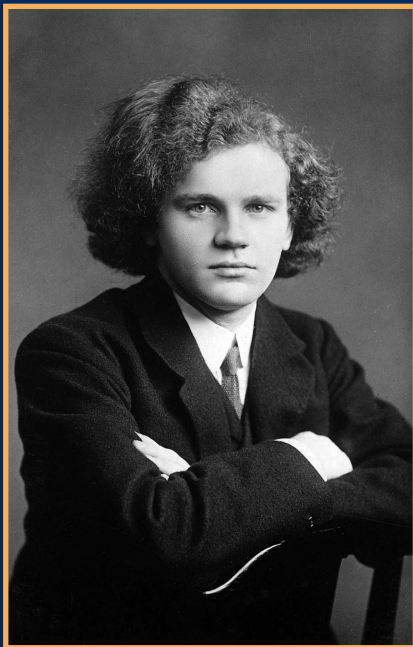




Great Pianists • Backhaus

8.111041

ADD



BRAHMS

Variations on an Original Theme

Scherzo in E flat minor

Intermezzi

Capriccios

Wilhelm Backhaus

Historical Recordings 1932 - 1936

Great Pianists: Wilhelm Backhaus (1884-1969)

BRAHMS: Variations on an Original Theme • Scherzo in E flat minor • Intermezzi • Capriccios

Wilhelm Backhaus was born in Leipzig in 1884. A major pianist of the twentieth century, he was not a pupil of any of the major teachers of his time, and the only pianist of note who had any bearing on his development was Eugen d'Albert, with whom he had some lessons in 1898 and 1899. Before going to d'Albert, Backhaus had studied the piano, from the age of ten, at the Leipzig Conservatory with Alois Reckendorf. Immediately after his time with d'Albert, he toured England as a substitute for an indisposed Alexander Siloti, the following year making his début at the Proms. In 1905 he won the prestigious Anton Rubinstein prize of 5000 Francs in Paris. He first visited America in 1912 but spent most of his time in Europe taking Swiss citizenship in 1931. Backhaus was a recording pioneer, making the first ever recording of a piano concerto in 1909 (an abridged version of the *Piano Concerto* by Grieg), and the first complete recording of Chopin's *Etudes Op. 10 and 25*. He continued to appear before the public into his eighties and died in 1969.

On 3rd December 1932 Backhaus gave a recital at Grotrian Hall in London. He played works by Beethoven and Brahms. Two days later he was at HMV Studio No. 3 at Abbey Road to record some of Brahms's solo piano music to be issued the following year celebrating the centenary of Brahms's birth. He recorded the first two *Ballades* from *Op. 10* (8.110766) and then the *Scherzo in E flat minor, Op. 4*, an early work inspired by the *Scherzos* of Chopin. Two takes of the first part were not successful, but he secured part two of the work in one take. First takes of *Op. 118 Nos. 1 & 2* and *Op. 76 Nos. 7 & 8* were also published and the second take of *Op. 118 No. 3*. In some cases two works were fitted onto one side of a 78 rpm disc and in the case of *Op. 118 Nos. 1 & 2* it sounds as though Backhaus is under pressure to play faster than usual in the second work. He returned two days later when a third take of the first part of the *Scherzo* was successful

and first takes of *Op. 118 Nos. 4, 5 & 6* likewise. For all these recordings Backhaus used a Bechstein piano and although he was in his fifties, his natural ebullience in the *Scherzo* seems to have put the piano out of tune, the first side of which comes from the final take made during the 7th December 1932 session.

In March 1933 Backhaus was again in London where he performed Mozart's *Piano Concerto in A major, K. 488*, at the Queen's Hall with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Adrian Boult. Two days later he was back at the HMV Studios to record more Brahms. During the December 1932 sessions he had tried to record four of the *Op. 39 Waltzes*, but on 31st March 1933 dropped *No. 6* and recorded only three. At another Grotrian Hall recital on 4th April Backhaus included Brahms's *Op. 118* which he had recorded complete the previous December, but also the *Piano Sonata in F minor, Op. 5*, and it is unfortunate that HMV did not record him in this work as his bold and dramatic style in this composer's music is well suited to this work. A contemporary critic wrote of Backhaus's loud playing, 'Up to and including *mezzoforte* Mr Backhaus plays like a sensitive artist; from *forte* onwards he becomes merely a professional pianist... The best vehicle for his style as it is, with its mixture of velvet glove and mailed fist, is Brahms, and of Brahms he played an agreeable selection of rhapsodies, waltzes, and intermezzi.'

As early as 5th May 1933 advance copies of the discs had been rushed to the critic of *The Times* for review. HMV published the recordings as a seven disc Brahms Centenary Album as well as the *Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15* (8.110699). 'His technique is of the highest order, but he sets musical expression above brilliant display. His strongest point is rhythm. These qualities make him an excellent interpreter of Brahms. Yet he shows now and again a curious insensibility to the poetical side of the music.' The latter opinion, however, certainly could not be directed at the

Intermezzi in A minor Op. 76 No. 7 or Op. 118 No. 6.

During the 1930s Backhaus was a regular visitor to Britain. On the 7th January 1936 he was soloist at Central Hall Liverpool with the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and Eugène Bigot and two days later he was at HMV No. 3 Studio to record some more Brahms solos. No doubt the Centenary issue had been a success and HMV were keen to record Backhaus in more repertoire by Brahms. During sessions on 9th and 10th January 1936 he recorded the complete *Waltzes, Op. 39*, (8.110766) and, having already recorded *Op. 118*, continued recording the late works – selections from *Op. 116, 117 & 119*. Also from these sessions comes Backhaus's poetic recording of *Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 21*, both sides issued from the first of two takes. A contemporary review referred to 'an attractive simplicity and clarity of outline.' The *Op. 39 Waltzes* were recorded complete on both days, but there were problems, and Backhaus returned to Abbey Road

on 27th January and recorded them again, this time on a Steinway piano. Also from this session with the Steinway come the released takes of *Op. 119 Nos. 2 & 3* and the *Capriccio in B minor Op. 76, No. 2*. The following day Backhaus played a Queen's Hall recital which included Schumann's *Fantasie, Op. 17*, and Beethoven's *Piano Sonata, Op. 111*, as well as a group of Brahms pieces. Two days later he was in Queen's Hall again where he played Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37*, with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and Adrian Boult.

These late pieces of Brahms suit Backhaus's temperament; as Abram Chasins wrote of him, 'Backhaus's preoccupation was with music. His was the European tradition in which the music comes first, the artist afterward.'

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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.

- 1 Scherzo in E flat minor, Op. 4** **7:40**
- Recorded in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London,
on 5th and 7th December, 1932
Matrices: 2B 4561-3 and 4562-1
First issued on HMV DB 1895
- Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 21** **9:14**
- 2** Theme 1:06
3 Variation 1 0:30
4 Variation 2 0:32
5 Variation 3 0:30
6 Variation 4 0:25
7 Variation 5 0:40
8 Variation 6 0:23
9 Variation 7 0:31
10 Variation 8 0:23
11 Variation 9 0:37
12 Variation 10 0:34
13 Variation 11 3:03
- Recorded in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London,
on 10th January, 1936
Matrices: 2EA 3022-1 and 3023-1
First issued on HMV DB 2808
- Waltzes, Op. 39** **3:42**
- 14** No. 1 in B major 0:47
15 No. 2 in E major 1:16
16 No. 15 in E flat major 1:39
- Recorded in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London,
on 31st March, 1933
Matrix: 2B 4563-2
First issued on HMV DB 1896
- 17 Capriccio in B minor, Op. 76, No. 2** **2:44**
- Recorded in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London,
on 27th January, 1936
Matrix: 2EA 3018-5 [part]
First issued on HMV DB 2807
- 18 Intermezzo in A minor, Op. 76, No. 7** **2:10**
19 Capriccio in C major, Op. 76, No. 8 **2:38**
- Recorded in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London,
on 5th December, 1932
Matrix: 2B 4566-1
First issued on HMV DB 1897
- 20 Capriccio in D minor, Op. 116, No. 1** **1:58**
21 Intermezzo in A minor, Op. 116, No. 2 **2:44**
- Recorded in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London,
on 9th January, 1936
Matrix: 2EA 3020-1
First issued on HMV DB 2807
- 22 Intermezzo in E major, Op. 116, No. 4** **4:21**
- Recorded in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London,
on 9th January, 1936
Matrix: 2EA 3013-1
First issued on HMV DB 2804
- 23 Intermezzo in E flat major, Op. 117, No. 1** **4:36**
- Recorded in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London,
on 9th January, 1936
Matrix: 2EA 3014-2
First issued on HMV DB 2805
- 24 Intermezzo in B flat minor, Op. 117, No. 2** **3:39**
- Recorded in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London,
on 9th January, 1936
Matrix: 2EA 3015-1
First issued on HMV DB 2805

- 25 Intermezzo in A minor, Op. 118, No. 1** **0:56**
- 26 Intermezzo in A major, Op. 118, No. 2** **3:53**
- Recorded in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London,
on 5th December, 1932
Matrix: 2B 4564-1
First issued on HMV DB 1900
- 27 Ballade in G minor, Op. 118, No. 3** **3:27**
- Recorded in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London,
on 5th December, 1932
Matrix: 2B 4565-2
First issued on HMV DB 1897
- 28 Intermezzo in F minor, Op. 118, No. 4** **1:57**
- 29 Romance in F major, Op. 118, No. 5** **3:08**
- Recorded in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London,
on 7th December, 1932
Matrix: 2B 4570-1
First issued on HMV DB 1898
- 30 Intermezzo in E flat minor, Op. 118, No. 6** **4:10**
- Recorded in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London,
on 7th December, 1932
Matrix: 2B 4571-1
First issued on HMV DB 1898
- 31 Intermezzo in B minor, Op. 119, No. 1** **3:48**
- Recorded in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London,
on 9th January, 1936
Matrix: 2EA 3016-1
First issued on HMV DB 2806
- 32 Intermezzo in E minor, Op. 119, No. 2** **4:17**
- Recorded in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London,
on 27th January, 1936
Matrix: 2EA 3017-4
First issued on HMV DB 2806
- 33 Intermezzo in C major, Op. 119, No. 3** **1:27**
- Recorded in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3, London,
on 27th January, 1936
Matrix: 2EA 3018-5 [part]
First issued on HMV DB 2807

Wilhelm Backhaus, Piano

**Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer:
Mark Obert-Thorn**

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.

Also available:



Great Pianists • Backhaus

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8.110766



BRAHMS

Piano Concerto No. 2

Ballades

Waltzes

Hungarian Dances

Wilhelm Backhaus

Saxon State Orchestra

Karl Böhm

Historical Recordings 1932 - 1939

8.110766

Playing
Time
72:27

BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Solo Piano Works

Wilhelm Backhaus (1884-1969)

1	Scherzo in E flat minor, Op. 4	7:40
2	13 Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 21	9:14
14	16 Waltzes, Op. 39	3:42
17	Capriccio in B minor, Op. 76, No. 2	2:44
18	Intermezzo in A minor, Op. 76, No. 7	2:10
19	Capriccio in C major, Op. 76, No. 8	2:38
20	Capriccio in D minor, Op. 116, No. 1	1:58
21	Intermezzo in A minor, Op. 116, No. 2	2:44
22	Intermezzo in E major, Op. 116, No. 4	4:21
23	Intermezzo in E flat major, Op. 117, No. 1	4:36
24	Intermezzo in B flat minor, Op. 117, No. 2	3:39
25	Intermezzo in A minor, Op. 118, No. 1	0:56
26	Intermezzo in A major, Op. 118, No. 2	3:53
27	Ballade in G minor, Op. 118, No. 3	3:27
28	Intermezzo in F minor, Op. 118, No. 4	1:57
29	Romance in F major, Op. 118, No. 5	3:08
30	Intermezzo in E flat minor, Op. 118, No. 6	4:10
31	Intermezzo in B minor, Op. 119, No. 1	3:48
32	Intermezzo in E minor, Op. 119, No. 2	4:17
33	Intermezzo in C major, Op. 119, No. 3	1:27

Wilhelm Backhaus was a twentieth century virtuoso who had the distinction of making the first ever recording of a piano concerto (an abridged version of the Grieg in 1909). However, it was for his interpretations of the works of Beethoven, Brahms and Chopin that he became best known, combining impeccable technical brilliance with romantic ardour. The many varied selections on this disc were recorded during concert tours that Backhaus made in Britain during the 1930s.



8.111041

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MADE IN
THE EU



Audio Restoration Producer: Mark Obert-Thorn

Full recording details can be found on pages 4 and 5 of the booklet

www.naxos.com

Cover Photograph: Wilhelm Backhaus (The Tully Potter Collection)

