

RECORD REVIEWS

BEETHOVEN: Sonatas for Piano: No. 7 in D, Op. 10, No. 3 (recorded in concert, Hamburg, February 16, 1948); **No. 15 in D, Op. 28** ("Pastorale"); **No. 21 in C, Op. 53** ("Waldstein"); **No. 32 in C Minor, Op. 111** (in concert, Salzburg, July 28, 1954). Edwin Fischer, pianist. Fonit Cetra Documents DOC 38 (two discs, mono), \$10.95.

In the period "between the two world wars" (let us hope there will never be another such!), the Swiss-born Edwin Fischer's career was something of a Doppelgänger to that of the (at least to American concertgoers) better-known--and all things considered, probably greater--Artur Schnabel. A pupil of Martin Krauss a Liszt disciple who was also the teacher of Claudio Arrau, Fischer (1886-1960) was revered for many of the same qualities that Schnabel was: for being a High Priest of Beethoven, Schubert, Mozart and Brahms. Like Schnabel, Fischer coincidentally made very few commercial recordings of Schumann's music--the only one that comes to mind is a Schumann Fantasy, made late in the artist's career; unlike Schnabel, though, Fischer was regarded as a Bach specialist and in fact was the first to record the complete Well-Tempered Clavier.

There were, of course, some notable differences between the Fischer style and the Schnabel style, and these four performances of Beethoven sonatas, all of them derived from recitals rather than recording sessions, tend to emphasize just these points of divergence. For one thing, Fischer's "intellectuality" was less doctrinaire than his distinguished colleague's: his tempos were generally slower, less rigorous, and his less puritanical adherence to textual matters is revealed here in numerous filled-in chords and octave amplifications in the bass which Schnabel would have mercilessly rejected. Moreover, Fischer--more of a sensualist to begin with--was evidently far more improvisational in his approach. In this respect his art resembles that of Arthur Rubinstein and Mieczyslaw Horszowski (who, happy to relate, is still playing splendidly at age 94). Whether Fischer's ripe expansiveness is closer to Beethoven or to Brahms is a moot point, but that it was genuinely Teutonic, and deeply musical, cannot be parried.

All four of the present performances find the pianist somewhat past his prime. Whether because of the music's characteristics, the appreciably earlier vintage, or both, the 1948 Hamburg Radio transcription of Op. 10 No. 3 finds Fischer in stronger technical and interpretive estate. There are, 'tis true, a few smudges (none of them particularly consequential), and the first movement tempo is perhaps a trifle comfortable for a Presto, but the combination of authority, fervor and a sense of tragedy produces a spiritu-

ally memorable, orthodox-sounding Beethoven. The Largo e Mesto (slow and sad) second movement is particularly profound here--and pianistically beautiful in sound. In light of such visionary recreation, this listener can readily overlook some arbitrary fussing with the appoggiaturas in the first movement's second subject.

The remaining three sonatas all come from the same concert--one given at the Salzburg Festival on 28 July 1954. The decline, as such, in Fischer's artistry is apparent more in minuscule uncertainties of touch and voicing than in "wrong notes" per se (which were always a hallmark of the Fischer--and Schnabel--style). Thus, the "Waldstein" Sonata, which requires lapidarian pianistic symmetry in particularly uncompromising degree, suffers the most from the prevailing lassitude. There are too many "holes"--chords left incomplete through imprecise voicing (though perhaps Fischer's active imagination and mercurial determination to make even repeated notes such as II:26-27 sound "different" accounts for some of the unsettling quality); a lack of requisite leggiero; and a general lack of urgency. One doesn't think of the "Waldstein" as a genial work.

Op. 111 is better--rugged, admirably proportioned, and sporadically eloquent. But Schnabel's great 1932 interpretation makes many of the same points more tellingly--with greater digital assurance and dynamic precision. Fischer's account has its labored moments; a slightly earlier studio-derived performance is better controlled, though still no equal of Schnabel's. Op. 28 has a few impetuous quirks in the first movement development that I rather liked. While looser and less well organized than Schnabel's performance, one of the greatest in that pianist's historic complete cycle, it is decidedly likable in its oafish, genial way. One can wink an eye and let those missed bass notes at the very end escape censure--admittedly, that passage is treacherous even for spryer, younger pianists.

Basically, the sound quality is very satisfactory, clearly conveying the noble warmth and color of Fischer's sound, and its granitic "clenched fist" quality as well. Two of these performances--the "Waldstein" and the "Pastorale"--were previously issued by Discocorp (now Music & Arts) as RR 435 in an American pressing in sound almost as fine as on this Italian issue.

Harris Goldsmith