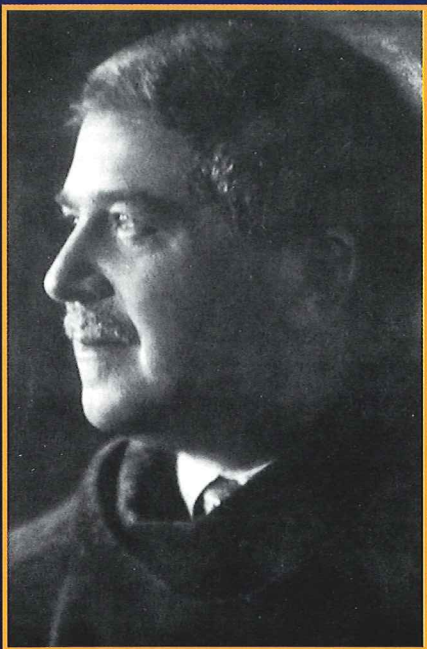




Great Pianists • Schnabel

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BEETHOVEN

Piano Concerto No. 3

Piano Concerto No. 4

Rondo in C major

Artur Schnabel

London Philharmonic Orchestra
Malcolm Sargent

Historical Recordings 1933

Great Pianists • Artur Schnabel

BEETHOVEN (1770-1827): Piano Concertos No. 3 in C minor and No. 4 in G major

She died of cancer on Christmas Day 1931 and gradually faded into obscurity, but Elizabeth Teresa Frances Courtauld, wife of the textile millionaire and art collector Samuel Courtauld, whose name continues to live through the Courtauld Institute of Art and the Courtauld Gallery at Somerset House, both in London, deserves a place in musical history. Lil Courtauld, as she was known, had an intense love of music that she put to good use. In 1929 she founded a series of highly successful concerts that, for their day, were remarkably different, and the original idea came from Artur Schnabel.

The coincidences were equally remarkable. Schnabel, who was born on 17th April 1882 in Lipnik, a small town in Austrian Silesia that is now a part of Poland, and the Courtaulds had become friends when they first met in 1927. This was also the year of the Beethoven Centenary, and in Berlin Schnabel marked the occasion by playing all 32 piano sonatas in a series of seven programmes. This was not a gala occasion, however, as the recitals were held on consecutive Sundays in a venue that was far from fashionable, the hall of the Volksbühne, a workers' organization that furthered the cause of music by offering tickets at token prices through successful block-booking arrangements. Schnabel, who refused to pander to popular taste and who treated all his audiences alike in terms of the music he played, must have been gratified that two thousand people attended each performance; and the critics acclaimed the cycle as the highlight of the season.

"Why not start something of the same kind here," he suggested to Lil Courtauld. She did, with only the help of a capable secretary, Cicely Stanhope, and what came to be known as the Courtauld-Sargent concerts at the Queen's Hall, began with Schnabel as featured

soloist and Malcolm Sargent conducting the London Symphony Orchestra. The events expanded audiences because they offered music at substantially reduced rates. There was no state patronage, however, and the scheme was private, subsidised largely by Samuel Courtauld himself, his reason for doing so easily understandable. Courtauld (1876-1947), said to have been shy and introspective, was a Unitarian, a member of a Christian organization formed in the seventeenth century that was dedicated to the principles of democracy, reform and social responsibility. He continued with what his wife had inaugurated, and the concerts ran to a total of 132, ending in 1940.

Lil Courtauld did not live to experience the flowering of her ideas, or the politics that inevitably crept in, or the sniping by critics at Schnabel's exposure in all-concerto concerts, a policy that Courtauld eventually insisted should be changed, nor did she see Schnabel's growing reputation that prompted him to play the Beethoven sonata cycle in London in 1932. She missed, too, the most far-reaching offshoot of her endeavours, Schnabel's decision to accept the offer of HMV to record all Beethoven's sonatas and concertos. As complete sets, they were the first ever.

Schnabel was now fifty and unlike his near-contemporary Wilhelm Backhaus, who enthusiastically welcomed the gramophone and had been making records since 1908, was deeply suspicious of the process of music reproduction. In his own words he "felt that recordings are against the very nature of performance, for the nature of performance is to happen but once, to be absolutely ephemeral and unrepeatable". That he relented and even came to value recordings is entirely owing to a diminutive, dynamic American at HMV who, in 1902, signed up Caruso in disregard of

orders from the directors of the company – and kept his job. He was Fred Gaisberg (1873-1951) and he continues the story: “One of the wisest and most remarkable artistic enterprises of the ‘thirties was the engagement of Artur Schnabel in England as the executant of Beethoven’s piano works complete. His success in London was immediate and he collected a big following of enthusiasts who regarded him as the greatest living exponent of Beethoven. I was agreeably surprised at the serious-minded crowds that filled the Queen’s Hall to capacity and would follow his playing with weighty tomes of the Sonatas propped on their knees. It was given out that Schnabel would never stoop to recording as he considered it impossible for a mere machine to reproduce the dynamics of his playing faithfully. Therefore when I interviewed him, he was coy but all the same prepared to put his theory to the test – though he would need a lot of convincing. At long last I was able to overcome all his prejudice. Tempted by a nice fat guarantee, he eventually agreed that it was possible to reconcile his ideals with machinery”.

In mid-January 1932, Schnabel played a recital in memory of Lil Courtauld, and the next day he “put his theory to the test” at HMV. Apparently he was not entirely satisfied with the initial outcome but had agreed to show good will, and the results comprised some of the epoch-making recordings of the twentieth century. The present two concertos, set down thirteen months after Schnabel first stepped into a studio, are disparate enough in mood to show how this artist adapted his range of expression to suit his definition of content. His feelings about these works may be deduced by comments he made in the United States where he lived from 1939 to 1946. “During my educational phase in Vienna until 1899...in this most musical city on earth...the G major Concerto by Beethoven was generally labelled as the ‘ladies’ concerto. Hardly any of the great pianists ever played it. The C minor

concerto was only played in conservatories by the lower grades”.

Seemingly the Viennese musical establishment of the day took a derogatory view of these works; and if we read Schnabel accurately, he deplored its opinions, the implications of which are distinctly odd. The *Third Concerto* is no more an ‘academic’ piece than the *Fourth* is small scale and Schnabel set out to prove that. He may not have been the first to do so on record (there are earlier recordings of these works, by William Murdoch, York Bowen, Mark Hambourg and Wilhelm Backhaus) but it would be fair to say that his interpretations have had the most lasting impact because they had the widest circulation at the time. Nor, in subsequent years, have record companies neglected to keep them before the public. By revealing both structural strength and lyricism in the music, Schnabel has had a continuing influence on a host of pianists, even though ideas about presenting these qualities continue to evolve, as indeed they must.

Those hearing Schnabel for the first time may find aspects of his style somewhat disconcerting. He lengthened or foreshortened phrases at will and he varied the pulse, sometimes restlessly, particularly in fast movements. It was a personal form of expression, his musical hallmark so to speak, but the large fluctuations of speed in parts of the first movement of the *Third Concerto* are unusual, and they need to be understood in context. The scores available then had the wrong time signature. Alfred Brendel believes that this ‘misdeed’, as he calls it, originated from Gustav Nottebohm and Carl Reinecke, who were responsible for the first complete edition. Their marking indicated a tempo double that which was required to make sense of the way the music is laid out. Intuitively, Schnabel and Sargent must have realised the error because the pacing of the orchestral introduction and the pianist’s initial contributions is moderate, but in the absence of official

confirmation for this speed, which was not available until Beethoven's autograph manuscript was rediscovered many years after the last war, Schnabel's hurrying at later stages suggests a conflict between what he instinctively felt was right and what he was led to believe the composer wanted.

If an evenly flowing rhythmic continuity was not always Schnabel's way with music, he could still portray a cosmic view of whatever piece, small or large, that he chose to play. Central to his make-up was an ability to find a sense of spirituality and repose in slow movements that few have been able to equal.

Idiosyncratic he certainly was, and though his later recordings of these concertos show some modifications in his ideas, there are no significant changes in execution. Schnabel stayed Schnabel, though, arguably, he was more daring in these 1930s performances. Yet, fifty years after his death at Axenstein in Switzerland on 15th August 1951 there is nothing about his musicianship that is dated. For reasons that are not fathomable, it remains uncannily timeless.

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 brass 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 Concertos Nos. 3 and 4
Rondo in C major, Op. 51, No. 1****Artur Schnabel**London Philharmonic Orchestra
Malcolm SargentPlaying
Time
70:04**Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37****33:49****1 Allegro con brio****15:04****2 Largo****10:47****3 Rondo (Allegro)****7:58**Recorded on 17th February, 1933 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 1, London
(on matrices 2B 4140-1, 4141-2, 4142-2, 4143-3, 4144-1, 4145-1, 4146-1, 4147-1 and 4148-2)
First issued as HMV DB 1940/4**Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58****31:33****4 Allegro moderato****17:30****5 Andante con moto****4:55****6 Rondo (Vivace)****9:08**Recorded on 16th February, 1933 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 1, London
(on matrices 2B 4132-1, 4133-1, 4134-2, 4135-1, 4136-1, 4137-1, 4138-1 and 4139-2)
First issued as HMV DB 1886/9**7 Rondo in C major, Op. 51, No. 1****4:42**Recorded on 13th April, 1933 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
(on matrix 2B 6630-2)
First issued as HMV DB 1944

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Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn

Source material kindly provided by Michael Gartz and Don Tait.

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