

Emil Gilels in Performance (Discocorp 559)

Beethoven: Sonata in F Minor, Op. 57 "Appassionata"; Chopin: Ballade in G Minor, Op. 23; Schumann: Arabesque, Op. 18; Debussy: Images (Bk. I). Recorded in 1952 (Beethoven) and 1963 (Chopin, Schumann, and Debussy).

Walter Gieseking Plays Beethoven (Discocorp 493) (Two discs)

Beethoven: Sonatas in G, Op. 31, No. 1; in F-sharp, Op. 78; in G, Op. 79; in E-flat, Op. 81a "Les Adieux"; in B-flat, Op. 106 "Hammerklavier"; and in C Minor, Op. 111.

Clara Haskil: Ludwigsburg April 11, 1953 Recital (Discocorp 213)

J.S. Bach: Tocatta in E Minor, BWV 914; Scarlatti: Sonatas in C, L. 457, K. 132; in E-flat, L. 142, K. 193; and in B Minor, L. 33, K. 87; Schumann: Variations on the Name "Abegg", Op. 1; Debussy: Etudes: Nos. 7 "Pour les sonorites opposees" and 10 "Pour les degres chromatiques"; Ravel: Sonatine; Beethoven: Sonata in C Minor, Op. 111. (Also includes tribute to Haskil from Alfred Cortot)

The Gilels disc is highly recommended; this is superb playing with the pianist in excellent technical and musical estate. The Beethoven, which I suspect is from a studio broadcast, receives an almost perfectly balanced reading that excites the mind as well as the senses. The first movement is suitably tense and expectant, while avoiding sensationalism. The second movement has a rich tonal solidity and the finale is tightly controlled with an explosive coda. The repeat in the second half of this movement is observed. Gilels is not always faithful to the composer's dynamics, but this is a performance that will give great pleasure. The sound is rather clangy on top, but still very listenable.

The other items are taken from a live concert with applause, yet audience noise is minimal. The Chopin has the right amount of elegance and power, again as in the Beethoven culminating in a staggering coda. However, one must observe that Gilels, along with many of his colleagues, would not flub so many notes in the left hand passages of the scherzando section, if he would simply play it a bit more slowly. The Schumann is suitably poetic, although a little top-heavy. The Debussy is often magical with the pianist in total control of the sonority of his instrument, though there are a couple of odd rhythmic lapses, such as the final bars of "Reflot dans l'eau." Do not pay too much attention to my little grumbles; this release will be very much appreciated in any piano lover's collection.

The Giesecking set is significant as he did not record any of the included works commercially. These performances are apparently derived from a complete Beethoven Sonata cycle the pianist did for the Saarländischer Rundfunk between April and December, 1949. The sound is rather boxy, and there is a small tape blurb in Op. 78, but it is generally quite acceptable. Giesecking's Beethoven has often struck me as too feline with a general lack of rhythmic vigor and harmonic drive that are so essential to the music. Also, he often seems to be occupied with delicate shadings at the expense of structural unity and impact. Furthermore, as Harris Goldsmith alluded to in a recent ARSC Journal review (Vol. XV, No. 1, pgs. 68-69) his playing sometimes gives the impression of amazingly proficient sight-reading. Op. 81a is a good example; the first movement is slightly too slow with a lack of forward momentum and there is an ever-present sense of impending technical catastrophe that is admittedly somehow avoided. The slow movement is given in a strangely detached manner, reducing this poignant music to mere tedium.

Op. 79, featuring both first movement repeats, is much more successful with the work's humor deftly brought out, though Schnabel remains unforgettable in this work. Op. 31, No. 1 is also enjoyable; the pianist strikes a nice balance between understatement and cheap humor. However, on repeated hearings one begins to be annoyed by missed bass notes and a lack of clear articulation in technical passages. One hates to say it, but all this performance needed to be a great one was a few hours of careful practice. Giesecking's imaginative response to pianistic color works extremely well in Op. 78, which is the most consistently satisfying performance included in this set. The first movement, with both repeats observed again, absolutely glistens, and the finale is a playful romp.

Op. 106 is problematical with an almost continual sense of technical strain. It is not that so many notes are missed, but that the pianist's rhythmic control is so weak that the ultimate result is dizzying chaos. There are, however, a few nice touches such as the delectable scale leading back to the scherzo proper, and the slow movement is often quite eloquent. Finally, Op. 111 is also frustrating with the work's opening rhythmic scheme being most unclear. The Allegro opens with demonic weight but is marred by the same technical strain as Op. 106. The coda which can be one of the most soothing moments in all of music, is treated very casually, thereby destroying its usual effect. The finale opens with a truly semplice statement of the theme, but this very positive effect is marred by some highly quirky rubato in the first two variations. After that, matters improve enormously with the remainder of the movement being performed on a highly exalted level. It is difficult to imagine the third variation being better played, and the following delicate fillagree passagework is exquisitely handled. One must also applaud the

pianist for observing Beethoven's L'istesso tempo indications. This movement, along with Op. 78, shows what a great musician this man could be, and it is unfortunate that the rest of this set does not even approach that level. While some may disagree, I really cannot recommend this collection to anyone other than devoted Giesecking collectors. Incidentally, my test pressings promised two Scarlatti Sonatas that were nowhere to be found.

Clara Haskil's playing, in contrast, seems to remain at a consistently high level. Giesecking's often casual approach is here supplanted by musicianship of aristocratic refinement, taste, and control. The woman's sense of poise is astounding, as is the level of seemingly effortless technical polish. Here is someone who obviously thought about the music as much as Giesecking, but also took the trouble to practice. Several of these items (the Bach, Schumann, Beethoven, and Scarlatti: Sonata, K. 107) were previously released on a two-disc Melodram album, catalog no. 207. That set also includes, among other items, a treasurable account of the Mozart D Minor Concerto with Fricsay that should not be missed. However, the present release contains some previously unavailable material and certainly provides a less expensive way to sample the art of this great pianist.

Haskil recorded the Ravel, Schumann, and two (K. 87 and K. 193) of the Scarlatti items for Philips at about the time of this recital, and they are hopefully still available on a rather expensive nine-disc collection, catalog no. 6747 055, from PSI. It is fascinating to observe the consistency between her work in the studio and in concert. The performances are almost identical, though the commercial sound is somewhat better than the slightly dull and hissy sonics of the Discocorp issue. Notice the flawless virtuosity present in both versions of Schumann's treacherous Abegg Variations that is utterly natural and never self-conscious. Score readers should note that she plays from the Clara Schumann Edition and not from Robert's original version currently available from Henle.

The Bach is clear and flowing, though one might wish for more rhythmic freedom. The Debussy Etudes are superb examples of her subtle control of color. The other Scarlatti Sonata (K. 132) makes one long for a re-issue of her long-deleted Westminster disc devoted entirely to that composer. The Beethoven, which she never recorded commercially, is, of course, the most important item on the record, and it is certainly a most distinguished reading, though for my taste, not quite up to the other items included here. The opening suffers from the same unclear rhythm as did Giesecking's, and there is also a very rare and most unfortunate technical lapse. The Allegro is a bit too subtle, though beautifully played, and coda is truly sublime. The variations flow effortlessly reaching a magnificent climax; however, she is not as scrupulous as Giesecking

in observing Beethoven's L'istesso tempo indications, and one certainly misses the supreme ecstasy the German pianist brought to the third variation. This well-filled disc concludes with a brief spoken tribute in French by her teacher, Alfred Cortot. Finally, one must thank Discocorp for making this material so easy to obtain and for continuing to provide high-quality, silent pressings.

Walter Pate