



Julius Katchen plays Liszt, Brahms, Beethoven, Schumann and Chopin

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Gramophone (Bryce Morrison - 01.07.2014)

Audite's two-CD set of recordings made for RIAS Berlin in 1962 and 1964 adds several first issues to Julius Katchen's discography (including the Liszt Sonata and Chopin's Berceuse), confirming his status as an elemental virtuoso. And if, as he himself put it, a pianist's greatest challenge lies in the fluent communication of emotion to his audience, then virtually all these performances tell you why he was lionised in Europe in general and Paris in particular, where he made his home for the greater part of his life. Katchen could not only communicate but engulf his audience with a voltage and exuberance that could pin you back by the ears.

True, his lavish style, his fulsomeness and coloration will hardly appeal to a puritan taste. He had little time for musical discretion or propriety. Few pianists have given such free rein to their feelings and imagination, and his Liszt Sonata, even in today's crowded marketplace, is among the most glittering and awe-inspiring on record. Hear him in the flourish at 7'03", a flash of lightning down the keyboard, but hear him also in the slow descending scales at the close of the central Andante or in the valedictory coda, and you will be made aware of a pianist who could change with chameleon rapidity from an all-guns-firing brio to a sense of the sonata's still, elusive centre.

He takes Brahms (always a speciality) by storm, too, and if there are moments (in the E flat minor Scherzo) where his volatility overwhelms the music's content, making for listening more exhausting than exhilarating, Katchen's glowing cantabile, backed by a charismatic theatricality, makes his Chopin a glamorous alternative to a more patrician approach, his rubato heady and alluring. There is delicacy and poetry in Schumann's 'Prophet Bird', making these finely recorded discs a thrilling confirmation of Katchen's stature, of a pianist whose tragic death at the age of 42 robbed the world of a unique personality.