



BRAHMS

Piano Concerto No. 1

Intermezzos in
E flat major and A minor
Rhapsody in G minor

Artur Schnabel

London Philharmonic Orchestra

George Szell

Historical Recordings 1938 and 1947

Great Pianists • Artur Schnabel

BRAHMS (1833-1897): Piano Concerto No. 1

There is a story about a small boy in Vienna who, on the way to his piano lesson, was passing a music shop. In the window was displayed a new work which he bought as a gift for his piano teacher. Upon presenting it to his teacher he was greeted with explosions and insults and told to leave the class. The teacher was Leschetizky, the music by Brahms, and the boy was Artur Schnabel.

Through his lessons in composition with Mandiczewski, the twelve-year-old Artur occasionally went on Sunday picnics with a group that included Brahms. The great composer always asked the same two questions: before the meal if young Artur was hungry, and afterwards if he had had enough to eat. Although Schnabel came to be known particularly for his interpretations of Beethoven and Schubert, he was not deterred by the unfortunate episode with Leschetizky from playing Brahms throughout his career at the beginning of which he often performed both piano concertos. In the latter part of his career he tended to play the first less, but played the second at the Royal Albert Hall in London as late as 1947.

At the invitation of Serge Koussevitzky in 1914 Schnabel visited Russia for the second time. He played the *D minor Concerto* in St Petersburg and Moscow with great success. He told his wife that he had never played the concerto so well and with such freedom. On his first tour of America in 1921 he was asked to play the same concerto in Buffalo and Detroit. He was fortunate that at this time the conductor of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra was the great pianist and musician Ossip Gabrilowitsch. Schnabel said that it was the only pleasant interlude in a long period of 'unemployment' because he was completely unknown outside Europe. The Detroit Free Press, however, which owned a local radio station, experimentally broadcast the concert to thousands of listeners thus giving him greater exposure. He was very unhappy on

this first tour of America and during one of the final concerts in Chicago where he again played the *D minor Concerto* with Frederick Stock and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, one of the piano keys would not sound. The performance had to be halted and a replacement piano found in the basement of the building.

In 1929 Schnabel was in London where, at the Queen's Hall, he played the Beethoven *G major Concerto* and the Brahms *D minor* in one programme with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Malcolm Sargent. This was an extremely successful occasion with the critics exclaiming on all sides. "A new chapter in the history of music-making was opened in Queen's Hall last night" said one, while the famous critic Ernest Newman referred to "his complete mastery of all aspects – form, display and emotion."

In 1932 Schnabel was back in Germany and in early December Bruno Walter engaged him to play the Brahms *First Concerto* with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. "A performance of well-nigh unsurpassable power", said the local press. Back in London at the end of the following year he played three Mozart concertos with Sargent as well as the *First Concerto* of Brahms with Adrian Boult, and the *Second* with Thomas Beecham.

By the time he came to record the *D minor Concerto* with Szell, Schnabel had been making records for HMV for the last nine years and was getting used to the process. This is what he had to say about recording. "In 1929 I was asked once again whether I would not agree to make records. Until then I had consistently refused to do so. One of the chief reasons for my refusal was that I did not like the idea of having no control over the behaviour of the people who listened to the music which I performed – not knowing how they would be dressed, what else they would be doing at the same time, how much they

would listen. Also, I felt that recordings were against the very nature of performance, for the nature of performance is to happen but once, to be absolutely ephemeral and unrepeatable. I do not think there could ever have been two performances of the same piece by the same person which were absolutely alike. That is inconceivable..... For ten years, from 1929 to 1939, I made all my recordings with the same engineer [Edward Fowler], so in the end the two of us did the work quite alone. There was no interference and I was, by then, very pleased with the spirit of the thing. In the meantime, everything had changed. Acoustic conditions had become better and there were also certain improvements in the technique of recording."

On 9th January 1938 Schnabel went into the HMV Studio 1 at Abbey Road in London with Szell and the London Philharmonic Orchestra to record the *D minor Concerto*. Although the *Adagio* was practically recorded and issued in first takes, the first movement proved more problematic; the musicians had to return to the studio on 18th December 1938 to re-record the last three sides of the first movement as well as one side of the *Finale*.

It is interesting that a contemporary review from April 1939 of this recording with Szell complains that in the last movement "Schnabel is not an ideal passage player. In the start he indulges in his persistent bad habit of rushing – one of the most weakening a pianist can allow to creep in. This player ought really to take himself in hand." A review of a re-issue of this recording in 1991 also states "In the last movement bad ensemble and snatched, lumpy phrasing from the soloist return to make the performance more than a little unsatisfactory." Schnabel certainly has his detractors where 'technique' is concerned, but it would appear that some of these rhythmic irregularities are intentional. Konrad Wolff, a pupil of Schnabel, states that in the last

movement of the *D minor Concerto* in groups of four semiquavers "Schnabel not only emphasised the *upper* notes of each pair of notes, but he also separated each of these pairs....", the effect being that the second and third notes of a group of four would be emphasised and detached from the first and fourth. Wolff also cites a passage in the last movement [Track 3 at 4' 14"]: "There are some works in which the deliberate separation, by rubato playing, of groups of slurred notes can be helpful. In the following example from the *Finale* of Brahms' *First Piano Concerto* some of the phrases extend over four notes, some over eight and some over only two. This passage gains in 'playfulness' if, like Schnabel, the pianist plays each group a little too fast (although without an accent at the beginning of each phrase), making a '*Luftpause*' before beginning the next group. Schnabel, though he was frequently criticised for it, applied this method in concerto playing wherever it would serve to clarify the structure."

Although thought of as a Brahms specialist because of his many performances of both concertos, it was not until 1947 that Schnabel came to record any of the solo works. Things had changed at HMV since before the war, and now Walter Legge was in charge. Schnabel proposed amongst other things that he record the *Rhapsodies*, *Intermezzi* and *Capriccios* of Brahms as well as Schumann's *Kinderszenen*. Two *Intermezzi* and two *Rhapsodies* were recorded at Abbey Road studios on 4th June 1947 four years before the pianist's death in 1951. For some reason, the *Rhapsody, Op.70, No.1* was never issued, but the remaining titles reveal a deep understanding of Brahms which, by this time, had matured into something very special, introspective and personal.

Jonathan Summers

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

Schnabel's recording of the Brahms *D minor Concerto* is problematic in several respects, not the least of which was the substandard sound in which it was originally presented. Miked so closely that Abbey Road Studio 1 sounded more like a closet than a concert hall, the piano tone was blunt and dull. Adding further injury, the plating of the original wax matrices was apparently faulty as evidenced by patches of noise and swish on several sides. The U.S. Victor pressings, usually quieter than the HMVs, were further compromised by their dubbing the first two sides, presumably to avoid groove wear on Szell's thunderous timpani rolls.

For the present transfer, I have added a small amount of reverberation in order to make the recording balance more acceptable. My sources for the concerto were pre-war Victor pressings, except for the first two sides, which were taken from HMV shellacs. The three works which conclude the disc, Schnabel's only Brahms piano solo recordings, came from HMV 78s, their only form of issue.

Mark Obert-Thorn

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.

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ADD

BRAHMS

Piano Concerto No. 1

Artur Schnabel (1882-1951)

London Philharmonic Orchestra

George Szell

Playing
Time
61:34

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

47:22

1 Maestoso

20:53

2 Adagio

15:53

3 Rondo: Allegro non troppo

10:36

Recorded on 9th January and 18th December, 1938 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 1, London
(on matrices 2EA 5964-2, 5963-2A, 5965-4, 5966-3, 5967-2, 5968-1, 5969-1A, 5970-1, 5971-1, 5972-1, 5973-2 and 5974-1)
First issued as HMV DB 3712/7

4 Intermezzo in E flat major, Op. 117, No. 1

4:53

Recorded on 4th June, 1947 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London (on matrix 2EA 12094-1)
First issued as HMV DB 6505

5 Intermezzo in A minor, Op. 116, No. 2

3:18

Recorded on 4th June, 1947 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London (on matrix 2EA 12095-2)
First issued as HMV DB 6505

6 Rhapsody in G minor, Op. 79, No. 2

6:01

Recorded on 4th June, 1947 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
(on matrices 2EA 12092-2 and 12093-2). First issued as HMV DB 6504

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LC 05537



Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn

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