



Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Sonatas | Wilhelm Backhaus

aud 23.420

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American Record Guide (John P. McKelvey - 2010.11.01)

This was recorded in concert in Berlin in April 1969, about 10 weeks before the pianist died (July 5). The broadcast tapes give us sound that is less smooth, rich, and sleek than in Audite tapes recorded 20 years earlier. It is stereo, satisfactory though not outstanding. In these performances, the pianist turns aside from the usual Bösendorfer instrument in favor of a less rich-voiced Bechstein E. It is a very good instrument, though its sound is drier and less sustained than the big, strong Bösendorfer.

These performances lack the clarity and ambience of the ones recorded by Decca, but they compensate with an element of freshness and spontaneity lacking in the studio productions. The earlier works, Nos. 15 and 18 have a spontaneity mighty scarce in the recorded competition. The Waldstein, No. 21, is also very good—a slow though weighty, extremely forceful and powerful account. The splendid account of No. 30, intimate and thoughtful to a fault, has a 17 minute CD to itself, since the 86-minute program is too long for a single disc. Audite does not charge full price, but 24 US dollars is still pretty hefty. The edition is handsomely packaged with copious notes and illustrations. All the pictures show Backhaus not as he looked at age 85, when these recordings were made, but instead about 30 years earlier. The notes are really excellent, and in themselves almost worth the price of the recordings.

Backhaus was obsessed with privacy. Information about his life has been hard to come by. The notes go rather far to ameliorate that difficulty, and are definitely quite valuable to anyone seeking to penetrate the veil of silence the pianist erected.