



Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Sonatas | Wilhelm Backhaus

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Fanfare (Paul Orgel - 01.01.2011)

Passagework is a little smudged here and there, and sometimes, Backhaus bangs or rushes slightly, but considering that this recording of one of his last concerts was made when he was 85, these small imperfections are easily forgiven. Backhaus specialized in Beethoven's sonatas—he first performed the complete cycle in 1928—and he goes for the larger structural picture, not all the precise details. His sound is big and generous and his ability to convey the span of long melodic lines is the most impressive aspect of these performances. From early in his career, Backhaus was considered to be a “classicist” whose playing emphasized textual fidelity and served as a corrective to self-indulgent performances of the time, but these things are relative, and by current standards, these performances are refreshingly impulsive and freely paced. Backhaus isn't afraid to linger or to push forward more than most contemporary pianists, and the music benefits.

Considerable rubato heightens the tender character of op. 31/3's minuet and the playful one in op. 28. Backhaus plays these two warm-hearted sonatas with real affection and no lack of speed in the fast movements. Op. 31/3's Presto finale never lets up and is a technically impressive performance by any standard.

Technical limitations hinder Backhaus the most in the first movement of the “Waldstein” and in the finale's motoric episodes, but he plays the work's central Adagio sostenuto with convincing rhythmic freedom, and the third movement's opening theme sings beautifully. He slows way down for the octave glissando passage and plays each octave with an individual stroke.

If the “Waldstein” is, overall, a performance to avoid, op. 109 is a pleasant surprise, a performance that improves as it goes on. Backhaus's control falters at times in the opening movement with too many arpeggiated chords and some shaky timing, but the prestissimo second movement is solidly played and he rises to the occasion of the third movement's variations—there is no more beautiful movement in any Beethoven sonata—with an eloquent, unfussy performance that is both technically impressive and emotionally soaring.

Listeners seeking refinement of touch should look elsewhere—almost any pianist I can think of would strive for more subtle balances between melody and accompaniment, more clearly delineated degrees of non-legato or staccato, and more sparing pedal—but I recommend this recording for its documentaton of an important Beethoven specialist playing extraordinarily well, considering his age, in three of the four sonatas. The music-making is very much alive. The miking sounds close, the recording is in stereo, and Backhaus's Bechstein is a bright, clear sounding instrument.