



BEETHOVEN

Piano Works Vol. 1

Sonatas Nos. 1-3

Artur Schnabel

Historical Recordings 1933 and 1934

Great Pianists: Artur Schnabel: BEETHOVEN: Piano Works Vol. 1

Piano Sonatas, Op. 2 Nos. 1-3

In the half century since his death, Artur Schnabel has emerged as something of an icon of modern music. As a composer of allegedly difficult music and performer of classical repertoire, he occupies an unusual place among twentieth-century pianists. He was fond of recounting that his teacher Theodore Leschetizky (1830-1915) would often remind him 'You will never be a pianist. You are a musician.' The instrument was always secondary to the music, despite his having been a child prodigy. He was born in Lipnik, a village on the Austrian-Polish border and at the age of seven moved with his family to Vienna to receive his musical training. His serious nature was soon apparent to Leschetizky, who never required Schnabel to learn the popular recital pieces of the era. His education complete, in 1898 Schnabel left Vienna for Berlin, pursuing a career there as soloist and chamber musician, composer, and teacher. He and his wife, the soprano Therese Behr, each maintained teaching studios in a large apartment that became an important meeting place for the leading musicians of the era. After 35 years, his career in Germany ended when the Nazis came to power in 1933. Through the 1930s he and his family moved between England and Tremezzo, in Italy, where he taught a summer course. Finally, in 1939, they settled in the United States, where Schnabel continued to perform and to teach until his death in 1951.

In the United States, in particular, journalists came to refer to Schnabel as 'the German professor.' He eschewed the showmanship often associated with piano virtuosos and refused to play lighter works or encores. Beethoven's music was his speciality and he understood it in ways no other pianist did. His erudite edition of the Beethoven sonata scores (published by Simon and Schuster in 1935) raised many eyebrows with its

extensive tempo markings and unconventional fingerings. In 1927, the centenary of Beethoven's death, he became the first pianist since Hans von Bülow to perform a complete cycle of the Beethoven sonatas from memory. He did this again in London in 1932, and then in Paris in 1934, and in New York in 1936. The recitals tended to attract an audience of connoisseurs. "In the majority it consists of musicians and students and those music lovers of the city who go to concerts with more than superficial entertainment in mind," wrote the *New York Times*' critic Olin Downs. Many would arrive carrying scores, following them closely as he played.

By the time of the New York cycle, Schnabel had become the first pianist to record all 32 of the sonatas. He accepted the task only with reluctance. In his biography, *My Life and Music*, he writes that through the 1920s he had "consistently refused" to record, not wanting to give up control over how and where people listened to his playing, and believing recordings to be the antithesis of the "absolutely ephemeral and unrepeatable" performance. He eventually consented to enter the studio on the condition that he record all of Beethoven's music for solo piano. These sessions took place at London's Abbey Road studios, beginning in the early months of 1932. Schnabel described his memories of the first year of recording as among the "most painful recollections of my life. I suffered agonies and was in a state of despair each time I recorded...Everything was artificial - the light, the air, the sound - and it took me quite a long time to get the company to adjust some of their equipment to music, and even longer to adjust myself to the equipment, however much improved it was. Then I became more indulgent - I no longer expected and demanded so much." This no doubt came

as a relief to engineer Edward Fowler, with whom he worked closely. Gradually, Schnabel even came to enjoy the process of recording, and by the end of the 1930s had completed most of what would be his recorded legacy.

HMV released the recordings by subscription under what it called the Beethoven Sonata Society. The 78rpm discs sold quite well despite being easily available only in countries of the British Commonwealth. "The excitement those albums caused here", wrote the American critic Harold Schonberg, "and the dent they made in some impoverished depression wallets!" - at import price. "There were twelve volumes of sonatas and three additional ones of miscellaneous keyboard works. They occupied yards of space (or so it seemed) on the record shelves." The set firmly established Schnabel's place as the leading specialist in Beethoven's piano music.

Since their first appearance in the 1930s, Schnabel's landmark recordings have usually been available at the high end of the market. In 1956, the Victor label, recognising Schnabel's place as the pre-eminent Beethoven scholar-performer of the age, released the solo piano recordings in a lavishly produced set of 13 LPs. Critics valued the beauty of the set but noted the drawbacks of the expensive packaging. "Perhaps Victor's plan is good merchandising", wrote Schonberg, "Those who admired Schnabel, who thought that his was the last word on the Beethoven sonatas, will buy the set in any event, \$80 or no, obsolete recorded sound or no." The pianist and composer Abram Chasins considered it "...too lavish. So revealing a musical experience should be readily available to everyone: to every music-lover, student, teacher and artist. Some way should be found to issue

such a document in an unlimited edition for those with limited funds. One can only hope that public demand will cause this to be accomplished on some practicable basis." Through the 1960s and 1970s the recordings appeared on a variety of labels. EMI released the sonatas in its 'Great Recordings of the Century' series on the Angel label in 1963. Even at full price, the 13-disc set proved to be an immediate success. At the end of the decade the company re-released the series on its moderately priced Seraphim label. The 16-disc set this time included the variations, bagatelles and other piano pieces, in addition to the 32 sonatas. In 1991, Angel transfers became available on CD, and were followed by five multi-disc sets on the full-priced Pearl label.

In these new transfers, Naxos presents Beethoven's sonatas in the order in which he composed them, beginning here with the three sonatas of Opus 2. Dating from his first years in Vienna, Beethoven published these sonatas in March 1796 and dedicated them to his teacher, Joseph Haydn. Few pianists could plumb the depths of these early works to the extent that Schnabel could. After his 15th January 1936 recital at Carnegie Hall, Olin Downs, writing in the *New York Times*, reported the first sonata to have been performed "with the fullest realization of its prophetic character, but without forcing the note... The finale was more than a premonition of the Beethoven to come, and indeed of the course of the romantic movement in piano music". These recordings offer such a journey. Now seventy years since they were made - their intensity and originality fully intact - they offer another generation the chance to re-discover Beethoven through Schnabel.

Brian C. Thompson

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.

Producer's Note

Artur Schnabel's pioneering Beethoven Sonata Society recordings were originally issued on 204 78 rpm sides in fifteen volumes, each containing six or seven discs. The first twelve sets contained the thirty-two sonatas, usually packaged as one early, one middle and one late sonata per album. Variations, bagatelles and sundry short pieces occupied the final three volumes. The sets were released in the UK on His Master's Voice with some volumes also being issued on French Disque Gramophone, German Electrola and (for the "Hammerklavier" Sonata only) Victor in the United States. In this eleven-CD reissue series, the first nine discs will be devoted to the sonatas, presented in their order of composition, while the final two volumes will feature the other works.

Because the original discs rarely turn up in any form other than British pressings, the problem of how to deal with the higher-than-average level of surface crackle inherent in HMV shellac has lead previous transfer engineers down one of two paths. One way has been to use heavy computerized processing to keep the noise at a minimum. While this made for a relatively quiet result, many critics felt that the piano's tonal qualities had been sacrificed to an unacceptable degree. Another approach went to the opposite extreme, filtering minimally and even apparently boosting the upper mid-range frequencies in an attempt to add a percussive brilliance to the piano tone. Although this produced a clearer result than the first method, many listeners were put off by the relentless onslaught of surface noise that this approach to filtering and equalization exacerbated.

For the current transfers, I have tried to strike a balance between these two positions. In order to start with the quietest-available source material, multiple copies of British, French and American pressings have been assembled, and I have chosen the best sides from each. Computerized declicking (although not denoising) has been employed not only to remove clicks and pops, but also to reduce surface crackle to a minimum without harming the upper frequencies. My approach to filtering has been to stop at the point at which more than just surface hiss was being affected; and my equalization has aimed for a warm, full piano tone which I believe is more representative of the original recordings.

Finally, I have linked the movements of each of the sonatas by retaining the surface noise on the original discs. With recordings of a basically higher noise level such as the present ones, I feel that once the listener has become acclimated to the surface hiss, much of it can be mentally screened out. It is counterproductive to be reminded of it at the start of each new movement, as happens in those editions in which movements are faded in and faded out.

In this volume, the first and third sonatas have been transferred from British pressings, while the second comes from a French copy. Although there is some blasting at a couple of particularly loud points during *Sonata No. 2* common to this type of source, I felt that for the remaining 99% of the recording the surfaces were so much quieter than the British shellacs that they were preferable in spite of that flaw. It is interesting to note that in order to fit the *Adagio* of the first sonata onto a single six-minute-long side, the HMV engineers ran the cutting turntable at 75.6 rpm for the entire sonata, making this one of the longest commercially-issued, non-microgroove "78" discs ever released.

Mark Obert-Thorn

Artur Schnabel: BEETHOVEN: Piano Works, Vol. 1

Sonata No. 1 in F minor, Op. 2 No. 1

17:28

- | | | |
|---|-------------|------|
| ① | Allegro | 3:18 |
| ② | Adagio | 6:02 |
| ③ | Menuetto | 3:24 |
| ④ | Prestissimo | 4:41 |

Recorded 23rd to 24th and on 28th April, 1934 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3

Matrices: 2B 6147-1, 6149-3 and 6151-1

First issued as HMV DB 2463 and 2464 in Society Volume 7

Sonata No. 2 in A major, Op. 2 No. 2

22:58

- | | | |
|---|--------------------|------|
| ⑤ | Allegro vivace | 6:30 |
| ⑥ | Largo appassionato | 7:22 |
| ⑦ | Scherzo | 3:22 |
| ⑧ | Rondo: Grazioso | 5:42 |

Recorded 9th April, 1933 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3

Matrices: 2B 6390-2, 6391-2, 6392-2, 6393-2, 6394-2, 6395-2 and 6396-2

First issued as HMV DB 2086 to 2089 inclusive, in Society Volume 4

Sonata No. 3 in C major, Op. 2 No. 3

26:00

- | | | |
|---|------------------|-------|
| ⑨ | Allegro con brio | 10:03 |
| ⑩ | Adagio | 7:45 |
| ⑪ | Scherzo | 2:51 |
| ⑫ | Allegro assai | 5:21 |

Recorded 26th to 27th April, 1934 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3

Matrices: 2B 6172-1, 6173-1, 6175-1, 6176-2, 6177-2, 6174-2

First issued as HMV DB 2646 to 2648 inclusive, in Society Volume 8

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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ADD

Complete Beethoven Sonata Society
Recordings Vol. 1Playing
Time
66:26

Artur Schnabel (1882-1951)

- | | | |
|--------|--|-------|
| 1 - 4 | Sonata No. 1 in F minor, Op. 2 No. 1
Recorded 23rd to 24th and on 28th April, 1934 in
EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3
Matrices: 2B 6147-1, 6149-3, 6150-1 and 6151-1
First issued as HMV DB 2463 and 2464 in Society Volume 7 | 17:28 |
| 5 - 8 | Sonata No. 2 in A major, Op. 2 No. 2
Recorded 9th April, 1933 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3
Matrices: 2B 6390-2, 6391-2, 6392-2, 6393-2, 6394-2, 6395-2 and 6396-2
First issued as HMV DB 2086 to 2089 inclusive, in Society Volume 4 | 22:58 |
| 9 - 12 | Sonata No. 3 in C major, Op. 2 No. 3
Recorded 26th to 27th April, 1934 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3
Matrices: 2B 6172-1, 6173-1, 6175-1, 6176-2, 6177-2, 6174-2
First issued as HMV DB 2646 to 2648 inclusive, in Society Volume 8 | 26:00 |

At first reluctant to make recordings, by the 1930s the great pianist Artur Schnabel fully accepted the new technology. His recordings of Beethoven's piano music include all the numbered sonatas, originally issued on subscription by the Beethoven Sonata Society, testimony to the originality and profound musicality of his interpretations.

MADE IN
E.C.

Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn

www.naxos.com

Cover Photograph: Artur Schnabel (Private Collection)



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