

A child prodigy of startling promise, Julius Katchen matured into a solo and chamber music pianist of broad interests and probing artistry. His death from cancer at age 42 denied a discerning public the presence of a pianist especially well-equipped to penetrate to the center-most meanings of those works he favored.

Born to a musical family, Katchen was instructed in the musical arts from his earliest years. His grandmother, formerly a faculty member at the Warsaw Conservatory, was his first piano instructor, while his grandfather taught him theory (his mother, a pianist, had trained at the Fontainebleau School of Music and had made concert appearances in both Europe and America). In 1937, Katchen presented himself to Eugene Ormandy and requested that he be permitted to play for him. Ormandy was sufficiently impressed to engage the lad for an appearance with the Philadelphia Orchestra. The October 21, 1937, concert found Katchen performing Mozart's Concerto in D minor to high praise. Following this glowing reception, the 11-year-old pianist was invited to perform at a pension fund concert with the New York Philharmonic the following month. Critic Lawrence Gilman was moved to recall the debut of Josef Hofmann as a prodigy a half century before. "His fingers are fleet, his conceptions clear and intelligent," wrote Gilman of Katchen. "He has a musicianly feeling for the contour and flow and rhythm of a phrase and a sense of what is meant by Mozartean style." A New York recital a year later brought even more enthusiastic praise for the youth's musical understanding.

Before his career advanced, however, Katchen's parents chose to place a hold on further public appearances and enroll him instead at Haverford College, where he majored in philosophy and English literature. His break, Katchen often insisted, developed in him the intellectual curiosity that fed his interest in the more mentally challenging works in the repertory.

A fellowship extended by the French government permitted Katchen to travel to Paris in 1946; that cosmopolitan city became his home for the remainder of his life and he lost no time in making himself a formidable presence there and in the rest of Europe, respected for his commanding interpretive thoughtfulness and virtuoso technique. He undertook several highly successful tours of the Continent, winning acclaim in each center he visited. Decca Records signed him to an exclusive contract and he began recording a bracing cross-section of the repertory with Brahms always at the core. He presented concert performances of Brahms' complete solo piano works in New York, London, Amsterdam, Vienna, and Berlin and was heard with major orchestras in the two piano concertos. In addition to solo appearances, Katchen often took part in chamber music performances, again concentrating on Brahms, but certainly not neglecting other aspects of an extensive personal repertory. Ned Rorem and Benjamin Britten were just two contemporary composers to benefit from Katchen's advocacy. To say, as some have, that Katchen never achieved the success in America that was his in Europe fails to account for the far greater portion of his mature years that were spent on the Continent where other cultural stimulations prompted his most involved and productive work. Katchen was also acutely aware of the need to extend the exposure of classical music well beyond its existing ranks -- on December 11, 1968, he was one of a large group of musicians, all but one of them from the rock and blues fields, to perform as part of the Rolling Stones' Rock & Roll Circus, and a segment that was introduced by Brian Jones, no less; alas, due to production and post-production problems, no one got to see any part of Katchen's performance until over three decades later; the pianist himself, terminally ill with cancer, didn't live another six months after this extraordinary event. His tragic death was keenly felt on both sides of the Atlantic.

Brahms

Piano Concerto No.1 In D Minor, Opus 15

Julius Katchen, piano

Pierre Monteux London Symphony Orchestra



Johannes Brahms was 20 years old when, in 1853, he first made the acquaintance of Robert Schumann through a letter of recommendation provided by the famous violinist Joseph Joachim. It was Schumann's unabashed praise of the music that Brahms showed him that, more than anything else, provided the young composer with the courage necessary to begin work on a full-scale symphony the next year. That courage, however, fell short in the end -- Brahms felt himself too inexperienced and was too haunted by the "footsteps of a giant" (Beethoven) to begin fruitful symphonic work -- and Brahms reorganized the material he had written as a sonata for two pianos. By 1858, this sonata for two pianos had itself been reborn as the Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15.

The Piano Concerto No. 1 as we know it today is a complete reworking of the ideas and themes of the original duo-sonata source; much of it is completely new music. The premiere of the piece in January 1859 was not the failure that it is sometimes portrayed to have been, but the cold response at a follow-up performance in Leipzig left a bitter taste in Brahms' mouth that he never forgot -- Leipzig remained an enemy for the rest of his life.

The concerto is in three movements: Maestoso, Adagio, and Allegro non troppo. The orchestral exposition to the giant Maestoso is

mighty, epic, and tragic in no small portion; much later, a radiant, chorale-like second idea is offered by the soloist, who Brahms provides with the kind of rich, deep sonorities so characteristic of his piano writing. At the recapitulation, which is ushered in by a massive climax in which the pianist is forced to use all his/her strength to compete with the massive orchestral bursts, the pianist boldly takes over the mighty utterances that began the movement.

Brahms wrote the words "Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini" at the head of the slow movement, but whether the words are an homage to Robert Schumann (whom Brahms sometimes called Domini), a portrait of Clara Schumann (the most popular interpretation, and one seemingly supported by a letter from Brahms to Clara), or some other reference is unknown.

The rondo-theme of the finale is introduced by the piano alone, and, later on, the soloist gets his/her one and only chance to impress the audience with a cadenza -- though it is dramatic necessity, not garish virtuosity, that demands the cadenza in the first place.

Brahms

Piano Concerto No.1 In D Minor, Opus 15

Julius Katchen, piano

Pierre Monteux London Symphony Orchestra

1. Maestoso - Poco più moderato 21:13
 2. Adagio 14:05
 3. Rondo (Allegro non troppo) 11:53
- Total Time: 47:11

Recorded by Decca, 24-25 Mar 1959 at Walthamstow Assembly Hall

Producer: Michael Williamson Engineer: Kenneth Wilkinson

Transferred from a 15ips 2-track tape



For more info e-mail us:
admin@highdeftapetransfers.com
or visit our website:
www.highdeftapetransfers.com