

CDs - chamber & instrumental

reviews

Beethoven Violin Sonata No. 9 in A, Op. 47
Kreutzer^a. Brahms Violin Sonata No. 1 in G,
Op. 78^b.

Adolf Busch (vn); **Rudolf Serkin** (pf).
St Laurent Studio mono (M) (D) YSL78-214
(56mins; ADD); rec. ^aLiederkrantz Hall, New York,
12/12/41; Studio C, Small Queen's Hall, London,
4 & 7/5/31. Item marked ^a from US Columbia
71344/7D, ^bHMV DB1527/9.

Brahms Violin Sonata No. 2 in A, Op. 100^a.
Schubert Piano Trio No. 2 in E flat, D929^b.

Adolf Busch (vn); ^b**Herman Busch** (vlc);
Rudolf Serkin (pf).
St Laurent Studio mono (M) (D) YSL78-203
(53mins; ADD); re. Abbey Road Studio No. 3,
London, ^a20/9/32; ^b23/10/35. Item marked ^a
from HMV DB1805/6, ^bDB2676/8.

Lovers of chamber music should waste no time in acquiring these two recordings, for they are gems of the first water – not only for the performances but for the excellent transfers. Much care has been lavished on them by Yves St Laurent, who corrects speed and pitch, recentres the 78s, manually removes the most intrusive clicks and pops, and most importantly uses no filters, so there is no loss of whatever frequencies and detail are to be found in the grooves. It means there is unavoidable “frying bacon”, in varying degrees, which is a little startling after years of digital pristine silence (but which may induce a little nostalgia in those of us of a certain age). But it is a price well worth paying. The instruments sound remarkably good, especially the piano in the Beethoven and both Brahms; it sounds astonishingly lifelike though the recordings are three-quarters of a century old. Only in the very quietest passages does the crackle come to the fore, but never unbearably so. In the three sonatas the balance is ideal, the piano “featuring” equally with the violin (and it is worth remembering that both Beethoven and Brahms entitled their violin sonatas *Sonatas for Pianoforte and Violin* – in that order). Only in the Schubert trio is the cello a little too recessed, but certainly not enough to spoil one's pleasure.

The *Kreutzer* Sonata is quite simply one of the finest performances of the work ever committed

to disc. It is fiery, brilliant, and a true partnership of equals. It also keeps rather strict time, which adds immeasurably to the momentum; indeed, it makes one realise how much the rhythm is pulled about by many other performers. The same rather strict rhythm, modified only where the composer directs, is found in the Brahms and Schubert, which averts any hint of sentimentality in the former and syrupiness in the latter. So does Busch's judiciously used, almost discreet vibrato (so different from the wide, lush, heart-on-sleeve vibrato one hears in the first Brahms sonata played by another legendary family ensemble, the Menuhin siblings, made in 1940 when Yehudi was 24 and Hephzibah 20).

These are classically styled, structurally coherent, one might almost call them dignified, performances, yet wanting nothing in feeling. The lovingly played trio is full of charm, yet there is no mistaking the desperate sadness that permeates so many of Schubert's late compositions. There is also, where warranted, plenty of humour, something at which the Busch/Serkin partnership excelled; the second Brahms sonata is altogether a genial and joyful affair.

There are some minor finger slips, as one might expect before the days of micromanaged tape splicing and the relentless pursuit of mechanically perfect playing. But make no mistake: like that of the *Kreutzer* Sonata, the Schubert and Brahms performances here are among the finest ever recorded – they are, in two words, truly great. Do not miss these beautifully restored and immensely rewarding recordings.

Tanya Tintner