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

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Fanfare (Boyd Pomeroy - 2012.03.01)

Another wonderful disc in Audite's archival RIAS series. Leo Blech is best known for his many fine recordings on 78s before the war; this disc provides a rare, and exceedingly welcome, opportunity to hear him after his return to Berlin in 1949 (the Jewish Blech had spent the war years first in Russia, then Sweden). His ignoring by the record companies after the war, though thoroughly regrettable, can probably be attributed to his age (he was 79 by the time of this concert, and would live until 1958).

The performance of the "Great C Major" captured here is nothing short of a revelation, extraordinary for a man of any age. The introduction is richly pliable, full of imaginatively molded details and with an arresting quality of "speaking" declamation. In the Allegro ma non troppo, he seems to devour the music whole in long, fluid paragraphs. The tempo is flexible, with an extreme volatility in the expanses of the second theme, accelerating by its end to a speed far beyond the initial Allegro. The long sequences of the development have a rare visceral excitement. Orchestral balances are lean and sharp, and the players' response to his galvanizing direction has real bite. The Andante con moto bursts with dramatic life and heightened rhetoric—hear the spontaneous volatility of the main theme's contrasting middle section (Rehearsal A ff.), or the amazing life-or-death intensity with which he invests the two-chord motive at 7 before D, etc. The lyrical second theme is shaped with tactile immediacy. At the movement's central climax, his accelerando is disconcertingly extreme, yet of a piece with his heightened conception of the whole. The Scherzo is lean and fiery; the Trio forward-pressing with little relaxation. The edifice is capped by a big-boned and weighty finale, flexible within a controlled master tempo, with biting accents and long-breathed shaping of paragraphs. Altogether a fascinating contrast with Furtwängler's postwar performances of the work, with their very different brand of interpretive freedom, but every bit as compelling.

The Chopin concerto is no less welcome, for a reminder of the quality of the near-forgotten Julian von Károlyi, who plays the work with a rare incisiveness, thrust, and exciting Hungarian rhythmic snap. His sound is on the dry side, using very little pedal, with agile reflexes and precision at high speed (exceptionally clean fioriture). Musical gestures are economical, but there is a coil-spring inner tension to his phrasing, and he has that rare knack of suggesting a lot while seeming to do very little. Blech's conducting is dynamic and involved (unusually for the time, he plays the opening ritornello complete; curiously, he observes a much shorter cut at the end of the movement).

As usual, Audite's production values are superb; the sound, transferred from the original master tapes, is of astounding vividness, color, clarity, and dynamic range for

its time and provenance. An altogether exceptional disc, and I wouldn't be too surprised if this were to wind up in my next Want List.

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