Edition Géza Anda (II) – Beethoven | Brahms | Liszt

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Fanfare (Jerry Dubins - 2009.01.01)

The only item in this collection designated as “live” is the Beethoven piano concerto; it also bears the latest recording date. The rest of the assembly is taken from WDR Cologne Studio recordings made between 1955 and 1960. It is not stated which are in mono and which, if any, are in stereo.

Born in Budapest, Géza Anda (1921–1976) was a pianist I always tended to associate with Bartók, probably because of the Hungarian connection, though his repertoire encompassed a fairly wide range of composers. His highly respected cycle of the complete Mozart concertos with the Salzburg Mozarteum is still available in an eight-disc boxed Deutsche Grammophon set at an incredible bargain price.

For listeners unfamiliar with Anda’s playing and/or those who are newcomers to classical music, the pianist might not be a first choice. His tone, at least on the recordings he made during the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, can come across as sounding a bit brittle and steely. Assiduous in matters of technical precision, his playing can also at times seem to be disengaged and lacking in expression. Yet it was precisely Anda’s steeliness of touch and precision of execution that I found so compelling in his Bartók; and his refusal to bedeck Mozart in floral wreaths was refreshing.

Yet virtue in one composer is not necessarily so in another. Anda’s rendition of Beethoven’s C-Major Piano Concerto in this collection sounds literal and aloof. Moreover, what was at the time the Cologne Radio Symphony Orchestra—today the much-improved WDR Symphony Orchestra of Cologne—was no Berlin Philharmonic. The playing is plagued throughout by poor intonation, mainly, and unexpectedly, in the strings rather than in the winds.

Anda’s performance of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 7 in D is mechanically exact, but essentially dry and humorless. By the time he gets to the late A-Major Sonata No. 28, Anda intuits that he is in a different musical universe, but it is one that makes expressive demands on him he can’t quite seem to relate to. The result is a very strange interpretation characterized by halting phrasing and ritards and diminuendos that seem to run off the shoulder of the road and into a ditch. Also, uncharacteristically for Anda, there is a very noticeable flub at 3: 18 in the second movement.

The Brahms sonata that begins disc 2 marks an improvement in Anda’s playing, though not, unfortunately, in the recorded sound. The sheer bigness of the work—its dynamic and tonal range—swamps the acoustic setting and stresses the recording technology. The highest notes are flattened out and glassy sounding, while the loudest passages must have needed to be compressed in order to avoid breakup. It’s

too bad, because it's in the Brahms Third Sonata that Anda really shines in a reading that reminds me of Richter's way with the composer, though Richter, for some reason it appears, never recorded the Third Sonata, only the First and Second.

As in the late Beethoven Sonata, Anda is once again a bit adrift in Brahms's late op. 117 reflective musings. Like someone who senses there is something just beyond his grasp that he desperately wishes to penetrate but can't, Anda projects onto these pieces a mode of expression that is not natural to them. The result sounds awkward and arch.

As with the Brahms Sonata, Anda is back in his element with Liszt. This is a B-Minor Sonata that goes head to head with some of the best—Richter, Horowitz, and Cziffra, to name just three electrifying versions. One must wait until the end of this two-disc set to get to the red meat of this collection, but the wait is worth it; or, you can just go directly to track 9 on disc 2, and be flabbergasted. For the Liszt alone—and secondarily for the Brahms Sonata, though the sound is poor—I would recommend this set. But if those two works are not of particular interest to you, I'd reserve recommendation mainly for Anda devotees.

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