



BEETHOVEN

**Piano Concerto No. 5,
'Emperor'**

Cello Sonata No. 2

Artur Schnabel

Gregor Piatigorsky, cello
London Symphony Orchestra
Malcolm Sargent

Historical Recordings 1932 and 1934

Great Pianists • Artur Schnabel

BEETHOVEN (1770-1827): Piano Concerto No. 5 'The Emperor' Cello Sonata No. 2 in G minor

Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto is among that select company of masterpieces which have succeeded in capturing the fancy of the layman while retaining the reverence of the expert.

Probably it achieves this by its quality of immense significance: the whole work seems big with fate – pregnant with mighty meaning. Rightly it is named "The Emperor" for nowhere is the master found in more majestic mood. We are reminded of one of Napoleon's bulletins from the battlefield – those long rolling periods and sonorous phrases surely find an echo in this tremendous music. Such a work, we feel, demands an artist to interpret it, but an artist who is prepared entirely to sink his own individuality – to use his genius wholly in expressing what Beethoven has to say to us. No one who hears these records will doubt that Artur Schnabel has succeeded in this to a supreme degree. His depth of perception is astonishing; to realise it one has only to hear the famous passage, which concludes the slow, profoundly moving second movement and leads on to the terrific rush and fervour of the third. That breathless hush, in which the music seems lulled to sleep by its own beauty, but in which we remain held in suspense, gripped in anticipation of something which must inevitably follow.....Schnabel's faultless execution and perfect modelling of phrases go for granted – we expect them, but few would expect such profound understanding as this, such *rightness* of approach, such vitality and intensity of touch. The recording is beyond criticism and this Concerto, as a whole, undoubtedly forms one of the most important events in the history of gramophone recording.

No, Naxos didn't write this. HMV did, for their advertisement in *The Gramophone*, July 1932. But the

company was not publicising a pioneering event. That had taken place ten years earlier when Frederic Lamond made an acoustic recording of this concerto. And HMV had another 'first' too under its belt – the first electrical recording of the same work, by Wilhelm Backhaus in 1927.

So why was this new version different? In a word, it was Schnabel. He was the star. His popularity was probably at its peak and capitalising on that – the five discs cost 30s (£1.50) – was commercially sensible. Schnabel (1882-1951) had played in London before but his presence in the 1930s had become special thanks to a series of concerts inaugurated in 1929 by Lil Courtauld, wife of textile millionaire and art collector, Samuel Courtauld.

Sponsoring music was nothing new to this remarkable couple. They rescued the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden in the mid-1920s, and singers like Lotte Lehmann, Frida Leider, Lauritz Melchior, Friedrich Schorr, Elizabeth Schumann appeared there. So did Bruno Walter and his conducting of *Fidelio*, *Don Giovanni*, *Der Rosenkavalier* was considered memorable. But running an opera house then was probably as difficult as it is now, and the Courtaulds withdrew their support after three seasons. Schnabel suggested another musical cause; and it became the Courtauld-Sargent concerts at the Queen's Hall with Malcolm Sargent (1895-1967) as principal conductor.

They were concerts with a difference; tickets were available at cut prices because Lil Courtauld wanted everybody, not just "a fashionable audience", to listen to music. The timing could not have been better. Britain was close to a long period of economic depression that would be triggered off by the Wall Street crash.

Unemployment had begun to rise (there were three million out of work by the end of 1932) and spending power faltered. So when the best seats normally costing 13s 6d (67.5p) each were offered at 10s (50p) and the cheapest dropped from 2s 4d (11.7p) to 1s 6d (7.5p), people arrived in very large numbers. The scheme was subsidised mainly by Samuel Courtauld (1876-1947) who continued with the concerts after Lil Courtauld died of cancer on Christmas Day 1931. They ran to a total of 132, ending in 1940 – and every event was sold out.

Schnabel was a regular soloist, sometimes in three concertos per programme, but what probably clinched his reputation was his performance of all the Beethoven sonatas at the Queen's Hall in 1932. Press and audiences alike labelled him as the greatest living exponent of these works; and the obvious step was to record his interpretations. There was a snag. Schnabel was dead against the whole process of music reproduction, and one of his reasons is comically antiquated: "I did not like the idea of having no control over the behaviour of the people who listened to music which I performed – not knowing how they would be dressed, what else they would be doing at the same time, how much they would listen".

He had not reckoned on Fred Gaisberg (1873-1951), a tireless and visionary producer with HMV who refused to take 'no' for an answer. Schnabel eventually capitulated but he did so on condition that not only the sonatas but also the concertos should be recorded complete. But what do you make of the hype that heralded the appearance of the *Emperor*?

The title is widely used. Though it is not Beethoven's title, he may not have objected because he had called the work a Grand Concerto in a letter to his publisher. But the comparison with 'Napoleon's bulletins' would have enraged him. He had little time for emperors as rulers, particularly in 1809 when this

concerto was being written. Napoleon, who had crowned himself Emperor, invaded Vienna. Guns pounded the city and the composer was driven away from his own home by noise and smoke, to seek refuge in the cellar of a friend's house. Of course, there are some truths about Schnabel. His depth of perception is astonishing, as are his profound understanding, intensity of touch and rightness of approach. But he never sank individuality. No artist can, and he would have had greater difficulty in doing so. Schnabel's motto was 'safety last' and some of his playing could be deemed reckless. The quality of his musicianship nevertheless reflected the risks he took to convey what he believed to be artistically right. He was singular – but he was also convincing.

Schnabel was fifty when he began recording, and in a fifteen-year span he concentrated on concertos – there were two more recordings of the *Emperor* – and solo piano works. But some chamber music also made it to the studio, among which were the five cello sonatas, all recorded with Pierre Fournier. They have made regular reappearances but this recording of the Second, with Gregor Piatigorsky (1903-1976), has not had as much exposure.

Piatigorsky and Carl Flesch (violin) were members of Schnabel's Piano Trio formed in Berlin in 1930. That same year they played in the Courtauld-Sargent concerts but HMV made no recordings. This performance of the cello sonata is, therefore, the only one that gives some idea of how Schnabel interacted with his partners. He had met Piatigorsky in the early 1920s, a young Russian émigré (said to have been smuggled out but robbed of money and possessions) whom he described as "absolutely unknown, was living in an unheated attic in the cold winter, and was undernourished". Not for long. Piatigorsky's contribution in a performance of Schenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* was so impressive that in 1924, he was

appointed principal cellist of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra under Wilhelm Fürtwängler; and he stayed for four years until solo commitments demanded more of his time.

“He was certainly the best cellist I had heard since Casals,” said Artur Rubinstein after a concert in Warsaw in 1931. Many years later, Piatigorsky joined Rubinstein and Jascha Heifetz to become a member of another trio, based in Los Angeles where they were all living. Fortunately, there are recordings of this group, as there are of the next venture founded in 1961 – the Heifetz-Piatigorsky Concerts in which other fine artists like Jacob Lateiner (piano) and William Primrose (viola) also took part. Today, though, Piatigorsky is

largely remembered for being the dedicatee of Walton’s *Cello Concerto* that he first performed in 1957.

It was not the first time that Piatigorsky’s gifts had been recognised in this way. Schnabel had also written him a piece – a Sonata for Cello Solo in 1931. But this recording of Beethoven seems to be a lone memento of their one-time collaboration. Piatigorsky did not acquire the sort of public status that Schnabel did, but his musical ethic “One must live for something greater than oneself – an ideal, a dream to be a good servant of art” would have had Schnabel’s wholehearted approval.

Nalen Anthoni

Mark Obert-Thorn

Mark Obert-Thorn is one of the world’s most respected transfer artist/engineers. He has worked for a number of specialist labels, including Pearl, Biddulph, Romophone and Music & Arts. Three of his transfers have been nominated for Gramophone Awards. A pianist by training, his passions are music, history and working on projects. He has found a way to combine all three in the transfer of historical recordings.

Obert-Thorn describes himself as a ‘moderate interventionist’ rather than a ‘purist’ or ‘re-processor,’ unlike those who apply significant additions and make major changes to the acoustical qualities of old recordings. His philosophy is that a good transfer should not call attention to itself, but rather allow the performances to be heard with the greatest clarity.

There is no over-reverberant ‘cathedral sound’ in an Obert-Thorn restoration, nor is there the tinny bass and piercing mid-range of many ‘authorised’ commercial issues. He works with the cleanest available 78s, and consistently achieves better results than restoration engineers working with the metal parts from the archives of the modern corporate owners of the original recordings. His transfers preserve the original tone of the old recordings, maximising the details in critical upper mid-range and lower frequencies to achieve a musical integrity that is absent from many other commercially released restorations.

The Naxos historical label aims to make available the greatest recordings in the history of recorded music, in the best and truest sound that contemporary technology can provide. To achieve this aim, Naxos has engaged a number of respected restorers who have the dedication, skill and experience to produce restorations that have set new standards in the field of historical recordings.



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BEETHOVEN**Piano Concerto No. 5 'Emperor'
Cello Sonata No. 2**Playing
Time
60:07**Artur Schnabel**Gregor Piatigorsky, cello • London Symphony Orchestra
Malcolm Sargent

Piano Concerto No. 5 in E flat major, Op. 73 'Emperor'	36:35
1 Allegro	19:02
2 Adagio un poco mosso	8:16
3 Rondo (Allegro)	9:17

Recorded on 24th March, 1932 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 1, London
(on matrices 2B 3244-2, 3245-3, 3246-1, 3247-1, 3248-1, 3249-1, 3250-2, 3251-2, 3252-1 and 3253-2)
First issued as HMV DB 1685/9

Artur Schnabel • London Symphony Orchestra • Malcolm Sargent

Cello Sonata in G minor, Op. 5, No. 2	23:33
4 Adagio sostenuto ed espressivo	5:34
5 Allegro molto più tosto presto	9:46
6 Rondo (Allegro)	8:13

Recorded on 6th and 16th December, 1934 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
(on matrices 2B 6192-3, 6198-3, 6199-3, 6200-4, 6201-4 and 6202-4)
First issued as HMV DB 2391/3

Artur Schnabel • Gregor Piatigorsky, cello

Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn
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