

One of the twentieth century's most important pianists, Wilhelm Kempff found warmth in Beethoven where many others discovered only stress and passion. Concentrating on the composers of the late Classical and early-to-middle Romantic periods, Kempff achieved graceful, amiable results while not neglecting the sterner core of this music. His nobility of purpose was everywhere evident, made manifest through lucid textures, an adherence to a flowing legato, and tonal shading. In addition, he was a composer whose oeuvre included two symphonies, four operas, songs, and solo piano works.

Trained first by his Lutheran church musician father, Kempff studied privately before entering Berlin's Hochschule für Musik at age 9. In 1914, he traveled to Potsdam for further studies at the Viktoriagymnasium before returning to Berlin to finish his work at the Hochschule and enroll at the university. At age 20, Kempff served as organist and pianist on a tour of Germany and Scandinavia by the Berlin Cathedral Choir. A successful 1917 piano recital at the Berlin Singakademie led to an engagement the following year with the Berlin Philharmonic, the first of innumerable collaborations with that august ensemble. During the 1920s and 1930s, he toured South America and Japan, as well as many parts of Europe, adding to his reputation for uncompromising musicianship and personable interpretation. At the same time, he taught, serving first as director at the Stuttgart Musikhochschule from 1924 to 1929 and, later, as piano instructor at Potsdam's Mamorpalais for the decade before WWII. The war kept his activities confined to Germany, but with its end, Kempff once more resumed a busy performance schedule.

England and America heard Kempff only later. In London, the public, including a large number of German émigrés, applauded him upon his first appearance there in 1951. Not until 1964 did New York hear the pianist in person, although by then his many Deutsche Grammophon recordings had already established his stature for Americans. Indeed, Kempff's long and fruitful relationship with that label had brought to the market a long list of desirable recordings, among them the complete Beethoven piano concerti; the sonatas; a relaxed, but rewarding survey with Wolfgang Schneiderhan of the Beethoven violin sonatas; and various collections of Schubert, Schumann, Chopin, and Brahms.

Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 1

Wilhelm Kempff

Ferdinand Leitner - Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra



Confusingly, Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 1 (1795-1800) actually follows the Concerto No. 2 in order of composition. The confusion is explained by the fact that the composer withheld what is now known as the Second Concerto from publication in order to make substantial revisions (including an all-new rondo), in the meantime proceeding to complete and publish the present work. There are distinct Mozartean moments in the First Concerto, particularly in the quiet, strings-only introduction to the opening *Allegro con brio*. With the entrance of the orchestra (complete with brass and timpani), however, the music takes on a more martial character and a distinctive vigor peculiar to Beethoven's style. The second subject, played by violins and woodwinds over a restless bass accompaniment, unfolds in longer, more lyrical phrases. When the piano finally enters, it's with material that can be heard as a variant of either of the themes already presented; a recurring rhythmic figure, though, clearly links it to the music that opens the work. Throughout the remainder of the movement, Beethoven employs light, rapid passagework no doubt intended to display the composer's own virtuosity. Further opportunity for pianistic display arises at the cadenza, which is followed by a brief coda. The

Largo second movement begins with a vocally expressive, lyrical melody, an almost prayerful moment that forecasts the profound slow movements of Beethoven's final period. The orchestra answers with a more forthright theme, then eases into a variant of the piano's melody. The soloist returns with further comments in this vein, highly ornamented and subtly supported and commented upon by the strings and woodwinds. After a poignant episode in which the keyboard adopts for the first time a thin, unassuming texture, the piano reintroduces the opening theme, soon joined by the orchestra. The movement closes in a hushed atmosphere. The *Allegro scherzando rondo* is typical of much of Beethoven's music of the period: full of high spirits, rhythmic syncopations, and irregular phrasings. The piano presents a comically sputtering theme, soon echoed by the full ensemble. Several of the succeeding episodes have a quirky urgency and comic almost melodrama of the sort that inspired silent film scores more than a century later. The work draws to a conclusion in a spirit of both boldness and mischief.

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- 1. Allegro Con Brio 14:25**
- 2. Largo 11:59**
- 3. Rondo - Allegro Scherzando Cadenza – Wilhelm Kempff 9:20**

Recorded by DGG 1962

Engineer – Werner Wolf Recording Supervisor – Otto Gerdes



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