



Clara Haskil plays Mozart, Beethoven and Schumann

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Gramophone (Jeremy Nicholas - 2009.07.01)

GRAMOPHONE

Legacies and rewards

Jeremy Nicholas welcomes the reissue of rediscovered recordings by a forgotten New Zealand virtuoso

From Audite come two discs of Clara Haskil remastered from original broadcast tapes recorded by Deutschlandradio in 1953 and 1954. Mozart's F major Concerto, K459, has a pedestrian first two movements before a deliciously sparkling finale; the D minor Concerto, K466, follows with Haskil's own cadenzas and Ferenc Fricsay conducting the RIAS Symphony Orchestra. Disc 2 has a second (live) recording of K466, this time led by the African-American conductor Dean Dixon, with Fricsay once again at the helm in a live Beethoven's Fourth Concerto, its chief distinction being the sublimely played slow movement. Surprisingly, perhaps, the most exceptional performances here are of Schumann's Abegg Variations and two sections of Bunte Blätter (try Haskil's heartwarming response to Drei Stücklein).

Tapes from South West German Radio (SWF) furnish Hänssler Classic's release of Géza Anda in four concertos, studio recordings made between 1952 and 1963. In the first two movements of Chopin's E minor Concerto (with the SWR Symphony Orchestra under Ernest Bour) Anda introduces ideas I have never heard from another and with which I was quite taken – deft little (unmarked) staccato scale runs, for instance, and a dramatically convincing ritenuto before the return of the main subject in the first movement. The finale is just this side of lethargic to be vivace. Anda's similarly light-fingered, sparingly pedalled playing gives the Schumann Concerto an almost Mendelssohnian character. Rachmaninov's Second has its sumptuous Romanticism pared down – chilly is the word that springs to mind – while the conductor Hans Rosbaud and Anda have not, apparently, agreed on every aspect of tempo if the shambolic passage after the first movement's alla marcia section is anything to go by. Far more successful is a taut and fiery Brahms Second with the same forces.

Nevertheless, given the choice, I'd rather hear Arthur Rubinstein than Anda any day in the Schumann and Brahms. In live performances from 1962 and 1964, recorded in the RAI concert halls in Turin and Naples, the septuagenarian Rubinstein invests both works with a vigorous muscularity that is quite remarkable. There again, few knew better than him how to tug at the heart strings and the Schumann, though in not quite such focused sound as the Brahms, has a first movement in which Rubinstein takes due note of Schumann's allegro affettuoso, absent both in Anda's performance (allegro) and in Hänssler's inaccurate track-listing (allegro non troppo).

Medici Masters have found a good quality source for the Chopin and Liszt recital given in Tokyo in April 1964 by Georges Cziffra (1921-94). Cziffra in Chopin is not always persuasive. Here, by and large, he is on his best behaviour and, indeed, often illuminating (F minor Fantasia, Scherzo No 2, Ballade No 4) offering soberly lyrical readings coloured with passages of trademark brilliance (fabulous repeated notes in the E flat Waltz, Op 18, and an adrenalin-drenched coda of the Ballade). Though he frequently programmed the work, the majestic character of the A flat Polonaise mysteriously eluded him, as it does here, its central section reduced to a flashy left-hand octave exercise. The remaining four items are of Liszt. The opening bars of the first of these, the Rhapsodie espagnole, are like hearing someone who has just had the handcuffs taken off. There is nothing quite like Cziffra playing Liszt. He simply leaves you smiling, shaking your head in disbelief, as he dazzles the senses. At 11'19" the Rhapsodie must be one of the fastest ever recorded – more furiously driven even than Barere – while for pure vehemence the Hungarian Rhapsody No 6 bids to outdo Horowitz's famous recording. Neither scores are short of Cziffra's own textual embellishments. Film of this Tokyo performance of the Grand galop chromatique, a Cziffra party piece, has been circulating for years. It's one of the great high-wire acts that only someone with the same abnormal muscular reflexes could equal. The sound throughout is fine, though, to my ears, the piano's crystalline treble seems not married happily to the comparatively muddy bass voicing.

Cziffra's posthumous legacy is, thankfully, being well taken care of. No such fate has hitherto befallen the New Zealand pianist Richard Farrell, whose tragic early death robbed us of a major talent (he was killed in a car crash near Arundel, Sussex, in 1958 at the age of 32). Except for a brief appearance on EMI's short-lived Phoenixa label in the early 1990s, I don't think any of Farrell's recordings have been available since his death. Many collectors treasure his account of Rachmaninov's Corelli Variations which is promised on a future volume of Farrell's complete recordings by the producers of this immaculately presented and remastered first volume (its two discs are smuggled into a single CD jewel case). All the items were released in mono on the Pye label in the UK and New Zealand. Here, the two concertos (with the Halle under George Weldon) are taken from their stereo Mercury Living Presence edition, released only in America; the Brahms solos are in stereo (previously unpublished), the Grieg items in mono. What we have here are some of the most beautiful recorded performances of the time bathed in what I can only describe as that warm, intimate piano tone familiar from the LP era now all too often lost to clinical digitisation; the Grieg Concerto (as poetic and full-blooded as they come), the four Brahms Ballades (straight to the top of my personal favourites) and 16 Waltzes (ditto), Grieg's Ballade (perhaps the most convincing version on disc of this awkward, flawed work), nine popular Lyric Pieces (how one wishes there were more) and Liszt's E flat Concerto (a magisterial "first movement", an unusually limpid quasi adagio and a thrilling finale). Buy this release. You'll be richly rewarded.