

SCHNABEL'S BEETHOVEN

BEETHOVEN: The Thirty-Two Sonatas for Piano, Artur Schnabel, piano from HMV Beethoven Sonata Society Edition, 78 r.p.m. originals, recorded 1932-1935, EMI HMV Treasury (England) RLS 758 (Nos. 1-7; Three Discs); RLS 754 (Nos. 8-15; Three Discs); RLS 755 (Nos. 16-22 and 24; Three Discs); RLS 758 (Nos. 23 and 25-32; Four Discs) (All mono)

No. 1, in F minor, Op. 2, No. 1; No. 2, in A, Op. 2, No. 2; No. 3, in C, Op. 2, No. 3; No. 4, in E flat, Op. 7; No. 5, in C minor, Op. 10, No. 1; No. 6, in F, Op. 10, No. 2; No. 7, in D, Op. 10, No. 3; No. 8, in C minor, Op. 13 (Pathetique); No. 9, in E, Op. 14, No. 1; No. 10, in G, Op. 14, No. 2; No. 11, in B flat, Op. 22; No. 12, in A flat, Op. 26; No. 13, in E flat, Op. 27, No. 1; No. 14, in C sharp minor; Op. 27, No. 2 (Moonlight); No. 15, in D, Op. 28 (Pastorale); No. 16, in G, Op. 31, No. 1; No. 17, in D minor, Op. 31, No. 2 (Tempest); No. 18, in E flat, Op. 31, No. 3; No. 19, in G minor, Op. 49, No. 1; No. 20, in G, Op. 49, No. 2; No. 21, in C, Op. 53 (Waldstein); No. 22, in F, Op. 54; No. 23, in F minor, Op. 57 (Appassionata); No. 24, in F sharp, Op. 78; No. 25, in G, Op. 79; No. 26, in E flat, Op. 81A (Lebewohl); No. 27, in E minor, Op. 90; No. 28, in A, Op. 101; No. 29, in B flat, Op. 106 (Hammerklavier); No. 30, in E, Op. 109; No. 31, in A flat, Op. 110; No. 32, in C minor, Op. 111

BEETHOVEN: The Five Concertos for Piano and Orchestra, Artur Schnabel, piano; London Symphony Orchestra (in Nos. 1 and 5); London Philharmonic Orchestra (in Nos. 2, 3, and 4); Dr. Malcolm Sargent, cond. from HMV 78 r.p.m. originals, recorded 1932-1935, EMI Voix de son Maitre (France) 2 C 153-03881/4 (Four Discs) (Mono)

No. 1, in C, Op. 15; No. 2, in B flat, Op. 19; No. 3, in C minor, Op. 37; No. 4, in G, Op. 58; No. 5, in E Flat, Op. 73 (Emperor)

To mark the centennial of Artur Schnabel (he was born on April 17, 1882), E.M.I. has produced fresh transfers of his Beethoven sonata and concerto recordings originally issued in the 1930s on 78 r.p.m. discs. All of these performances have appeared on long play before, but the latest restorations bring us appreciably closer to the originals: the piano tone is steadier, more impactive, and one gladly accepts more surface noise in exchange for the added brightness and the elimination of "wow" and "flutter" which momentarily intruded themselves in all of the previous transfers of the sonata discs (for some reason, the concerto cycle has had better luck in transference to microgroove -- the 1955 dub on RCA Victor LCT 6700, while not to be compared with this superb French version, was more than satisfactory). To be sure, these recordings are never going to sound particularly elegant; even considering their date of origin, the tone quality is generally spiky and unsensual when measured against the resonant, sonorous piano tone of Da Capo's reissue of Cortot's 1928 Schumann Carnaval or the full bodied reproduction of both instruments in Japanese Angel's of the 1936(?) Kreisler/Rupp Beethoven Kreutzer. But some of this might well be attributable to both Schnabel's approach to music and to making records....

For all the extensiveness of Schnabel's discography, it is worth remembering that he wasn't a particularly phonogenic artist; by 1900, he was already settled into a pattern of giving concerts, playing chamber music, teaching and composing that made him famous in his last years and -- with the exception of a few piano rolls dating from one of his early American tours -- he made no recordings at all until he was nearly fifty years old. For all the obvious seriousness of his legacy (don't take his facetious remarks "self-destruction through preservation"; calling HMV's London studio "The Torture Chamber" at face value), making records was, for him, an auxiliary to his musical lifestyle. The music he cared to lavish his monumental intellectual and spiritual resources on was, as he phrased it, "better than it could be played" and the concept of a "definitive performance", permanently fixed for posterity, probably never even entered his mind. Rachmaninoff, on the other hand, was an artist -- one of the very rare ones of that period -- who obviously did think in terms of the phonograph. He habitually refused to let his concerts be broadcast -- lest flawed performances be recorded off the air -- and he laconically insisted that the masters of all unapproved studio recordings be destroyed. Schnabel, then, was like Beethoven whose sketchbooks reveal the experimentation and laborious gestation of masterpieces and who left in his wake a stockpile of less-than-consequential handywork; Rachmaninoff's attitude, on the other hand, is not unlike that of Brahms -- with his trusty wastebasket and bonfire.

More than thirty years after his physical passing, Schnabel's art remains controversial. Many of his disciples regard him with almost papal infallibility, sometimes going so far as to defend his probably inadvertent use of corrupt texts with their consequential wrong notes and other misprints (and certainly emulating his recognizable rhythmic mannerisms--often crudely caricaturing them in the process). Detractors on the other hand, continue to glibly dismiss Schnabel's playing as technically inadequate (quipped Moritz Rosenthal, on hearing of Schnabel's rejection for military service, "Well, what did you expect? No fingers!"). Both factions are fond of recalling the words of Theodor Leschetizky to his young student, "You are never a pianist; you are a musician" as if playing the piano well and being a serious musician were mutually exclusive!

I don't know which are more objectionable -- the mindless virtuosos, with unlimited technical resources and execrable artistic judgement, or the so-called "serious" musicians, who proudly flaunt rhythmic sloppiness, overpedaling, and digital shortcomings like honorary badges. Rather, I do know that the Hofmanns of this world offend me more, but I confess to growing irritation at some of the cliches of the "musical" camp. And, rehearsing so many of Schnabel's performances after a dozen years of relative recollection, I am forced to admit that many of the foibles he cultivated (or, at the very least, sanctioned) have become the basis of their many bad habits. Although he was in most respects a pianistic wizard (who actually could get away with "doing most of the working for performances while walking"), there were certain chinks

in his technical armor. And it must be admitted that these tended to grow worse with additional years of slipshod practice. Compare the filligree passagework at the end of the first movement in the 1932 and 1947 Emperor Concerto recordings, for example; or note that the characteristically impatient execution of those figures in the first movement of Op. 111 (4, 5 and 6 bars before the end of the exposition), as heard in the 1932 recording, has degenerated into total chaos in the performance he recorded for RCA (Victrola AVM 1-1410) a decade later. Most assuredly, many of Schnabel's liberties (call them distortions if you will) have solid musical reasons--usually to bring out elements of structure and harmony--but were these habits really necessary?

A pupil once asked Schnabel whether it was better to "play in time" or to "play with feeling", and the sage answered that it is best "to feel in time." Actually, Schnabel tended to distort certain note-values, editorializing them to delineate voice leadings and aesthetic content. And because he sought a constant mobility, he tended to dodge in and out of the metronomic beat in the manner of a fencing master--beginning a trill (Op. 2, No. 3, first movement, bars 21 and 23) prematurely; agitating the scurrying unison passagework (in Op. 31, No. 1's first movement); jolting one's sensibilities with a vehement sforzando like pelting artillery fire (in the first movement of Op. 2, No. 1) or achieving a hair-raising accelerando (octaves, development section, first movement, in the 1932 and 1942 Emperor Concertos; the 1947 version is relatively milder and less idiosyncratic than its two predecessors). To many listeners, details of this sort all created an element of surprise and invigoratingly characterized Schnabel's musicmaking. But to some who dislike his playing (and even for some who admire it), one could draw the (uncomfortable?) analogy between this kind of rhythmic license and the jolting sensation one gets from being in an elevator that comes to an abrupt halt. Similarly, Schnabel often created the feeling of structural clarification simply by whisking the music past one's ears impatiently--the blur of notes into an aural "et cetera"; the telescoping of beats (a particularly extreme--and objectionable--example of this occurs near the beginning of his Hammerklavier recording), the restless piling of paragraph upon paragraph, often at unusually brisk tempos; all these things tended to "run the music through, mentally". For some, it represents an alert, eager mind pressing forward inquisitively; for others, it sounds merely ruthless and cavalier.

This extensive re-exposure to Schnabel's performances revealed to me another interesting characteristic--their ability to seem slow and inflected when, in reality, tempos are quite agitated. The Waldstein Sonata is an excellent example of this and the reason is that the fast basic tempo is subjected to numerous, almost imperceptible, gear-shifts and periodically peppered with rhetorical "breathing pauses" (the pianist's own description; see the footnotes in his text to the Beethoven sonatas). It was said of Beethoven's own performances that he tended to take fast movements faster than anyone else (and with violent fluctuations and, in Joachim's words, "boilings over"), and slow movements slower. This certainly is the case with Schnabel's playing--his

way with the many Adagios and Graves has a metaphysical quality bordering on suspended animation; part of this timeless quality came from a seamless legato and a wonderfully pliant sound, and part came from a miraculous instinct for timing. Schnabel's treatment of such slow movements was an indispensable ingredient of his greatness, but his example was largely untransferable: consider all the droopy, directionless, doom-laden performances of the Largo e mesto from Op. 10, No. 3 -- unsuccessful attempts, undoubtedly, of would-be Schnabelization. Schnabel's own performance of the movement is undoubtedly too slow, but is saved by superb coloristic palette, focus, and, above all, by a searing intensity. He once said that "although many can express sorrow in music, only a few can attempt the more difficult task of expressing joy." Schnabel's playing could be crushingly monumental, but, invariably, usually avoided stuffiness by its cutting intellectual edge, by its glimmer of twinkling humor.

Thus, one listens gratefully to his revelations but at the same time ruefully acknowledges the undeniable element of "schlamperei" in the playing.

The improved solidity of tone in the sonata recordings tends to redeem certain movements that previously offended me--the finale of Op. 10, No. 2, that of Op. 31, No. 3 and even the March and finale of Op. 101, while not ideal, now seem much stronger. Similarly, the Appassionata is better discerned in this undistorted dub, making an altogether more favorable impression despite its arguably rushed third movement (Schnabel follows his own printed advice for tempo, never explaining how his recommended "152 to the quarter note" tallies with Beethoven's "Allegro ma non troppo" directive.) Many of the other performances seem more masterly than ever--particular favorites of mine being Op. 2, No. 1; Op. 2, No. 3 (despite those questionable trills); Op. 10, No. 1; Op. 14, No. 1 (I also like the first two movements of Op. 14, No. 2, although vagaries of performance keep the metrical pulse of its third movement a mysterious secret); Op. 26; Op. 27, No. 1; Op. 28; Op. 31, Nos. 1 and 2 (even with the rushed first movement of the G major and the occasional jumble in the Tempest's finale); Op. 49, Nos. 1 and 2; Op. 53; Op. 54 (unsteady second movement and all); Op. 78; Op. 79; Op. 81A; Op. 90; Op. 109 and Op. 111 (the last two immeasurably superior to the softer, flabbier, but fractionally better reproduced 1942 performances).

On the other hand, certain sonatas--or rather, certain movements of sonatas--seemed a bit hasty of tone, clipped and businesslike--as, for example, Op. 7 and Op. 22. And after years of being an apologist for Schnabel's recording of the Hammerklavier, I have had a change of heart: trying to attempt Beethoven's fast metronome marks is one thing (this, the only sonata where the composer left any, is specified to begin with a first movement paced at "138 to the half note") and playing hob with note values and leaving out notes (and beats!)--all of which happens much too often here--is quite another. For all the insight lavished on the Adagio (even that movement lacks the warmth heard in Op. 109 and

111), the inescapable fact is that Schnabel sounds as though he had not prepared this demanding sonata sufficiently; this brusquely insensitive performance, then, is an unqualified failure; as he plays it, the stature of first movement and fugue simply vanish in a jumble of harsh, indistinct sound.

In this latest reincarnation, the sequence of the sonatas differs from both that of RCA (which kept the original arbitrary order of the Beethoven Society 78 albums) and COLH/Seraphim/Japanese Angel (which placed them in strict numerical sequence): numerical order is kept in the first two three-disc volumes, but in Volume 3, the shorter Op. 78 displaces the longer Appassionata, which appears in Volume 4, sensibly allotted to a whole side; and the tiny Op. 79's appearance is delayed to precede the Hammerklavier. The excellent Eric Blom notes, written for the original 78 issue, have happily been retained.

It seems a pity to have to add a sour note, but reissue producer Keith Harwick could have done his homework better: like his earlier counterparts, he has neglected to respect Schnabel's wishes in re the spacing of movements as set forth in his printed edition--the Marcia funebre of Op. 26, for instance, does not follow without pauses as Schnabel says it must, and Beethoven's own directive to link first and second movements of Op. 110 by only a single bar's pause is, as usual, ignored. But an even more serious failing is new to this transfer only: a measure has been carelessly expunged from the first movement of Op. 111. For shame!

Most mid-1930s concerto recordings were made under quaintly impromptu conditions: soloist, conductor and orchestra, more oft than not, thrown together with hardly any rehearsal. Although these examples of the Schnabel/Sargent partnership sound more informal than the later accounts of concertos 2-5 with Frederick Stock, Issay Dobrowen and Alceo Galliera (there is also an aircheck of No. 3 with Szell and the New York Philharmonic), it should be recalled that Schnabel and Sargent (not yet Sir Malcolm) had developed a congenial rapport via concerts sponsored by Sir Robert Mayer and Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Courtauld, collaborating in concertos by Bach, Mozart and Brahms as well as those by Beethoven. With the possible exception of No. 2, where soloist and conductor seem to have decidedly different notions re the first movement tempo, and where the violins' pervasive portamento sticks out like stage icicles in the Adagio, these earlier versions are technically firmer, temperamentally stronger and, ultimately, more satisfying. And the aged reproduction treats both piano and orchestra fairly kindly. This Voix de son Maitre release features the same Keith Hardwick transfers used by American Arabesque for their recent issue (a detailed review of which appeared in the October 1981 issue of High Fidelity). If you can afford the luxury import price, the French pressing has two points of superiority: firstly, the equalization is warmer, solider, mellower; secondly, the sequence, with Nos. 2 and 4 back to back, avoids the splitting of the Third Concerto across two separate discs. But Arabesque counters

these advantages by including as bonuses the splendid Schnabel performances of the Adante Favori and C major Polonaise, Op. 89, recorded in 1938 by HMV and for some unknown reason never issued on 78 r.p.m., and by offering the set more inexpensively. And their processing--harder, brighter than VSM's--is more than acceptable, with clean surfaces that almost match the import. (I have not heard the British HMV Treasury edition which contains the Andante and Polonaise, plus Fur Elise and the Op. 34 Variations.)

Harris Goldsmith