



Annie Fischer plays Schumann: Piano Concerto, Op. 54 - Leon Fleisher plays Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 2

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Two illustrious pianists with star-crossed careers are honored here, and acquit themselves with honor. The eminent Hungarian pianist Annie Fischer made her Swiss debut in Zurich when she was 14, but she was forced to spend the Nazi era in Sweden, as a Jewish artist in exile, and once she returned home in 1946, her touring outside Hungary was limited. This account of the Schumann Piano Concerto from 1960 was her only appearance at the Lucerne Festival; she had played the same work at her Zurich debut three decades previously. (Fischer appeared only once at the Salzburg Festival also, with the Bartók Piano Concerto No. 3 under Solti.) Her playing is so adroit and natural—to the point of sounding effortless—that one easily believes Schumann was one of Fischer's favorite composers. Her well-balanced interpretation flows in perfect accord with Giulini, who included among his talents the skills of a great accompanist. The Philharmonia, honed by Karajan since its founding, plays with a lovely, rounded tone. Perhaps the finale is a bit too relaxed and self-contained to fit Schumann's marking of *Allegro vivace*, but this is a flawless reading in which cultivation and Romanticism are beautifully merged. Fischer is still undervalued outside Hungary, and this live performance is a major addition to her discography.

Leon Fleisher's fate was to lose the use of the last two fingers of his right hand only months after this appearance at the Lucerne Festival in the summer of 1962 (the highly unreliable program notes attribute the onset of paralysis to a condition called "pianist's neurosis"—let's hope something was lost going from German to English). He was one of the brightest lights among post-war American pianists, and even though Fleisher was a pupil of Artur Schnabel's, he approaches the Beethoven Second Piano Concerto with the cool, crystalline touch of Horowitz, who had a profound effect on that entire generation. The passagework is stunning, not just for clarity but also for the nuance Fleisher adds even when moving at top speed. His complete Beethoven concerto cycle with Szell has never left the catalog since the early 1960s, and on this occasion they remain aligned in preferring a fleet, Haydnesque approach, albeit with a fairly robust-sounding orchestra; there is minimal rubato and no slow down for second themes. The atmosphere of a live concert adds an extra touch of exuberance from both conductor and soloist.

Unlike Fischer, Fleisher returned several times to Lucerne, twice to play concertos for the left hand by Ravel and Prokofiev, then twice more, in 2008 and 2012, for solo recitals after he recovered the use of both hands. It's worth noting that on the second half of this 1962 concert Szell led a very fine reading of the Brahms First Symphony, previously released in Audite's admirable series devoted to Swiss Radio broadcasts from the Lucerne Festival. Every installment to date has been warmly received by Fanfare critics.

Despite a few egregious passages, the program notes contain useful information. The recorded sound, which favors the piano considerably, is very good for a mono radio broadcast, affording a rich timbre to the instrument even if the orchestra is a bit thin and edgy, but only a bit. Artistically, the archives have yielded up two must-listen performances.

