



## L. v. Beethoven: Piano Sonatas | Wilhelm Backhaus

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### Audiophile Audition (Gary Lemco - 2010.08.11)

Backhaus stands as among the most consistently satisfying of all Beethoven interpreters in the epic mold.

From the Philharmonie, Berlin 18 April 1969, the venerable Wilhelm Backhaus (1884-1969) appears in four Beethoven sonatas at the end of his long and fruitful career, having been a curator of the Classic tradition who eschewed modernists so he could cultivate the few select masters – Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, and Brahms – to his personal taste. Acknowledging that Backhaus was eighty-five-years-old at the time of these performances, we might recall a comment made by Professor Philip Friedheim, one of my significant music mentors at SUNY Binghamton: “While we can always relish the excitement of a young highly gifted virtuoso, there is still a special place for the artist who has lived with his music for a long time and thought it through deeply.” So, if the Backhaus technical arsenal does not match his heyday, the authority and long experience of his musical penetration yet moves us by its sheer authenticity of expression.

Years notwithstanding, Backhaus takes the opening of the Op. 109 at a terrific clip, and the short phrases cascade in lyric and passionate fury across the page. Another breakneck pace marks the Prestissimo, although Backhaus provides some luxuriant chords in the few moments of relative ease the music’s emotional turmoil permits. The final movement, an Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo and six variations, offers a glimpse into Beethoven’s late style of musical evolution, organic, and rife with that innigkeit or inwardness that sets the bar for much of the Romantic ethos. The facile sway of the phrases, the clear delineation of the lines, and their collateral liberation of the trill testify for those who wish to classify Backhaus as a neo-Classicist interpreter of Beethoven, though his encyclopedic grasp of form remains his own. A splendid silence precedes the outburst of applause.

The D Major “Pastoral” Sonata might stand as an evocation of recalled youth, with its soft drone figures and suavely elastic motion to the secondary theme, consistently understated by Backhaus, who seems to withdraw from any forced drama in the development so as to allow the music to play itself, despite the F-sharp Minor tonality that could easily have devolved into sentimentality. A resolute walking-tempo pervades the D Minor Andante, a march with a sense of irony. Staccati and triplets emerge in spry figures in the trio. The harmonization of the original melody in variation rings with bright exuberance. Bright splashy colors pepper the Scherzo, a contrast in long quarter notes and fleet broken octaves. The rustic finale, a countrified gigue marked Allegro ma non troppo, insinuates a bagpipe, except that the fugal development belies its bumpkin urges. Backhaus renders this movement with a muscular elan the audience well appreciates.

The outer jocularly of the E-flat Sonata finds emotional foils in its chromatic harmony, which points backward to the Pathétique Sonata and forward to Wagner's Tristan. Backhaus alternates between ceremonial pomp – à la C.P.E. Bach – and a deft bravura, treating the first movement as a virtuoso etude. The leading cell of the first movement recurs several times in various guises, a leitmotif effect whose four beats presage the Fifth Symphony. The 2/4 Scherzo moves by Backhaus as a blur speckled with light that occasionally explodes or glistens with phosphorescent power. That Beethoven develops his motives attests both to the attraction of sonata-form and the composer's admitted effort to "go in new directions" insofar as his work after 1801 is concerned. The E-flat Menuetto bespeaks Backhaus' capacity for aristocratic expressivity, the line never sagging, the (sometimes martial) progression seamlessly evolving out of itself. No reticence plagues the Presto con fuoco last movement, a rollicking bout of eighth notes in rustic style, rolling, roiling, and romping through the Philharmonie, courtesy of a Bechstein E thoroughly invigorated by Wilhelm Backhaus.

The eternal "Waldstein" Sonata (1804) first movement sets a course between pure motor energy and a chorale in E Major. The urgency of his attack causes Backhaus to slip on a few notes, but the emotional thrust and grand line remain intact, and the cumulative effect proves dramatically convincing at every turn. The music serves so obvious as a display piece we forget how much lyricism emanates from its swaying periods. Wasn't it Wagner who commented that in Beethoven every musical element becomes melody? Wonderful plastic touches as Backhaus takes the chorale through A Major, A minor, and finally back to the tonic C Major. The 6/8 Adagio molto proceeds as an elongated meditation in often mercurial colors, perhaps a model for the second movement of Schumann's Piano Concerto. With creamy chords Backhaus initiates the Rondo, whose glow many refer to as the "Aurora" movement. Scales and triplets tumble forth from Backhaus in a devastating torrent of sound, the scale equivalent to the last two piano concertos. When the music turns into a frenetic dance, we can hear presages of the Seventh Symphony. By the last pages – prestissimo – the Old Lion has us astounded at the grandeur of his conception, the durability of his art. Backhaus stands as among the most consistently satisfying of all Beethoven interpreters in the epic mold.