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

aud 95.643

EAN: 4022143956439

4 0 2 2 1 4 3 9 5 6 4 3 9

International Piano (Benjamin Ivry - 2016.05.01)

[redacted]hing matter

‘Playing’ the piano never seems quite the right way of describing Annie Fischer at the keyboard. Sober, serious and uncompromising are the heroic qualities that she brought to her performances. Benjamin Ivry explores the life and career of an artist who looked tragedy unflinchingly in the eye, bringing a steely intensity to her music-making.

In a typically thrilling concert performance from late in her career, a septuagenarian Annie Fischer played Beethoven’s Third Piano Concerto with the NHK Symphony conducted by Miltiades Caridis. In the 1989 video, the granitic Hungarian grandma laid down the law with uncompromising grandeur. One thinks of Irene Worth, the American actress long resident in the UK, whose tough-as-nails, omniscient Grandma Kurnitz in Neil Simon’s film Lost in Yonkers moved audiences.

Beyond such matriarchal flamboyance and energy, Fischer’s performances were noted for their intense idiomatic understanding and devil-may-care absolutism, despite wrong notes. Her inspiration derived from the era of Artur Schnabel, during which the musical message was primordial, not the note-for-note perfection expected from studio recordings. There was something sublime in the sheer limpidity of her best solo work, as in a Brahms Sonata in F minor (on BBC Legends 4054-2), recorded at Edinburgh’s Usher Hall in 1961. Yet in Fischer’s renditions, especially from her later years, there can be a noteworthy absence of merriment or festivity in some of the more playful or witty passages, for example in Beethoven and Mozart. This unrelentingly tragic approach sometimes fails to express an inherent element in the music. Fischer laboured heroically at the keyboard; she did not ‘play’ the piano. Any mere ludic aspiration might be too trivial for an artist of such high seriousness.

On the other hand, she often conveys a take-no-prisoners attitude, as in a Schumann Kreisleriana from 1986 (BBC Legends 4141). Conquering this score seems akin to scaling an Alpine peak unaided. Sombre and sober, she boldly plumbed emotional depths of the most demanding Classical and Romantic scores. Her Mozart concertos, especially in the 1980s, could have tragic weight bordering on ponderousness. Yet this is vastly preferable to the superficial, fleetfingered gloss with which these works are sometimes dispatched.

After hearing her dense 1968 studio recording of Schubert’s Sonata in B-flat D960 (reissued on Hungaroton 41011) one might wish to call for ‘More light!’ (as Johann

Wolfgang von Goethe reportedly did on the occasion of his last gasp). Even the gossamer and celebratory final two movements of Schubert's D960, marked Scherzo allegro vivace con delicatezza and Allegro, ma non troppo, express disquiet and adamant feelings in Fischer's weighty hands. This is even more evident in a somewhat lumbering traversal, marred by technical hiccups, of Schubert's Sonata No 20 D959 from a 1984 Montreal recital (on Palexa CD-0514). Still, the overall integrity and cohesiveness of Fischer's performances renders such quibbles relatively meaningless.

No such qualms impede our appreciation of her best recordings, such as a handful of versions of Beethoven Third Concerto. On one of these from 1957, with the Bavarian State Orchestra led by Ferenc Fricsay (available on Pristine Audio PASC400), the vivacity of soloist and accompanying orchestra are ideally matched, driving the performance along with vigorous momentum. In a live Mozart Piano Concerto No 22 K482 from 1956 with Otto Klemperer (Palexa 515), or No 23 K488 with the Philharmonia and Adrian Boult (Documents 299267), courtly accompanists fluent in the Mozartian idiom proved apt interlocutors.

Among many intriguing recordings of one of her warhorses – Schumann's Piano Concerto in A minor – a high place must be granted to a live performance from Lucerne with the Philharmonia and Carlo Maria Giulini (on Audite 95643). Then there is a pellucid studio Bartók Third Concerto from 1955 with Igor Markevitch (Warner Classics 68733); atypically effervescent Mozart concertos from the 1950s with the Concertgebouw Orchestra and Otto Klemperer (Archiphon ARC-WU099-100); and a fizzy Beethoven Third Concerto from 1956, again with the Concertgebouw and Klemperer (Archiphon ARC-WU092-93). The impression of an endless treasure trove of artistically rewarding recordings is accurate: Annie Fischer's discography really is that rich.

Fischer's solo work is equally lively, in such mainstays as Beethoven's Pathétique Sonata (an ideal 1958 studio version reissued on Warner Classics 634123). The scale and architectural scope of her conception of Beethoven sonatas makes even her later complete set, with its highs and lows (Hungaroton 41003) worthy of sustained attention. A 1960s video, about which less-than-precise information exists, features Fischer playing the Pathétique in Budapest's Great Hall of the Franz Liszt Academy of Music. At times her tempi are so fast as to suggest she feared being hustled off the stage for not finishing promptly. A less enchanting experience are two-ton, sometimes lurching 1970s studio renditions of late Beethoven that sound ungainly. In their own way, even these flawed performances by Fischer are as daringly individual as Schnabel's, though ultimately less convincing – at least to some listeners.

Fischer needed no Polonius to know how to be true to herself. It seems apt that she died while listening to a radio broadcast of Bach's St John Passion. A large-scale, emotive reading of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No 5 with Otto Klemperer from 1950 (Guild GHCD 2360) is further evidence of her devotion to this composer, and collegial rapport with this tricky conductor.

Where did this acute artistry develop? Fischer studied at Budapest's Franz Liszt Academy with the pianist and composer Ernő Dohnányi (1877–1960) and the pedagogue Arnold Székely (1874-1958). The latter also taught Andor Földes, Louis Kentner, Lívia Rév, and Georg Solti. In 1933, still in her teens, Fischer won the first Franz Liszt International Piano Competition, a contest in which Louis (born Lajos) Kentner was placed third and Andor Földes eighth. Relatively early in her career, she was performing and learning from such celebrated maestros as Ernest Ansermet,

Adrian Boult, Fritz Busch and Willem Mengelberg. Starting in the 1950s, she made studio recordings with some excellent conductors, including Fricsay and Markevitch, but some of Fischer's finest surviving performances with orchestra have yet to be transferred to CD. An online discography by Yuan Huang* includes enticing items such as a Bartók Third Concerto from 1955 led by the eminent Hungarian conductor László Somogyi. There also survives a 1963 Beethoven Emperor Concerto from Russia, led by the Latvian maestro Arvīds Jansons (father of Mariss Jansons); a 1970 Brahms Second Concerto with Christoph von Dohnányi; and a 1972 Beethoven Fourth Concerto conducted by Ernest Bour. If and when these performances become more widely available, a fuller impression of the range and scope of Fischer's artistic achievement will become possible.

For now, the inner mysteries of Fischer's profound artistry may be revealed in part by a surviving 1992 rehearsal fi lm of Mozart's Concerto No 22 K482. Fischer wears a headscarf and, during the orchestral tuttis, puff s on a cigarette stashed in an ashtray inside the piano. The conductor Tamás Vásáry, himself a noted pianist, looks at her with justified veneration; indeed he saw her as a mentor, as did another veteran Hungarian keyboard master of today, Peter Frankl. When Fischer's fingers are otherwise unengaged, she conducts with her left hand for a few instants, then remembers the smouldering cigarette conveniently stashed inside the piano. She reaches for it with her right hand and takes a drag, savouring what are clearly twin necessities in life: Mozart and nicotine. Then she conducts along a little with her right hand, using the cigarette as a tiny baton, inhaling repeatedly before replacing the ciggie in its ashtray just before the next keyboard passage.

The Romanian-French aphorist Emil Cioran, himself an ex-tobacco aficionado, once proclaimed that during his smoking days, he 'could not even appreciate a landscape without a cigarette in his hand'. Likewise, Fischer was an artist whose life and work were intertwined with smoking. That said, to apply the joshing sobriquet 'Ashtray Annie' to Fischer, as London's orchestral musicians reputedly did during her lifetime, trivialises the passion she invested in all her activities, whether for music or self-administering jolts of nicotine.

Tobacco deprivation in concert halls may possibly have resulted in the peremptory, nervy attack that mars some of Fischer's live performances, especially of Beethoven. Life struggles also doubtless affected her world view. During the Second World War, Fischer fled her homeland to Sweden with her husband, the musicologist Aladár Tóth (1898-1968). She was born Jewish, and 70 percent of Hungary's Jews (an estimated 450,000 of them) were murdered by the Nazis. Despite this carnage, Fischer returned to Budapest after the war, and stayed through successive Communist dictatorships. This wartime exile and impoverished life in the postwar Soviet bloc may explain a certain bleak outlook compatible with a tragic view of art and life.

With fanfare on her centenary in 2014, the Hungarian government issued a postal stamp in Fischer's honour. This may seem ironic to some observers, given the re-emergence in Hungary of far-right politicians and their hateful antisemitic rhetoric. To the piano world, Hungary is now the place where Budapest-born András Schiff dares not return for a visit because if he does so, his compatriots have threatened to 'cut off both of [his] hands,' as Schiff told the BBC. Official state celebrations of Annie Fischer in Hungary have not mentioned her Judaism.

Genuine honour to Fischer comes from the world's piano lovers. During her lifetime she received justified praise from critics such as Andrew Keener, who in the July 1983 Musical Times commended Fischer's London recital for 'musicmaking that radiated humanity, humour and an abundant sense of enjoyment. Rarely can

momentary aberrations have mattered so little and never once was there any suspicion that faulty technique was responsible. Over and again, notably in the second and fourth movements of Beethoven's Sonata Op 101, exuberantly characterised, Annie Fischer would follow a momentary sketchiness with something technically remarkable by any standards'. Keener's inclusion of humour as a feature of her playing may indicate that on occasion the aforementioned caveat about uniform seriousness may be overstated.

Even Charles Rosen, the American pianist who could be hypercritical about colleagues, wrote aff ectionately in his Piano Notes: the World of the Pianist (2002) about sitting on the jury of the 1966 Leeds Competition with Fischer (other jurors included Gina Bachauer, Maria Curcio, Rudolf Firkušný, Nikita Magaloff and Lev Oborin). Rosen lauded Fischer as a 'pianist for whom I (like almost everybody else) had the utmost admiration, who gave a good mark to the pianist I thought should get another chance; she was rather taken with a good-looking Korean contestant, so I voted for her candidate and she voted for mine. In the next round, I was sitting next to her while the Korean was playing, and she turned to me and said softly: "He isn't very good, is he?" – "No," I replied, trying to invest my reply with the proper melancholy.'

Just as some operatic divas and divos show their mettle best in live recordings, so Fischer seemed to exult in the drama and electricity of a performance in the presence of an audience, rather than an antiseptic, Apollonian recording studio. Even today, responding to the energetic physicality of her playing, some critics who are unaware of the evolution of gender politics refer to Fischer's 'masculine' style. What they simply mean is that she was one of the mightiest pianists of her century.

IN RETROSPECT

NO LAUGHING MATTER

'Playing' the piano never seems quite the right way of describing Annie Fischer at the keyboard. Sober, serious and uncompromising are the heroic qualities that she brought to her performances. *Benjamin Ivry* explores the life and career of an artist who looked tragedy unflinchingly in the eye, bringing a steely intensity to her music-making ›

IN RETROSPECT

IN RETROSPECT

The impression of an endless treasure trove of artistically rewarding recordings is accurate: Annie Fischer's discography really is that rich

IN RETROSPECT