NAXOS Historical

Great Pianists • Schnabel

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BEETHOVEN
Piano Works Vol. 5

Sonata No. 14 'Moonlight'

Sonata No. 15 'Pastorale'

Sonata No. 16

Artur Schnabel

Historical Recordings 1933 - 1937

Piano Sonata No. 14 "Moonlight" • Piano Sonata No. 15 "Pastorale" • Piano Sonata No. 16

Artur Schnabel was born in 1882 in Lipnik, a village on the Austrian-Polish border. He studied with Theodore Leschetizky in Vienna and from 1898 pursued his career in Berlin, becoming a leading chamber music performer and later devoting most of his time to the solo piano repertoire and to composition. Through the 1920s and 1930s he was recognised as the leading authority on Beethoven's piano music, publishing an idiosyncratic edition of the sonata scores, performing these 32 works in complete cycles in several cities, and, with great reluctance, producing the first complete set of recordings of them. Schnabel's biographer César Saerchinger has written that economic conditions played a role in the pianist's 1931 decision to make recordings for His Master's Voice. The world was in the depths of the Depression and the Nazis had recently emerged as an ominous presence in Germany, where Schnabel was still living and teaching at Berlin's Hochschule für Musik. In the spring of 1932 Compton Mackenzie, editor of *The Gramophone*, wrote of being "thrilled" by the announcement that Schnabel was to record all of Beethoven's solo piano music and the five concertos, which would be sold by subscription: "For a long time now Schnabel has refused to have anything to do with the gramophone although repeatedly asked to record. …I might remind readers that members can be enrolled in [the Beethoven Sonata Society] through H.M.V dealers, and there is every expectation that the membership will be a large one." No doubt executives at HMV were nervously hopeful that Mackenzie was correct. Most potential subscribers would have been familiar with and interested in only the better known sonatas, and no other pianist of the era had the stature to make such demands of a record company.

Schnabel recorded Beethoven's *Sonata No. 14 in C Sharp Minor, Op. 27, No. 2* in April 1933. Beethoven had referred to the work as '*quasi una fantasia*', as its form defies convention, opening with an *Adagio* that flows into the *Allegretto* second movement. A tumultuous *Presto agitato* in sonata form brings it to a close. It has of course long been known as the *Moonlight* sonata. Completed and published in 1801, Beethoven dedicated it to a young student, the Countess Giulietta Guicciardi, fuelling speculation of a romantic link between the two. In the 1930s the *Moonlight* was a recital favourite, as it is now. Its place in Schnabel's repertoire was revealing of his reputation as a scholar-pianist, whose interpretations of the late sonatas often drew more attention than the popular works. After a Carnegie Hall performance in February 1936, the critic of the *New York Times* focused on Schnabel's playing of the *B flat major Sonata, Op. 106* (the *Hammerklavier*), noting also that "his interpretations of the three earlier sonatas [the *E flat major, Op. 7*; the *C sharp minor, Op. 27, No. 2*, and the *G major, Op. 14, No. 2*] were marked with a characteristic regard both for detail and the full sweep of a work. The *C sharp minor Sonata*, for years the favorite of any keyboard pounder, assumed a new vitality."

The *Sonata in D major, Op. 28*, the *Pastorale*, also dates from 1801. The title was given to this sonata by the Hamburg publisher August Cranz, in reference to the bucolic style of the outer movements. It is this character, and especially the dance-like rhythms of the final movement that Schnabel brings out in his recording. It is an interpretation of the *Pastorale* that the pianist-critic Harris Goldsmith once described as his "first choice," owing to its "structural clarity and tempos that miraculously manage to be both broad and impetuous." In its August 1933 review of the recording the *Gramophone*'s critic wrote only of the transparency of Schnabel's playing and of his choice of tempi: [He] "is a clean expositor. I do not think all musicians care enormously about that side of his skill - in comparison, that is, with plenty of other fine players. The slow movement of *Op. 28*, Beethoven marked only *Andante*, and 2-4. Schnabel takes it very slowly, so that for once it drags. This section shows clearly the survival of the

influence of the old dance suite movements, from which the sonata evolved. The middle section is piquantly done. …Schnabel is inclined to rush in one or two places — for instance, in the first movement of *Op. 28*, the bar consisting of two triplets followed by a group of five." Schnabel's intentions may in fact have been captured accurately. A comparison with his edition of the score, reveals the performance to be very close to the printed page, both in its tempi and pedal markings.

Beethoven published the three sonatas of *Op. 31* in Switzerland in 1802, the year in which he also composed the *2nd Symphony* and the three *Violin Sonatas, Op. 30*, and the year in which he wrote the famous *Heiligenstadt Testament*. The first sonata of the *Op. 31* set, in *G major*, has been overshadowed by its siblings. Released in 1937 as the Beethoven Sonata Society's volume XI, Schnabel's recording of the *Sonata in G Major, Op. 31, No. 1* was originally paired with the *E flat Major Sonata, Op. 7*. In a review published in *The Gramophone* in September 1937, one critic disparaged the work, writing that "one cannot help admiring the tact and finish with which Schnabel plays music that cannot have interested him much. He makes all the points and never lets the composer down." Attitudes towards this work have changed considerably since the 1930s. D.F. Tovey has written that "in its treatment of keys this sonata closely foreshadows the *Waldstein Sonata*… In the present sonata the slow movement presents us with a self-conscious reaction, being the most diffuse and ornate ABA movement in all Beethoven's works. …The *G major Sonata* states its bold harmonies with a nervous and jocular air of paradox. There is almost a touch of humour in following its first movement with a reactionary slow movement. … both sonatas [this one and the *Waldstein*] end with a brilliant and luxurious rondo, but that of the *G major Sonata* laughs at itself in its last page." Pianist Robert Taub has called *Op. 31, No. 1* "a genuinely funny piece." The second movement, he writes, "is a good-natured parody of Italian lyric opera in which the 'diva' goes off on extraordinary runs and trills, leaving the 'accompanist' wondering what to do. The third movement continues with long, flowing lyrical lines alternating between the two hands, which assume ridiculously funny extremes of tempo and dynamics in the coda." It was this understanding of the work that Harris Goldsmith called attention to in writing that "Schnabel brings an uncouth humor to the piece with his faster tempos and more impulsive, less impeccable passagework. His adagio, though, is played with much tempo variation and sounds unconventionally profound." In his insistence on recording all 32 sonatas, Schnabel left a statement that influenced how we understand and appreciate many of Beethoven works, and HMV's 1931 gamble continues to resonate seventy years later.

Brian C. Thompson

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.

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.

Producer's Note

Artur Schnabel's pioneering Beethoven Sonata Society recordings were originally issued on 204 78 rpm sides in fifteen volumes, each containing six or seven discs. The first twelve sets contained the thirty-two sonatas, usually packaged as one early, one middle and one late sonata per album. Variations, bagatelles and sundry short pieces occupied the final three volumes. The sets were released in the UK on His Master's Voice with some volumes also being issued on French Disque Gramophone, German Electrola and (for the *Hammerklavier Sonata* only) Victor in the United States. In this eleven-CD reissue series, the first nine discs will be devoted to the sonatas, presented in their order of composition, while the final two volumes will feature the other works.

Because the original discs rarely turn up in any form other than British pressings, the problem of how to deal with the higher-than-average level of surface crackle inherent in HMV shellac has led previous transfer engineers down one of two paths. One way has been to use heavy computerized processing to keep the noise at a minimum. While this made for a relatively quiet result, many critics felt that the piano's tonal qualities had been sacrificed to an unacceptable degree. Another approach went to the opposite extreme, filtering minimally and even apparently boosting the upper mid-range frequencies in an attempt to add a percussive brilliance to the piano tone. Although this produced a clearer result than the first method, many listeners were put off by the relentless onslaught of surface noise that this approach to filtering and equalisation exacerbated.

For the current transfers, I have tried to strike a balance between these two positions. In order to start with the quietest available source material, multiple copies of British, French and American pressings have been assembled, and I have chosen the best sides from each. Computerised declicking (although not denoising) has been employed not only to remove clicks and pops, but also to reduce surface crackle to a minimum without harming the upper frequencies. My approach to filtering has been to stop at the point at which more than just surface hiss was being affected; and my equalisation has aimed for a warm, full piano tone which I believe is more representative of the original recordings.

Finally, I have linked the movements of each of the sonatas by retaining the surface noise on the original discs. With recordings of a basically higher noise level such as the present ones, I feel that once the listener has become acclimated to the surface hiss, much of it can be mentally screened out. It is counterproductive to be reminded of it at the start of each new movement, as happens in those editions in which movements are faded in and faded out.

The sources for the current volume's transfers were laminated French "Disque Gramophone" pressings for the last two sides of the *Moonlight Sonata* and all of the *Pastorale*, and British HMV shellacs for the remaining sides. Some blasting is inherent in the master of the *Moonlight Sonata* during the third movement's louder passages.

Mark Obert-Thorn

Sonata No. 14 in C sharp minor, Op. 27, No. 2, "Moonlight" 13:38

1 Adagio sostenuto 5:01
2 Allegretto 2:13
3 Presto agitato 6:25

Recorded 10th and 11th April, 1933 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
Matrices: 2B 6602-1, 6603-1 and 6604-1
First issued as HMV DB 2089 and 2090 in Society Volume 4

Sonata No. 15 in D major, Op. 28, "Pastorale" 21:15

4 Allegro 7:22
5 Andante 7:21
6 Scherzo 2:06
7 Rondo 4:27

Recorded 3rd and 17th February, 1933 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
Matrices: 2B 2674-4, 2675-3, 2676-4, 2677-3, 2678-4 and 2679-3
First issued as HMV DB 1953 – 1955 in Society Volume 3

Sonata No. 16 in G major, Op. 31, No. 1 24:01

8 Allegro vivace 5:53
9 Adagio grazioso 12:31
10 Rondo - Allegretto 5:36

Recorded 5th and 6th November, 1935 and 15th January, 1937 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
Matrices: 2EA 2499-1, 2500-3, 2501-2, 2502-3, 2503-2, 2504-3 and 2505-3A
First issued as HMV DB 3154 – 3157 in Society Volume 11

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Complete Beethoven Sonata Society Recordings Vol. 5

Artur Schnabel (1882-1951)

Playing Time 58:54

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Matrices: 2B 2674-4, 2675-3, 2676-4, 2677-3, 2678-4 and 2679-3
First issued as HMV DB 1953 through 1955 in Society Volume 3

8 - 10 **Sonata No. 16 in G major, Op. 31, No. 1** 24:01
Recorded 5th and 6th November, 1935 and 15th January, 1937 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
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First issued as HMV DB 3154 through 3157 in Society Volume 11

At first reluctant to make recordings, by the 1930s the great pianist Artur Schnabel fully accepted the new technology. His recordings of Beethoven's piano music include all the numbered sonatas, originally issued on subscription by the Beethoven Sonata Society. This, the fifth volume of the Beethoven Piano Sonatas series, presents the famous *Moonlight Sonata,* which was no less a recital favourite in the 1930s than it is today. Writing in 1936, the critic of the *New York Times* noted that Schnabel's interpretation was marked with a characteristic regard both for detail and the full sweep of the work, which "assumed a new vitality". In its August 1933 review of the recording of the *Pastorale Sonata*, *Gramophone*'s critic wrote of the transparency of Schnabel's playing and of his unerring choice of tempi. In his insistence on recording all thirty-two Sonatas, Schnabel left a statement that influenced how we understand and appreciate many of Beethoven's works.

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Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn

A complete tracklist can be found on the last page of the booklet

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