



F. Chopin: Piano Concerto No. 2 & F.
Schubert: Symphony 'The Great' in C
major, D. 944

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Audiophile Audition (Gary Lemco - 2011.09.18)

Leo Blech (1871-1958) hardly endures as a famous name in the history of German music-making, but his expertise extended over a huge range of operatic works as well as the modern instrumental efforts of Krenek, Milhaud, Weill, and Busoni. Wilhelm Furtwängler openly praised Blech's "consolidation of assurance and clarity" in his conductor's art. Composer Franz Shreker referred to Blech as an "epitome of magnificent precision."

Forced to leave Germany by the Nazi regime to assume a post in Riga, Blech made a career in Moscow and Leningrad until once again Nazi troops dogged his progress. Through the intervention of Heinz Tietjen, Blech made it to Sweden, yet he was among the few Jewish musicians to return to post-war Germany in 1949 to render musical service to a nation attempting to recover from the Valley of Death. The live concert preserved on this fine disc derives from the 4 June 1950 collaboration between Blech and RIAS at the Titania-Palast, Berlin-Steglitz. Interested connoisseurs should also seek out the Pristine restoration of Blech's Tchaikovsky Fifth, masterfully engineered for CD by Mark Obert-Thorn.

For the Chopin F Minor Concerto, we have the keyboard art of Julian von Karolyi (1914-1993), a musician often berated for his temperamental excesses; but here, with Blech, the deliberately nurtured rubati and luft-pausen find a common sympathy of expression. The evocations always run to the chaste form of the Romantic tradition in Poland, the accented line fluid, the runs gossamer. The influence of Cortot seems well nigh, and we might assume that master at the keyboard except the digital articulation is more exact, the pedaling more spare. When Chopin's poetry reigns, Karolyi delivers the line with tender directness. The orchestral part—so easily consigned to a mere accompaniment—becomes quite inflamed under Blech's fluid direction. The exquisite song of the Larghetto spins itself out in a delicate tracery whose trills and sudden accelerations and ritards never lose their flexible tension. The middle section becomes effectively gripping, a real moment of *dramma giocoso* whose bass pulsations in the strings tremble with menace: Orpheus descending. The sheer *éclat* and finesse in the last movement *Allegro vivace* capture the dance element in Chopin as well as the more driven aspects of his writing for keyboard and orchestra.

Schubert's Ninth Symphony ranked high among Blech's favorite compositions, and we find in his sensitive reading many aspects of the Central European style that mark his reading, including—and foremost—the expressive warmth of the string line. Serenity and solemn magnitude of expression reign supreme in the outer movements, even where the Schubert's penchant for dual tempos divide our emotional allegiances. When the music accelerates, the energy educed by Blech quite rivals similar kinesis from colleague and contemporary Willem Mengelberg.

Blech takes the aggressive, occasionally frenzied approach to the Andante con moto, slowing down its secondary theme and literally gliding into its central-section laendler. The color intensity from the brilliantly responsive RIAS winds and strings testifies to the consistent training by its major music-director, Herr Fricsay. A whirlwind Scherzo ensues, redolent with the Austrian countryside, the RIAS horns and tympani in full throttle, a kind of Schubertian equivalent for the Beethoven Eroica scherzo. Some may find the last movement Allegro vivace lacking in monumentality when compared to either Mengelberg or Furtwängler, but try telling that to the inflamed RIAS players! The trumpet work alone quite dazzles the ear. How did Goethe express it?: “When I sought to put on my hat, I couldn’t find my head!”

