Current Review

Clara Haskil plays Mozart: Piano
Concerto K. 466 - Robert Casadesus
plays Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 5

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of the first in what looks like being an important new series from Audite in
association with the Lucerne Festival. Working, as they always do, from original
tapes from broadcast archives, Audite plan a series of issues of concert
performances from the festival, many of which, I suspect, will be appearing on disc
officially for the first time. This series is launched auspiciously with two concerto
performances by leading pianists of the last century.

In the booklet we learn that in a letter written in October 1959 Clara Haskil described
her Lucerne collaboration with Klemperer as “unforgettable”. I’m not surprised for this
disc preserves a very fine performance. After a strong, sinewy introduction by
Klemperer and the Philharmonia Haskil’s first entry exudes graceful calm. Thereafter
we are treated to much stylish, wonderfully subtle and tasteful playing. The pianism
is carefully calibrated yet always a sense of spontaneity is evident. The balance of
the recording favours the piano yet one can still hear that Haskil receives
distinguished support from Klemperer and his orchestra: this is a real partnership.
There’s often great delicacy from Haskil yet the music making has strength when
required. Haskil uses her own cadenza, which is effective.

Poise and elegance are the hallmarks of the Romance and these characteristics are
maintained even in the more strongly etched central section. After that central
passage the music dissolves back into the movement’s main material in a completely
disarming way. There’s energy and drive at the start of the rondo finale and
thereafter the music is presented nimbly and with good humour. This is a marvellous
performance of the concerto; a performance to savour and treasure.

We learn from the notes that Casadesus made five commercial recordings of the
‘Emperor’ Concerto. Reviews of one of these – with Hans Rosbaud – and of two
off-air recordings are listed in our Masterworks index He was no stranger to playing
the concerto with Dmitri Mitropoulos: they’d made a commercial recording of the
work together in New York in 1955 and in his biography of Mitropoulos, Priest of
Music, William R. Trotter mentions that they gave the concerto together in concert in
January 1950. This Lucerne concert apparently was the debut of the Vienna
Philharmonic at the city’s Festival; it was also the sole appearance there by Dmitri
Mitropoulos.

After the nobly rhetorical opening flourishes there’s excellent spirit and energy in the
long orchestral introduction. Casadesus offers a good deal of heroic and
commanding playing yet he’s equally capable of sensitivity. With Mitropoulos clearly
on the same wavelength as his soloist this is a gripping account of the huge first
movement. There’s Olympian calm in the slow movement where Casadesus is
aristocratic. The finale is launched with surging athleticism – and a few tiny slips by
the pianist, though these are inconsequential blemishes. The performance radiates great confidence and no little electricity. There are several occasions where the music is slowed fractionally to make expressive points but impetus is soon regained. Though this fine performance of the ‘Emperor’ is a very different experience to the one offered by Clara Haskil in Mozart each performance is completely compelling in its own right.

Applause follows both performances – it’s separately tracked after the Mozart. Audite have done an excellent job in making the transfers from the original broadcast tapes. There’s a well-produced booklet containing several photographs but the English translation of the extensive essay in German isn’t entirely free of errors.

These are two very fine performances indeed. If this new Lucerne/Audite series proceeds in similar fashion it will be most attractive to collectors.