F. Chopin: Piano Concerto No. 2 & F. Schubert: Symphony 'The Great' in C major, D. 944

aud 95.640

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American Record Guide (David Radcliffe - 2012.03.01)

Leo Blech (1871–1958) was a popular and prolific Victor artist in the 1920s and 30s whose career was wrecked by the Nazis late in life. It was resumed after the war, yet after a 20-year hiatus Blech seems to have attracted little notice outside of Germany, and his abundant shellac recordings were rarely transferred to newer media. Indeed, they were hardly suitable to post-war taste. These broadcast performances, made in 1950 when the conductor was 79, differ little in manner from records he made in the 1920s, which seems all to the good to those who prefer the grand old style to the desiccated internationalism that followed.

If the RIAS musicians respond to Blech with obvious enthusiasm, they seem to have had difficulty following his motions, for entrances and balances lack the precision one expects and that Blech obtained in his earlier recordings. It may be just that he was getting old or that there was not enough rehearsal time, but I think I hear something more than that—an orchestra more accustomed to being told exactly what was required of them struggling to follow the lead of a conductor accustomed to a more fluid working relationship with his players. They grasp the idea, but the execution tends to be rugged.

However that may be, the interpretations seem a throwback to the earlier times of Nikisch and Mahler, with untethered tempos, free rubato, and much striving for rhetorical effect: hoary old Leo Blech grabs the listener by the collar and never stops shaking. This can be exhausting in the long Schubert performance, which suffers by comparison to Furtwangler—who used similar devices with a sense of control lacking here. Blech can be heard to better advantage in this symphony in his studio recording, the ancient Victor M 33. But there is a poignancy about this late performance not to be gainsaid: it is not merely the survival but the positive assertion of 19th Century musical values in bomb-shattered Berlin. It was a bold thing for a Jewish conductor to return to Germany after the war (the story is well told in the liner notes) and Blech must have felt that he had important things to convey to a younger generation of listeners. In the Chopin concerto he finds a fit companion in the Hungarian pianist Julian von Karolyi (1914-93) who swoops and teeters and soars in the best old-fashioned virtuoso manner. The broadcast sound is wooly, not much of an improvement on Blech’s early electrics, but the sense of occasion triumphs over all in this moving historical reissue.

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