

## KEMPF'S BEETHOVEN SONATAS

Beethoven: Sonata in F Minor, Op. 2, No. 1 (Recorded October 13 & December 22, 1951), Sonata in A Major, Op. 2, No. 2 (Recorded December 19, 1951), Sonata in C Major, Op. 2, No. 3 (Recorded October 13, 1951), Sonata in E-flat Major, Op. 7 (Recorded December 19, 1951), Sonata in C Minor, Op. 10, No. 1 (Recorded December 19, 1951), Sonata in F Major, Op. 10, No. 2 (Recorded December 19, 1951), Sonata in D Major, Op. 10, No. 3 (Recorded December 20, 1951), Sonata in C Minor, Op. 13 "Pathétique" (Recorded December 23, 1950), Sonata in E Major, Op. 14, No. 1 (Recorded December 20, 1951), Sonata in G Major, Op. 14, No. 2 (Recorded December 20, 1951), Sonata in B-flat Major, Op. 22 (Recorded December 20, 1951), Sonata in A-flat Major, Op. 26 (Recorded December 20, 1951), Sonata in E-flat Major, Op. 27, No. 1 "Sonata quasi una fantasia" (Recorded December 20, 1951), Sonata in C-sharp Minor, Op. 27, No. 2 "Moonlight" (Recorded May 3 & 4, 1956), Sonata in D Major, Op. 28 "Pastorale" (Recorded December 21, 1951), Sonata in G Major, Op. 31, No. 1 (Recorded December 21, 1951), Sonata in D Minor, Op. 31, No. 2 "The Tempest" (Recorded December 21, 1951), Sonata in E-flat Major, Op. 31, No. 3 (Recorded December 22, 1951), Sonata in G Minor, Op. 49, No. 1 (Recorded September 15 & December 22, 1951), Sonata in G Major, Op. 49, No. 2 (Recorded September 25, 1951), Sonata in C Major, Op. 53 "Waldstein" (Recorded September 24, 1951), Sonata in F Major, Op. 54 (Recorded September 25, 1951), Sonata in F Minor, Op. 57 "Appassionata" (Recorded September 22, 1951), Sonata in F-sharp Major, Op. 78 (Recorded September 12, 1951), Sonata in G Major, Op. 79 (Recorded September 21, 1951), Sonata in E-flat Major, Op. 81a "Les adieux" (Recorded September 24, 1951), Sonata in E Minor, Op. 90 (Recorded September 21, 1951), Sonata in A Major, Op. 101 (Recorded September 25, 1951), Sonata in B-flat Major, Op. 106 "Sonate für das Hammerklavier" (Recorded September 21, 1951), Sonata in E Major, Op. 109 (Recorded September 20, 1951), Sonata in A-flat Major, Op. 110 (Recorded September 20, 1951), and Sonata in C Minor, Op. 111 (Recorded September 20, 1951).

Wilhelm Kempff, piano. DG 2740 228 (Ten records)

Re-issued in honor of the pianist's eighty-fifth birthday, this is the second of this three complete traversals of the Beethoven cycle. It was originally issued in this country by American Decca and later in the mid-sixties on DG KL 42/51. Its reappearance is a cause for rejoicing and despite my minor reservations, Beethoven piano buffs should definitely consider adding it to their collections.

Kempff has the wonderful ability to sound unique or special, while rarely sounding mannered or eccentric. His playing seems so natural that one often has the sensation that this is how the music ought to be played, even when he is offering an interpretation that runs counter to some of the more customary performance traditions. A good example of this is the first movement of Op. 2, No. 1; his tempo, which is

radically slower than what one normally encounters, is totally successful. Notice the clean staccati of the opening phrase and the clarity which this tempo allows in the eighth note passagework. Also, the harmonic tensions can now be more pronounced. Another good example is the first movement of the "Pathetique"; following a marvellously poised introduction, the pianist plays the Allegro di molto e con brio at a much slower pace than normal. Yet with his penchant for clarity and scrupulous observance of the composer's indications, the result is more exciting than most of the much quicker readings I have heard. One other interesting point: observe how in both of the movements cited the pianist is careful to keep an alla breve sensation despite his slow tempi.

With Kempff, the highlight of many of the early sonatas can be found in the slow movements of such works as Op. 2, No. 2, Op. 7, or Op. 22. In so many performances these movements can seem merely "pleasant", but with his playing they take on an added depth. The melodic contours float from bar to bar, phrases are spun out with rapt control, and climaxes are perfectly judged, all with a consummate sense of style. In some of the more famous slow movements, such as Op. 10, No. 3 or Op. 31, No. 2, the results are even more moving.

Another feature of these readings is the pianist's insistence on clarity; excessive pedalling is judiciously avoided, though never to the point of sounding dry. The finale of Op. 2, No. 3 is simply astonishing, absolute quicksilver; one must also cite his beautiful trills in this movement. Occasionally, Kempff's drive for clarity seems to backfire in such a place as the treacherous finale of Op. 101, where his attempt to articulate each running sixteenth note is not particularly successful. Essentially, his approach serves only to point up the difficulty of the passage. The first movement of Op. 81a is a similar example; this is perhaps the weakest performance in the cycle. However, he certainly redeems himself in the final two movements. The start of the finale is as bracing as one could ever hope to hear.

My biggest reservation about this set concerns the matter of first movement repeats which are for the most part missing. This is very much a personal matter, but surely in such two movement works as the "Waldstein" and Op. 111 with their extensive finales, the exposition repeats are essential for the overall balance of the works. However, one should note that he does observe the repeats in the variations of the latter. In fact, he is likely to observe any repeat that does not occur in the first movement as in the case of "The Tempest", where he ignores the first movement repeat while observing the one in the finale.

One might also have some reservations about some of the less assertive works. They are sometimes approached in too sedate a manner. For example, Op. 26 certainly responds very favorably to Richter's dynamic approach on RCA VICS 1427, while Kempff's more genteel reading makes the work seem slightly boring, especially in the outer movements. One other feature of his playing should be mentioned. Sometimes when confronted with a series of sixteenths slurred in groups of two, Kempff rushes the

two notes together producing an effect almost like that of a rolled chord. This strikes me as a deft and humorous solution to the difficult slurring in the first movement of Op. 31, No. 3, but as rather bizarre in the finale of Op. 78.

Yet, one must say that for all of the quibbles discussed above, one could also cite many more examples of truly great playing including the terrifying trills in the fugue of the "Hammerklavier", a craggy, taut "Appassionata", a rippling Op. 22 (with first movement repeat!), and a radiant Op. 110. Certainly if one is in the market for a set of the Beethoven sonatas, this one would stand up well to any of the competition. For repeated listening, I feel that it would be preferable to Schnabel, who, despite his many virtues, does not allow the music to breathe, especially when compared to Kempff. Brendel and Ashkenazy offer much exquisite playing, but the former seems to be a bit urbane for this music while the latter lacks Kempff's strength of personality. I suppose the real strength of this set is what I alluded to earlier in that here is an individual concept that seems to grow out of the music, not one that has been pushed on it.

DG provides a multi-lingual booklet with an interesting essay on the pianist by Karl Schumann, tributes from several students, some brief comments by Kempff on each sonata, recording dates, and several fascinating pictures. The sound is generally excellent; there is some slight tape hiss, but most importantly the piano has not been over-miked, and one can really enjoy the beautiful sound of the instrument.

Walter Pate