



**Robert Schumann & Johannes Brahms:
Cello Concerto, Op. 129 & Piano
Concerto, Op. 15**

aud 95.622

EAN: 4022143956224



www.musicweb-international.com (Stephen Greenbank - 2013.08.20)

1963, two young artists gave a concert in Berlin in the 'RIAS presents' series. For three years the radio series had, in conjunction with the Radio Symphony Orchestra, been giving the opportunity to young artists at the start of their careers, the opportunity to play with an orchestra. The only proviso was that they had not previously appeared in Berlin in an orchestral concert. This exists even to this day as 'Debut im Deutschlandradio Kultur' and many renowned musicians have made their debut in this way. These include Jessye Norman, Daniel Barenboim, Evgeny Kissin and Cecilia Bartoli.

The two artists involved in the 1963 concert were the eighteen year old British cellist Jacqueline du Pré, and the Argentinean pianist Bruno Leonardo Gelber, who was twenty-one. Du Pré began learning the cello at the age of four and studied with William Pleeth. She also had tuition from Casals, Tortelier and Rostropovich. Tragedy struck in the early 1970s when she developed multiple sclerosis, dying at the age of forty-two in 1987. Gelber overcame polio to become a concert pianist and won a scholarship to study with Marguerite Long in Paris.

First on the programme for this disc is the Schumann Cello Concerto. In 1850, the Schumanns moved from Dresden to Düsseldorf. The change of surroundings brought about a creative upsurge in Robert, and within a few months he had composed the Rhenish Symphony, Scenes from Goethe's Faust, some songs, and the present cello concerto. Amazingly it was composed in just fifteen days. Schumann was fond of the cello and played it for a while when a finger injury in 1832 put an end to his career as a pianist. He never achieved proficiency, but his dabbling gave him an understanding of the instrument and its possibilities. His cello concerto is in three linked movements. This both unifies the work and prevents the irritating habit of audiences applauding after each movement, a practice Schumann detested.

The Schumann Concerto is a compact work. It has been criticized for its not very adventurous orchestration. Indeed Joan Chissell, an authority on Schumann, makes the pertinent comment "... for though discretion is undoubtedly the better part of valour in accompanying the least penetrating of all solo instruments in a concerto, Schumann's excessive caution frequently results in drabness". This presents a problem for the conductor, as the orchestration is very sparse and exposed in places. Added to this is the flexibility and rubato in the solo part. Rostropovich even went so far as to ask Shostakovich to re-orchestrate the work, though I've never heard that version to compare.

When first listening to this CD, I was reminded of a DVD documentary about Jacqueline Du Pré, in which Sir John Barbirolli is interviewed countering the criticism from some quarters that her playing suffered from excessive emotion. I will always

remember his wise words: “when you’re young, you should have an excess of everything. If you haven’t excess, what are you going to pare off as the years go by”. As can be expected, du Pré delivers a passionate and expressive performance. With beauty of tone the concerto is ravishingly played. The slow movement especially has a pervasive melancholy and wistfulness. It is truly heartfelt. The conductor Gerd Albrecht rises to the challenge with flying colours and gives the soloist more inspirational support than Daniel Barenboim does in the studio recording five years later. That said, the 1968 EMI recording does not flatter the New Philharmonia orchestral sound, which seems slightly recessed. In general, I find the present live performance more engaging and spontaneous than the studio event. The sound is remarkably good for a mono recording of this vintage. A similar performance I have from 3 March 1967 with Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic, live from Carnegie Hall, is also more free, natural and instinctive than the New Philharmonia version. Schumann provides an accompanied cadenza at the end of the third movement. Curiously du Pré inserts her own spectacular cadenza and picks up Schumann’s cadenza at the end. She does not do this in the recordings with Barenboim and Bernstein. This is not as unusual as it may at first appear. Shafran, Fournier and Tortelier added their own cadenzas at the same juncture.

Brahms composed his First Piano Concerto at the age of twenty-five in 1858, and gave the first performance a year later in Hanover, Germany. The work had a lengthy gestation period, starting as a symphony, then a sonata for two pianos, and finally as a concerto in the form we know it today. It is large in scale and the piano and the orchestra take on equal roles.

A few months ago I reviewed Gelber in the Brahms Second Concerto with the NHK Symphony Orchestra. What impressed me with that magisterial account was Gelber’s formidable technique, enabling him successfully to achieve his vision and realization. Likewise with Brahms 1, he employs his prodigious artistry to deliver something of real stature. There’s tremendous energy here with Albrecht providing sympathetic support and sustaining the dramatic tension throughout. A good balance is achieved between the dramatic and the lyrical. The music is thoughtfully paced with both soloist and conductor having a clear understanding of the work’s towering architecture.

With first-class liner notes this is an admirable release enshrining two youthful renditions. These are valuable documents that should be required listening for collectors of historical instrumental performances. The disc gave me a great deal of pleasure. The sound, as I mentioned earlier, is exceptional for its age, and allows the music to emerge with definition and clarity.