

the age of 12. After 1920, Serkin was associated with noted violinist Adolf Busch, both as a duo-sonata partner, and with the Busch Chamber Orchestra (and, from 1935, as Busch's son-in-law). An American debut in 1936 with the New York Philharmonic under Toscanini led to Serkin's decision to relocate to the U.S. in 1939. Invited to join the piano faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music, he quickly rose to become head of the piano department, and, from 1968, president of the Institute. He devoted his summers to cultivating several generations of young musicians at the Marlboro Festival in Vermont.

Many observers have remarked that Serkin was not a natural pianist. Indeed, he seemed rather to play by force of will alone, and the strength of his musicianship lies more in the deep insight that he brought to the music of the composers he holds dearest -- traditional Austrian and German masters -- than in virtuosic pianism. In the sonatas of Beethoven, Serkin finds particular inspiration. His Beethoven interpretations do not necessarily please the listener in terms of superficial "beauty," but rather convey the unique mixture of logic, violence, and spiritual transcendence that he feels is the essence of Beethoven's work. In the Brahms concerti, Serkin's vision is nothing short of titanic. On off-nights, however, Serkin's lofty, cerebral brand of pianism sometimes failed him, and the austere, "square" approach to phrasing that makes his playing so immediately recognizable sometimes sounded unnecessarily harsh.

Rudolf Serkin's discography is impressive, spanning most of the general repertory from Bach to the early/mid-twentieth century, and including such relative novelties as the F minor Concerto of Max Reger, a composer Serkin had an abiding affinity for. His work at the Curtis Institute, and, during the summers, at the Marlboro Festival, has made him one of the most influential American teachers of the post-World War II era. Serkin's son Peter is also a pianist of considerable renown.

Beethoven

Piano Concerto No. 4

Rudolf Serkin, piano

The Philadelphia Orchestra - Eugene Ormandy



Beethoven's famously copious notebooks confirm that he only composed after an indeterminate period of inspiration, followed by a period of experimentation, followed by a period of gestation: in other words, an evolutionary process. While we know in most cases when works were premiered and published, we don't know when exactly he conceived them, or what chain of change preceded their first public performance. We remain in the dark, for example, on what days of which months -- or for that matter in what year -- he concentrated on the Fourth Piano Concerto to the exclusion of all else.

Not that we need to know. It suffices to recognize its revolutionary (as well as evolutionary) nature, beginning with the very first chord. No concerto before, by Beethoven or anyone else, began as the G major does, with the solo instrument playing unaccompanied -- not only that but playing both dolce and softly! The miracle, however, is that Beethoven introduces the main theme and rhythm of the entire first movement within five sweet, soft, solo measures ending on a D major (dominant) chord, which the orchestra answers in B major before modulating to the tonic G. There is none of Beethoven's characteristic vehemence, not even at a crescendo to forte with sforzando punctuation in measures 20-22, although he composed the Fourth Concerto and Appassionata Sonata concurrently, all the while the Fifth Symphony was incubating in his other-consciousness.

Fascinatingly, principal themes in the opening movements of the Fourth Concerto and Fifth Symphony share a rhythmic motto: three short notes of equal value followed by a longer fourth note. (In the concerto, all of these are the same note; in the symphony, the last one is a third lower.) Noteworthy, too, was the premiere of both works on the same Vienna program -- that storied four-hour marathon of December 22, 1808, in the

unheated Theater an der Wien, which also introduced the Pastoral Symphony and "Chorale" Fantasia with an orchestra that refused to rehearse with the composer present. Apropos of the G major Concerto: while a traditional double-exposition follows its trailblazing start, Beethoven's instrumental textures, tonal weight, subtleties of harmony, and especially the illusion he creates of improvisation were seven-league strides.

The slow movement is even more revolutionary, despite the brevity of only 72 measures and its indebtedness to the middle, Romanza movement of Mozart's D minor Concerto (K. 466), which Beethoven played publicly with outstanding success. However, in his own concerto, the juxtaposition of implacable strings playing both forte and staccato, and the piano's conciliatory legato response with the "soft" pedal down throughout, was unprecedented. Such palpable confrontation was not the norm in concertos. Neither was the orchestra's eventual capitulation, followed without pause by a rondo-finale marked vivace, whose presto coda is as scintillant as any music Beethoven ever wrote.

Even so, solo pianists and their audiences were slower to take up the Fourth than Beethoven's other concertos. But Mendelssohn -- a general who savored caviar -- loved it best, and played it at his last London concert, in 1846: a program that also featured his own music for A Midsummer Night's Dream and the Scottish Symphony.

Rudolf Serkin emerged from the environment of post-World War I Austria to become one of the most profound and challenging pianists of the century. Childhood studies in Vienna with Richard Robert (piano), and Joseph Marx and Arnold Schoenberg for composition, led to a 1915 debut performance with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra at



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I - Allegro Moderato 18:54

II - Andante Com Moto 5:33

III - Rondo - Vivace 9:33

Recording Info: Recorded by Columbia 1965
Producer - Thomas Frost



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