



Ludwig Van Beethoven

The Piano Concertos

Maurizio Pollini
Berliner Philharmoniker
Claudio Abbado

3-cd box
Deutsche Grammophon 439770-2

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra no. 1 in C major op. 15

- I. Allegro con brio [17:16]
- II. Largo [11:13]
- III. Rondeau. Allegro [scherzando] [9:05]

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra no. 2 in B flat major op. 19

- I. Allegro con brio [13:33]
- II. Adagio [8:41]
- III. Rondeau. Molto allegro [6:31]

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra no. 3 in C minor op. 37

- I. Allegro con brio [16:07]
- II. Largo [10:07]
- III. Rondeau. Allegro [9:36]

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra no. 4 in G major op. 58

- I. Allegro moderato [17:18]
- II. Andante con moto [5:16]
- III. Rondeau. Vivace [10:00]

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra no. 5 in E flat major op. 73, 'EMPEROR'

- I. Allegro [20:29]
- II. Adagio un poco moto [7:47] - attacca:
- III. Rondeau. Allegro [10:35]

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Whilst Gilels was alive, Pollini was one of the heirs apparent; now that Gilels is gone he is king — in Beethoven, at least. There may be more individual and idiosyncratic interpreters of the music but there is none whose command, at best, is sovereign. Pollini's 1976 DG recording of the Fourth Piano Concerto with Böhm and the Vienna Philharmonic was arguably the finest since Gilels's EMI version with Leopold Ludwig and the Philharmonia Orchestra. And Pollini's latest account, recorded live in Berlin with his old confederate-in-arms Claudio Abbado, is almost as successful. The thing being live, the piano's first long exordium may be a little more brittle-sounding than previously, less perfectly honed, but against this has to be set an even more keenly felt sense of the evolving drama, and a slow movement where the dialogue between piano and orchestra is spellbinding in its intensity.

I am not sure that Pollini is yet entirely reconciled to Beethoven's prankish first concerto, the Concerto No. 2 in B flat. In the outer movements, he can seem brusque: ill-at-ease with Beethoven in his rumbustious, amorous, Hooray Henry mood. Best take the concerto by the throat, as Serkin used to do, or else humour and civilize it — Perahia's approach, and Kempff's. Still, this is a better scaled, better accompanied, better recorded performance than the one in Pollini's earlier DG cycle. After Böhm's death in 1981, Jochum stepped in to record the two earliest concertos. Jochum was a wonderful Beethoven conductor (according to Arrau no one matched his intuitive understanding of the poetic depths of the Fourth Concerto). Sadly, he was neither used to Pollini nor fully at ease with the Vienna Philharmonic. In that sense, Böhm was irreplaceable.

Abbado and Pollini are much more hand-in-glove, which gives the cycle a cohesiveness its predecessor rather obviously lacks. I don't think Abbado and the Berliners play the first movement of the Emperor Concerto as commandingly — as cogently, as trenchantly —

as Böhm and the Vienna Philharmonic on the earlier recording. But the slow movement goes well, and — live in Berlin — the finale is more jovial than before.

Not everything worked that Pollini did with Böhm, and their 1978 account of Beethoven's Third Concerto tended to sit on its hands. By contrast, the new performance of the Third is a joy from start to finish, irresistible in the way the old DG Annie Fischer/Fricsay version used to be. On record, the Third has always been the most elusive of the five concertos; this new performance, though, is worthy to sit alongside Pollini's 1976 account of the Fourth.

And what of the fact that these are live recordings? The sound as such is full-bodied and immediate, with very few inconsistencies of balance. Musically, though, there are evident gains — moments where the tension is palpable in a way that it rarely is in the recording studio. True, the older Pollini / Böhm recordings of the Fourth and Fifth Concertos also have this quality in rare measure, but would the new Third have worked so well in the studio ?

Technically, Pollini is pretty immaculate, though that doesn't mean these are unedited takes. Given that quite a few squeaks, bumps and ill-timed coughs have been left in, I can only assume that worse intrusions had to be edited out. Perhaps nothing could be done about the well-tuned cough on the final chord of the Third Concerto's Largo but a musically astute editor would have brought the finale in four or five seconds earlier — the violins' G sharp needs to be pretty promptly denied and reasserted (as A flat), if the splendid, Irreconcilable Keys joke is to make its proper impact.

Richard Osborne, June 1994