

HISTORIC INSTRUMENTAL RECORDINGS

SCHUMANN: Concerto for Cello and Orchestra in A Minor, Op. 129.

MIASKOVSKY: Concerto for Cello and Orchestra in C, Op. 56

Mstislav Rostropovich, cello; London Symphony Orchestra, Sir Benjamin Britten, cond. (in the Schumann); Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra, N. Faktorovich, cond. (in the Miaskovsky).
Discocorp RR 500 (mono)

Rostropovich made one other recording of the obscure Miaskovsky, and at least three others of the Schumann. The present account of the conservative Soviet composer's likeable but hardly enlivening score (he died in 1950 but sounds more like a relic of Glazounov's, if not Tchaikovsky's era) is probably the same as that once issued in the Soviet Union; a more recent version--in stereo--can be found on a Seraphim disc coupled with David Oistrakh's account of Prokofiev's Concerto No. 2. Although the EMI version is at least as well played, and technically superior as to recorded sound, the Faktorovich-led reading is perhaps a bit more robust and spontaneous sounding.

This account of the Schumann preserves a valuable collaboration with Sir Benjamin Britten (in subsequent years, Rostropovich and Britten were to make many fine commercial discs together). Stylistically, this most closely resembles the subdued, introspective version that the cellist taped for D.G. with Mravinsky and the Leningrad Philharmonic when they visited London in 1961 (the same year as the present broadcast that produced the BBC tape used here). The sound is good enough--conservative, but airy and spacious in ambience. Whether it is preferable to the superior-sounding Mravinsky-led D.G. is a question all Britten devotees will have to ask themselves. But, without question, it far outdistances the coarse Bernstein-mauled Angel performance and the lusty early Soviet mono taping issued by Monitor and myriad other budget labels. I, for one, am happy to add this disc to my collection.

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SCHUMANN: Etudes Symphoniques, Op. 13;

Waldscenen, Op. 82; Drei Romanzen, Op. 28

Walter Giesecking, piano,
Discocorp 492 (mono)

Giesecking was a great pianist. He was also something of a chameleon in that, being a noted colorist, he was able to change the color of his interpretive personality according to his momentary habitat (as note his heavily weighted, sentimentally portentous Grieg Concerto with Karajan and his altogether more attractive and volatile wartime broadcast of the same work released by Discocorp, erroneously attributed to Furtwangler). And, again like those little lizards, Giesecking could wiggle about with disconcerting flippancy. What could be a deft turn of phrase in a Mozart concerto would turn out to be shallow and irritating

in late Beethoven (his way with that little groupetto in the Tema of Beethoven's Op. 109 remains in my mind, after all these years, as a particular--and characteristically Gieseckingsque--abberation).

I have liked much of Giesecking's recorded Schumann: His mercurial tempos, and pointedly explicit phrasing in this romantic music had sufficient "tradition" without the usual accompanying over-sufficiency of kitsch. Particularly to my liking was the wartime Kreisleriana broadcast that Urania, and later Discocorp, issued. At first, I thought that I was going to like these performances--for the start of each record side leads one to expect a solid, ample piano sound and the already mentioned Giesecking combination of objectivity and sophisticated passion. But as the music progresses, the recorded sound drops in level and so (in a different sense) does the playing. Here is another demonstration to lend credence to the contention that Giesecking relied on his amazing sightreading ability rather than on practice. He may well have not been sightreading this music, but the casualness of the pianism strongly suggests that he was, indeed, doing just that.

The Waldscenen, to be sure, needs a deft touch (and in fact sounds rather short of breath in Arrau's "profound", bronzen-toned performance). But one need only compare Giesecking's skittish, and sloppy, playing of the unisons in the second of these miniatures with Richter's bewitching accuracy to sense an acute feeling of disaffection. Or Richter's beguilingly atmospheric "Vogel als Profit" with this drummed-out, pelikan like performance. Orchestrally suggestive tuttis, always suggested by Richter, are skimmed over by the late German artist here, and a feeling of dryly dedactic boredom--like that of a musically responsible and less inebriated Hofmann--pervades the entire disc. In fairness, Giesecking never approved these performances for release, and perhaps they shouldn't have been. Only the standard variations of Op. 13 are given.

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BEETHOVEN: Piano Music (Volume 5)

Artur Schnabel, piano (Recorded 1932-1938)
HMV Treasury RLS 769

Bagatelles, Op. 33, 119, 126; Fantasia, Op. 77; Fur Elise, WoO 59; Minuet, WoO 82; Rondos: in A, WoO 49; in C, Op. 51, No. 1; Rondo a Capriccio, Op. 129 ("Rage over a lost Penny"); Variations: in E flat, Op. 35 ("Eroica"): on a Waltz of Diabelli, Op. 120

Observant readers will see from the contents listing above that Volume 5 of HMV's new transfer of the Beethoven Society does not strictly correspond to the earlier Seraphim incarnation. The Op. 34 Variations are omitted--along with the 1938 Fur Elise--and in their place, one finds the first long play transfer of an earlier Fur Elise (1932), which originally occupied the last side of the Schnabel/Sargent Beethoven C major Concerto, and the first release anywhere of Schnabel's performances of the Elf Bagatellen, Op. 119, recorded 10 November 1938. It is anyone's guess why these were never before issued--for like the similarly

unpublished Schnabel readings of the F major Andante Favori and the Polonaise, Op. 89 (which made their first official appearance last year in the HMV box of the Five Concertos, along with the displaced Op. 34 Variations and the later Fur Elise; both were issued "unofficially" on a Bruno Walter Society disc several years earlier). These retrieved bagatelles are superbly played and beautifully engineered for their period. One wonders how much other valuable unpublished Schnabelia exists in EMI's vaults (RCA is known to have a complete set of the Schubert Impromptus, D. 899, vintage 1942).

Because they are being issued for the first time, Op. 119 obviously deserves to be noted first. Schnabel's way with these authentic miniatures (as opposed to Op. 33, and especially, Op. 126--which, despite their designation as "bagatelles", are substantially scaled klavierstucke) contrasts instructively with the equally eloquent Rudolf Serkin interpretation for CBS. Where Serkin goes for a wiry intensity and volatile brio (albeit with a degree of nuance and color rare for that pianist--at least on records), Schnabel instead veers toward weight and sobriety. This essential difference is particularly notable in the C minor (Risoluto) bagatelle, but throughout, there is a ripper expanse to the sonority, and a broader inflection. One discovers that Schnabel is less textually astute than Serkin near the end of the very first (G minor) Bagatelle, placing the quarter rest on the second--instead of the first--beat of bar 65. But, like Serkin, he plays an F instead of an A flat in the melodic line at bar 20 of the same piece (which clearly makes more musical sense than the variant favored by some modern "scholars.")

Schnabel was himself a pedagogue and an editor, but even so, one discovers a few careless details along the way: Rehearing the superb performances of the Op. 126, for instance, I was a bit taken back to be reminded that the pianist fails to note a variant in the embellished melodic line at the start of the first piece. But, having made the point that Schnabel could be a bit cavalier, it is also imperative to see these tiny lapses in the context of a much more important musical honesty and pianistic mastery. Indeed, Schnabel is heard at his most persuasive through this set, and the vital validity of his artistry is immeasurably helped by the marked improvement of the new transfers.

One particular beneficiary of HMV's improved technical work is the so-called "Rage over a lost Penny": As heard in the filtered earlier transfer, it sounded like an exciting but godawful mess; now it is revealed to be less blurred by indiscriminate pedaling, and reasonably detailed and accurate. The 1932 Fur Elise, surprisingly, is substantially different from that of 1938--a little squarer, with an angular rhythmic solidity in place of the later version's rippling fluency. (I find this one stronger; the latter account more charming.) The remaining performances which always seemed wonderful, are even more irresistible in these revitalized restorations--the Eroica and Diabelli Variations, in fact, are probably the most probing and eloquent interpretations ever put onto records.

This set, then, is urgently recommended, even to those who already own most of the material on the older Seraphim and COLH pressings. One word of caution, however: a few of the earliest pressings of the HMV anthology gave the C major Rondo twice at the expense of its A major counterpart--this error has been corrected.

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CHAUSSON: Concerto for Violin, Piano and String Quartet, in D Major, Op. 21
FAURE: Berceuse, Op. 16

Jacques Thibaud, violin; Alfred Cortot, piano; with Mme Inard and Messrs. Voulfman, Blainpain and Eisenberg.

EMI-Pathe Marconi 2C 051-03719 (mono) [from originals recorded July 1 and 2, 1931]

Pablo Casals, the distinguished friend and colleague of Thibaud and Cortot, once described music as being "like a face: if you don't like the face, well and good; but don't try to change it."

I don't like the face of Chausson's Concerto, Op. 21. To these ears and sensibilities, it has always been a charter member of the genre best characterized as "My bathtub runneth over:" in common with the Franck Piano Quintet and sundry Lisztian exercises in futility, the composer's reliance upon billowing chromaticism, cyclic repetitions and what Debussy loathsomely referred to as "Wagner Fever" make this music seem to go on forever, producing both fatigue and ennui, not to mention flatulent pretension....

But rehearing this first recording of the piece, I realized the truth in Casals' remark: in the days of the 78 r.p.m. disc, Thibaud, Cortot et al brought all the rhetoric to a boil in this wild and woolly 1931 performance, while nonbelievers were ostensibly supposed to take solace in a brisker, tauter 1941 Heifetz/Sanroma presentation. But hearing both performances anew, I have to confess that Thibaud/Cortot and friends play with such sincerity and conviction that they ultimately almost succeeded in winning me over, whereas Heifetz, Sanroma and associates (much too businesslike to be described as "Friends"!) approach the music as skeptics, refining its ensemble problems and compressing its architectural outlines, paradoxically causing it to seem even more banal. In summation, Thibaud and Cortot offer an eloquent sermon, while Heifetz and Sanroma would appear to be doing a "gig."

No such strictures apply to the Faure Berceuse, a little gem of a work. Thibaud and Cortot play it very beautifully, though no better than Menuhin or Pinchas Zukerman (in two of those violinists' most eloquent recorded performances).

These new transfers sound altogether more vital than the older, perfectly adequate dubbing on French COLH 313 (which may well have derived, however, from the same tape).

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DVORAK: Quintet for Piano and Strings, in A, Op. 81

SCHUMANN: Quintet for Piano and Strings, in E Flat, Op. 44

Artur Schnabel, piano; Pro Arte Quartet
EMI World Records, Retrospect Series SH 408,
(mono) [from HMV originals, 1934]

This is the first official reissue of this early recording of the Dvorak Quintet: It appeared--also coupled with the Schumann--on an underground Discocorp release some years ago. The Schumann was, in addition, also included in the COLH "Great Recordings" Series, but that French Pathe disc (COLH 85, coupled with Schnabel's 1947 Kinderscenen, his only other commercial recording of anything by Schumann) was never repressed in the domestic Angel catalogue.

The Dvorak is, by far, the more successful. In this ebullient composition, Schnabel's combination of architectural rigor with kinetic temperament enlivens the music in an exciting manner. Here the pianist's dynamic presence also infuses the Pro Arte musicians who were, to judge from their other work--alone and with collaborating musicians, relatively staid and frilly. In every respect--save possibly that of color, which is naturally restricted by the primitive engineering--this is a superb and cogently organic interpretation. The string playing, to be sure, exhibits much more period portamento than might be considered appropriate today, even for such high romantic fare as this, but--like the pianist's phrasing--it is also sinuous and tensile, full of intelligent enthusiasm.

Schumann's Quintet, on the other hand, never takes wing as it should. For one thing, the first movement tempo sounds distinctly tepid alongside the even older (but better sounding) Gabrilowitsch/Flonzaley classic (briefly available in RCA VCM 7103), and, throughout, an aura of moderation and "correctness" keeps the material earthbound whenever it asks to be airborne "on wings of song". Schnabel evidently played great quantities of Schumann's music in concert cycles, but--to judge from this, his curiously goosestepping Kinderscenen (always excepting its unusually eloquent "Traumerei") and the sloppy and erratic aircheck of the Piano Concerto (which is, alas, authentic despite son K.U. Schnabel's vehement denial)--its essence seemed to evade him. In many ways, this account of the Quintet is duplicated, in much better sound, by Curzon and the Budapest and by Rubinstein with the Guarneri. In the absence of the Flonzaley, I recommend Serkin/Budapest (CBS M2s 734).

These transfers are much more subtle than the earlier ones. There is less filtering than on the COLH of the Schumann, and an altogether smoother equalization and less surface noise than on the Discocorp (which was dubbed from worn commercial shellac pressings rather than the metal parts presumably available to EMI). I suspect that there has been a judicious use of a time delay to impart more body and depth to the sound.

Harris Goldsmith