



BRAHMS

Piano Concerto No. 1

Variations on a Theme
by Paganini

Wilhelm Backhaus

BBC Symphony Orchestra
Adrian Boult

Historical Recordings 1929 and 1932

Great Pianists: Wilhelm Backhaus (1884-1969)

BRAHMS: Piano Concerto No. 1 • Paganini Variations • Rhapsodies, Op. 79

Wilhelm Backhaus was born in Leipzig in 1884. A major pianist of the twentieth century, Backhaus was not a pupil of any of the major teachers of his time, and the only pianist of note who had any bearing on his development was Eugen d'Albert, with whom Backhaus had some lessons in 1898 and 1899. Before going to d'Albert, Backhaus had studied the piano, from the age of ten, at the Leipzig Conservatory with Alois Reckendorf. Immediately after his time with d'Albert, Backhaus toured England as a substitute for an indisposed Alexander Siloti, the following year making his début at the Proms. In 1905 he won the prestigious Anton Rubinstein prize of 5000 Francs in Paris. He first visited America in 1912 but spent most of his time in Europe, taking Swiss citizenship in 1931. When he returned to America in 1954 it was with a successful series of Beethoven sonatas at Carnegie Hall. Backhaus was a recording pioneer, making the first ever recording of a piano concerto in 1909 (an abridged version of the Grieg), and the first complete recording of Chopin's *Etudes Op. 10* and 25. He recorded throughout his life remaking on LP many recordings he had made on 78rpm discs. At the time of his death he was recording, for the second time, the complete Beethoven sonatas. He continued to appear before the public into his eighties and died in 1969.

As a young man Backhaus was a firebrand virtuoso with an incredible technique, yet early in his performing career he programmed works such as Beethoven's *Piano Sonata Op. 111*, and later played Chopin's *Goldberg Variations*, but it was with Beethoven and Brahms that he became most associated. After his initial recordings for HMV before the First World War, Backhaus recorded for Polydor in Berlin in 1916, a highlight from these sessions being a truncated version of one of his specialties, the *Variations on a Theme of Paganini* by Brahms, a work he had played at his London début in 1901. After resuming his association with HMV after the First

World War, Backhaus recorded a complete version of the *Variations* in 1925. This was right at the end of the acoustic era, and after the introduction of the sonically superior electrical recording process, Backhaus again recorded the work in November 1929. It still remains one of the classic performances of this technically challenging work, and it should be remembered that it was recorded in the days before tape editing became the norm. The authority and conviction Backhaus brings to this score, one he had been playing all his life and an obvious favourite, is evident in the security of his technique and interpretation. Although the technical feats are breath-taking in their facility, Backhaus never plays for effect and makes musical sense of everything, even though he had to contend with a Bechstein 'baby grand' piano for the recording session. Backhaus was very busy in the recording studio in September and October 1929 attempting to record Beethoven's *Fourth Piano Concerto* (which was not completed until the following March), and the *Waldstein* and *Pathétique Sonatas*. Another title he attempted to record at this time was his own arrangement for solo piano of the *Romanza* from Chopin's *Piano Concerto No. 1*. He tried recording it at least five times, but unfortunately, a recording of this work was never released.

Backhaus was in England in November and December 1932 where he gave a recital of popular sonatas at the Queen's Hall with the violinist Mischa Elman. A newspaper reviewer was in the fortunate position of being able to compare the performances of the sonatas by Franck, Brahms and Beethoven with those he had heard previously by another duo, Ysaÿe and Busoni. A week later Backhaus gave a solo recital at Grotrian Hall of early Beethoven works and Brahms's *Variations on a Theme of Paganini*. During the ensuing week Backhaus went to HMV's Abbey Road Studios to record the *First Piano Concerto* by Brahms with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and

Adrian Boult. Two sessions were needed on consecutive days to record this large work, but the recording was a straightforward affair with few sides needing to be repeated. Boult and the BBC Symphony Orchestra match Backhaus's virility and drive in the outer movements giving excellent rhythmic support. In this new transfer, the quality of Backhaus's tone on the Bechstein piano he used for the recording can be savoured in the *Adagio*. Backhaus recorded much of his repertoire again in the LP era, but after the Second World War his playing took on a less heroic, more serious aspect, and the recording of the same concerto with the Vienna Philharmonic and Karl Böhm made for Decca in 1953 does not have the same vitality of this earlier recording; after all, this is a young man's concerto written when Brahms was in his twenties.

The two *Rhapsodies* come from a series of solo

sessions Backhaus made in December 1932. The following year, 1933, was to be the centenary of Brahms's birth, and during the previous December Backhaus recorded many of the short piano solos from *Op. 118* and *Op. 76* as well as these heard here from *Op. 79*.

Backhaus's performances had a conviction and integrity about them, and in 1928, a few years before these recordings were made, he was described as resembling 'no one more than the great Anton Rubinstein in the reverent attitude he brings to bear on all aspects of his art and he belongs to that select minority of great virtuosi who interpret the great masters with religious enthusiasm and unswerving fidelity to the spirit of their music.'

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Mark Obert-Thorn

Mark Obert-Thorn is one of the world's most respected transfer artist/engineers. He has worked for a number of specialist labels, including Pearl, Biddulph, Romophone and Music & Arts. Three of his transfers have been nominated for Gramophone Awards. A pianist by training, his passions are music, history and working on projects. He has found a way to combine all three in the transfer of historical recordings.

Obert-Thorn describes himself as a 'moderate interventionist' rather than a 'purist' or 're-processor,' unlike those who apply significant additions and make major changes to the acoustical qualities of old recordings. His philosophy is that a good transfer should not call attention to itself, but rather allow the performances to be heard with the greatest clarity.

There is no over-reverberant 'cathedral sound' in an Obert-Thorn restoration, nor is there the tinny bass and piercing mid-range of many 'authorised' commercial issues. He works with the cleanest available 78s, and consistently achieves better results than restoration engineers working with the metal parts from the archives of the modern corporate owners of the original recordings. His transfers preserve the original tone of the old recordings, maximising the details in critical upper mid-range and lower frequencies to achieve a musical integrity that is absent from many other commercially released restorations.

Producer's Note

The source for the transfers were mid-1930s U.S. Victor "Z" pressings, the most quiet form of issue for these recordings. In the Paganini Variations, two different cutting turntables were used, and a slight difference in sound may be noticeable for the one side not recorded on the "B" table.

Mark Obert-Thorn

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15

1	Maestoso	19:10
2	Adagio	12:46
3	Allegro non troppo	10:53
Recorded 28th and 29th November 1932		
EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 1, London		
Matrices: 2B 4109-2, 4110-1, 4111-3, 4112-1, 4113-2A, 4114-2, 4115-2, 4116-1A		
4117-2A and 4118-3A		
First issued on HMV DB 1840 through 1844		

Variations on a Theme by Paganini, Op. 35

4	Theme	0:29
Book I:		
5	Variation 1	0:26
6	Variation 2	0:26
7	Variation 3	0:26
8	Variation 4	0:48
9	Variation 5	0:21
10	Variation 6	0:16
11	Variation 7	0:24
12	Variation 8	0:30
13	Variation 9	0:55
14	Variation 10	0:38
15	Variation 11	1:19
16	Variation 12	0:49
17	Variation 13	0:30
18	Variation 14	0:38

19	Book II:	Variation 1	0:39
20		Variation 2	0:18
21		Variation 3	0:19
22		Variation 4	0:49
23		Variation 5	0:14
24		Variation 6	0:15
25		Variation 7	0:19
26		Variation 8	0:30
27		Variation 9	0:24
28		Variation 10	0:27
29		Variation 11	1:05
30		Variation 12	0:45
31		Variation 13	0:41
32		Variation 14	0:36

Recorded 19th November 1929

Queen's Small Hall, London

Matrices: Cc 18186-2B, 18187-1, 18188-2B and 18189-2B

First issued on HMV DB 1388 and 1389

33	Rhapsody in B minor, Op. 79, No. 1	8:02
Recorded 7th December 1932		
EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London		
Matrices: 2B 4372-1 and 4373-2		
First issued on HMV DB 1899		

34	Rhapsody in G minor, Op. 79, No. 2	4:08
Recorded 7th December 1932		
EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London		
Matrices: 2B 4374-1		
First issued on HMV DB 1900		

The Naxos historical label aims to make available the greatest recordings in the history of recorded music, in the best and truest sound that contemporary technology can provide. To achieve this aim, Naxos has engaged a number of respected restorers who have the dedication, skill and experience to produce restorations that have set new standards in the field of historical recordings.

Playing
Time
71:24

BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Piano Concerto No. 1

Wilhelm Backhaus (1884-1969)

BBC Symphony Orchestra • Adrian Boult



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ADD

Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15

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|----------|---------------------------|--------------|
| 1 | Maestoso | 19:10 |
| 2 | Adagio | 12:46 |
| 3 | Allegro non troppo | 10:53 |

Recorded 28th and 29th November, 1932
in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 1, London

Variations on a Theme by Paganini, Op. 35

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|----------------|-----------------|-------------|
| 4 | Theme | 0:29 |
| 5 - 18 | Book I: | 8:56 |
| 19 - 32 | Book II: | 7:21 |

Recorded 19th November, 1929
in Queen's Small Hall, London

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|-----------|---|-------------|
| 33 | Rhapsody in B minor, Op. 79, No. 1 | 8:02 |
| | Recorded 7th December, 1932 in EMI
Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London | |

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|-----------|---|-------------|
| 34 | Rhapsody in G minor, Op. 79, No. 2 | 4:08 |
| | Recorded 7th December, 1932 in EMI
Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London | |

Wilhelm Backhaus was a twentieth century virtuoso who had the distinction of making the first ever recording of a piano concerto (an abridged version of the Grieg in 1909), but it was for his interpretations of the works of Beethoven and Brahms that he became best known. The recordings on this CD include a work that he had performed at his London début in 1901, the *Variations on a Theme by Paganini*. Backhaus was a performer of great technique and integrity and was keen to keep pace with advancements in recording technology. Although Backhaus re-recorded much of this repertoire, these earlier recordings possess a vitality and drive that are not always present in his later recordings.

Audio Restoration Producer: Mark Obert-Thorn

A complete tracklist can be found in the booklet

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Cover Photograph: Wilhelm Backhaus (Lebrecht Collection)

