

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1214

KATHARINA WOLPE – Volume 3

In the course of planning our new catalogue we felt that it would be good to include a programme showing the range and diversity of Katharina Wolpe's music-making. Like many artists, the reaction to our proposal was immediate, "No, I hate making records." "But," we countered, "that won't be necessary. We already have two pieces which have not been issued and a third which has been available only on cassette." "But I would have to listen again to the tapes, which is just as bad." Well, after many excuses and delays she agreed at any rate to set aside a morning for the task. The day came, and the task was accomplished. We hope you enjoy the concert.

Symposium Records

Sonata Opus 111 No.32 (Beethoven)

Beethoven's late piano sonatas occupy a unique and revered place in piano literature. Original and individual in their form and musical design, each of them, Opp. 101, 106, 109, 110 and 111, could be a model for countless possible future compositions.

"What if" speculations, whilst irresistible to the speculator, are usually pointless. It is nevertheless absorbing to wonder whether Beethoven would have written anything like these exploratory and revolutionary works had he not become almost totally deaf. This personal tragedy of the greatest composer not being able to hear a single sound is a diabolical stroke of fate. It is possible, nevertheless, that the very fact that he could not hear physical sound any more, left his unique imagination free to hear and create sounds that a more "practical" composer could not have heard or created. Possibly even Beethoven could not have thought of writing anything like the "Hammerklavier" Sonata with the reality of the thin and relatively inflexible sound of the contemporary piano alive in his ears. It is a paradox that by virtue of his deafness Beethoven really invented the modern piano with its huge range of sound. He influenced not only the future of music, but also, almost incidentally, the development of the 19th century's most popular instrument.

Three things are characteristic of the late sonatas:

Firstly, a much loosened adherence to the tonic, the home key; tonality becomes less strict, and, consequently, less secure.

Secondly, the introduction of fugues and fugal writing.

Thirdly, a new and greater importance of variations.

Each of the late sonatas contains a fugue, but these fugues are nothing like Baroque fugues. In Opp. 101 and 106 they are the culmination of the piece, in Op. 111 fugal and fugue-like writing dominate the first movement, and in Op. 109 variations 3, 4 and 5 each have fugal characteristics.

The variations also are unlike any heard before. Earlier classical variations were in essence decorative and external, embellishing an outline with a chiaroscuro of figuration; like garlands draped about a basically severe architectural form. Beethoven's variations inhabit a different world. He asks a series of questions of his theme. They are not so much variations as transfigurations. At the completion of a complex discourse the true nature of the original theme is revealed.

The last sonata, Opus 111 in C minor, was completed in 1822. There is little in this last sonata to compare with earlier ones in either form or in the piano writing. It starts with great fierceness, drama and turbulence. The writing is fugal without being in strict counterpoint. As in the fugues of the "Diabelli" Variations and the "Hammerklavier" Sonata, rather than creating "divine order", they produce indescribable ferocious energy with each new entry. Despite this, the first movement ends calmly and even changes, surprisingly, to C major, in this way opening the door to the next movement. (Incidentally, Chopin, for all his professed dismissal of Beethoven, borrowed this passage for the end of his "Revolutionary" Étude.)

The second movement consists of a theme and variations in the C major. At the time Beethoven composed this sonata he felt himself to be completely isolated; his music had become too difficult for the notoriously superficial audiences of Vienna who only liked pretty tunes. Beethoven was in almost constant pain and completely deaf when he composed this movement which is miraculous in its translucent and transcendental beauty.

After this sonata Beethoven wrote the Bagatelles Opp. 119 and 126, and the "Diabelli" Variations, but he never wrote another sonata.

Drei Klavierstücke, D.946. (Op. posth.) (Schubert)

These three pieces were first published forty years after Schubert's death in an edition made by Brahms, which is used for this recording.

No.1 in E flat minor

This first is in the form of a Tarantella, its key, figuration and mood reminiscent of the Trio in Beethoven's Op.7 Sonata. It has two Trios; the second was crossed out by Schubert in the manuscript, but it seems too beautiful not to be played. Brahms re-instated it.

No.2 in E flat

The main part is a heavenly Schubert melody recalling the Austrian popular street music played on the "Drehorgel", a sort of hurdy-gurdy. Like the first piece it has two Trios.

No. 3 in C

This is a fast and very energetic Czardas with a slow and quite extraordinary middle section in D flat. The Czardas returns and we end in a whirl - feet stamping and skirts flying - a movingly vital and joyous contribution to life from one so very near to death.

The Klavierstücke are played for this recording on a Viennese Fortepiano, number 233 by Carl Henschker, circa 1840, from the Finchcock Collection. The 7 lowest notes have each two copper strings, then come 12 notes each of three brass strings and the remainder have each three strings of iron. The compass is from C to A.

The early 19th century piano is in every way lighter and more delicate than the modern instrument; its very shape looks frail and aristocratic next to the broad shoulders of the modern concert grand. These are pianos from a time when concerts were given in small halls or even large rooms. A fortepiano would not be heard in today's huge halls, nor would its wooden frame and delicate construction survive the tough life of a modern concert grand.

Perhaps there is no real place for it in a society that seems to want to perform chamber music in football stadia, but if we are interested to hear how Schubert sounded when he improvised, the sound of this Henschker Hammerklavier must be very close. Its wonderful clarity and thinner, more thready sound enable the different registers to sound quite independently of each other. The clean, transparent base is ideal for accompanying the melodies in the right hand and ideal also for bringing to light the beauty of Schubert's contrapuntal bass lines. The sustaining pedal is also a revelation for the way in which it binds sounds together without blurring their outlines. This transparency makes it possible to hear the complete texture even when long pedals are used. Against that one has to set the weakness of the upper register (it is quite impossible, for instance, to make a real crescendo going upwards) and the absence of the warm glowing cantabile of the modern piano.

This wooden framed Viennese fortepiano by Carl Henschker, has been most expertly restored, but does nevertheless show an occasional slight infirmity of its one and a half centuries.

Recorded during a Lecture Recital at the Purcell School, Harrow-on-the-Hill, Middlesex, May 25th 1990.

Sonata in B minor Opus 1 (Berg) Mässig bewegt

Alban Berg was born in Vienna in 1885. When he began to write his piano sonata he had already composed the magnificent seven early songs and a setting of a poem by Theodor Storm. Thus the Sonata is not the work of an immature student, as the opus number might lead one to suppose, but a completely successful work by a brilliant young composer, aged 21.

Berg was a pupil of Schoenberg, but on the whole he had an easier time of it with the public than did his teacher. *Wozzeck*, for instance, has long been in the repertoire of most big international opera houses, whilst *Moses and Aaron* is still rarely performed. Similarly, this piano sonata has had a much easier passage than any of Schoenberg's piano works; it is quite often heard in concerts of "normal" as against "modern" music.

The Sonata is in one movement. It is in strict sonata form, with all the classical required steps: First subject - Second subject - Development - Recapitulation - Coda. Perhaps Berg felt the need for this firm structure to hold on to, for in all other respects it is a terribly stormy piece. It sweeps along with tremendous passion and verve, piling sequence upon sequence with seeming recklessness. Put like this it sounds exhausting, but the effect on hearing it is very different. The balance between the order of the counterpoint and the tension of the chromaticism, and between the power of the climaxes and the gentle purity of the coda, make this one of the piano masterpieces of the century.

Berg died in Vienna in 1935, he left only this one piece for piano.

Recorded at the Purcell School, Harrow-on-the-Hill, Middlesex in 1990 on Steinway Model B grand-piano circa 1985.

Katharina Wolpe

KATHARINA WOLPE

Distinguished performances of the Viennese classics have established Katharina Wolpe as one of the most interesting and eloquent pianists of her generation. In another field, her brilliantly authoritative interpretation of twentieth century music and the avant-garde have contributed towards creating her unique reputation. She first appeared in London playing the Schoenberg Piano Concerto at the BBC Promenade Concerts, learning the work at very short notice. This achievement immediately established her reputation in Britain and as a result she was invited to play concertos with all the major British orchestras.

She has been a soloist with the London Symphony Orchestra, the London Philharmonic, the Philharmonia, the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the English Chamber Orchestra, among others, as well as appearing with all the major provincial orchestras, and she plays regularly for the BBC, both radio and television.

Katharina Wolpe has toured widely, gaining great critical and public acclaim. While on tour in Canada she was invited to become Pianist in Residence at the University of Toronto, where she proved herself to be an exceptional and creative teacher. She held this post for two years and now returns frequently to Canada for Master Classes and Workshops as well as her regular concerts.

Her apparently effortless understanding of twentieth century idiom has inspired many composers to write works especially for her. She is the daughter of the composer Stefan Wolpe and has performed many of his works including his "Piece for Piano and Sixteen Instruments" which is dedicated to her.

The Berg Sonata is published by Alban Berg/GEMA

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