



Edition Friedrich Gulda – The early RIAS recordings

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GRAMOPHONE

Gulda and Richter

A Beethoven performance that convinces in its 'rightness'

There are some recorded performances that spell "rightness" with such unflinching certainty that for the duration you're hoodwinked into believing that the music couldn't possibly be performed any other way. Such is the 1950 Berlin RIAS recording of Beethoven's A major Sonata, Op 101, played by Friedrich Gulda, which aside from the first movement's perfect pacing and the measured drama of the Vivace alla marcia includes a finale where the sense of inexorable momentum is intoxicating. Audite's four-CD set of early Gulda recordings for RIAS excavates many wonderful performances and, because most of the repertoire was also commercially recorded by Gulda, allows for some instructive comparisons. Not that I have so far been able to trace a commercial Gulda recording of Chopin's Preludes, Op 28, an extraordinary rendition where Beethovenian gravitas and nimble fingerwork alternate with sustained intensity in slow music, ie the F sharp major Prelude, which reminded me of Michelangeli at his best. The Nocturne, Op 48 No 1, is played with an imposing depth of tone, the stormy middle section disruptive but never rushed, whereas the Barcarolle is positively hedonistic in its forthright projection and lavish colours.

By contrast Gulda's bright and crisply articulated account of Mozart's great C minor Concerto, K491 (with Hummel's cadenzas) looks forward to a later age, much abetted by Igor Markevitch's clear-headed conducting. Gulda also offers a dark and at times relentless account of Prokofiev's Seventh Sonata while an all-French programme includes performances of Debussy's Pour le piano and Suite bergamasque, together with shorter pieces, that combine murmuring passagework with vital delivery of the more rhythmic numbers, qualities that also enhance the effect of Ravel's Gaspard de la nuit. And there are the other Beethoven works, the sonatas Opp 14 No 2 (especially engaging) and 109, and the Variations, Op 35 (Eroica) and in C minor. I read from the comprehensive notes that Austrian Radio holds a complete Beethoven sonata cycle from 1953, which would I'm sure be gratefully received by piano aficionados. No need to ask for Sviatoslav Richter recordings: the market is positively flooded with them. And yet one new release from West Hill Radio Archives offers a "fabled" concert (their claim) given at the Budapest Academy of Music in February 1958.

Pictures at an Exhibition is fairly similar to the uncompromisingly direct account put out by Philips (same period) but the real find is Schubert's late C minor Sonata, D958, which is both impetuous and at times delicate. The finale has something of the Erlking's ferocity about it and there are shorter pieces by Rachmaninov and

Debussy. The sound is dry but clear.

