

Ernst Levy ^{Volume} 2

LINER NOTES

Ernst Levy - Pianist of Genius

This second Marston volume of pianist Ernst Levy presents all his remaining, commercially-recorded studio performances - sonatas by Beethoven and Haydn. The original recordings date from circa 1956 and were first issued as a series of LP discs on the (U.S.) Unicorn label. Peter Bartók (son of the composer) served as engineer for the recording sessions, which took place in the acoustically superior Kresge auditorium at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Appended to this collection are some extremely rare Levy recordings of Mozart's "D Minor Fantasy, K.397," and Grünfeld's transcription of the Strauss "Voices of Spring" waltz, made, utilizing a Pleyel piano, in France around 1929, for the obscure Sonabel label. Levy did not own copies of these Sonabel recordings himself, and our tapes are made from what are apparently the only surviving copies. In 1977 the pianist asked a friend who owned the copy of the Strauss record to mail it to I.P.A. It arrived broken in half, and Levy wrote to the I.P.A. on 4 May 1977: "As concerns those old 78 rpm records, they are not very important."

Born in Basel, Switzerland in 1895, both sides of Levy's family were Jewish. He was a remarkable prodigy who began to talk at eight months, begging a month later for his Uncle's violin. By the age of two and a half he could recite long poems very expressively and corrected mistakes others made in reciting. At four, when he began piano studies, his teachers learned he had absolute pitch. At this time he carried on a correspondence and signed his letters with the musical note "E." By 1900 he could play accompaniments to anything in any key, and began composing. Attending then his first orchestral concert, he was impressed but noted that "everything was not always beautifully played," and that he preferred the Beethoven 4th concerto to the Chopin. At first he wanted to be a conductor. He composed incessantly, which he called "phantasieren". When he heard the organ in concert for the first time he cried, and said he wanted to be an organist, and the same with the violin, and then the piano. At his second orchestral concert he heard a Raff Symphony, and exclaimed, "This is no Beethoven!" By 1901 he was correcting errors his teachers made and appeared in public for the first time, performing Haydn's D major concerto.

Levy's father died when he was four and he was raised in a household of women, all of whom spoiled him. The Swiss government gave him a special dispensation from attending public schools; he was educated at home. From the earliest age it was evident that Levy was always trying to prove himself intellectually. His personality was "set" at that early age - very emotional, but very much under control.

He pursued musical training in piano performance, conducting, and composition in Basel and Paris, working with Raoul Pugno and Egon Petri, as well as with the Swiss composer-pianist Hans Huber. From 1917 to 1921 he directed the piano master class at the Basel Conservatory. Then at the age of twenty-six Levy established residence in Paris where, after seven years devoted to piano recitals and teaching, he founded the Choeur Philharmonique. Under Levy's guidance this ensemble gave French audiences their first encounters with major choral works by such composers as Schütz, Bach, Handel, Haydn, Berlioz, Liszt, Franck, and Brahms, and recorded Liszt's "Missa Choralis" for Polydor in 1929. The German occupation of Paris in 1939 necessitated Levy's hasty departure, first for Spain, and then the United States, where he would remain until he returned to Switzerland in 1966.

Levy's American years included several important academic posts and an ever-increasing output of compositions; he would ultimately complete fifteen symphonies and a great deal of choral, chamber and instrumental music. Several of his compositions have been recorded and issued by various firms, most notably Opus One Recordings, and Levy's compositions heard on those recordings are compellingly attractive.

In America Levy often collaborated with the distinguished Austrian-American musicologist Siegmund Levarie (b. 1914), and the two co-authored one of the most amazing books published in English on music: "Musical Morphology - A Discourse and a Dictionary" (Kent State University Press, 1983). The section entitled "Reality" (pages 233 -237) discusses the locus, essence, relevance and interpretation of any piece of music. As for a work's location: "... We think of a musical work as a reality existing all at once... yet the process by which it is built in our mind is inevitably temporal - a succession of events related to each other through memory. The events co-exist in the score... ..Which score? The autograph? A particular edition?Does the composition exist in thousands of copies? The locus cannot be found in notation. Music had reality before the invention of notation... But a performance or recording of music, too, retains a subjective character that lies outside the work itself.. Listening to it, we do not say, 'This is the work,' but rather, 'This is a performance of the work.' This distinction remains true... [when] the composer fixes his composition directly on magnetic tape. A second copy of the tape does not double the reality... .. By an inverse process of that which led from the composer's conception of the work as a whole to its temporal expression in notation and performance, the listener in turn rebuilds it (or is supposed to rebuild it) in his own mind... it is in the mind that the composition may be said to live... " The essay continues, discussing the ultimate meaning of recordings and interpretations of musical works, in an equally intelligent manner.

Writer Andrew Porter has ranked Levy the pianist with Schnabel, Backhaus, Kempff and Solomon, but others have failed to discern his genius, and he never had much of a career as a performing pianist either in Europe or America. Levy's intellectual interests were far ranging and he wasn't especially interested to have a major career as a touring artist,

although he did make half-hearted attempts in Paris in the 1920s and later in America in the 1940s. He had patrons and his playing had admirers, but none was powerful enough, and perhaps the time was no longer right for his style of performance. Levy once commented that it was a stroke of luck that he had been forced to spend the greater part of his life in America teaching, since American universities gave him the opportunity to earn his living as a many-sided humanist. As a teacher he taught a number of musicians including the pianist Peter Armstrong; as a writer he produced a theory of harmony and several other major works, and as a theorist he wrote "An Appendix on the Proportions of the South Tower of Chartres Cathedral" which was published by the Bollingen Foundation in the original edition of Otto von Simson's "The Gothic Cathedral."

In September 1975 Gregor Benko wrote to Levy then living in retirement in Morges, Switzerland, asking for his assistance in reissuing his recordings as a pianist, and the correspondence continued for four years. Levy offered his complete cooperation but there were obstacles, which were then insurmountable. It has taken more than twenty years and the enthusiastic support and help of several individuals to bring these recordings to the public, including Gerald Morgan, Siegmund Levarie and Neil Ratliff. Among the many materials supplied to the project by Professor Levarie is a quote from a 1997 letter by Professor Ernest G. McClain, a colleague and close friend of both Levy and Levarie, concerning Levy's piano-playing: "The 'objectivity' of a musical experience exists only for those of extreme inner aesthetic 'sensitivity.' Ernst understood that so beautifully. He knew why psychological experiments had to be made on musicians of his quality. For the others, nothing is 'well-defined,' not even ambiguity. It is the emergence of viewpoint disclosed in study or performance which matters, and the secret of his piano artistry lies in his ability to carry the listener through that kind of emergent experience. He knew what he was doing, never trusting mere 'talent' to work its magic. It is that self-consciousness of his artistry which separated him from so many other pianistic geniuses. He was even smart enough to understand that public neglect left him free to hold fast (almost painlessly) to his own virtue. Nothing corrupts the soul faster than applause, and oh!, how we long for it."

Donald Manildi and Gregor Benko, 1999

Ernst Levy: Haydn & Beethoven

When a composer interprets the music of other composers, naturally the results often display insights which do not occur to usual performers. My ears cherish having heard Villa-Lobos conducting Beethoven, Copland conducting Fauré, and the recordings of Rachmaninoff playing major works of Chopin and Schumann, Dohnányi playing Schubert and Brahms, and Medtner playing Beethoven. Ernst Levy - with more opuses (258) to his credit than Rachmaninoff (45), Dohnányi (48) or Medtner (61) - brings his composer's knowledge to the task of interpretation with equally indelible effect. Heard here, Levy's readings of four sonatas by Haydn and five by Beethoven take the listener into the minds of those composers in ways as provocative today as they were when first issued.

Most listeners, readily confounded by Levy's individuality - nay, creativity as a performer - belong to the objective ("urtext") generations which have proliferated, roughly speaking, since the 1940s. To them, this playing willfully distorts the scores' printed indications (which are held to be sacrosanct), thus misrepresenting the intentions of Haydn and Beethoven. Such people forget the lessons of history - the countless accounts of composers changing their minds, sanctioning vastly different performances and even instructing students to depart from what was written. The matter of tempo fluctuations vexes these folk too - as if metronomes had ever been esthetic, rather than clockwork, mechanisms in composers' minds. Stultified persons of this type will probably shy away from albums such as this, fearing contamination of the pure air they think their environment provides. No argument to the contrary would be capable of moving them to believe in both the utter sincerity of Levy's approach and in the historical viability of his enterprise. As Levy himself remarked, "There are those who understand and those who don't understand."

Understandable, surely, is the dynamism inherent in anything written by Haydn - not just matters of the contrast between piano and forte but that between the characters and situations of the operatic stage. In his only autobiographical statement, Haydn began by asserting himself as the composer of operas. He wrote more than twenty. His was the age of the Sturm und Drang movement in German literature. It affected not only the way he composed for dramatic situations onstage but his treatment of the events in instrumental forms - symphony, string quartet, piano sonata. Thus, when Levy gives full-bodied projection to the portent behind the notes of Haydn's Sonata in B Minor, we get a sense of pulse and a range of dynamics like that of an orchestra in concert. The Sonatas in C Major (with its central movement probably a tribute to Mozart, who had just died) and in D Major are given treatment just as vividly orchestral, their lyrical moments being declaimed as if by good singers. The Sonata in A-flat Major, particularly noteworthy for its extraordinarily beautiful slow movement, finds Levy inspired by the implications of every phrase, period and section. The presto Finales are marvels of fleet-fingered execution in the name of musical wit.

Levy's Beethoven, already familiar to those who have heard the previous album in this series (Marston 52007-2), descends from his Haydn just as surely as did Beethoven from Haydn, his teacher. Rosemary Hughes's phrase about the Finale of Haydn's Sonata in D Major - that "it dramatically illustrates the Haydnishness of Beethoven" - suits the situation found in the music. Beethoven built upon the same ideas of dramatic opposition, of motivic construction, of dynamic interplay and of cantabile lines as Haydn. However, his pianos and his orchestras grew larger and louder. He pushed his fingers and his mind to new levels of virtuosity. Haydn's surprises become cataclysms in Beethoven's caldron of creativity.

Beethoven's Sonata, Op. 57, Appassionata provides the stunning example. Everything in its musical textures can be traced back to Haydn, yet not one note sounds as though Haydn had composed it. The drama is visceral, being dug into deeply by Levy, passionately, sensuously. The

pulse throbs with life, sometimes - like life - beating faster, then slower. Lines are heard, voices call out in ways that send us back to our scores, where we discover that, indeed, they have been there all along. Levy understands that all the movements of this heaven-storming work contain as substance a three-note motive which moves up a half-step and returns. It is, in fact, the Sonata's point. Levy makes it audible at the end of the first movement's Development section with such drama as I have never heard, then carries it forward into the Recapitulation so that its meaning can be felt.

The two-movement Sonata, Op. 90 finds Levy aware that the symphonic quality of the first and the lyricism of the second are but two faces of the same idea, so his interpretation shows us both the core and its outward differences. Just as he avoids making the first over-wrought, his taste precludes sentimentalizing the second by too broad a tempo. When we recall that Beethoven told the work's dedicatee, Count Moritz von Lichnowsky, that he had attempted to incorporate two ideas of the Count's courtship of his fiancée, the "struggle between head and heart" and a "conversation with the loved one," we understand the depth of Levy's penetration of this music.

The Sonata, Op. 101 is less susceptible of characterization, being perhaps the most quixotic of all the Beethoven sonatas. Its four, brief movements seem so many experiments in concise utterance, replete with subtleties of construction and self-reference that escape the minds, hence the hands, of many executants. The composer dedicated it to his favorite interpreter, the Baroness Dorothea von Ertmann - the very lady whose flexible tempi and rhapsodic style of performing Beethoven so astonished Felix Mendelssohn. Levy tackles head on the challenges of the Sonata's high ideals. He produces a reading of boldness and probity.

In the eminent Sonatas, Op. 109 and 110, Levy soars magisterially, his composer's insight once more sculpting in tone what is only ink on paper. Beethoven's lofty inspirations are experienced anew as the pianist shines his own light on their masterful and inevitable successions of melody, harmony and rhythmic impulse. Particularly arresting are his handling of the otherworldly variations which conclude Op. 109, his pacing of Op. 110's first movement and his unusually triumphant playing of the last movement's Fuga and Coda. What is to be cherished in these performances is Levy's uncompromisingly personal vision at work, proposing solutions to the artistic problems posed by what is not on the pages of Beethoven's scores.

Frank Cooper, University of Miami, 1999

TRACK LISTING

CD 1 (79:26)

Haydn:

Piano Sonata No. 31 in A-flat (Hob. XVI/46) 15:17

1. Allegro moderato 6:18
2. Adagio 6:43
3. Presto 2:16

1956; Unicorn Records UNLP 1036; originally recorded by Peter Bartók

Piano Sonata No. 47 in B Minor (Hob. XVI/32) 9:26

4. Allegro moderato 3:34
5. Menuet - Trio 2:59
6. Finale, Presto 2:53

1956; Unicorn Records UNLP 1036; originally recorded by Peter Bartók

Piano Sonata No. 60 in C (Hob. XVI/50) 14:49

7. Allegro 5:45
8. Adagio 6:36
9. Allegro molto 2:28

1956; Unicorn Records UNLP 1036; originally recorded by Peter Bartók

Piano Sonata No. 61 in D (Hob. XVI/51) 6:10

10. Andante 4:15
11. Presto 1:55

1956; Unicorn Records UNLP 1036; originally recorded by Peter Bartók

Beethoven:

Piano Sonata No. 23 in F Minor, op. 57, "Appassionata" 21:48

12. Allegro assai 9:40
13. Andante con moto 7:06
14. Allegro, ma non troppo - Presto 5:02

1956; Unicorn Records UNLP 1034; originally recorded by Peter Bartók

Piano Sonata No. 27 in E Minor, op. 90 11:56

15. Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck 5:21
16. Nicht zu geschwind und sehr singbar vorgetragen 6:35

1958; Unicorn Records UNLP 1051; originally recorded by Peter Bartók

All Tracks were recorded in mono except Tracks 15-16

All Tracks were recorded in Kresge Auditorium, M.I.T.

CD 2 (71:33)

Beethoven:

Piano Sonata No. 28 in A, op. 101 19:35

1. Etwas lebhaft und mit der innigsten Empfindung 3:45
2. Lebhaft, marschmäßig 5:46
3. Langsam und sehnsuchtsvoll 3:14
4. Geschwindes, doch nicht zu sehr und mit Entschlossenheit 6:50
1958; Unicorn Records UNLP 1051; originally recorded by Peter Bartók

Piano Sonata No. 30 in E, op. 109 19:53

5. Vivace, ma non troppo 4:14
6. Prestissimo 2:35
7. Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung 13:04
1956; Unicorn Records UNLP 1033; originally recorded by Peter Bartók

Piano Sonata No. 31 in A-flat, op. 110 20:46

8. Moderato cantabile molto espressivo 6:56
9. Allegro molto 2:15
10. Adagio, ma non troppo. Fuga. Allegro, ma non troppo 11:35
1956; Unicorn Records UNLP 1033; originally recorded by Peter Bartók

Mozart:

11. Fantasy in D Minor, K. 397 5:13
1929; (1155-56) Sonabel 12028

J. Strauss, II:

12. Frühlingstimmen, op. 410 6:06
1929; (1157-58) Sonabel 12029

All Tracks were recorded in mono except Tracks 1-2
Tracks 1-8 were recorded in Kresge Auditorium, M.I.T.

Producers: Scott Kessler and Ward Marston

Audio Conservation: Ward Marston