

BEETHOVEN: Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, No. 5, in E Flat, Op. 73 ("Emperor"): First Movement Only. Eugen D'Albert, piano; Berlin Radio Orchestra; Bruno Seidler-Winkler, cond. [Radio transcription, recorded December 1, 1930]; Symposium Records 1000

Eugen D'Albert (1864-1932) was one of the last generation of Liszt pupils, and, along with Moritz Rosenthal, probably the most illustrious virtuoso to come from those auspices. As early as 1889, the occasion of his New York debut (in this concerto), Henry Krehbiel was singing D'Albert's praises and one can infer the respect in which this musician was held by reading Artur Schnabel's appraisal: [Busoni] "was the greatest figure--there is nobody like him....If he and Eugen D'Albert, who also had a most fascinating personality, had been combined in one, the result would have been one of the greatest musicians of all times, for D'Albert had all the raw material and Busoni all the refinement....Both after their fortieth year began to neglect their piano-playing--it meant less and less to them; they preferred to compose. D'Albert, with his elemental qualities, had been labelled the "Beethoven Player'...." Of D'Albert Bruno Walter wrote: "I shall never forget the titanic force in his rendition of Beethoven's concerto in E flat major. I am almost tempted to say he did not play it, he personified it. In his intimate contact with his instrument, he appeared to me like a new centaur, half piano, half man."

For years, collectors have been reading about an alleged D'Albert recording of the first movement of that very Beethoven concerto, recorded by German Radio on December 1, 1933, and now we have that document, skillfully dubbed from five single-sided 78 r.p.m. discs, in mint condition, that were discovered in the private collection of one Marco Contini of Milan. Not that it matters terribly much, in view of such a historically important curio, but the sound quality is much better than what one might expect. The Germans were technically quite advanced for their time, and the distant microphoning and wide frequency range give a vivid impression of the playing, particularly once the equalization has restored bass and amplitude.

One wonders whether centaurs, like other creatures, change their proportions with advancing years. One can certainly appreciate Walter's assessment of D'Albert's "titanic force" and "elemental qualities," but the fact is that D'Albert's pianistic estate was far from pristine by 1930--whether one chooses Walter's rather poetic way of saying that he tended to ignore conventional, technical amenities, or Schnabel's more practical observation that he didn't practice enough to meet the standards of professional exactitude. Often, in fact, D'Albert's ideas take on a certain caricatured exaggeration that one suspects is the result of shaky equilibrium rather than intentional perversity. Like so many sophisticated and inspired musicians past their technical prime, this 66-year-old icon tends to draw

upon his reserves of "authority," and his performance becomes abstracted and unmindful of mundane details and realities. While it is certainly true that any modern performer who missed so many notes, smeared so many passages, mauled the tempos to this extent and proved so cavalier about literal ensemble would be all but laughed off the stage (poor Seidler-Winkler sounds downright nonplused, although he tries to oblige his willful soloist's impulsive flights of fancy), it must be said that the basic premises behind D'Albert's seeming eccentricities are both sound and musical.

Generally speaking, D'Albert's ideas about this work are large-scaled, heroic and freewheeling. There is a modicum of lyricism, but in the main, the grand gesture is prized over the intimate caress, and the long-lined harmonic progression takes priority over the immediate nicety of phrase. There are plangent fortissimos and sensual pianissimos but rarely does sentiment turn into treacle. In fact, "brusque" would be an apt word with which to characterize D' Albert's style here. What sets his reading apart from more conventional ones is the degree of tempo fluctuation he uses--many passages where the music accumulates sequential harmonic tension are permitted to freely accelerate only to draw back abruptly at cadences. One hears a similar sort of manipulation in certain performances by Mengelberg, Furtwängler and Casals.

In fact, one can hear many of D'Albert's ideas, albeit in greatly modified form, in the "Emperor" Concerto performances of Wilhelm Backhaus (a D'Albert pupil) and of Schnabel. The aforementioned accelerations and cadential ritards are certainly discernible in Backhaus' recordings (particularly the early one with Landon Ronald), and an even more notable feature--the hair-raising acceleration of the octave passage in the first movement development section--was one of the first details that initially troubled me, and then won me over, in the Schnabel/Sargent and Schnabel/Stock recordings. (The Schnabel/Galliera, the latest, is more constant in tempo, more temperate in spirit.)

There are many other notable details as well: the quasi-cadenzas, for instance, fairly explode with vitality (and those in the recapitulation are insightfully differentiated from those at the movement's beginning); low bass notes occasionally jut forth like the dropping of an anchor to proclaim a grand clarification of some harmonic event.

But, as noted above, this extremely fascinating document may be a curio, and not for the general music-lover: its appeal will be specialized and limited.

-Harris Goldsmith-