



BRAHMS

Piano Concerto No. 2

Ballades

Waltzes

Hungarian Dances

Wilhelm Backhaus

Saxon State Orchestra

Karl Böhm

Historical Recordings 1932 - 1939

Great Pianists: Wilhelm Backhaus (1884-1969)

BRAHMS: Piano Concerto No. 2 in B flat major • Ballades • Waltzes • Hungarian Dances

Wilhelm Backhaus was born in Leipzig in 1884. A major pianist of the twentieth century, he 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 debut 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. Backhaus was a recording pioneer, making the first ever recording of a piano concerto in 1909 (an abridged version of the *Piano Concerto* by Grieg), and the first complete recording of Chopin's *Etudes Opp. 10 and 25*. He continued to appear before the public into his eighties and died in 1969.

Backhaus made the first of his three recordings of Brahms's *Piano Concerto No. 2 in B flat, Op. 83*, in Dresden in June 1939, months before the outbreak of the Second World War. His conductor was Karl Böhm, the same conductor who partnered him for his third and final recording of the work many years later in 1967. In the 1939 recording Böhm conducts the Saxon State Orchestra who were in fact the Dresden State Orchestra, or Dresden State Opera Orchestra, today known as the Dresden Staatskapelle. Previous conductors of the orchestra include Weber, Wagner and Richard Strauss. Böhm was general music director of the Dresden State Opera and they visited London in November 1936 for performances at Covent Garden. Böhm did not return to London until September 1954 when he conducted the Vienna State Opera in performances of three Mozart operas at the Royal Festival Hall.

Post-war Backhaus performances could be ponderous and portentous, but this recording shows him still in youthful spirits, even though he was fifty-five years old at the time of the recording. The first movement may not have

the depth of his 1952 recording with Carl Schuricht and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, but the second movement is far less grim-faced than it can often be heard, and the *Andante* has some particularly beautiful ensemble playing. The recording was not issued until May 1940 in Britain finding contemporary critics commenting on German facets such as 'the abundant rich recording (though it is on the German line, not the British)' and describing Brahms's music containing 'heartiness, which never degenerates into horseplay, and the best of the old German spirit that we loved, and hope some day to see renewed in its people'. Another critic referred to Backhaus's tone having a 'hard edge', but this was probably due to poor sound reproduction of the time and low quality wartime shellac. Modern transfer techniques show that the German recording captured a large amount of detail and tone quality from most instruments in warm sound.

At the end of November 1932 Backhaus performed with the violinist Mischa Elman at the Queen's Hall in London, playing sonatas by César Franck, Brahms and Beethoven. On 5th December Backhaus was at HMV's Studio 3 in Abbey Road where he recorded Brahms's *Ballades Op. 10 Nos. 1 and 2* at the beginning of a session. He must have been pleased with the results as he recorded the *First Ballade* twice and the *Second*, only once. In the days of 78rpm recording a second take was often required as a cover in case of technical problems which would have only been discovered at a later date, often after the artist had left the country. It is not surprising therefore to see that Backhaus recorded a second take of the *Second Ballade* at the end of his next session on the 7th December. As it turned out, it was not necessary as both sides were published as first takes.

Backhaus returned to HMV's studios on 31st March and 1st April 1933 when he recorded a few sides of Brahms solos. The *Hungarian Dances* were the only works recorded on 1st April; he made three takes of the side from which take 2 was selected for publication. With his undoubted affinity for the music of Brahms, it is unfortunate that HMV did not ask Backhaus to record the

Piano Sonata in F minor, Op. 5, which he played at his Queen's Hall recital a few days later on 4th April 1933, especially as it was the Brahms centenary year and HMV did not have a recording of the work in their catalogue. The only one available at that time was Percy Grainger's 1926 recording for Columbia, and Harold Bauer's recording for Schirmer was not made until 1939.

Backhaus was again in London in January 1936 and went to HMV's Abbey Road Studio 3 to record some more piano solos by Brahms. First to be recorded on the 9th January were the *Waltzes, Op. 39*, followed by many of the late piano pieces. Obviously the recording of the *Waltzes* was unsatisfactory as the following day Backhaus again recorded them, but after a few takes of the first two sides the recording of the work was abandoned. The reason for this was probably the instrument used for the recording sessions. Backhaus chose to play a Bechstein piano, and

perhaps this did not suit the requirements of the engineers because when he returned on 27th January for another recording session at Abbey Road, Backhaus used a Steinway piano, and it was the recording of the *Waltzes* from these sessions that was published, hence the high take numbers for each of the three sides. The following day Backhaus gave a recital at the Queen's Hall in London where he played Schumann's *Fantasie, Op. 17*, Beethoven's *Piano Sonata in C minor, Op. 111*, and a group of Brahms's pieces. After complaining of forced loud tone in some parts of the Schumann and Beethoven, a critic noted, 'The best vehicle for his style as it is, with its mixture of velvet glove and mailed fist, is Brahms, and of Brahms he played an agreeable selection of rhapsodies, waltzes, and intermezzi'.

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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 *Second Concerto* was transferred from British HMV discs, while the sources for the solo items were mid-to-late-1930s U.S. Victor "Z"-type shellac and "Gold" label pressings. The master for the final side of the third movement of the concerto contains some noise and distortion which are present on all copies.

Mark Obert-Thorn

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Concerto No. 2 in B flat major, Op. 83

- | | | |
|----------|----------------------|-------|
| 1 | Allegro non troppo | 16:04 |
| 2 | Allegro appassionato | 8:05 |
| 3 | Andante | 11:53 |
| 4 | Allegretto grazioso | 9:06 |

Saxon State Orchestra • Karl Böhm

Recorded June, 1939 in Dresden

Matrices: 2RA 3956-2, 3957-1, 3958-1, 3959-3A, 3960-1, 3961-1A, 3962-1, 3963-3, 3964-3A, 3965-2, 3966-2 and 3967-1

First issued on HMV DB 3930 through 3935

Ballades, Op. 10

- | | | |
|----------|-----------------------------|------|
| 5 | No. 1 in D minor ("Edward") | 4:07 |
| 6 | No. 2 in D major | 4:59 |

Recorded 5th December, 1932
in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3
Matrices: 2B 4559-1 and 4560-1
First issued on HMV DB 1894

Waltzes, Op. 39

- | | | |
|-----------|-------------------------|------|
| 7 | No. 1 in B major | 0:50 |
| 8 | No. 2 in E major | 1:12 |
| 9 | No. 3 in G sharp minor | 0:43 |
| 10 | No. 4 in E minor | 0:30 |
| 11 | No. 5 in E major | 1:01 |
| 12 | No. 6 in C sharp major | 0:53 |
| 13 | No. 7 in C sharp minor | 1:10 |
| 14 | No. 8 in B flat major | 0:35 |
| 15 | No. 9 in D minor | 0:50 |
| 16 | No. 10 in G major | 0:29 |
| 17 | No. 11 in B minor | 0:39 |
| 18 | No. 12 in E major | 0:49 |
| 19 | No. 13 in B major | 0:26 |
| 20 | No. 14 in G sharp minor | 0:36 |
| 21 | No. 15 in A flat major | 1:18 |
| 22 | No. 16 in C sharp minor | 1:10 |

Recorded 27th January, 1936
in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3
Matrices: 2EA 3010-5, 3011-5 and 3012-4
First issued on HMV DB 2803 and 2804

Hungarian Dances

- | | | |
|-----------|-----------------------|------|
| 23 | No. 6 in D flat major | 2:49 |
| 24 | No. 7 in A major | 1:36 |

Recorded 1st April, 1933
in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
Matrices: 2B 6379-2
First issued on HMV DB 1896

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
71:50

8.110766

BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Piano Concerto No. 2

Wilhelm Backhaus (1884-1969)

Saxon State Orchestra • Karl Böhm



ADD

Piano Concerto No. 2 in B flat major, Op. 83

- | | | |
|---|----------------------|-------|
| 1 | Allegro non troppo | 16:04 |
| 2 | Allegro appassionato | 8:05 |
| 3 | Andante | 11:53 |
| 4 | Allegretto grazioso | 9:06 |
- Recorded June, 1939 in Dresden

Ballades, Op. 10

- | | | |
|---|-----------------------------|------|
| 5 | No. 1 in D minor ("Edward") | 4:07 |
| 6 | No. 2 in D major | 4:59 |
- Recorded 5th December, 1932
in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3

- | | | |
|------|-----------------|-------|
| 7-22 | Waltzes, Op. 39 | 13:10 |
|------|-----------------|-------|
- Recorded 27th January, 1936
in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3

- | | | |
|-------|------------------|------|
| 23-24 | Hungarian Dances | 4:26 |
|-------|------------------|------|
- Recorded 1st April, 1933
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. Backhaus made the first of his three recordings of Brahms's *Piano Concerto No. 2 in B flat, Op. 83*, in Dresden in June 1939, months before the outbreak of the Second World War. If post-war Backhaus performances could sometimes be ponderous, this recording shows him still in youthful spirits, even though he was fifty-five years old at the time of the recording. The *Andante* has some particularly beautiful ensemble playing.

Audio Restoration Producer: Mark Obert-Thorn

Special thanks to Donald Manildi and the International Piano Archives at the University of Maryland (IPAM)

A complete tracklist can be found on page 4 of the booklet

www.naxos.com

Cover Photograph: Wilhelm Backhaus (Lebrecht Collection)

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