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

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Clifford Curzon was a finicky perfectionist who never liked the recording process and never seemed satisfied with his recorded performances, however favorably they were viewed by everyone else. His repertoire was not very extensive, but what he played, he played exceedingly well. In this respect he resembles Michelangeli and Lipatti. We are left with a somewhat sparse catalog of mostly splendid performances--far less complete than it could have been.

Curzon recorded expressive and powerful accounts of these two concertos with Knappertsbusch and the VPO in the mid-1950s. They are scheduled to be released soon on a low-cost Decca CD. Why, then, do we need these items from Audite?

Well, simply because these 1977 performances are even more poetic, grandly shaped, spontaneous, luminous, splendidly proportioned, and totally effective than the earlier ones. What is more, Kubelik and his great orchestra supply as sensitive and romantically supportive an orchestral backing as one could imagine--a framework for Curzon\'s pianism even more elegant than the formidable Knappertsbusch manages. Also, the sound here, though exhibiting less warmth and resonance than one expects from the Herculessaal, is more spacious, better focussed, and precisely imaged than in the earlier issue. Curzon is more expansive, and his sensitive and poetic shaping of phrases and paragraphs puts this release right into the top drawer. This is most impressive in No. 4, a work that is clearly structured on a Mozartean model. The Emperor is a little more straightforward, though still grandly proportioned and nobly expressed. Curzon\'s runs and trills are often slightly uneven, intentionally so I think, to give each of them i ts unique and individual profile. The uniquely poetic quality of these readings really puts them in a class by themselves. This is a full-price release, and it is worth far more than the asking price. It demonstrates this artist\'s work at its best.

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