

TCHAIKOVSKY

Piano Concertos Nos. 1 and 2

Benno Moiseiwitsch

Philharmonia Orchestra • Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra
George Weldon



Historical Recordings 1944 and 1945

Great Pianists • Benno Moiseiwitsch (1890-1963)

TCHAIKOVSKY: Piano Concertos Nos. 1 and 2

"It is with great pleasure that we inform you that your son Benjuma won the Academy Open Contest, the Rubinstein Prize, for his brilliant and individual playing....," said the letter from the Imperial School of Music to Mrs Moiseivich. She had apparently been so overcome that Benjuma himself had to read the full text to her, not once but twice, the second time slowly as commanded. Rushing through the words was to be expected; after all he was only nine and probably thoroughly excited. He had every reason to be. This was a prestigious competition and his rivals had been older by at least eight years.

Benjuma Moiseivich, was born in Odessa on 22nd February 1890, eventually becoming Benno Moiseiwitsch, having adopted the German transliteration of his surname before he settled in Britain, but the Anglicisation of Benjuma to Benno has an unknown origin and it is said that he had not approved of the change. It did not, of course, make a scrap of difference to his immense talent, something he shared with Simon Barere, Shura Cherkassky, Emil Gilels, Tina Lerner, Nathan Milstein, David Oistrakh, Igor Oistrakh, Vladimir de Pachmann, Lefl Poushinoff, Vasily Sapellnikov and Tossy Spivakovsky, all of whom were also born in that same city by the Black Sea.

The revolution in October 1905 impelled Moiseiwitsch, who had also been sacked from the School, and his older brother to leave Russia. Their father, a horse-dealer, sold three pedigree animals to finance musical studies in London, but the professors of the institution (according to his nephew Maurice Moiseiwitsch this was the Royal Academy of Music but others think it was the Guildhall School) who assessed the young pianist said there was nothing they could teach him, and an audition with Theodor Leschetizky (1830-1915) in Vienna was a failure. The legendary teacher dismissed Moiseiwitsch because his

playing of Chopin's *Revolutionary Study* was ostentatious. Still, Leschetizky did invite him to return and, at the second attempt, is said to have told Moiseiwitsch, "Now you are no longer a gifted amateur, you're beginning to hear yourself seriously". Leschetizky was not dictatorial and seemed to have nurtured individuality; which probably explains why there was no recognisable 'house style' in those of his students who became distinguished soloists.

Maurice Moiseiwitsch believed that "Benno's style changed and developed over the years" and attributed a lot of it to private sorrow – his divorce in 1924 from Daisy Kennedy, an Australian violinist, to whom he had been married for ten years, and later, the death of his second wife Anita, probably in the late 1930s. "He never fully recovered from it," said Maurice Moiseiwitsch, "He became rather self-absorbed and lost a great deal of the sparkle, humour and gaiety he had shown in former days", and the artist who had been "much more enthusiastic about sheer pianistic effects, grappled with difficult pieces with amazing virtuosity . . . varied his moods more abruptly or emphatically and had a tendency to individualise passages markedly" turned to a more introspective means of expression. He had been contracted exclusively to HMV/EMI from 1916 to 1960 and these recordings show signs of the changes in his outlook.

It is only fair to say that the performances were not greeted with universal enthusiasm on their first appearance. The interpretation of the *First Concerto* was thought to lack glamour, which is less a reflection on Moiseiwitsch than on prevailing opinion that deemed the work to be a vehicle for steely-fingered virtuosity. Perhaps at one time Moiseiwitsch too felt the same way but on this occasion he did not follow contemporary popular fashion and it is a pity that his approach was not fully appreciated. His serious view of the work, however, spread the recording across nine

78rpm sides (as opposed to the usual eight) and the 'filler' was *Chanson triste*, recorded another day.

Moiseiwitsch's partner, George Weldon (1908-1963), was well regarded in musical circles. His efforts to reconstitute the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in 1943 and enhance its reputation, were appreciated; but he left in 1951, not to be in charge elsewhere but to become second conductor of the Hallé Orchestra. Its music director, Sir John Barbirolli, called him, "A really fine musician of very wide range and sympathies. As a colleague he was helpfulness and loyalty personified, the perfect associate musically and personally". He was popular with the audiences at Manchester's Summer Proms and the critic Michael Kennedy has described him as "an underrated conductor, capable of magnificent performances". Fame, however, eluded Weldon, which was not the case with Malcolm Sargent, once an accomplished pianist and a pupil of Moiseiwitsch for a short time.

Back in 1944, Sargent was music director of the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, and was initially due to conduct this recording of the *Second Concerto* but fell ill. Interestingly, the work was then virtually unknown and Moiseiwitsch, who may have been the first in Western Europe to further its cause, would doubtless have welcomed the opportunity to expose the music to a wider audience. The scheduling, however, was unfortunate. Shellac, needed to make 78s, was not easily available; and this meant adapting Alexander Siloti's edition, in itself a savagely amended travesty of the original but the only one that was recognised, to fit the allotted eight sides. Tchaikovsky knew that the work was long (he himself made some cuts when he conducted it in St Petersburg with Sapellnikov as soloist) and had asked Siloti to suggest modifications that would help to condense the music; but the suggestions offered went beyond mere pruning. They

amounted to radical alterations in both the writing and structure of the first two movements, particularly the second, and the composer rejected them. He told the publisher, Jurgenson, "There will be no great changes – it will be a matter of cuts only". But Tchaikovsky died three months later and Jurgenson issued Siloti's unauthorised version.

Today, it would be pointless to question why this score – Tchaikovsky recomposed – became accepted and remained a standard for a very long time. Fortunately the composer's own manuscript was also published, but we do not know whether Moiseiwitsch ever considered using it. Nor do we know how he played both concertos in later years because he did not record them on LP. Studio work declined in the 1950s and only sporadic issues kept his name before collectors. His last sessions for EMI, three years before his death from heart disease on 9th April 1963, saw him in the undignified position of having to record a compilation of movements from popular concertos, one of which was the third from Tchaikovsky's *First Concerto*. It was the closest he came to a remake. Small wonder that Moiseiwitsch switched his allegiance to American Decca (Brunswick in the UK) but some contemporary reports suggest that the results are not those by which he should be remembered. Better then to remember him by the finest examples of his output, among which are his only recordings of these concertos. They are not flawless (they were also made under less than ideal conditions), but their imperfections do not diminish Moiseiwitsch's sharply honed interpretative acumen that gives us a very good impression of the sensibilities that governed this lofty and, by all accounts, magnanimous musician.

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Discographic information has been taken from Benno Moiseiwitsch: An HMV Discography by Bryan Crimp (Appian Publications & Recordings, 1990, Hexham, Northumberland, UK)

Ward Marston

In 1997 Ward Marston was nominated for the Best Historical Album Grammy Award for his production work on BMG's Fritz Kreisler collection. According to the Chicago Tribune, Marston's name is 'synonymous with tender loving care to collectors of historical CDs'. Opera News calls his work 'revelatory', and Fanfare deems him 'miraculous'. In 1996 Ward Marston received the Gramophone award for Historical Vocal Recording of the Year, honouring his production and engineering work on Romophone's complete recordings of Lucrezia Bori. He also served as re-recording engineer for the Franklin Mint's Arturo Toscanini issue and BMG's Sergey Rachmaninov recordings, both winners of the Best Historical Album Grammy.

Born blind in 1952, Ward Marston has amassed tens of thousands of opera classical records over the past four decades. Following a stint in radio while a student at Williams College, he became well-known as a reissue producer in 1979, when he restored the earliest known stereo recording made by the Bell Telephone Laboratories in 1932.

In the past, Ward Marston has produced records for a number of major and specialist record companies. Now he is bringing his distinctive sonic vision to bear on works released on the Naxos Historical label. Ultimately his goal is to make the music he remasters sound as natural as possible and true to life by 'lifting the voices' off his old 78 rpm recordings. His aim is to promote the importance of preserving old recordings and make available the works of great musicians who need to be heard.

Producer's Note

Tchaikovsky's *First Piano Concerto* has been one of the most frequently recorded works in the concert repertoire. Its debut on disc took place in 1926 with an acoustic Vocalion recording featuring the Russian pianist Vassily Sapellnikoff, and by 1950, some sixteen recordings of the work had been released. Benno Moiseiwitsch made his recording of the concerto for HMV in 1945 and it is little wonder that public and critics alike overlooked its emergence. For by this time, Moiseiwitsch was up against two recordings by Artur Rubinstein, one by Horowitz, not to mention recordings by other less known pianists all vying for a market share of the Tchaikovsky concerto pie. Moiseiwitsch's recording was issued on HMV's budget priced "plum label" and was marketed solely in Great Britain. It remained in the catalogue for only a year or two and was never issued by any other HMV affiliate nor in the U. S. by RCA Victor. Consequently, this set is quite scarce and the only available pressings are English HMV discs which are notorious for their crackly surface noise.

For the present transfer, I was able to locate three sets of originals, none of which were in perfect condition but all serviceable. By using a judicious amount of the CEDAR de-crackling algorithm, I was able to attenuate enough noise to make the performance listenable without appreciably diminishing the beauty of Moiseiwitsch's unique sound.

Tchaikovsky's *Second Piano Concerto* has never enjoyed the acclaim of his first and it is interesting to note that in 1944, Benno Moiseiwitsch was the first pianist to record the work. It was also issued on English HMV plum label pressings but additionally was offered by Australian HMV on superior pressings. This transfer was made primarily using a set of excellent Australian pressings. Only occasionally was I compelled to insert small passages from English pressings. I have attempted to make these edits inaudible, but a keen ear may well hear some slight variation in surface.

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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TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

Piano Concertos Nos. 1 and 2

Benno Moiseiwitsch (1890-1963)

Philharmonia Orchestra * • Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra
George WeldonPlaying
Time
67:52**Piano Concerto No. 1 in B flat minor, Op. 23 ***

33:20

① **Allegro non troppo - Allegro con spirito**

19:24

② **Andante semplice - Prestissimo - Tempo I**

7:18

③ **Allegro con fuoco**

6:38

Recorded by HMV in Friends Meeting House, London, 30-31 August 1945

(Matrices 2ER 874-1, 875-2, 876-1, 877-1, 882-2, 878-2, 879-1, 880-1, 881-2); catalogue C3466-70

Philharmonia Orchestra • George Weldon

Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 44 (ed. Siloti)

30:49

④ **Allegro brillante**

16:36

⑤ **Andante non troppo**

7:19

⑥ **Allegro con fuoco**

6:54

Recorded by HMV in the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, 29 August 1944. The issued take of the first movement cadenza (side 3) was recorded in Studio 3, Abbey Road, 19 October 1944

(Matrices 2ER 784-2, 785-2, 786-5, 787-2, 788-2, 789-2, 790-1, 791-1); catalogue C 3410-13

Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra • George Weldon

⑦ **Chanson Triste, Op. 40/2**

3:42

Recorded by HMV in Studio 3, Abbey Road, 5 October 1945. (Matrix 2EA 10615-1); catalogue C3470

Archivist and Audio Restoration Producer: Ward Marston

With thanks to Raymond Edwards and Donald Manildi



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Cover Photograph: Benno Moiseiwitsch (Lebrecht Collection)

