

BEETHOVEN: Sonatas for Piano: No. 27 in E Minor, Op. 90; No. 29 in B Flat, Op. 106 ("Hammerklavier"). Egon Petri, piano. (Op. 90 from KPFA Studio broadcast, May 8, 1959, and Op. 106 from recital, San Francisco Fine Arts Museum, June 25, 1959). Dell'Arte DA 9016 (mono)

Egon Petri (1881-1962), pupil of the legendary Ferruccio Busoni, was, in his low-keyed way, something of a legend in his own right. He was a strong pianist--both technically and interpretively; his conceptions were a bit sober and tended to be hewed from bronze or granite, and he was celebrated for giving his audiences marathon programs. At an early New York recital, for instance, he played Beethoven's Diabelli Variations, the twelve Etudes of Alkan (this, years before our "Romantic Revival") and the twelve of Chopin's Op. 10. And at one of his last appearances, he offered no less than seven of the Beethoven Piano Sonatas (Op. 49/1 and 2, Op. 54, Op. 79, Op. 81A, Op. 90, and Op. 106.) He was the first western artist to visit the Soviet Union in the 1920s and there, too, he evidently ran true to form: Glazunov was "awed and astounded by [Petri's] physical endurance...Petri played an all-Liszt program, this in one concert, mind you--Don Juan and two sonatas (the B minor and Dante). It was a champion performance, the result of good nutrition and a peaceful life for three generations." (Shostakovich/Volkov memoirs, Testimony, New York, 1979, p. 71)

Petri recorded Beethoven's Op. 90 for British Columbia in the 1930s (LX 544/5; American Columbia pressing on 68883/4D in album X71), and he recorded the Hammerklavier twice for LP, for Columbia circa 1952, ML 4479 (later reissued on Columbia special Products P 14152) and for Westminster XWN 18747, circa 1957. My initial impression of this 1959 in-concert rendition of the Op. 90 was of far greater freedom and poetic involvement than I remembered hearing on the 78 discs of a quarter-century earlier, and my thoughts race back to the case of Wilhelm Backhaus, a similarly strong and reserved sort of player, who made two recordings of this very same work. The earlier is cucumber-cool and withal, unremarkable. The later (a virtual Schwanengesang; one of the very last Backhaus recordings)--is full of tender, poetic insights and mutations of tempo and nuance, and is rather untypical in its personalized musings. But memory can be deceptive: rehearing the old Petri 78s reacquainted me with a performance far broader and more eloquent than I had recalled (and one quite astonishingly well reproduced for its time). In fact, the later version offers much the same conception, still very ably presented, but with less concentrated flow, less well-gauged technique and voicing, and as a result, less subtlety. (Characteristically, the older Petri labors a bit over that awkwardly spaced left hand passage in the first movement, bars 55 through 65 and again at 198-208, that his younger counterpart negotiated with easy aplomb.) Still, one is glad to have the more-than-acceptable later reading, particularly, in the absence of the long unobtainable studio recording.

A comparison of Petri's two "official" Hammerklavier recordings shows the earlier Columbia version to have been a bit more assured and rhythmically flexible, and the later Westminster (presumably done with more tape splicing), a bit more note-perfect but also a trifle dogged at times. In some respects, this last concert taping is, predictably, the least assured in terms of technique: there is some insecurity on the treacherous skips, and minor muddles in some of the more densely scored contrapuntal passages. Furthermore--possibly as concession to what was by then nearly eighty years of (presumably) "peaceful living and good nutrition"--Petri chooses to bypass the first movement repeat that he included on both of the earlier recordings. Hobbled by smudges, falters and wrong notes, the playing nevertheless continues to exude tremendous authority. It makes me sad that, east-coaster than I was and still am, I missed hearing Petri in the flesh. He was one of the great ones.

In all of its incarnations, Petri's Hammerklavier avoids the drama that other interpreters have looked for in this music. His tempo for the opening movement is neither so precipitate as Schnabel's headlong attempt to approximate Beethoven's seemingly impossible-to-play "half note equals 138," (also the approach of Beveridge Webster on a now deleted Dover issue and of Peter Serkin on Pro Arte, who sounds completely revolutionary since he plays a period instrument that approximates Beethoven's own Broadwood), nor so monumentally deliberate as the readings of Rudolf Serkin, Kempff, Brendel, Barenboim and Gilels. Petri keeps the on-going line but lets it undulate and unfold with notable freedom, veering away from the hyper-intense or the epic. If you will, his approach could be likened to a mixture of Furtwänglerian asymmetry and Klemperer-like sobriety. His favored sonority is full, non-percussive, but, like Klemperer's, never particularly focused or colorful. There is also a trace of "old-world" point-making in the way he underlines the composer's structural and harmonic progressions. On the other hand, Petri also stops well short of the theatricality that characterized Arrau's early 1960s, Philips recording (which has its analogy not with Furtwängler, or Klemperer, but with Mengelberg). In the great slow movement, he keeps a rather strict basic tempo and lets the music move along with a modicum of sentiment but a minimum of sentimentality--in that, he is philosophically closer to Rudolf Serkin than to Schnabel, Kempff or Barenboim. As for the final fugue, even making allowances for the octogenarian Petri's ebbing physical resources, it is doubtful that this musician ever wanted the music to move so quickly, or sound so ferocious, as it does from Schnabel and Peter Serkin.

Still, if Petri's temperament was hardly what one would call "flaming," his musicianship and humanity were no less illuminating for that. Soundwise, Dell'Arte's on-location tapes are a bit unglamorous but withal, very lifelike.

-Harris Goldsmith-