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ST. DAVID'S HALL, CARDIFF
(February 16th, 1984)

HELSINKI PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Conductor: Paavo Berglund Soloist: Bernard d'Ascoli (piano)

Beethoven was of course a deaf pianist, Paul Wittgenstein was a one-armed pianist, Paavo Berglund is a left-handed conductor and Bernard d'Ascoli a blind pianist.

At first glance this latter fact should not make any difference whatsoever. After all, Stevie Wonder has made a great deal of money at the piano despite the fact that he is blind, Ray Charles is another, and George Shearing is still performing at the top of his form (especially in recent years when he has been teamed with the magnificent bassist, Brian Torf).

At second glance, there might be pause for thought that the musicians listed have all been jazz or pop performers who have played predominantly with small groups of musicians. If Bernard d'Ascoli only performed recitals as a soloist the matter would rest there, but in a concert like that presented by the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra the young man is playing with eighty other people . . . or rather . . . and here come the point . . . the eighty other people have to a large extent got to be playing with him.

The situation is unfair in one way and interesting in another. It is unfair because there is a tendency to search out evidence that because he cannot watch the conductor there are bound to be problems of ensemble. There were in fact none during his performance of Liszt's *Piano Concerto No. 2*. The situation is interesting because it raises an issue which concerns the extent to which music making on this scale is a group effort, and the extent to which the pianist can be a responsive member of the creative team. One wonders therefore to what extent the pianist could be involved in the sort of creative ferment that gave rise to the notorious or magnificent (depending on your point of view) performance of the Brahms *Piano Concerto No. 2* that Glenn Gould gave with (or perhaps 'against') Leonard Bernstein — a performance that is happily preserved on tape — or whether he could partake in the sort of living communal creative act that most performances were under the baton of Furtwängler.

These thoughts are not presented to cast any doubts upon Bernard d'Ascoli, but rather to show the way in which any performance of music can and should raise issues about itself: become self referential, if you will. Every musical performance (as artistic event) is both an act of creative originality and is at the same time a statement about the nature of music and its performance.

In the event, the performance of the Liszt piano concerto, which was given as part of the final concert presented by this orchestra on its current tour of Britain, was lyrical and attractive. The comparison that Edward Greenfield made in another context between d'Ascoli and the pianism of Wilhelm Kempff does indeed appear to be an apt one since the young French pianist seems to be a thoughtful and probing interpreter rather than a purely virtuosic one.

The concert in St. David's Hall was the eleventh to be given by this orchestra within a fortnight, with a great deal of travelling between each concert and, since two of the three works played at each concert appeared to have been the same, one might have been forgiven for searching for traces of tiredness or staleness in the performance. But only the final work, Brahms's *Symphony No. 2*, was given a less than thoroughly satisfying reading. Can this really have been the eleventh performance of the symphony during a period of less than two weeks?

The concert opened with a glowing performance of Sibelius's final symphony: *No. 7 in C, Op. 105*. There is a tendency, I think, to regard

this last symphony of Sibelius as being akin to his last major orchestral work, *Tapiola*, completed a year later in 1925: descriptive of barren lands and long winters. Paavo Berglund's interpretation seemed to be founded more closely on Sibelius's comments regarding his first drafts of the work 'Joy of life and vitality, with appassionato passages . . .' This was an autumnal reading, rather than an austere one; descriptive of a Finnish Fall, rather than Northern wastes. From the beautifully paced opening with vibrant and rich string tone to the peaceful ending the tonal control of the orchestral players and the structurally integrated interpretation presented by Paavo Berglund was deeply satisfying.

The impression made by the quality of the orchestral playing was immediately supported during the opening passage of the Liszt *Piano Concerto No. 2* which is scored for exposed woodwind and which was lovingly played with great control.

The formal part of the concert closed with a performance of Brahms's *Symphony No. 2* which glowed during the Adagio but which also in some less secure woodwind playing and slightly muddy textures showed, perhaps, some end-of-tour signs of a relaxation of concentration. Nonetheless, the lively tempo set for the final Allegro brought the work to a lively Finnish!

The best played work of the concert came during the first encore, *Valse Triste* by Sibelius, which in its hushed string textures and deeply felt interpretation showed how important it is to take all music seriously, and to treat each work with the greatest possible quality and care.