NAXOS Historical

Great Pianists • Schnabel

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J. S. BACH

Italian Concerto, BWV 971
Toccatas, BWV 911 and BWV 912
Concerto No. 2 for Two Keyboards, BWV 1061

Artur Schnabel

Karl Ulrich Schnabel • London Symphony Orchestra • Adrian Boult

1936 - 1950 Recordings

Artur Schnabel (1882-1951)

J. S. BACH: Keyboard Works

Born in Lipnik, Austria in 1882, Artur Schnabel was barely ten years old when he commenced studies with Theodore Leschetizky in Vienna. After his adult début in Vienna in 1897 Schnabel decided to move to Berlin, making his début in that city the following year. As a teenager, Schnabel made a living from teaching as well as from performing on tour with instrumentalists, all the while composing music. He performed the *Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 83*, by Brahms (Naxos 8.110665) with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and Artur Nikisch and the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, while at the age of 22 Schnabel played the same work at his London début with the Hallé Orchestra and Hans Richter. On returning to Berlin Schnabel and his wife, soprano Therese Behr (1876–1959), became the centre of musical life in the city. During the 1920s he taught at the Hochschule für Musik and toured Europe, as well as the Soviet Union four times and America twice. For the centenary of Beethoven's death Schnabel performed the complete 32 *Piano Sonatas* in seven recitals in Berlin and over the next few years repeated this marathon undertaking in London and New York.

After a tour of Australia in 1939, rather than return to Europe, Schnabel decided it was safer to go to America, where he taught at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and took American citizenship in 1944. He gave his final recital at Hunter College in January 1951 and died in August of that year.

Although Schnabel played virtuoso repertoire at the beginning of his career, including Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 23* and Liszt's *Piano Sonata in B minor*, he quickly became associated with certain composers, particularly Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann and Brahms. Although he recorded all of Beethoven's *Piano Sonatas* and *Concertos*, he recorded very little Bach: all of it is heard on this one compact disc. The reason that Schnabel played so little Bach in public is because he thought that Bach's keyboard works were not suited to the large concert hall. When questioned on this subject in 1945, he replied, '*The Well-Tempered Clavier*, even the *Suites*, are somehow wasted there and their real value cannot appear. The chief reason is the intimacy of most of Bach's piano music. And I don't play transcriptions or arrangements of any kind. I have played *Toccatas*, the *Italian Concerto*, and other works by Bach very often and have made recordings of three Bach pieces: *Toccata in D major*, *Toccata in C minor* and the *Italian Concerto*. Have you heard these records?... I think they came out well.' Schnabel also made some comments about the performance of Bach on the piano as opposed to the harpsichord, '…crescendo and diminuendo are not only expressions; they are elements of articulation and modulation, and if Bach's music were performed without articulation and modulation – or inflection, as in language – it would be unbearable, it would not be music. The same applies to legato and staccato. I am absolutely against the exclusive non-legato in performances of Bach's music.'

In 1936 Schnabel recorded Mozart's *Concerto for two pianos in E flat, K.365*, and his first recording of Bach - the *Concerto for two keyboards in C major, BWV 1061*. He was partnered by his son, Karl Ulrich (1909-2001) who had made his Berlin début ten years before and went on to perform two piano recitals with his wife Helen Fogel.

On 27th November 1937 Schnabel gave a Saturday afternoon recital at Queen's Hall in London which opened with the *Toccatas in C minor, BWV 911* and *D major, BWV 912* by Bach. One critic found that 'he gave an admirably clear and well proportioned exposition, controlling tone, accent, and rhythm with absolutely certain effect, but in the main obtruding his own personality so little that the interpretation could have been criticised as too detached had not certain passages – the little *adagio* section which precedes the fugue of the second work, for example – been made so exquisitely tender.' Other works in the programme that afternoon were Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*, *Op. 120*, and Weber's *Piano Sonata in E minor, Op. 70*. Schnabel

recorded the same two Bach *Toccatas* a few days before his recital. These works had not been recorded on the piano at that time (although a recording of the *C minor Toccata* by Marcel Maas was made around the same time by French Columbia). One of Schnabel's greatest talents was the ability to employ not only seemingly natural tempos, but more importantly, the perfect tempo relationship between sections and movements. Of the recording of the *Toccata in C minor, BWV 911*, one critic wrote upon its release, 'Schnabel has rarely made a more satisfying recording than this. He refuses speed and brilliance to the opening *Allegro moderato*, taking it more slowly than is usual. Thus he gives it special significance and makes the transition to the *Adagio* seem inevitably right.'

After the Second World War, in May 1946, Schnabel returned to London for a series of six concerts at the Albert Hall and opened the first with the *Toccata in D major, BWV 912,* prompting one critic to write that 'The pianist's playing has lost none of the remarkable characteristics which we remember from his performances of eight and more years ago, notably the acute sense of tonal values, the dramatic tension, and the intellectual grasp of the whole architecture of a movement.'

In November 1938, a year after recording the two *Toccatas*, Schnabel was back in London for performances of Beethoven's fourth and fifth *Piano Concertos* with Adrian Boult and a Queen's Hall recital where he played Schubert's *Piano Sonata in C minor, D. 958*, Weber's *Piano Sonata in A flat major, Op. 39,* and Beethoven's *Hammerklavier Sonata, Op. 106*. At this time he returned to HMV's Abbey Road Studios for three days of recording sessions producing Bach's *Italian Concerto, BWV 971*, on the third day. All the four sides were issued from first takes.

It was another ten years before Schnabel recorded any more Bach. He was in London for a performance of his own *Symphony* in June 1948, given at the Albert Hall by Malcolm Sargent and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, and a few days later returned to the HMV Studios. Again it was a well known work of Bach, the *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue in D minor, BWV 903*. Schnabel had used a Bechstein piano for his Bach recordings during the 1930s, but now used a Steinway. By now Bach played on the piano was taking second place to the burgeoning trend of Bach played on the harpsichord with Wanda Landowska at the vanguard. She had recorded the major solo works presented here on the harpsichord in 1935 and 1936 (Naxos 8.110313). Schnabel's recording of the *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue* covered three sides of two 78rpm discs, and although he returned for seven more sessions at HMV during June 1948, when he recorded Mozart *Concertos* and Beethoven *Cello Sonatas*, he did not record a short solo work to fill the fourth side. Because he had a heart attack in November of that year, a 'filler' for the fourth side was not made. Six sessions between the 6th and 13th June 1950, however, were used to record the Schubert *Impromptus*. At the end of the last session, which turned out to be Schnabel's very last time in the recording studio, he recorded the *Prelude and Fugue in D major* which was then used as the fourth side so that the *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue* could then be issued, two years after it had been recorded.

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Producer's Note

This disc contains all of Schnabel's commercial disc recordings of the works of J. S. Bach. The sources for the transfers were pre-war American Victor "Gold" label pressings for the two *Toccatas* and the two-piano concerto, wartime Victors for the *Italian Concerto*, and British HMV shellacs for the remainder. The *Well-Tempered Clavier Prelude and Fugue* was the last recording Schnabel made before his death in 1951.

Mark Obert-Thorn

Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750)

Italian Concerto in F, BWV 971 **12:05**

1 (Allegro giusto) 3:17
2 Andante 5:35
3 Presto 3:13

Recorded 11th November, 1938
in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
Matrices: 2EA 7031-1, 7032-1, 7033-1 and 7034-1
First issued on HMV DB 3732 and 3733

Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D minor, BWV 903 **11:19**

4 Fantasia 7:08
5 Fugue 4:11

Recorded 15th-16th June, 1948
in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
Matrices: 2EA 13126-1, 13127-1 and 13128-1
First issued on HMV DB 21150 and 21151

Prelude and Fugue in D major, BWV 850 **3:39**
(from *Book 1* of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*)

6 Prelude 1:17
7 Fugue 2:22

Recorded 13th June, 1950
in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
Matrix: 2EA 14779-1
First issued on HMV DB 21151

Toccata in C minor, BWV 911 **10:50**

8 Introduction – Allegro 3:47
9 Fugue I (Allegro) – Adagio 2:37
10 Fugue II (Allegro) 4:27

Recorded 24th November, 1937
in in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
Matrices: 0EA 6006-1, 6007-1, 6008-2 and 6009-4
First issued on HMV DA 1613 and 1614

Toccata in D major, BWV 912 **11:46**

11 Introduction (Presto) – Allegro 2:24
12 Adagio – Fugato – Adagio 6:41
13 Fugue (Presto) 2:41

Recorded 24th November, 1937
in in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
Matrices: 0EA 6010-2, 6011-3, 6012-2 and 6013-3
First issued on HMV DA 1615 and 1616

Concerto No. 2 in C major for Two Keyboards, BWV 1061 **19:33**

14 (Allegro) 6:44
15 Adagio ovvero Largo 7:39
16 Fuga 5:09

with **Karl Ulrich Schnabel, *piano***
London Symphony Orchestra • Adrian Boult
Recorded 28th October, 1936
in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 1, London
Matrices: 2EA 4103-1, 4104-1, 4105-1, 4106-1, 4107-1A and 4108-1

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J. S. BACH

Artur Schnabel (1882-1951)

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Playing Time 69:12

	Italian Concerto in F, BWV 971	**12:05**
1	(Allegro giusto)	3:17
2	Andante	5:35
3	Presto	3:13
	Recorded 11th November 1938, London	
4-5	**Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D minor, BWV 903**	**11:19**
	Recorded 15th-16th June 1948, London	
6-7	**Prelude and Fugue in D major, BWV 850**	**3:39**
	(from *Book 1* of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*)	
	Recorded 13th June 1950, London	
8-10	**Toccata in C minor, BWV 911**	**10:50**
11-13	**Toccata in D major, BWV 912**	**11:46**
	Recorded 24th November 1937, London	
	Concerto No. 2 in C major for Two Keyboards, BWV 1061	**19:33**
14	(Allegro)	6:44
15	Adagio ovvero Largo	7:39
16	Fuga	5:09
	with Karl Ulrich Schnabel, *piano*	
	London Symphony Orchestra • Adrian Boult	
	Recorded 28th October 1936, London	

This release contains all of Schnabel's commercial disc recordings of the works of J. S. Bach, a composer whose keyboard music the pianist felt was too intimate for performance in the concert hall. One of Schnabel's greatest talents was the ability to employ not only seemingly natural tempos but, more importantly, the perfect tempo relationship between sections and movements. Of the recording of the *Toccata in C minor, BWV 911*, one critic wrote upon its release, 'Schnabel has rarely made a more satisfying recording than this. He refuses speed and brilliance to the opening *Allegro moderato*, taking it more slowly than is usual… he makes the transition to the *Adagio* seem inevitably right.' The Prelude and Fugue from *The Well-Tempered Clavier* was the last recording Schnabel made before his death in 1951.

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IC 05537

Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn
Special thanks to Nathan Brown, Charles Niss and Don Tait

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A complete track list can be found in the booklet
Cover Image: Artur Schnabel (Private Collection)

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