



Christian Ferras plays Beethoven and Berg Violin Concertos

aud 95.590

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[American Record Guide](#) (John P. McKelvey - 01.03.2012)

If you like your Beethoven slow and incomparably well-played you'll find this release a real treat, indeed a thrilling experience, one of the greatest ever engraved on records.

One end of the spectrum of recordings of the Beethoven concerto is anchored in a famous Heifetz/Toscanini performance with the NBC Symphony, made about 1937 in the utterly dead studio 8H in RCA's New York facilities. At about 36 minutes, it must also be the fastest, and though Heifetz was technically perfect, the sound kills it. It was the first recording of the work I ever owned, and in the light of 65 years of listening, has to be the worst.

If Toscanini was the fastest, Karl Böhm at 48 minutes is by far the slowest performer, slower by far than Furtwängler and Menuhin in their fine account (four minutes faster than this one). If it weren't for the level of tension and commitment attained and maintained by everyone involved, it would be a ridiculous flop. Instead, it is flat out the finest account of this difficult work I've ever heard. Ferras, then at the ripe age of 18, plays at a level of intensity as well as flawless execution and intonation I could hardly imagine possible. He was at this time at the zenith of his career, one later disrupted by drug and alcohol addiction, and problems of personality—ending in suicide at age 40. Audite's restoration has brought forth sound of remarkable clarity—perfect in equalization, absolutely free from noise and distortion. It's a remarkable sonic restoration. The Berlin Philharmonic of the time was Furtwängler's group, a highly refined and flexible ensemble. Its performance here is, under his friend Böhm, superb.

There is one problem, however, and it is the fault of the original engineers, who carelessly omitted the initial section where the themes are introduced at the beginning of I. It is to be repeated note by note, though this performance, as recorded, omits the first statement entirely—roughly a bit more than one minute of music. Of course, the missing section could easily have been copied and dubbed in, but the producers feared that an exact repetition would not have captured the nuance and total integrity of the performance as a whole. So they left it out. It does not make all that much difference, and unless you're listening critically, you may not even notice it, but if you're ruthlessly committed to perfection, you'll have to copy it and insert it yourself. I have the equipment to do this easily, but I'm not planning to do it.

I had a faint recollection of another performance, somewhere in my archives, that bore some imperfectly perceived and half-remembered connection to this one. I searched my uncatalogued and haphazardly shelved archives, and after a while

came on a CD recording of the Beethoven concerto on Urania played by (guess who) Ferras and Böhm with the excellent Frankfurt Radio Orchestra, recorded at about the same time as the Audite! Trembling with excitement I fed it to my player and was rewarded to hear another great performance of this music, with both sections of the introduction in place, and perfectly played. The tempos are also slow, though at 46 minutes they are slightly faster than in the Audite recording. The same high level of interpretation and execution is nevertheless achieved. I’m afraid that recording may be difficult to come by, since the Urania label expired several years ago. Still, copies may be around online or from other archival sources. There are other fine performances of the music by Menuhin, Oistrakh, Fritz Kreisler, Szigeti, Milstein, and others too numerous to mention. I must suggest, however, that this recording excels all its competitors.

The same high level of interpretation and execution can be heard in the accompanying recording of Alban Berg’s concerto, with the RIAS orchestra led by Massimo Freccia, though its effect is somewhat less smashing if only because Berg’s concerto, fine as it undoubtedly is, isn’t quite as monumental as Beethoven’s. Nevertheless what is heard is not excelled by any other recorded performance of it that has come my way. A splendid accompaniment is also a substantial asset.

The CD is packaged in an attractive case with extensive notes and commentary, to top off one of the most remarkable musical experiences that has ever come my way. Don’t even think about it, just get it.