Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Concertos No. 4 & No. 5

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This release is tagged Volume 7 in Audite's ongoing series devoted to Karl Böhm. The concerto is a live account dating from 1950 and may well prove the more interesting item. Backhaus left two studio accounts of the work, both for London/Decca: a fine mono version with Clemens Krauss, a less commanding stereo remake with Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt. If my memory is accurate, the performance featured here is closer to that earlier effort and is in many ways admirable in its unaffected directness and freedom from the excessive breadth that some pianists have imposed on the first movement. There it is interesting to hear how, while echoing Schnabel's tempo for that movement, Backhaus doesn't quite match that pianist's smooth legato phrasing in a few key passages, the solo introduction being a prime case in point. With Backhaus it sounds slightly choppy. Nevertheless this is generally a commanding account, its one major flaw being the unfamiliar and unduly long cadenza that Backhaus favored in the finale, one that may well be his own. In the first movement he plays the familiar one by Beethoven. Sonically the piano comes off better here than the orchestra. It is unusually close in perspective but free of distortion. Typical of tapes of the period, however, the timbre of the orchestra is shrill, with unpleasantly edgy string tone. As for the Symphony No. 4, one wonders if this 1952 studio recording was ever previously released—it is not cited in either of the two WERM supplements. (Perhaps a limited issue was produced and confined to Germany.) Sonically it marks a big improvement over the concerto: less harsh if still a bit edgy and remarkable in its wide dynamic range and freedom from the once-common tape-hiss. Musically, it is very close to Böhm's 1972 stereo account for DG with the Vienna Philharmonic, the one marked difference between them being this earlier version's having a few rhetorical emphases in the third movement that the later account avoids. Both include exposition repeats in outer movement and offer tempos that, if slightly broader than usual, remain eminently musical. In short, this is a significant historical release.

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