

**BACH Mass in B**, BWV 232. Elisabeth Schumann (sop), Margaret Balfour (alt); Walter Widdop (ten); Friedrich Schorr (bbar), Albert Coates, cond; Royal Choral Society, London SO; 1929

**SCHUMANN *Liederkreis***, op. 39. Friedrich Schorr (bbar), Fritz Kitzinger (pn), Recorded November 1937 and January 1938

**MENDELSSOHN *Elijah***, op. 70: *Ist nicht des Herrn Wort; Es ist genug*

IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1177-2 Mono (2 CDs: 156:58)

By Ken Meltzer

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The 1929 HMV London recording of Bach's Mass in b is of the utmost historic and historical importance. The fact that it was the first complete recording of Bach's choral masterpiece would be enough to guarantee its discographic significance. But HMV also provided a most impressive assemblage of musicians; soprano Elisabeth Schumann, alto Margaret Balfour, tenor Walter Widdop, and bass Friedrich Schorr as soloists, along with the London Philharmonic Chorus and London Symphony Orchestra, all conducted by Albert Coates. The recording was made over a period of months in 1929, with various portions committed to disc based upon artist availability in London. To be sure, the recording is a document of Bach performance practices of the era. Coates opts for large choral and symphonic forces, broad tempos, and marked *ritardandi* both at the end of set numbers, and 78 rpm sides (wherever they may fall in the course of the music). I doubt that today, in the wake of HIP scholarship, you'd encounter such an interpretation. But while the performance is anachronistic, it is also impressive and quite moving. I suspect that all the artists were aware of the importance of this recording, and they gave their very best. How wonderful to hear four vocal soloists whose ample (both Widdop and Schorr, and to a lesser degree, Schumann, were celebrated for their artistry in the operas of Wagner) and beautiful voices negotiate Bach's challenging writing in most impressive fashion. Also notable are the clarity and fervency of their textual declamation. The same may be said for the London Philharmonic Chorus, and the London Symphony Orchestra plays beautifully as well. A new restoration by Immortal Performances (IP) of the 1929 HMV Bach B minor Mass presents the almost century-old recording in quite fine sound. There is more than ample dynamic range, color, and focus to appreciate the recording's high level of execution and artistry.

As a supplement to the B minor mass recording, IP focuses on Friedrich Schorr. First is a Victor recording of Schumann's song cycle *Liederkreis*, made in 1937-8 by Schorr and pianist Fritz Kitzinger. By this stage of his career, Schorr was experiencing challenges in his voice's upper register. But the music of *Liederkreis* is not unduly taxing in that regard, and Schorr, in rich, secure form, sings with the warmth, nobility, and pointed diction that made him the finest Hans Sachs and Wotan of his age. Kitzinger is a sympathetic collaborator. The marvelous recorded sound is worthy of Schorr's artistry. And finally, two arias from Mendelssohn's oratorio *Elijah*, recorded by Schorr in the early 1930s, with Coates conducting. Schorr, in prime voice and beautifully recorded, is a fiery and eloquent prophet. Schorr and Coates performing music inspired by Bach, composed by a man who was central in reviving interest in the Baroque master, brings this marvelous release full circle. IP's booklet includes commentary by

Dewey Faulkner, Richard Caniell's *Recording Notes*, and artist bios and photos. A most gratifying set. Recommended.

Five stars: A superb restoration of the 1929 premiere recording of Bach's B minor Mass, plus gems from Friedrich Schorr.