



YSL 78-958 **ARTHUR SCHNABEL Vol. 6**

“For someone like me who admires this historical recording of the Brahms Second Piano Concerto, there is bound to be blowback about Artur Schnabel’s less-than-virtuosic technique. The importance of flawless execution in piano playing will never be a settled matter. The most famous line about Schnabel is that he was a musician first and a pianist second. But in an age of prodigious technical prowess, that compliment also implied a deficiency in his execution. (A much-repeated quip has Moritz Rosenthal being informed that Schnabel had failed his army physical. ‘What do you expect?’ Rosenthal said, ‘No fingers!’ The same anecdote is told with different pianists in place of Rosenthal and Schnabel.)

Many collectors will already have a fixed opinion about Schnabel’s Brahms Second, and mine is strongly positive. I have no trouble listening through a few clinkers, blurred passagework, and various flaws that madden other listeners. Schnabel and Boult, recorded in London in 1935, are fired up by the music nearly to the same intensity as the famous collaboration between Horowitz and Toscanini from Carnegie Hall in 1940; even the timings for each movement are quite close. Anyone who wants technical brilliance knows which of the two accounts he will prefer, and by a considerable margin, I imagine. The concerto occupied multiple 78rpm sides, which gave Schnabel the opportunity for rest and retakes, so one shouldn’t exaggerate his technical deficiencies.

Schnabel’s musicality goes without saying, but there are a few idiosyncrasies here. The beginning of the first movement where orchestra and piano exchange phrases starts at a tempo in accord with Brahms’s marking of *Allegro non troppo*, but things drastically speed up thereafter, and there are solo entries where Schnabel presses to go even faster, not entirely with the conductor’s agreement. The Scherzo goes well, minus any glaring flaws, and the slow movement is taken as a fairly quick *Andante*, not a lingering *Adagio* as is so often the case. The solo playing is quite powerful. Together Schnabel and Boult shape the finale for momentum and strength, saving it from seeming anticlimactic.

This performance has been remastered and reissued many times on diverse labels, but Yves St. Laurent’s work is exceptional. The source is given as a U.S. pressing, Victor M 305 [from pristine 'z' shellac pressings]. Compared with an EMI version and another on Naxos Historical, YSL’s sound is greatly superior for its quiet surfaces, full dynamic range, lack of distortion, and instrumental color. I doubt that the material could be remastered better. The piano is quite prominent, but the BBC Symphony isn’t so recessed as to seem unnatural, and the strings in particular seem full and lifelike. All the registers of the piano are well balanced, with a noticeable but not annoying emphasis on the left hand. The sound from disc to disc is also remarkably consistent, and joins are smoothly handled.

As a filler we get three solo pieces, a Rhapsody and two Intermezzi, from 1947. One immediately notices that the piano sounds fuller and brighter than it did in the concerto, where the piano is a bit boxy and wooden by comparison. On the other hand, there is considerable grittiness from surface noise in the incidental works. Schnabel's readings are lovely but not, I'd say, revelatory. The main event is certainly the concerto, and I found it a wonderful listening experience. This release is strongly recommended to anyone with an interest in Schnabel's enduring artistry."

- Huntley Dent, FANFARE

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