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# Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 4 & Symphony No. 4

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American Record Guide (William Bender - 2010.07.01)

Probably Record Guide

It probably needn't be said that these two works belong together like Cavalleria Rusticana and I Pagliacci, the two one-act operas Metropolitan Opera fans used to call ham & eggs. But there is a certain reflective kinship that makes this Beethoven double bill particularly enjoyable—the composer free of his later angst but at the peak of his middle-period genius. The playing by all not only adds to that pleasure but gives the album its real distinction.

Backhaus and Bohm had been concerto partners, and friends, in the years before World War II (their two Brahms concertos remain popular reissues to this day on Naxos and Biddulph), and this reading of Beethoven 4 in 1950 Berlin was one of their first post-war get-togethers, if not the first reunion itself. Both were done for broadcast, the concerto before an audience in the Titania Palast, the symphony in a 1952 "studio" recording in the Jesus Christ Church, both places regularly favored by the Berlin Philharmonic. The RIAS Symphony was Ferenc Fricsay's orchestra, which since 1948 he had quickly built into a first-rate ensemble. Berlin was still divided into East and West, and RIAS stood for Radio in the American Sector. Audite tells us that the sound heard here was drawn from the original broadcast reel-to-reel tapes. The result is very easy on the ears, though the treble is limited and the bass line is sometimes blurry.

The symphony is done in Bohm's usual no-nonsense style, and is endearing. I do not know his later set of the Beethoven nine with the Vienna Philharmonic, but I would be surprised if the Vienna Fourth were as genial, as courtly even, as this one with the RIAS. It is one of Beethoven's more mysterious works. Many a prominent conductor has foundered on its innocent shoreline, trying to lay on meaning and profundity that might have astonished the composer. Bohm seems to have succeeded by simply turning the music over to the orchestra. It often seems that way with Bohm. But it is of course never that simple. He works hard for it in rehearsal. The minuet (III) is perhaps the most charming thing in the performance. At the end of each section—the beginning minuet, the trio, and then the movement itself—Böhm introduces gentle retards that are not called for in the score but are certainly permissible and are like farewell curtsies of a bygone rococo era—and charming.

Wilhelm Backhaus brings one of the 20th Century's great piano techniques to bear on the piano concerto, with electrifying results. He had a familiar ability to make every passage, every phrase, sound just right, ever so easy, fully at the service of the music. This was done without a hint of showing off, unless it be in a cadenza—but even there he seemed to stay cool. Over the years that glistening pearlywhite tone was ceaseless in its ability to pierce even the thickest of orchestral sonorities, though Beethoven's discreet orchestrations do not present that kind of challenge. Nor does the man on the podium here.

There is one debatable interpretive moment that occurs right at the start with the piano's delicate solo opening. Beethoven gives seemingly contradictory directions for this passage. The dots over the piano's notes are the familiar indication that the composer wants the music played staccato, or detached. But he also writes p, for soft, and dolcefor sweet. Is it possible to do both? Backhaus clearly favors the staccato approach, though he does his best to be quiet about it. Going back to Leon Fleisher's 1959 recording with George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra (most recently on Sony 48165), one is charmed and convinced by his half-voiced emphasis on the soft and the sweet. Surely Beethoven must have wanted it that way, as a beckoning contrast to what was to follow. Artur Schnabel thought so too in his three recordings of the piece.



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