HIGH FIDELITY
OCTOBER, 1957

The Five Beethoven Concertos by Rubinstein and Krips

THE THIRD complete edition of the five canonical Beethoven piano concertos (the other complete albums being those of Schnabel and Kempff) is the first to depart from the interpretative tradition of Central European pianists. The pervading outlook here is romanticism in the grand manner as found in the vintage playing of Artur Rubinstein, who characteristically scoffed at the approach of septuagenarian status by recording all of the five in the space of ten days last December.

Beethoven's interest in the solo instrument with orchestral accompaniment grew out of his public appearances as a virtuoso playing his own music. The fifteen-year span between the earliest of these concertos and the *Emperor* of 1809 takes us from the composer of twenty-three, freshly transplanted from Bonn to Vienna, to the matured genius of thirty-eight with *Fidelio*, the *Rasumovsky* quartets, and six symphonies set like mileposts behind him. Yet he explored the concerto form before writing the earliest of the works he later consented to publish — the B flat concerto we know as No. 2. A concerto from 1784, reconstructed from a set of instrumental parts, has even been issued in three recordings.

It was 1935 before the canonical five were available as seen by one pianist. Etched in wax in what Schnabel called "the torture chamber" of Abbey Road, they remain in RCA Victor LCT 6700, a unique document of the most distinguished Beethoven specialist of the century. In the following decade and a half he made a number of attempts to rerecord these works, but increasing difficulties with technical problems, plus the hazards of engineering and uncongenial accompaniments, never produced results that could overshadow these performances with London orchestras under Malcolm Sargent.

Before the war Schnabel's closest rival on discs was Walter Gieseking, whose performances of Nos. 1, 4, and 5 on Columbia 78s were replaced after 1948 with new longplay versions for the same company. Recent years have brought other editions in longplay format — Wilhelm Kempff for Decca with Paul van Kempen and the Berlin Philharmonic, Rudolf Serkin with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphians for Columbia (available only on single discs), and Friedrich Wührer with Walther Davisson and the Pro Musica Orchestra of Stuttgart in Nos. 1-3, 5 for Vox and No. 4 for Remington. Wilhelm Backhaus and Paul Badura-Skoda each offer nearly complete editions, lacking Nos. 1 and 3 respectively.

Rubinstein has recorded two of these three works before: the third in an unflattering transcription of a Toscanini broadcast; the fourth with Sir Thomas Beecham and his RPO, a prematurely extinguished glow in the final days of 78-rpm recording. For many these new discs, especially those of Nos. 1 and 2, will therefore present a familiar artist in a hitherto unfamiliar role.

Sonically these are the best recordings to be had. The monaural discs are exciting enough, the forthcoming tapes ought to be even more so. (Simply playing the monaural recording through my stereo speaker system produced thrilling realism.) A product of the Manhattan Center, here billed as RCA Victor's New York studios, there is a richness in the low frequency registration, a sense of fullness unmarred by booming resonances, that combines with bright and agreeably balanced highs to produce intoxicating sound with clean detail. Certainly the engineers were in top form.

Hardly less can be said for the artists. This is the finest Beethoven I have heard from Rubinstein. That many respond to his interpretation of the composer is well documented by the box-office and record sales, and this time public acceptance ought to be stronger than ever before. There is no doubt that these are highly effective performances, well conceived in terms of the tonal architecture of the scores, sensitive and musicianly in their realization. I have played my copy of the set several times and matched it with other versions of these works; consistently it has held up under such comparison.

Naturally those who find in Schnabel, or Serkin, or Kempff the fulfillment of their idea of Beethoven may dissent from Rubinstein's statements of these scores. Admittedly they are different from those of a German pianist, but the difference does not, I find, carry with it any falsification. Those who know Schnabel's slow tempo for the Largo of No. 3 — called by Tovey "the most highly developed slow movement in all Beethoven's concertos" — will find the faster pace and romantic bloom of Rubinstein's version less effective, but the beauty and content of the music are truthfully conveyed; Beethoven has not been emasculated and perfumed. In the final movement Rubinstein's tempo is slower than Schnabel's and his results, if anything, more pleasurable.

Rubinstein has a greater sense of metrical freedom than pianists of German training, and he does not shape his phrases or shorter groups of notes into the firm plastic units they mold. His emphasis is on movement and freedom for expressive variation, theirs on solidity and force of utterance. This is best seen in the Concerto No. 2, where Rubinstein's playing in the slow movement contains phrases more likely to recall Chopin than the youthful Beethoven influenced by Mozart. Here Schnabel's simple classicism may be preferable, but in the rondo finale Rubinstein's bubbling animation is surely persuasive.

This is about the way it goes. There are few things in these discs to which I emphatically deny assent — one of them is Krips's interpolation of a ritardando into the first twenty-three bars of No. 3 — some I prefer done in other ways, many I forthrightly enjoy. Nos. 4 and 5 are likely to be the most successful as single records and probably must be regarded as the most satisfying over-all performances of the five. The slow movement of the fourth subdues its furies with the most sublime piano tone, the fifth surges with energy and the rich coloring of a true bravura style.

It was Schnabel's own dictum that these works are "so total and universal" that no one statement, however fine, can exhaust them. Rubinstein's edition, therefore, cannot be other than welcome. The product of collaboration with an able conductor and a splendid orchestra, it is the noble effort of a realist's mind and a romanticist's heart.

ROBERT CHARLES MARSH

BEETHOVEN: *Concertos for Piano and Orchestra: No. 1, in C, Op. 15; No. 2, in B flat, Op. 19; No. 3, in C minor, Op. 37; No. 4, in G, Op. 58; No. 5, in E flat, Op. 73 ("Emperor")*

Artur Rubinstein, piano; Symphony of the Air, Josef Krips, cond.
RCA VICTOR LM 6702. Five 12-in. $15.95 (or $3.98 each).