

Mozart: Complete Piano Sonatas. Lili Kraus, piano. EMI/Angel EAC 30127-30133 (mono)

The discs under review consist of a reissue by Japanese EMI/Angel of Lili Kraus's first recording of the complete Mozart piano sonatas, along with a number of the composer's other piano works, made in the 1950's and originally issued in the United States on the Haydn Society label; they have long been out of print. What makes the present reissue of special interest to Mozartians is the opportunity it affords for comparison with Mme. Kraus's later stereo recording of the sonatas recorded for Epic in the mid 1960's. Although only two discs were issued by the latter company before it abandoned the classical field, Odyssey fortunately picked up the ball in 1974 and issued the entire cycle with a couple of filler items in two three-disc sets (Y3 33224 and Y3 33220); these discs are fortunately still available.

It is always fascinating to study an artist's traversal of a composer's complete output within a given form or genre at different stages of his/her career, principally to observe changes that may have occurred in the general conception of given works resulting frequently from a complete rethinking, or, if the general conception remains unchanged, to note more subtle differences in the execution of details or certain different emphases at various points in the scores. Likewise of interest, of course, is the comparison of a given artist's approach to a composer with the interpretations of other artists who identify closely with that same composer. Competitors to Mme. Kraus in the complete Mozart sonatas include Giesecking (Seraphim), Eschenbach (DG), Balsam (L'Oiseau lyre - out of print) and (Musical Heritage Society), and Haebler (shortly forthcoming in the Philips Complete Mozart Edition); other pianists such as De Larrocha have given us magnificent performances of some of the sonatas.

Mme. Kraus has many credentials to classify herself as something of a Mozart specialist, having devoted much of her career specifically to this composer. In addition to the recordings of the solo and concerted piano works and the piano and violin sonatas with Boskovsky (also recently reissued by Japanese EMI/Angel), Mme. Kraus became the first artist to perform the complete concerto cycle during a single season in New York (1966-1967), followed a year later by the sonata cycle contemporaneous with the Odyssey recorded cycle. She has been featured in TV documentaries and has given numerous master classes devoted to Mozart.

What, then, of her approach to the composer? Let it be noted at the outset that she is fortunately of that school of performers who consider Mozart as a flesh-and-blood human being, albeit a genius, who expresses in his music the full range of human emotion and feeling. Too many artists, Giesecking among them, have been guilty of the spineless "Dresden china" approach to Mozart, treating him as a lifeless formal perfectionist who reveals little or no emotion in his music. Giesecking's recorded cycle exhibits an approach small in scale with a limited dynamic range, subtle use of rubato and other expressive devices being practically

non-existent. The man's digital facility was incredible, but his Mozart cycle resembles sight-reading sessions far more than communicating a genuine immersion in and commitment to the music (although at times he could be "turned on" in Mozart--witness the incredible K. 467 Piano Concerto collaboration with Cantelli and the New York Philharmonic in 1955 (available through the Bruno Walter Society) which reveals a totally transformed artist at work; perhaps the conductor had something to do with this).

By contrast, Mme. Kraus's approach is large in scale with a wide dynamic range and great intensity of expression. She is a totally committed interpreter who obviously feels every bar of the music, making the most of the dramatic and emotional contrast in the scores. That said, I have always had difficulty in gaining complete satisfaction with Mme. Kraus's Mozart playing. This results less, I think, from her most admirable overall approach than from certain annoying mannerisms in the execution of details which too often undermine the final result. The intensity of expression becomes at times too intense, even feverish. The secret of the greatest Mozart playing (and that of the Classicists in general) lies in the ability of the artist to successfully integrate detail into the structure of the work as a whole, so that the latter is never lost sight of. Phrase climaxes, for example, must never be overstressed dynamically or imbued with overdone rubato, or the overall flow so necessary for the realization of the but perfect Mozartean proportions will be disrupted. Yet there must simultaneously exist an awareness, on the part of the interpreter, of thematic contrast and an ability to make the phrases breathe naturally so that the expressive content is fully realized while maintaining the flow of ideas. Thus the key is subtlety, and it is the too frequent lack of this quality that unfortunately mars Mme. Kraus's work to a degree. Her rubato is too often too pronounced so that it sounds forced, calculated, and lacking in spontaneity. In addition, she has the unfortunate habit (also characteristic of her mentor Schnabel at times) of rushing to the climax of a phrase or section, generally accompanying this by an overwrought crescendo. Climaxes in Classical composers are an integral part of the structure and are in a sense "built-in"; performers do not need to "editorialize" in order for them to make their intended effect.

Mme. Kraus does not appear to overly concern herself with musicological niceties. In both sets, trills which should begin on the upper auxiliary too often begin on the principal note. As to appoggiaturas, on the other hand, Mme. Kraus does appear to have developed some scholarly awareness by the time she recorded the Odyssey cycle, since many of those played long on the earlier cycle are correctly executed short on the remake. Concerning "completeness" of the cycles, it is incredible that by the time Kraus recorded the Odyssey cycle she was apparently unaware of the necessity to include one of the greatest sonatas, that in F, K. 533/494 which the composer himself, having written the rondo first, intended ultimately to comprise a complete sonata and which has been accordingly included in most recent scholarly editions.

Following are comments on the individual sonatas in which I have attempted to compare both cycles. From a performance standpoint neither set is superior to the other; in fact, in some cases it is impossible to claim that certain individual sonatas are better in one set than the other, while in others one may make such a claim. For the sake of economy, letter "A" stands for the EMI/Angel version, letter "B" for the Odyssey, and Roman numerals refer to the movements of a given sonata.

K. 279, C major: I and III are suitably vital in both versions; in II, A is altogether preferable, being more disciplined than B. The latter contains a good example, in the first few bars, of Mme. Kraus's tendency to overdo crescendi simultaneously with accelerations.

K. 280, F major: In I, A has pronounced rubato within short segments (e.g. bars 18-22, 35-59) thus disrupting the flow. B, on the other hand, is smoother and more flowing. In II, A is profoundly expressive, whereas in B Kraus takes a considerably faster tempo which, while poetic to an extent, creates a greater sense of urgency with less repose than in A. Thus we have here an interesting case of two different but equally effective concepts of this movement. III similarly shows a somewhat diverse approach, A stressing wit and humor while B, being slower, is more reserved and less vital, not really presto.

K. 281, B flat major: A, in I, is definitely preferable; Kraus maintains continuity better through less rubato than in B. In A, strangely, she does not repeat the exposition, a mistake rectified in B. In II and III, B is a bit more dramatic but not quite as expressive in the lyrical portions.

K. 282, E flat major: In I, A is again preferable as Kraus, by taking a slower tempo than in B, seems to dig deeper to realize more effectively the expressive content, although I take strong exception to her sharp distinction between the legato and staccato notes in Bars 10-11 and 27-28; the extremely short staccatos at this slow a tempo trivialize the phrases, thus producing (rarely for Kraus) a "Dresden china" effect. In B, although the interpretation is slightly less poetic on the whole, she executes these phrases far more convincingly. The spirit of the minuet (II) is better realized in A, B being a bit heavy-handed and making less of the dynamic contrasts. III displays considerably different approaches, each convincing in its own way. A is fast and light, really more presto than allegro, while B is much slower and displays a greater dynamic contrast.

K. 283, G major: The entire sonata is equally well performed in both versions, the same basic concept prevailing. The lyric, dramatic, and, in III, humorous, aspects are equally well defined, and both performances are happily free of Mme. Kraus's objectionable mannerisms.

K. 284, D major: I, one of the orchestral-style sonata movements with its sharply contrasted dynamics, is in general more convincing in A, Kraus paying closer attention to the composer's dynamic markings.

In B not all of the "tutti" imitations (forte passages) are as strong as they could be, and the rubato is slightly overdone. Kraus's tendency to overstress crescendi and accelerandi is unfortunately very prevalent in parts of the development. In II, A is more poised and more expressive than B, while III, a set of variations, is well performed in both versions. In short, A is the clear winner in this sonata.

K. 309, C major: In I, another orchestral style movement, Kraus is preferable in B where she follows Mozart's markings scrupulously, the development in A being badly disfigured with alternating dynamic contrasts in bars 73-76 not marked in the score, coupled with the annoying dynamic and rhythmic oversteering. The latter is happily absent in B. Kraus takes a much slower tempo for II in A than in B and, although she is perhaps a bit more poetic in A, she again introduces dynamic contrasts not marked in the score (bars 37-38, 41-42); these are less prominent in B. III is likewise less satisfactory in A, being somewhat sedate with too much of a music-box quality. B, even if a bit mannered, has altogether more character. Thus the better performance of the whole sonata is B.

K. 310, A minor: With this sonata we come to one of the pinnacles in Mozart's solo piano output. Composed in Paris shortly after the death of the composer's mother in 1778, it appears to be a personal revelation of Mozart's current state of mind and is full of tragic overtones in its pathos and drama. One would therefore expect that it would be particularly suitable to Mme. Kraus's temperament. In I, she does not disappoint in either version, although B is a bit more poised with better continuity and more discreet rubato. The all-important appoggiaturas dominating the first theme are also more convincingly executed in B. II is impossibly mannered in A with rubato carried to unacceptable extremes; the dynamic contrasts are too pronounced with some positively explosive accents (bars 14, 24) and the accelerandos and ritards are excruciating. This music, dramatic as it is, simply cannot take such treatment; it needs altogether more discipline, such as Dinu Lipatti provided in his legendary readings. Fortunately Kraus makes amends in B which is in general quite satisfactory; although there is still slightly too much exaggeration here and there, the drama of the movement is realized with far more subtle use of rubato and management of dynamic contrasts. The somewhat faster tempo also helps. III is good in both versions, although Kraus tends to accelerate in A at bars 64 ff. where the main theme appears in left-hand octaves; thus B is slightly preferable. Interestingly, as far as the sonata as a whole is concerned, A represents Mme. Kraus at her worst, while B is one of her best performances.

K. 311, D major: A, although very vital, again has too much rubato in the development together with some dynamic oversteering. B, on the other hand, is more subtle at this point and, interestingly, reveals some discreet rubato in the second theme of the exposition which, in turn, makes the development rubato more palatable. In II, A is preferable, B being slightly superficial, while III is good in both versions.

K. 330, C major: Both performances are, in general, excellent, although different in emphasis, B being slightly slower and bringing the lyrical aspects of the writing to the fore. A, slightly violating Mozart's *allegro moderato*, has a more playful, jaunty atmosphere. II is likewise good in both versions; interestingly, in the minor-mode middle section, Kraus pedals the left-hand repeated sixteenth-notes in A, whereas in B she opts for no pedal, preferring a pronounced staccato effect for the repeated notes; the latter seems less effective. In III, A is extremely curious in that Kraus starts at a fairly brisk tempo, but upon the forte thematic repetition at bars 9 ff. she slows down markedly, where the tempo remains. Since nothing similar occurs in the exposition repeat, I suspect that this may be a case of a wrong "take" being used. If Kraus had stuck to the original tempo the performance might have been effective, but it turns out to drag terribly in spite of some felicitous phrasing and telling effects. B, on the other hand, is very good.

K. 331, A major: In I, both performances are excellent, Kraus elucidating the different character of each variation while maintaining continuity. Her incorrect execution of trills, however, adversely affects Variation II; how much more telling would be the effect if she had begun them on the upper auxiliary, adding a nice dash of spice with the slight dissonance one hears when such trills are correctly played. II is slightly more disciplined in B, while III is good in both versions, being lively and spirited.

K. 332, F major: I is more straightforward and less mannered in B. In both versions, however, Kraus reveals her cognizance of larger-dimensional formal structure since she, contrary to many pianists, builds the many repetitions of the syncopated figure to a dramatic climax at bar 123 by making a gradual crescendo, at the same time properly weighting the forte-piano contrasts in each bar to integrate them within this increase in dramatic intensity. Other artists are content to execute the forte-piano contrasts without a comparable increase in overall dynamic intensity, which makes for a far less interesting result. Although Mozart did not indicate this crescendo, it is one case, contrary to others previously mentioned, in which the decision not to follow the composer's markings slavishly seems amply justified. Strangely in A there is no exposition repeat in this movement. Both performances of II are good, but in III neither version shows Kraus at anywhere near her best. The brilliant passages are well played, but for a generally perpetuum-mobile-style movement (even with the contrasting lyrical passages) there is entirely too much rubato with grossly overdone ritards at many cadential points. In bars 91-111, Kraus suddenly becomes impressionistic, using much pedal, thus creating a misty, Debussy-like effect. I'll take De Larrocha any day in preference to either of these performances.

K. 333, B flat major: In I both A and B, in their different ways, reveal Kraus at her best. A is more brilliant and a touch faster than B with good continuity and thematic characterization, save for an overwrought climax at bars 73 ff. in the development. B, although placing

less emphasis on brilliance, is similarly well characterized but with a bit more rubato, always discreetly handled. II, although deeply felt in both versions, is too intense, B, however, being more disciplined although slightly faster; both performances, in fact, are somewhat faster than the norm. In III, B is the preferable performance; Kraus makes more of the concerto-like structure (complete with cadenza!) in which each statement of the refrain is initially stated piano (imitating a solo instrument) immediately followed by a forte restatement (imitating the tutti). These dynamic contrasts are insufficiently differentiated in A. B rectifies this problem and in addition is much better disciplined, being happily free of the overstressing apparent at times in A. Both performances, moreover, make the most of the brilliant passage work which is beautifully articulated. B is the preferred version of the entire sonata owing to its clear superiority in the last movement.

Fantasy and Sonata, K. 475/457, C minor: We come now to one of Mozart's towering masterpieces in any genre. These works were originally published together and are frequently so performed; moreover there is a distinct thematic interrelationship between the initial themes of the Fantasy and the sonata's first movement. In K. 475 Kraus is again in top form, displaying a good comprehension of the large-scale architecture; in the opening adagio, for example, she builds the tension gradually throughout the sequences of initial-beat fortes followed by three beats piano so that a climax is reached at bar 12, followed by a comparable decrease of tension. She accomplishes this through careful gradations of the f-p juxtapositions similar to that employed in K. 332/I; the effect is particularly successful in B. In the allegro (bars 62-88), A is more satisfactory since it builds to the climax more convincingly, being a less mannered and more direct statement; this is also true of the piu allegro section (bars 146-158). In general, however, K. 475 and Kraus are congenial, not the least because her style with its large dynamic range and dramatic urgency is well suited to the almost Beethovenian intensity of this work.

The outer movements of the K. 457 Sonata should be similarly well matched to Mme. Kraus's general approach, although here, even though the dynamic contrasts are well handled, her pronounced rubato wreaks havoc with the thematic flow. In music of such intensity it is fatal to italicize each theme and disrupt the continuity through enormous ritards and other rhetorical devices resulting from over-interpreting. Although both versions are guilty in this respect, B is a bit less calculated and more spontaneous. III shows a more subtle and discreet use of rubato in both A and B. II is very expressive and poetic in both versions, B again being more disciplined in the handling of rubato. In toto, it is difficult to make a clearly defined choice for the Fantasy while B is generally preferable in the Sonata.

K. 545, C major: Kraus generally acquits herself well in this deceptively simple work. The 2d movement, however, is a bit too mechanical and music-box-like in A; tastefully applied rubato, such as we get in B, is most welcome in this movement with its steady Alberti bass figuration

in the left hand throughout the movement. The last movement is not imbued with the sort of romp that De Larrocha brings to it, nor is it as fast, but Kraus's greater delicacy seems equally witty in its own way.

K. 570, B flat major: In I both performances are among Kraus's best and are similar in approach with some small differences; B is slightly broader with a bit more subtlety of nuance. II sees Kraus realizing successfully the expressive potential of the writing in both performances, B seeming to flow better at a slightly faster tempo; even considering the adagio tempo, A does seem a bit static. Some of the phrase climaxes are a trifle strong but since the rubato is so carefully controlled and spontaneous sounding, it is less jarring than in some of the other sonatas. III is similar in tempo and approach in both versions; the playing is vital as befits the movement, save for a couple of overstressed passages. Query: Why, in B, at bar 50, beats 1 and 2, does she play B-natural instead of C in the left-hand repeated notes? The Broder edition has C which is what Kraus plays in the earlier performance.

K. 576, D major: This last sonata, the first of a planned set of six "easy" sonatas to be composed for the eldest daughter of the Prussian King, Princess Friederike, and the only one actually composed, is, in spite of the composer's disclaimer, perhaps the most difficult of the entire canon from a technical standpoint. The highly contrapuntal writing in the outer movements, for example, requires the utmost care in the balancing of the voices as the thematic thread passes from one hand to the other, in addition to the evenness of touch and rhythm always required in Mozart. In I, both performances exhibit tremendous vitality --note the way she snaps off the short trills which follow the fanfare-like principal motive of the main theme. B is rhythmically steadier although the passage work is marginally rougher in execution than A; however, Kraus slows slightly for the second theme in A while in B she correctly maintains the same tempo, thus creating a better flow. Worthy of praise is the marvelously subtle treatment of the lyrical portion of the development (bars 81-96) in both versions; the slight dynamic and rhythmic gradations provide a telling contrast to the vigorous treatment of the more dramatic passages. In II, A is too slow, thus impeding the continuity which is better maintained in B with a more convincing tempo; the dynamic climaxes at bars 6-7 and 14-15 are likewise better integrated into the structure with the slightly faster tempo. In the last movement Mme. Kraus fortunately avoids the trap encountered by many pianists who do not take Mozart's allegretto marking literally enough. Although the main theme may appear too slow as initially heard, when one reaches the triplet figurations in the left hand at the repetition of this theme (which continue for much of the remainder of the movement), the need for the tempo marking becomes obvious. That said, however, A does seem a shade too slow and, strangely for Kraus, considerably subdued and lacking in vitality. B, although perhaps a little faster, has far more elan and spark, even a bit too much at times; this vitality, unfortunately, is not consistently maintained, being somewhat vitiated in places by too frequent and too abrupt dynamic changes and

overdone rubato. In general, it is not one of Kraus's better movements in either version, thus rendering not entirely satisfactory either of her performances of this important final sonata.

The performances of the other works in the EMI/Angel cycle display the same virtues and faults characteristic of Kraus's treatment of the sonatas. As to sound, the piano of the earlier cycle appears to have a somewhat shallow tone with a rather unpleasant percussive effect in louder passages; this may in part be an engineering fault. The Odyssey cycle was obviously recorded on a concert grand with an extremely full and rich sonority, also providing brilliance where that is called for. For Mozart, however, I feel the tone is just a bit too overripe.

As to the EMI/Angel pressings, it is a pleasure to report that they are virtually flawless; I took extreme pleasure in being able to listen for extended periods without anxiously awaiting the next loud click, crunch, or other aggravating extraneous noises which have for far too long seriously impeded one's enjoyment of most domestically manufactured discs. The Japanese here demonstrate, as do also the Dutch (Philips), that it is indeed possible to make satisfactory discs if sufficient expense, time, and effort is invested in quality control. The annotations are in Japanese only; this writer is thus precluded from making a qualitative judgement of same.

In conclusion, one might reasonably wonder whether, considering the large number of faults as well as virtues I have found in Mme. Kraus's Mozart, there is any artist who comes closer to combining satisfactorily all the qualities necessary for wholly convincing interpretations of these works. From the evidence thus far at hand, I would nominate Alicia De Larrocha for this distinction. Discipline, proportion, poetry, a sense of architecture, marvelous textural clarity, and wonderfully pearly finger work combine with an instinctive sense of just the proper amount of rhythmic liberty permissible to enable the music to unfold naturally and realize its expressive potential without jeopardizing the larger structure characterize her work; may Decca/London continue its "Mostly Mozart" series until all the sonatas are recorded. As to the cycles of Eschenbach and Balsam, both are quite satisfactory, generally striking a happy balance between Kraus's volatility and Gieseking's clarity; neither, however, reaches De Larrocha's exalted level.

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