Paul Kletzki conducts Brahms, Schubert & Beethoven

aud 95.642

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Fanfare (James Miller - 2016.10.01)

Paul Kletzki was born in 1900 and died two weeks short of his 73rd birthday. A native of Poland, he moved to Germany in 1921 with the intention of being a composer and found some success there before departing in 1933 with the arrival of Nazism. Mussolini's turn toward anti-Semitism drove him from Italy in 1936. After a few years in the Soviet Union, he departed for his final home, Switzerland, in 1939. Claiming that Nazism had destroyed his creativity, he gave up composing in 1942 and concentrated on conducting. Between 1958 and 1970, he served, at various times, as chief conductor of the Liverpool Philharmonic, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, and L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande. The performances listed above are taken from what is described as a charity concert … more on that later.

I wonder if the concert featured the pieces in the order in which they appear on the CD; it seems to me that Beethoven and Schubert followed by Brahms would have been the likely order. These are certainly high-quality, intelligent performances with subtle tempo changes and an intelligent use of dynamics for dramatic emphasis. Interestingly, in the Passacaglia of the Brahms Fourth, he doesn't even pretend to keep a steady tempo, letting each variation "speak for itself" with considerable success. As imposing as it may be, this performance is like a major step on the way to his superior (and two-channel) studio recording for EMI. The Schubert "Unfinished" is, if anything, even better, with the same flexible tempos and dynamic contrasts helping the music to tell its story. After these two achievements, the strong performance of the Leonore No. 3 is almost anti-climactic.

Speaking of the dynamic contrasts that Kletzki uses to such good effect, they are sabotaged to some extent by an unexpected intrusion—anything below mf is accompanied by the annoying swish of a stylus traversing the grooves of what I take to be a transcription disc. Are the performances actually from a "charity concert"? Could be, but the audience is astonishingly healthy and polite—there's no shuffling, no coughing, and no applause whatsoever. As it happens, Kletzki made English Columbia 78s of all three works—the Beethoven and Schubert with the Philharmonia Orchestra and the Brahms with the Lucerne Festival Orchestra (!). In addition, I perceived what seemed to be a side break in the Brahms Symphony. All of these coincidences (?) may be explicable but I thought I should mention them. My speculations do not diminish my respect for the performances themselves, but they do have me wondering.

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