

**BEETHOVEN: Sonatas for Piano: No. 16 in G, Op. 31, No. 1; No. 24 in F-sharp, Op. 78; No. 25 in G, Op. 79; No. 26 in E-flat, Op. 81A ("Lebewohl"); No. 29 in B-flat, Op. 106 ("Hammerklavier"); No. 32 in C Minor, Op. 111 (from German radio tapes of assorted vintage). Walter Gieseking, pianist. Music & Arts RR 493 (two discs, mono), \$19.96; 17.96 if ordered directly from Music & Arts Programs of America, Inc., P.O. Box 771, Berkeley, CA 94701.**

In an adjacent review, I lamented the fact that Alfred Cortot, a great virtuoso who simply didn't like to practice, didn't take a little extra time to polish the performances he left us on records. I have always thought that Cortot (and Schnabel, too, for that matter) let certain things go by only because his audience permitted him to do so: in other words, an intelligent artist would have happily accepted more lapidarian, note-perfect playing had the "norm" of his day required it: even in the early 1950s, after the introduction of tape editing, the mania for the cosmetic, note-perfect recording had not yet taken full hold of our aesthetic sensibilities....

The same could be said of Gieseking--and in his case, this is clearly borne out by the patrician cleanliness of most of his "official" recordings. But "off mike," so to speak, he could--like his distinguished colleagues--be maddeningly cavalier. Some of the glibness even appeared intermittently in the studio readings, as for instance in the unforgettably insensitive way he rattled off the gruppetto in the Tema of Beethoven's Op. 109; compare this to the deeply humane way of Schnabel and Dame Myra Hess. What surprised me about these Beethoven sonatas in the Music & Arts album (I understand that still another of them he never officially recorded, the "Pastorale," Op. 28, is obtainable on another Music & Arts release, IGI 380, sharing vinyl with Schubert's G Major Sonata and Bach's Sixth English Suite) is the degree of slovenliness present, and even more so, the rhythmic distortion with the purpose of delineating structure that actually rivals Schnabel's in both quantity and intensity.

Op. 31 No. 1, for example, is highly Schnabelian in its brisk tempos, its cubistic telescoping of phrases, and its vigor. It is, to be sure, somewhat irritating that he never once gets the bass note right in the first movement's second theme, but in its rambunctious way the performance satisfies.

The three "little" sonatas, Opp. 78, 79, and 81A, find Gieseking in rather pale estate. Op. 78 lacks the focus of Schnabel's incomparably succinct reading, and its last movement in particular sounds both tepid and flurried. Op. 79 is generally well played, but Gieseking's pace for the wiggling finale is comparatively listless while the Barcarola central

movement seems to suffer from drought; it lacks a sense of fantasy and flow, just as the finale lacks fun. The "Lebewohl"'s first movement is miserably beset by erratic, flustered rhythm, especially in that celebrated passage with the double notes, but the performance recovers somewhat thereafter--the scampering Le retour finale romps exuberantly.

Gieseeking suddenly strikes fire in the "Hammerklavier." He plays the first movement at something approaching Schnabel's forward impetus (and drops almost as many notes). This ruthless vigor and structural elucidation continues to the sonata's end. In the Adagio one is whisked through the musical anatomy with a feeling of resolute destiny comparable to those elevators that leave your stomach on floor 38 while the rest of you is transported to floor 40! It's not particularly warm playing, but it nevertheless possesses a burning intelligence. Similarly the final Fuga, which is prefaced by an unusually brisk introduction. The whole sonata (with first movement repeat) is squeezed onto a single side and is consequently mastered at a low level. With the volume boosted, this performance has real impact, with the sundry lapses of little import.

Op. 111 is, if anything, even finer. Gieseeking surprisingly omits the first movement repeat here, but he hurtles through the movement as if possessed. The knotted, densely polyphonic writing is conveyed with truly convulsive energy. As for the Arietta with its evolving variations, the concept is bold, elevated in structural comprehension, but perhaps in the end not really uplifting in spirit.

The sound on all these German radio tapings is so-so, with Op. 111 faring best in that respect. The test pressings suggest that this is not one of their better efforts--too many pops, ticks and swishes. There are also other signs of careless production: two Scarlatti sonatas are supposed to follow Op. 111 but never do.

Harris Goldsmith