

BRAHMS: Concerto No. 1 in D Minor for piano and orchestra, Op. 15 (recorded February 1933). **BEETHOVEN: Sonata No. 26 in E-flat for piano, Op. 81A ("Lebewohl")**(London, September 1934). Wilhelm Backhaus, pianist; BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Adrian Boult (in the Brahms). Music & Arts RR 315 (mono), \$9.98; \$8.98 if ordered directly from Music & Arts.

BRAHMS: Concerto No. 2 in B-flat for piano and orchestra, Op. 83 (recorded in concert, Lugano, 1958). Wilhelm Backhaus, pianist; Orchestra della Radio Svizzera Italiana conducted by Carl Schuricht. Melodram MEL 202 (mono), \$10.95.

Wilhelm Backhaus (1884-1969) had a long and distinguished phonographic career. A pupil of Eugen d'Albert, he began his recording career via cylinder and ended it on stereo discs, missing the introduction of digital techniques by merely a few years. Always at home with the music of Beethoven and Brahms, Backhaus (or Bachaus, as he spelled his name in 78-rpm days) recorded less likely fare in his younger years, the complete Chopin Etudes and the Grieg Concerto, for example.

Almost needless to say, both Brahms concertos figured prominently in both his concert and discographic repertory--there are two Backhaus versions on disc of the D Minor, and three documenting his burly way with the B-flat. The two items here bring us a long-overdue LP transfer of the D Minor in its earlier recording (first published on HMV DB 1839/43) and a fourth Backhaus account of Op. 83. The presence on the podium of Carl Schuricht means that there are now two performances with that maestro (Schuricht also led the 1952 mono LP edition with the Vienna Philharmonic) to balance the pair done in 1938 and 1966 in collaboration with Karl Böhm.

The two releases present an intriguing comparison and suggest the unlikely thesis that Backhaus wore the mantle of sobriety in his youth, becoming ardent and reckless in old age. A more probable explanation is that Backhaus, like so many other artists, tended to lose his reserve before an audience--and if some of the very last Backhaus discs of Beethoven sonatas also give evidence of greater abandon and emotional warmth, perhaps the reason is that those late recordings, though of studio provenance, were made in very long takes, a bit more informally, and thus approximated more closely the conditions of the concert hall.

I was interested to rehear the early D Minor Concerto recording for another reason: it was on the basis of an early hearing or two of that selfsame album, over New York's WQXR years ago, that I acquired the remake with Böhm and the VPO when London released it in the early 1950s. When one is

a young teenager he can be pardoned for thinking of the Brahms D Minor as a work of towering maturity and one best served by the most venerable of performers; paradoxically, now that I'm older and, hopefully, wiser, I realize that this concerto's genius is more crucial to its well-being than its "maturity"--Brahms was barely out of his own teens when he began it, and the music's heated sublimity (the central Adagio is said to be the composer's elegy for Robert Schumann and his declaration of love for Schumann's widow) is really more ideally served by the fiery abandon that only the young (and young at heart) can bring to it. Suffice it to say, I had over the years become disenchanted with Backhaus' sober approach and was therefore grateful for the opportunity to reevaluate it. This was, incidentally, the first time I had been able to listen to both Backhaus versions in juxtaposition.

In the main, both accounts are essentially similar--the earlier a bit faster in tempo, more flexible in rubato, which may be the soloist's reaction to Boult's framework, which is similarly more ardent and molded than Böhm's more predictable angularity. And while Backhaus kept a surprising degree of his technical address well into his seventies, one senses a greater pianistic reserve in the 48-year-old virtuoso. One also must mention the directness and simplicity of Backhaus' way--especially his cogent and straightforward handling of the first movement's second theme group, traditionally mauled and sentimentalized by too many modern-day exponents. These felicities duly noted, I must say that Backhaus gives a basically uninvolved, uninteresting performance--one about as lovable as a pet rock. Lines and harmonic tensions which often have searing impact and intensity under other auspices here emerge with a leathery, lumbering (nothing to do with tempos, which are actually rather fast) tortoise-like lack of urgency. Backhaus, incidentally, adds a low B-flat in the bass overlapping the first note of the fugato in the third movement--a practice recently taken up again by Brendel and a few others.

The early Beethoven "Lebewohl" Sonata (transferred from HMV DB 2407/8), the first of four Backhaus versions, is by and large more convincing than the Brahms concerto as an interpretation. The grasp of notes and structure is equally impressive, but here the well-built edifice is filled out by a certain emotional vigor, and even a modicum of warmth. It should be noted that Backhaus was one of the earliest performers to opt for the correct version of the bass line at measures 118-119 in the first movement--just as Gieseking (see the above review) was one of the last to persist in playing the discredited text, i.e. with the bass line parallel to the same passage in the exposition. The pressing is representative of Music & Arts' lately improved standards of

production, and Ward Marston's tape transfers are generally good, save for a serious volume fluctuation in the Sonata's first movement coda.

A much warmer, improvisatory aspect of Backhaus' interpretive personality comes to the fore in the 1958 live taping of the Brahms Second Concerto. A few dropped notes are also present--as is to be expected from virtually any in-concert performance of this marathon work--but these, if anything, actually add to the feeling of spiritual involvement. My favorite Backhaus account of Brahms No. 2 remains the 1938 Dresden recording with its considerably faster tempos and really spectacular technical command, but this somewhat more discursive aircheck shows Backhaus to have been a more communicative player than many of us realized. The sound is standard off-the-line mono for the period: the period gains from its close microphoning, but the same proximity certainly doesn't flatter the scrappy, substandard orchestral playing. Schuricht's direction, per se, is authoritative.

Harris Goldsmith

BRAHMS: Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 68 (recorded April 11, 1928). **MOZART: Symphony No. 39 in E-flat, K. 543** (April 12, 1928). Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Felix Weingartner. Opal 828, \$12.95.

During the past ten years Weingartner's fortunes have changed. In the early '70s he was known to many modern collectors virtually only by repute, for the extensive US Columbia reissues had disappeared without replacement from elsewhere, save for the old Pathé transfers available from Vox and Japan of the Vienna Philharmonic Beethoven 8th and 9th. But then Parnassus and BWS started the modern revival in a modest way (let us ignore an appalling Electrola transfer of the Eroica). EMI followed in the UK with The Art of Felix Weingartner (ARSC Journal, VIII:2-3, p. 114), containing full discographic details and a critical assessment. Credit then passed to Japanese Angel for issuing Anthony Griffith's superb Beethoven transfers (ARSC Journal IX:2-3, p. 59), appreciatively reviewed in The Gramophone and elsewhere. A spate of Japanese unofficial issues duplicated and added to their Angel Beethoven set, and gave us as well all the Brahms symphonies and shorter works, including a reprint--unacknowledged--of the EMI discography. In the USA Past Masters put out a series of excellent transfers of less familiar material, all fully documented. And lately, even Melodiya in its series "The World's Leading Interpreters" has published a well-annotated disc of the Beethoven Second Symphony and the Rienzi Overture (33M 1043699-700). To