



L. v. Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 4 & Symphony No. 4

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The Karl Bohm (1894-1981) legacy here embraces two sessions with Ferenc Fricsay's RIAS Symphony Orchestra, the 9 October 1950 live recording of the Beethoven Fourth Concerto with Wilhelm Backhaus (1884-1969) and the 21 and 23 April 1952 studio recording of the B-flat Symphony. A directness of expression marked both interpreters' individual styles, especially as Karl Bohm prided himself on the complete lack of gratuitous gestures and "political" gratuities. Once the essential tempo is set for the first movement, *Allegro moderato*, Bohm and Backhaus move through its Aeolian gestures like a hot knife in wax, carving out huge, sinewy lines and embellished arches. Bohm is careful to bring out the flute's contribution to the interwoven tapestry throughout. At times, the Backhaus sound becomes most Italianate, basking in long songful lines and the separation of voices as antiphonal arias. The close miking of his first movement cadenza has the sound of hitting the individual keys, but the cantabile effect transcends the mechanism. The re-integration of piano, plucked strings, horns and winds at the end of the cadenza immediately swells to an expansive peroration to close a most effluent collaboration.

The second movement *Andante con moto*, long compared to an Orphic invocation to tame the Furies, accomplishes its intensely graduated task with resonant authority, especially in the brief cadenzas wiry trill and harp-like progression to the muted, tremolo strings that end this uncanny music. An air of solemn mystery opens the last movement *Rondo*, especially in the colors elicited from the cellos and violas. The Backhaus touch proves quite magical—he plays his own dynamic cadenza in the last movement—sparkling in its counterpoint and thunderous in its cascading runs. The famed Backhaus consistency of tone provides the watermark for this beautifully contoured performance of the work; and even in the more explosive episodes a serenity of spirit reigns that vaunts its celestial authority.

From those mysterious chords that open the B-flat Symphony—perhaps a forecast of dire events to come—to the unbuckled jollity of the actual *Allegro vivace*, we are held in thrall by a precise master of tonal weights and colors, especially in the cellos and two bassoons. The Jovian romp consumes the entire panoply of the orchestral palette, the flute's leading the way with string basses and tympani doing their best to sing of eternal youth. The repeat only intensifies the unbridled brio of the performance, the surging waves of colossal energy. For a perfect example of the Bohm serene line, the E-flat *Adagio* movement bequeaths us a sterling example, its rondo form articulated in modulated waves of sound. Even so, an air of introspection permeates the lyrical sections, a serenade ethos—close to the Pastoral Symphony—that swells into divine thunder. The two-against-three impulses of the peasant-like *Allegro vivace* contort whatever remains of the Viennese Minuet that gave birth to this form, and Beethoven insists that the trio be played twice to create a five-part structure. Bohm's realization, magisterially *sostenuto*, amplifies the sheer

girth of Beethoven's iconoclastic gestures. The final movement rushes at us, a perpetuum mobile in the manner of Haydn, but more urgent and raucous. Flute and cellos have their say, as do the hearty string and brass sforzati that punctuate this movement; but the comedy plays to the bassoon once more, whose solo throws a brickbat at convention.

