Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Sonatas | Wilhelm Backhaus

aud 23.420

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The last testament of this eminent musician

There is something indomitable, indeed magnificent, about Backhaus's recital at the Philharmonie in April 1969, given shortly before his death in the same year. Already in his mid-eighties, and with a vast career stretching behind him, he didn't stint. The programme consisted of four Beethoven sonatas; there were no concessions to other composers, or other forms. Form, indeed, was the essence for late Backhaus, which would be a sympathetic consideration, if nothing else, if the playing were raddled, but the remarkable thing is that it is very much not raddled. Indeed it's only at a few points, when one feels him tire, that one becomes aware of weaknesses in this area. For the main part Backhaus proves remarkably resilient for a man of 85, a performer whose digital control is married to profound resilience and perception.

The Pastoral sonata opens with a real sense of occasion, and it shows a formidable awareness of the need for flexibility within a strongly etched rhythm. The slow movement is neither over-stressed nor over-romanticised, but full measure of pawkiness attends the scherzo – heavy, assuredly, in part at least, but with a gnarly wit and plenty of rubati. This presages a fleet, fluent finale. The E flat major Op.31 No.3 sonata manages to combine strength of sinew and light heartedness of spirit. Its scherzo is full of energetic playfulness and one listens in admiration as Backhaus delivers on the finale's con fuoco marking with commensurate power and not a little swagger. By the Waldstein one begins to feel him tiring. Three years ago I reviewed a performance he gave of this sonata in the Beethovenhalle, Bonn, in September 1959. This earlier live traversal is lighter than the decade-later one under review, and contains fewer slips, though this does seem to have been a work that caused him digital problems notwithstanding the dates of the performances. What he invariably located in it however was a wonderfully sustained sense of piety. The second disc contains only the E major Op.109. It opens in rather 'tripping' fashion, but features a strong Prestissimo, and then the noble unfolding of the finale, which in this performance marries tonal depth to graphic architectural assurance.

Backhaus's complete Beethoven sonata recordings are on the 8 CD Decca Original Masters 475 7198 and various other examples of all the four sonatas played in 1969 exist, from 78s in the case of the earlier two to 1950 Deccas – these in addition to the 1960s Deccas contained in the box noted above. So, there is quite a deal of choice for even the Backhaus completist, but not even that fact should dent enthusiasm for

the last testament of this eminent musician enshrined in this recording.

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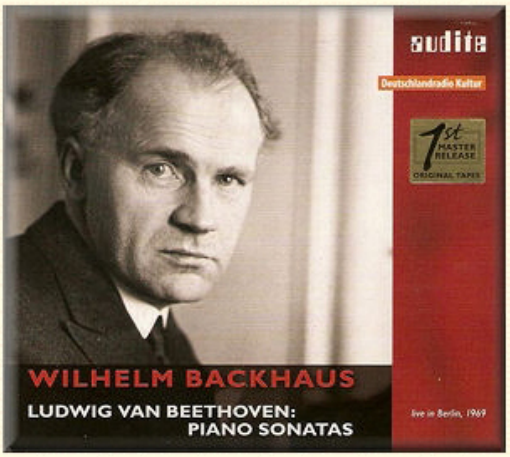

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)
CD 1
Piano Sonata No.15 in D major Op.28 *Pastoral* (1801) [22:01]
Piano Sonata No.18 in E flat major Op.31 No.3 (1801-02) [22:00]
Piano Sonata No.21 in C major Op.53 *Waldstein* (1803-04) [24:14]
CD 2
Piano Sonata No.30 in E major Op.109 (1820) [17:39]
• Wilhelm Backhaus (piano)
rec. 18 April 1969, Philharmonie, Berlin
• **AUDITE 23.420** [68:15 + 17:41] (S)

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