



Clara Haskil plays Mozart, Beethoven and Schumann

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Fanfare (Boyd Pomeroy - 01.05.2010)

Another winner in Audite's invaluable ongoing series of historic reissues from 1950s German radio archives. As usual, the new remasterings derive from the original master tapes, with clearly audible superiority to any previous releases on other labels. The Mozart concertos and Schumann pieces were recorded for Berlin RIAS under studio conditions between January 1953 and November 1954. They are supplemented by two live performances, including a second Mozart K 466 taken from a concert the day before its studio retaping for RIAS (and thus affording the opportunity to compare the same performance under live and studio conditions on consecutive days).

Mozart's piano concertos, or a few of them, were central to Haskil's limited repertoire. Her performance style in this music is well known – precise fingerwork, a rather small-scale lyricism characterized by great subtlety of tonal and rhythmic nuance, and a nervous temperament that could make for rather accident-prone concerts. In her day, many regarded her as the epitome of Mozartian style. She must have enjoyed working with Fricsay, judging by their number of preserved collaborations, both studio and live – including at least three in K 459 alone. However, his conducting does her few favors in the first movement of the same – the tempo slightly too staid; a stolid impression of excessive legato and a general lack of light and shade not making a good foil for Haskil's characteristic understatement. (She also perpetuates an obvious score misprint in the recapitulation of the secondary material – a jarring D instead of the correct high F in bar 318, for those curious.) This movement benefits from living a little more dangerously; for modern-piano versions in the up-to-tempo quick march it really needs, hear Goode/Orpheus (Nonesuch), Kocsis/Budapest Festival (Philips), or Schiff/Salzburg Camerata (Decca). Things improve greatly in the remainder of the concerto, however, the second movement taken at a real Allegretto, and a wonderfully elegant finale incorporating (unusually for its time) a stylish improvised Eingang before the first return of the main theme.

The D-Minor Concerto, K 466, must have been Haskil's single most-performed piece, to judge from the bewildering proliferation of performances on CD. The studio version with Fricsay here has previously appeared on DG, but the new Audite remastering is clearly superior in every way. The performance, however, leaves a rather soft-focused impression, the music's exceptional dramatic qualities recollected in a little too much tranquility (though the subtly varied shadings of the first movement's recurrent solo entry are vintage Haskil). In comparison, the previous day's live performance seems to provide a "shot in the arm" for both Haskil and Fricsay, with a nervous intensity missing from the studio version. Even so, she displays more D-Minor fire in a live 1956 performance with Munch in Boston (Music & Arts, though the harsh sound is a drawback). But the limitations of Haskil's approach are evident if we cast a wider comparison to other pianists from the early-mid 1950s:

Serkin/Ormandy (1951, Sony), Lefébure/Casals (1951, Sony), Kraus/Boskovsky (1955, Japanese EMI), Kempff/Karajan (live, 1956, Audite) – all in their different ways offering playing (and conducting) of stronger character and greater dramatic reach.

I've left the best concerto performance for last: Beethoven's Fourth with the under-represented American maestro Dean Dixon. What a difference a conductor can make! Haskil left a number of versions of this concerto between the years 1947 (with Carlo Zecchi for Decca) and 1959 (with Erich Schmid in Beromünster), of which the best conducted are the present version and a 1952 Vienna performance with Karajan (Tahra, but in much less good sound). Dixon's direction is superb – exceptionally alert, with a trenchancy and precision of orchestral execution far above routine, along with an imaginative response to the score's poetry that brings out the best in Haskil, in a performance of radiant long-lined lyricism. This is truly inspired music-making, soloist and conductor reacting to one another in little hair-trigger nuances of timing (for a small but telling example, listen to the turn to minor at the beginning of the first-movement development, the way Haskil reacts to the sudden emotional transformation of the ubiquitous eighth-note upbeat figure, passed from orchestra to soloist – so simple, but the stuff of truly great collaboration). Altogether one of Haskil's best-ever live concerto performances, and alone worth the price of the set.

Schumann's technically undemanding Bunte Blätter finds Haskil in her element, the intimate lyrical impulses conveyed with wonderful spontaneity, even if she is sometimes reluctant to give Schumann's weightier moods their due (by what stretch of the imagination does her Albumblatt No. 4 qualify as "sehr langsam"?). The dazzling Abegg Variations reminds us that her technique was, in its way, the equal of anyone's. Her airborne fantasy in this piece was truly sui generis.

As usual with this series, the recorded sound is stunningly good for its vintage (both studio and live performances), raising the bar for other labels' historical restorations. Indeed, I'm tempted to say that this is now the finest-sounding representation of Haskil's art available. Highly recommended to newcomers and seasoned Haskilians alike.