery committed on these warhorses by the Academy of Ancient Music, led from the harpsichord by Richard Egarr. Not only do the musicians tune their instruments to A=392Hz—a whole step below the modern concert pitch of A=440, and equivalent to a modern G—but the valveless horns, in No.1 in particular, have a rustic, braying quality that is at first off-putting, then refreshing, and finally, with familiarity, essential. Also unusual is the use of a baroque guitar as an occasional continuo instrument, as well as the more familiar theorbo. Perhaps as a result of the low pitch, the balance between the treble recorder, oboe, valveless trumpet, and solo violin in No.2 is beautifully arranged. Overall, the sound (in two channels) is natural and unforced; the slow movement of No.6 is a delight in this respect. Yes, tempos are sometimes on the stately side—the first movements of Nos.3 and 4 and the finale of No.6, for example—but this set has been in constant rotation since I acquired it. (XXXII-7)

RACHMANINOFF: *Rachmaninoff Plays Rachmaninoff*

Prelude in C-sharp minor, Op.3 No.2; *Moments Musicaux*, Op.16 No.2; *Etudes Tableaux* in C and E-flat major, Op.33 Nos. 2 & 7; *Daisies*, Op.38 No.3; plus arrangements for piano of works by Bach, Kreisler, Mendelssohn, Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky.
 Sergei Rachmaninoff, 1909 Steinway D SE piano, as realized by Zenph Studios
 RCA Red Seal 748971 (CD). 1921-1942/
 2009. John Q. Walker, exec. prod.;
 Steven Epstein, prod.; Richard King,
 eng.; Anatoly Larkin, Zenph consultant;
 Marc Wienert, piano tech.; Richard
 Shepherd, designer of SE reproducing
 mechanism. DDD. TT: 78:24

From the opening phrase of Sergei Rachmaninoff's arrangement of Fritz Kreisler's *Liebesleid*, originally recorded in New York City on October 25, 1921, and presented on this CD in stunningly good, if fairly close, modern piano sound (the engineer was the widely respected Richard King), this Zenph CD takes your breath away. It follows in the footsteps of Zenph Studios' first two SACD/CDs of "re-performances": Glenn Gould's 1955 *Goldberg Variations*, which I made our "Recording of the Month" for September 2007; and Art Tatum's *Piano Starts Here*, reviewed by John Swenson in September 2008. In all three, a computer was used to analyze the original recording and then, with pains-



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taking massaging of the data by Zenph's Dr. Anatoly Larkin, to produce an enhanced MIDI file capable of controlling a Yamaha Synclavier or, in this case, a beautifully restored 1909 Steinway D fitted with a development by Richard Shepherd of Wayne Stahnke's SE reproducing mechanism. The program is presented twice: once from the perspective of an audience in the Kenan Recital Hall at Peace College, Raleigh, North Carolina, recorded with three DPA omni mikes; and once from the perspective of a performer, using a Neumann dummy-head binaural mike. The motive may be commercial, in that Zenph's "re-performances" of great historical recordings establishes a new copyright for the record company, but the musical results are impressive. As Robert Silverman once corrected me when I referred to Rachmaninoff as a "pianist," "If he were just a *pianist*, then they'll have to come up with another word for those of us who play the piano!"

ROBERT BAIRD

THE BEATLES: *Abbey Road*

Parlophone CDP 0946 3 82468 2 4 (CD). 1969/2009. George Martin, prod.; Geoff Emerick, eng.; Allan Rouse reissue producer. Alan Parsons, Tony Banks, asst. engs. AAD. TT: 47:26

NIRVANA: *Nevermind*

Sub Pop/DGC/ORG 032 (LP). 1991/2009. Nirvana, Butch Vig, prods., engs.; Andy Wallace, mix; Jeff Sheehan, James Johnson, asst. engs. AAA. TT: 42:39

After the usual racking of an increasingly feeble brain, followed by time spent pacing in front of shelves trying to ferret out yet another pair of super-obscure treasures, I sat and pondered which records really *were* the heaviest in my collection. Which ones really *were* the indisputable King Kongs? The stone classics that never grow old? Records from which so much else continues to flow?

Once I'd framed it that way, *Abbey Road* and *Nevermind* immediately jumped into my head and, despite my best efforts to knock them off their perch, held firm. The only problem was that I was *sure* that everyone and their mother had already chosen *Abbey Road*, and probably *Nevermind* as well, as R2D4s past. Turns out, much to my wondering eyes, that no one in the long history of "Records To Die For" has ever given *Abbey Road* the nod, probably for the same reason I almost didn't: they assumed it had already been done to death. And *Nevermind* had been honored only once.

Needless to say, with the much-improved sonics of its 2009 reissue, *Abbey Road* is even more glorious than before—if that's possible. A final burst of whatever camaraderie was left among the fabulous foursome, the album's set of tunes, some of them admittedly goofy, still make for one of the most consistent albums ever made. There's nary a bad song here. Favorites include the late George Harrison's exquisitely sexy "Something," Sir Paul's saliva-spewing howl in the sentimental mush of

