



LUCERNE FESTIVAL

HISTORIC  
PERFORMANCES

audite

# Annie Fischer

Schumann Piano Concerto  
Philharmonia Orchestra | Carlo Maria Giulini

# Leon Fleisher

Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 2  
Swiss Festival Orchestra | George Szell



Robert Schumann (1810–1856)  
Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 54

Annie Fischer piano  
Philharmonia Orchestra | Carlo Maria Giulini

LUCERNE, KUNSTHAUS, 3 SEPTEMBER 1960

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)  
Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 19

Leon Fleisher piano  
Swiss Festival Orchestra | George Szell

LUCERNE, KUNSTHAUS, 29 AUGUST 1962

recorded live at LUCERNE FESTIVAL  
(Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern)







## Two truths –

### Annie Fischer and Leon Fleisher in Lucerne

How does a man play the piano? With strong hands; in a clear, unfussy, unsentimental and alert fashion; completely in control, free, measured and purposeful. A woman, on the other hand? She touches the piano delicately; loves the soft notes, the ornamental and the decorative; she is a refined young lady, educated in salons and trained, by well-meaning teachers, to remain faithful to the musical text. If these clichés were to represent the truth, Annie Fischer would be a gentleman-pianist, whilst Leon Fleisher could be said to epitomise female musical virtues. If one hears them, one straight after the other (and not with an interval of two years, as was the case in Lucerne), one could indeed conceive such silly, and yet illuminating, ideas and ask oneself how these musical stereotypes have come to appear back-to-front. After all, a contemporary critic writing about Annie Fischer in the 1960s commented that her tone at the piano demonstrated “an astonishingly resolute steeliness for a woman”.

However, in Robert Schumann’s A minor Concerto, Op. 54, which Fischer played at her first and only performance for LUCERNE FESTIVAL in 1960, her tone did not resemble steel and iron, but neither was it evocative of tea dances and autograph books. The Hungarian pianist Annie Fischer, born in Budapest on 5 July 1914, shortly before the First World War, had already conquered the concert stage as a child prodigy and made her Swiss debut at the age of fourteen, performing the Schumann concerto in Zurich. She trained at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in her home city, attending the same piano class as Georg Solti and also studying with the Hungarian music patriarch, Ernő Dohnányi. In the fateful year of 1933, she won the International Franz Liszt Piano Competition (Louis Kentner was awarded third prize, and Andor Foldes finished up in eighth position), after which she would soon tour across Europe, performing alongside illustrious maestros including Ernest Ansermet, Adrian Boult, Fritz Busch, Otto Klemperer, Igor Markevitch and Willem Mengelberg. In 1937, she married the music critic Aladár Tóth, sixteen years her senior, who had heard her debut concert which she had given at the age of ten. But then her fortunes took a sharp decline. Death – a German master – assumed power in Hungary: a Jew, Annie Fischer fled to Sweden, living and surviving in exile, giving concerts and lessons until she could finally return to Budapest in 1946. Her husband became director of the Hungarian State Opera (making Otto Klemperer chief conductor) whilst she was honoured with the highest accolades, prizes and medals, as well as a professorship at the Academy of Music; even today, a scholarship awarded by the Hungarian ministry of cultural affairs is named after her.





The term “international concert career” seems out of place with this serious, modest and uncompromisingly music-oriented artist. And yet the 1950s represented the beginning of Annie Fischer’s “grand tour” of the metropolises of the Old and New Worlds. She gave performances at prestigious festivals (her only appearance at Salzburg in 1964: Bartók’s Third Piano Concerto with Solti and the Vienna Philharmonic), made recordings “for eternity” – Mozart concertos and Beethoven sonatas – her incontestable authority honoured wherever she went. Annie Fischer was asked to judge at the “Leeds International Pianoforte Competition”, the “Concours Reine Elisabeth” in Brussels and the “Concours Marguerite Long – Jacques Thibaud” in Paris. Her Russian colleague and contemporary Sviatoslav Richter wrote about her in his diaries: “Brilliant musician and pianist, ‘the grand dame of the pianoforte’ ... Annie Fischer is a great artist with great breath and true depth ... One doesn’t worry about a few wrong notes (sorry).” Her compatriot András Schiff, almost forty years her junior, acknowledges that Annie Fischer was a very important musical influence on him: “I have never heard more poetic playing in my life. Certain works, such as the Schumann C major Fantasie, I can’t hear from anyone else anymore: her interpretation has become embedded in my mind.”

Robert Schumann had also begun his A minor Concerto as a “Phantasie” for piano and orchestra in 1841 – a hybrid between symphony, chamber concerto and sonata poured into a single movement which, nonetheless, traverses the stations of an “Allegro”, an “Adagio” and a Rondo. Schumann had already spent years trying to find a “new, brilliant way ... of combining orchestra and piano, allowing the sovereign at the piano to develop the riches of his instrument and his art, whilst the orchestra is more than a spectator and artfully interweaves the musical set with its manifold characters”. In summer 1845 Schumann added the *Intermezzo* as well as a finale to his “Phantasie”, making up a “complete” piano concerto in three movements.

Clara Schumann gave the premiere on 4 December in Dresden, for Schumann had conceived his concerto, from beginning to end, for a woman – his wife. He quotes her name and her work as early as in the principal theme of the first movement: he alludes to her *Notturno*, Op. 6 No. 2, and spells her poetic pseudonym “Chiara” with the initial notes C-B-A-A (B being “H” in German notation). She was the “sovereign at the piano”, developing the riches of her art as a *prima inter pares*, without demoting the majority of the musicians to marvelling “extras”. “The piano is most subtly interwoven with the orchestra”, Clara wrote about Robert’s concerto; “it is impossible to consider one without the other”.

And it was also impossible to think of the one, Annie Fischer, without the other, London’s Philharmonia Orchestra, when she performed Schumann’s romantically enigmatic piano concerto in Lucerne on 3 September 1960. This spirit of collaborative music-making, “most



subtly interwoven”, akin to chamber music, matched the pointedly undictatorial approach of the Italian conductor Carlo Maria Giulini, who emphatically did not wish to be denoted as a conductor: a musician amongst musicians, no demonstrator. During the war years, whilst Fischer was living in Swedish exile, Giulini had deserted from the army and gone underground. In 1944, he performed the first public concert in Rome after the end of the German occupation. In 1960 he was still considered, especially on account of his time at La Scala, Milan, to be a renowned opera specialist, whilst he was later praised and loved for his performances of the symphonies of Mozart, Schubert, Brahms and Bruckner, before beginning to polarise his audiences, due to a tendency towards contemplative tempi.

For the Schumann Piano Concerto, Giulini and Fischer also chose predominantly calm and cautious tempi. In the “Intermezzo”, the prescribed “Andantino” stretches into an “Adagio”. The opening gambit in the introductory bars, alternating between piano and strings, seemingly comes out of nowhere, or out of stillness, as though a sketch were being drawn on a white sheet of paper. Thereafter, however, the cello cantilenas are sung in a spirited, soulful manner – in the chest voice of an Italian baritone aria. In the finale Fischer and Giulini also opt more for an “Allegro moderato” rather than “vivace”: it is not their aim to speed along in record time, even less to indulge in virtuoso displays. Annie Fischer’s playing is classically grounded, almost austere, and unswervingly sincere. Every note counts, every bar takes shape, nothing becomes lost in the casual or obliging: we hear a document of an intellectual, emotionally controlled and musically coherent pianist who, according to the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, “garnered unusually fervent success” in Lucerne with this approach. Annie Fischer died in Budapest in 1995, a legend in her native country. In the west, however, she has to be brought back to mind, for the honour due to her is unfortunately not self-evident.

Fame, even if it is not solely based on purely musical reasons, is not something which the American musician Leon Fleisher is lacking. Like a prophecy, or almost the writing on the wall, it was present in his life from the beginning. “My mother was very ambitious for me and gave me a choice: either I was to be the first Jewish President of the United States, or a great concert pianist. Whichever it was, I had to be perfect.” However, this well-nigh superhuman aspiration drove him to “great despair, self-pity and unhappiness allied with commensurate ecstasies”. Like Annie Fischer, Leon Fleisher – born in San Francisco in 1928 – was also catapulted into musical life in his youth. The conductor Pierre Monteux announced him as “the pianistic find of the century”. But in 1963, a few months after his Lucerne debut, he was struck by a manual disaster very similar to that which, 130 years previously, had afflicted Robert Schuman, crushing all dreams of becoming a piano virtuoso. His plans and ambitions were thwarted by a “professional neurosis”, a musician’s





disease akin to writer's cramp – “focal dystonia” in medical terms – manifesting itself in the form of paralytic contortions of the fourth and fifth fingers of the right hand. During the following decades, Fleisher found himself restricted to playing the repertoire for left hand. In Lucerne he appeared in 1987 with Ravel's *Concerto pour la main gauche*, and in 1992 he performed Prokofiev's Fourth Piano Concerto. Following his recovery later in life, he played two recitals for LUCERNE FESTIVAL at the Piano in 2008 and 2012, performing, in old age, solo and chamber works for two hands, literally moving his audience to tears.

In order not to be governed by a seemingly never-ending crisis, Fleisher consciously reconsidered his profession: “Suddenly I realized that the most important thing in my life was not playing with two hands, it was *music*. ... In order to be able to make it across these last thirty or forty years, I've had somehow to de-emphasize the number of hands or the number of fingers and go back to the concept of music as music. The instrumentation becomes unimportant, and it's the substance and content that take over.”

When Leon Fleisher performed Beethoven's Second Piano Concerto alongside the Swiss Festival Orchestra and George Szell on 29 August 1962 (the second half of this concert, Brahms' First Symphony, is already available in this series of “LUCERNE FESTIVAL Historic Performances”), there was no sense of the impending threat of dystonia. On the contrary: Fleisher's playing was scintillating and accurate. Although this pianist is “descended” from Beethoven in a direct musical-genealogical line – his teacher, Artur Schnabel, had been taught by Theodor Leschetitzky who, in turn, had studied with Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny – he did not interpret the B-flat major Concerto, Op. 19, in the masculine manner and with the dramatic ire generally associated with the composer. Instead, Fleisher fashions the solo part gracefully and elaborately, as if embroidered with a needle, crystal clear and as bright as day: classicist in the sense of the piano generation mediating between Mozart and Chopin. The 65-year-old Szell, however – born, like Annie Fischer, in Budapest and a regular guest at Lucerne from 1956 until his death – relocates the orchestra, stylistically speaking, into the advanced 19<sup>th</sup> century: a rich sound, broad strokes and a pithy tone, though at the same time with accurate and painstaking articulation. Lights and shade are thus unevenly distributed on this recording: the sparkling piano sound floats above substantial, earthy orchestral music.

But what is “truth” in musical interpretation? The beautiful or the profound, lightness or austerity, male vigour or female elegance? The answer – everybody knows, none can tell.

Wolfgang Stähr  
Translation: Viola Scheffel



### LUCERNE FESTIVAL Historic Performances

In cooperation with audite, LUCERNE FESTIVAL is presenting outstanding concert recordings of the work of artists who have shaped the Festival throughout its history. The aim of this CD edition is to retrieve treasures – for the most part previously unreleased – from the first six decades of the Festival, which was founded in 1938 with a special gala concert led by Arturo Toscanini. These recordings come from the archives of Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen (SRF), which, from the outset, has regularly broadcast the performances from Lucerne. Carefully remastered and supplemented with materials and photos from the LUCERNE FESTIVAL archive, they represent a history of the Festival in sound.

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recording: live recording at LUCERNE FESTIVAL (Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern)



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