

American Record Guide



Readd ami the Diabelli Variations

Beethoven: A Man for All Talents

ARG Interviews Pfeiffer and Frost

The Joyful Music of Mathias

Kuerst and the 32 Sonatas

Maria Callas: A Critical Discography Part II

Guide to

Records

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Backer Brendel Haitink Kuerti Mengelberg

BEETHOVEN: *Sonata in F minor, Op. 2, No. 1; Sonata in G minor, Op. 49, No. 1; Sonata in D minor, Op. 31, No. 2.* Mihály Bacher, piano. Hungaroton SLPX 11858. \$7.98.

Among attractive discs from Hungary of late are several by the newest crop of brilliant, young pianists, such as Mihály Bacher.

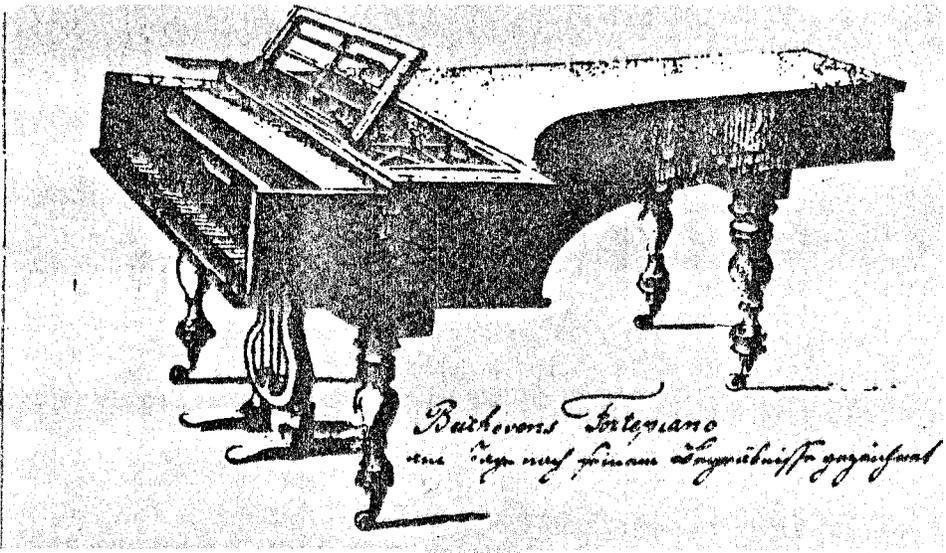
These are small-scaled, lightweight performances: This works well enough for the two-movement *G minor Sonata* which is more like a sonatina anyway, but the first refreshing to hear some episodes of the *F minor Sonata* played with such delicacy and in such leisurely gait. The music is refined, flows expressively, and is very well proportioned within the confines of the moderate dynamic boundaries that Bacher sets for himself. But both the *F minor* and *D minor Sonatas* demand more passion, dramatic emphasis and energetic highlighting of contrasting sounds; for there is grander pianistic sweep and emotional power inherent in these works than this sensitive artist exhibits. Fine piano sound, though.

—Gruvelinamt

BEETHOVEN: *33 Variations on a Waltz by Franz Anton Hoffmann, Op. 10, No. 3; A Mort Diabelli, Op. 120.* Alfred Brendel, piano. Philips 9500 381. \$8.98.

Critical reaction to Brendel's first Vox recording of the *Diabelli Variations* was divided. On the Atlantic side it was hailed as Beethoven playing of the highest order; in this 'country it was found to be mannered and not up to Brendel's usual standard. The spontaneity and warmth of feeling evident in this new recording should satisfy both sides, qualities that gain no doubt from being recorded live during a concert in the Royal Festival Hall, London, in 1967.

In a recent broadcast interview, Brendel stated that "there is something in a



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live performance which a recording at Udo can rarely (inspire): a sense of risk communication also. Now I try much more in a recording studio to play as I play in a live performance." Collectors of pirate records will attest to the intensity of communication that a sense of risk can generate on a record, yet the attitude of commercial companies to records of live performances is ambivalent. There have been recent issues of Carnegie Hall opera performances from which all scam of the hall ambience and of the live audience has been erased; not a cough nor a reverberation to be heard. So successful has been this cleaning-up process that more than one commentator has asked questions concerning the sonorousness of the recordings and

the role that the studio rehearsals played in producing the finished product. No such artistic issues are raised here, however. There IS no doubt that this is a recording of a concert performance of the Variations.

This set of Variations is, of course, paroxysmal music to precede so closely the *Missa Solenne* and the *Ninth Symphony*. The skittish opening and the quirkiness of so much of the music certainly suggests a basis for Brendel's description in the liner notes of the work as an "exploration of musical humour." And it is indeed the interplay of the sublime and the humorous that makes this set so attractive. Highlights include a wonderfully beguiling performance of Variation 2, and a 5th Variation that is thrown off with delicate panache. The 14th Variation, *Grav*, is not as poised and full of yearning as was the performance of Vox, and the playing of it makes clear the one drawback of the recording: the pianissimos are throughout too loud and nowhere do I hear the delicate, ethereal, soft tone which is such an important aspect of Brendel's art. Variation 16 is bigger, more exciting and Variation 23 faster than were the case in his first recording, and Variation 31 also suffers from being presented in a slightly more Bachian and less Chopinesque manner. The highlight of the *Fughetta*, Variation 24; a simple song lovingly cap-

tilted, Ai
 Cr all the various individual delights of this performance, Brendel conveys an overwhelming sense of unity; the work is presented as one continuing idea rather than as a set of disparate pieces. It is fascinating to hear how from within the strict discipline of a classical framework Brenda has created a performance that is freer and has a greater sense of fun than was evident in his first recording. On his own admission this is the benefit gained from the live performance. The drawback is the presence of a bronchial audience, a higher than normal level of tape hiss (though this is not a distraction) and a faint ostinato accompaniment by the Hall's air-conditioning system. None of which can detract from the faultless playing of a performance to treasure.

—Payne

BEETHOVEN: *Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37.* Alfred Brendel, piano; London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Bernard Haitink. Philips 9500 253. \$8.98.. Cas. 9500 381, \$8.98.

There is something wrong with this performance. Not all the orchestral gloss and brilliance in the world can hide the fact that this performance of music that comes in Beethoven's oeuvre between the Symphony No. 1 and *The Creatures of Prometheus* is misconceived in its stolid conducting and its large-scaled orchestral sound. The fault lays squarely at the feet of the conductor, because a recent broadcast of a performance of this concerto given by Brendel with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra conducted by Levine at last year's Ravinia Festival made clear how well Brendel can play it. It was a performance full of sparkle and joy in the outer movements, attributes that are all too painfully missing from this recording, a reissue from the recent box of the complete Beethoven concerti.

The first movement does not start out well. Admittedly the question of metronome markings in Beethoven is controversial, but a quarter note equals 144 coupled with the direction *Allegro con brio* certainly suggests a character that Haitink's complacent tempo of a quarter note equals 132 fails to capture. The performance is large-scaled with smoothed-out rhythms and

orchestral playing so highly polished that the shine makes inner detail unclear: staccato notes are barely detached, and only the score tells of trills on accompanying instruments. The performance is to some degree saved by Brendel's ravishingly hushed playing of the *Largo*, playing that is deeply affecting yet contained within an emotionally ascetic framework, It never becomes sentimental but remains profoundly moving throughout. Brendel then starts out the third movement at a delicate gait but the orchestral entry at measure 33 is driven like fury, and there's a sense of disagreement concerning tempo throughout the rest of the movement until the final *Presto*, which is a marvellous climax.

The disc has wonderfully silent surfaces, Robert Simpson writes a fascinating sleeve note, and throughout the recording Brendel's performance is full of delicate playing and diaphanous tones. Wouldrthat I could be less concerned about the overall concept of the performance and Haitink's bland contribution.

—Payne

BEETHOVEN: *The Nine Symphonies; Fidelio Overture.* To van der Sluys, soprano; Sure Luger, alto; Louis van Tulder, tenor; Willem Revelli, bass; Toonkunskoor, Amsterdam; Koninklijke Oratorium-Vereniging; Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam; Willem Mengelberg, conductor. Philips Mono 6767003, 8 LPs, \$71.84.

All recordings are live performances made during April and May 1940 (evidently in the course of a Beethoven festival) except for the *Eroica*, which is a 1940 studio recording originally Issued by Telefun ken.

• *Symphony No. 1:* A bracing and witty performance with an engaging skipping spring to the rhythms. The winds, by virtue of Mengelberg's careful attention to attack and release, achieve remarkable clarity. The performance is impaired, however, by grossly exaggerated ritards at cadences.

Symphony No. 2: Here Beethoven's ruggedness and massiveness are emphasized, though in this symphony, mercurial wit and brilliance are more appropriate. The great *largo* is far too swooning but again is fascinating in the wealth of wind details conjured by Mengelberg. Still, because of its jarring tempo contrasts, *rellentandos* at

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