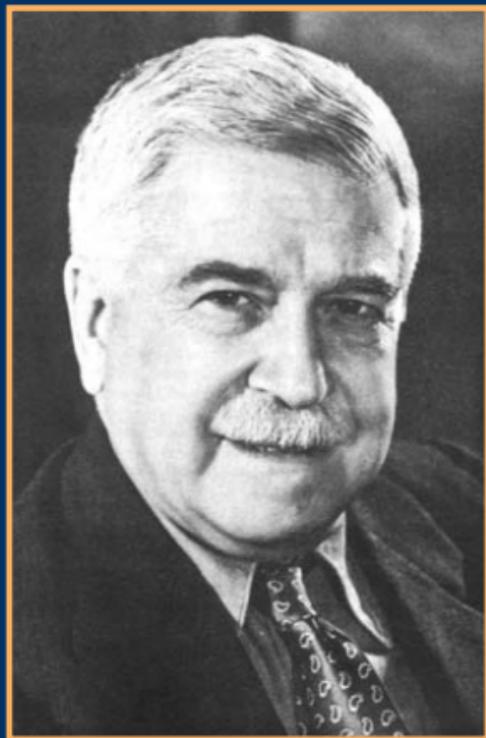




Great Pianists • Schnabel

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BEETHOVEN

Piano Works Vol. 4

Sonatas Nos. 11-13

Artur Schnabel

Historical Recordings 1932 - 1934

Great Pianists: Artur Schnabel: BEETHOVEN: Piano Works Vol. 4

Piano Sonatas Nos. 11-13

Artur Schnabel (1882-1951) was born into a bourgeois family at Lipnik, a village on the Austrian-Polish border. At the age of seven he moved with his family to Vienna to receive his musical training from Theodore Leschetizky. Leschetizky quickly recognized the child's serious nature and never required him to learn the popular recital pieces of the time. Schnabel was later fond of telling that Leschetizky would remind him 'You will never be a pianist. You are a musician'. Had his natural gifts as a pianist been anything less than remarkable he might have appreciated the comment less. This temperament became his trademark, and in the half century since his death his reputation as one of the twentieth century's great scholar-interpreters has changed remarkably little. His attitudes and knowledge have been transmitted through a small number of his writings, through concert reviews, and through the many pianists that he taught. This could well have been all that remained of his playing, as his uncompromising nature nearly prevented him from ever entering a recording studio.

For 35 years Schnabel's career was centred in Berlin. He arrived there in 1898, at the age of sixteen, fresh from his studies with Leschetizky. Initially he devoted much of his time to accompanying the soprano Therese Behr, whom he married in 1905, and to performing chamber music. The violinist Carl Flesch was his main performing partner through the early years in Berlin and described their partnership at that time as 'simple and unspoilt, and easily satisfied with modest financial results, but demanding in all artistic questions. The gramophone was canned music for [Schnabel] then, and he refused to play chamber music in large halls'. After the First World War, Schnabel's interests changed radically. He was not yet ready to begin a recording career, but he virtually abandoned chamber music in favour of composition and solo recitals. Beethoven's music assumed an increasingly important place in his repertoire, culminating in the first of several recital series featuring all 32 sonatas.

The 1920s proved to be a glorious time for Berlin and for Schnabel and Behr. The family's large apartment, with its four grand pianos, became an important meeting place for the leading musicians of the era. Through the 1930s, after the Nazis came to power in Germany, Schnabel divided his time mostly between Trezzano, Italy, where he taught a summer course, and London, where in 1932 he had begun recording all of Beethoven's solo piano music at Abbey Road Studios.

Schnabel was fifty when he finally consented to record for HMV. His recordings, the first complete cycle of the Beethoven sonatas on disc, were issued by subscription. They became a classic almost immediately and the yardstick by which all others would be measured. Schnabel's reputation ensured that the recordings would remain in print for many years, despite their imperfections. In a 1970 article on recordings of the Beethoven sonatas, pianist and critic Harris Goldsmith acknowledged Schnabel's occasional 'tendency to maul rhythm and jump beats. And yet' he continued, 'I like Schnabel's approach to this music over all the competition: I feel a close, temperamental kinship with its hard moral core and quivering, raw-nerve expressive sensitivity'. Recorded between November 1932 and May 1934, the three sonatas on the present disc were originally released widely apart (as volumes 5, 9 and 2, respectively), as the original HMV discs grouped the works as Schnabel might perform them at a recital (even if the nature of the multi-disc 78rpm sets made listening in that way impractical). The chronological sequence presented in the current Naxos set allows a different experience, emphasizing the development of Beethoven's music. This evolution is strikingly apparent in the fourth volume and the three sonatas from this transitional period.

Composed between 1800 and 1801, *Sonatas Nos. 11-13* bridge two very different periods in Beethoven's piano sonatas. Charles Rosen has quite aptly described the *Sonata in B flat major, Op. 22*, of 1800, as the composer's 'farewell to the eighteenth

century'. Hoffmeister & Kühnel of Leipzig published it in 1802 with a dedication to Beethoven's patron Count Johann Georg von Browne-Camus. It represents the culmination of classical form and Beethoven considered it to be one of his most perfect creations. With the *Sonata in A flat major, Op.26*, on the other hand, Beethoven begins his departure from tradition. The sonata was published in Vienna by Cappi in March 1802 and of the four movements only the last, a *Rondo allegro*, is in a conventional form. The first two movements are moderately daring: the sonata opens not with an *Allegro* but with *Andante* in the form of a theme and five variations. It continues not with a slow movement but a *Scherzo*. It is, however, the third movement, the funeral march, that provides the sonata with its subtitle. The movement is in the unusual key of A flat minor but is most extraordinary for Beethoven's use of an apparent (though unspecified) programme in this funeral march in memory of an unnamed hero (*Marcia funebre sulla morte d'un Eroe*). The form itself was popular at the time, especially in republican circles, and Chopin was just one of the many admirers of the work. Not surprisingly, it was among the pieces performed at Beethoven's funeral. The stylistic departure begun in *Op.26* continued in the two sonatas of *Op.27*, which Beethoven completed in 1801 and published with the description '*sonata quasi una fantasia*'. As with the preceding sonata, in the *Sonata in E flat major, Op. 27, No.1*, Beethoven again chose unconventional forms, beginning with the opening movement: an *Andante-Allegro-Andante* structure that suggests a suite, particularly in the middle section in 6/8 metre.

Writing nearly fifty years after the original recordings were released, Goldsmith provided an informed and seasoned assessment of Schnabel's recordings of these three sonatas. He expressed reservations about Schnabel's interpretation of the *Sonata in B flat major*, describing the opening movement as having a 'hard-bitten, businesslike aggressiveness', but characterized the second movement as 'sublime'. For Goldsmith, in 1970, it was Schnabel and Arrau who offered 'the outstanding accounts' of the *Sonata in A flat, Op.26*: 'Schnabel's weighty first movement and stormy Funeral March impart unusual scope and weight to the piece, while his precipitate bravura in the other two movements supplies a welcome glint and an extroverted brio'. Of the truly romantic *Sonata in E flat major, Op.27, No.1*, he wrote, 'Schnabel realises to perfection the zany, almost hysterical gaiety of the work's manic moments and the brooding introspection of its depressive ones. The allegro outburst in the opening movement has, in his performance, the disorderly scribble of Beethoven's handwriting, and his treatment of the finale almost (but never quite) races out of control'. These remarks merit considering as we listen to these recordings once again. Although the Beethoven discography has expanded enormously in the 33 years since Goldsmith's comments appeared in print, it is difficult to contest his claim that Schnabel's recordings of the Beethoven sonatas remain 'a price-less legacy from a legendary musical thinker and ought to be considered basic to every record library'.

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.

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.

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 led 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 acclimatized 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.

The sources for the current volume's transfers were laminated French 'Disque Gramophone' pressings for *Op. 22* and British HMV shellacs for the other two sonatas.

Mark Obert-Thorn

Artur Schnabel: BEETHOVEN: Piano Works, Vol. 4

Sonata No. 11 in B flat major, Op. 22

24:11

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|------|
| 1 | Allegro con brio | 6:38 |
| 2 | Adagio con molta espressione | 9:01 |
| 3 | Menuetto | 3:16 |
| 4 | Rondo: Allegretto | 5:16 |
- Recorded 12th and 13th April, 1933 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
Matrices: 2B 6616-1, 6617-1, 6618-1, 6619-1, 6620-1 and 6621-4
First issued as HMV DB 2211 to 2213 in Society Volume 5

Sonata No. 12 in A flat major, Op. 26

22:18

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|-------|
| 5 | Andante con variazioni | 10:01 |
| 6 | Scherzo | 2:28 |
| 7 | Marcia funebre sulla morte d'un Eroe | 7:23 |
| 8 | Allegro | 2:26 |
- Recorded 25th to 27th April and 7th May, 1934 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
Matrices: 2B 6166-2, 6167-2, 6168-2, 6169-1, 6170-2, 6171-4
First issued as HMV DB 2850 to 2852 in Society Volume 9

Sonata No. 13 in E flat major, Op. 27, No. 1

15:12

- | | | |
|----|------------------------|------|
| 9 | Andante | 5:21 |
| 10 | Allegro molto e vivace | 1:35 |
| 11 | Adagio con espressione | 3:06 |
| 12 | Allegro vivace | 5:10 |
- Recorded 1st November, 1932 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
Matrices: 2B 4461-2, 4462-2, 4463-1 and 4464-1
First issued as HMV DB 1820 and 1821 in Society Volume 2

Playing
Time
61:41

8.110756 **Complete Beethoven Sonata Society**
Recordings Vol. 4
Artur Schnabel (1882-1951)

8.110756
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- 1 - 4

Sonata No. 11 in B flat major, Op. 22
Recorded 12th and 13th April, 1933 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
Matrices: 2B 6616-1, 6617-1, 6618-1, 6619-1, 6620-1 and 6621-4
First issued as HMV DB 2211 to 2213 in Society Volume 5

24:11
- 5 - 8

Sonata No. 12 in A flat major, Op. 26
Recorded 25th to 27th April and 7th May, 1934 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
Matrices: 2B 6166-2, 6167-2, 6168-2, 6169-1, 6170-2, 6171-4
First issued as HMV DB 2850 to 2852 in Society Volume 9

22:18
- 9 - 12

Sonata No. 13 in E flat major, Op. 27, No. 1
Recorded 1st November, 1932 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London
Matrices: 2B 4461-2, 4462-2, 4463-1 and 4464-1
First issued as HMV DB 1820 and 1821 in Society Volume 2

15:12

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. This, the fourth volume of the Beethoven Piano Sonatas series, presents three sonatas written in 1800 and 1801, including the famous Funeral March of *Op. 26*. Schnabel's legendary performances remain stylistically in tune with the late eighteenth century while at the same time looking forward to the romanticism and self-expression of the nineteenth century, a testimony to the originality and profound musicality of his interpretations.

Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn
A complete tracklist can be found on the last page of the booklet

www.naxos.com

Cover Photograph: Artur Schnabel (late 1940s)
(Private Collection)



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