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Artur Schnabel was one of the great musical minds of the 20th century, an artist who brought a special intensity to the interpretation of the piano music of Mozart, Schubert, and in particular of Beethoven.

The Schnabel family left Germany for good in 1933 for Italy, and a few years later settled in the USA. In his autobiography My Life and Music, Schnabel notes that during the three years before the family left Germany, he did a lot of touring. “I played in Italy, Spain, Greece, Turkey, Palestine, and gathered new experiences” he says.

During this trip Schnabel gave two solo recitals in Istanbul, the Queen of Cities. These were reviewed in the local press, and the reviews throw light upon the manner the artist was received by the locals. From Saechinger’s Schnabel biography in his biography of Schnabel, César Saechinger writes about early 1931: “…he was now in demand in many strange places, and Turkey was one of them. He played with orchestras in Istanbul and Ankara, and gave ten recitals there and in the provinces. No one took the trouble to keep the Press reviews, so it is difficult to know how he impressed these exotic audiences with his offerings of Mozart, Schubert and Beethoven, occasionally varied by Schumann and Brahms.”

It appears that the paucity of the information on his performances in Turkey is not because of lack of local interest, but because Schnabel seems to have played only twice there, both of these being solo recitals in Istanbul.

The main orchestra in Ankara at that time had its roots in the Ottoman band formed by Giuseppe Donizetti (the elder brother of Gaetano Donizetti) in Istanbul in the first half of the 19th century. The orchestra was moved to Ankara in 1924, and officially became the “Presidential Symphony Orchestra” in 1932. This was the only major orchestra available to the audiences then. However, the orchestra’s archives contain no information about any concerts given by Schnabel.

There is also no record that Schnabel gave solo recitals in Ankara or played with an orchestra in Istanbul. It is doubtful that he visited any “provinces” either. When Schnabel performed in Istanbul, the Republic of Turkey was almost ten years old. Saechinger is probably thinking of the then extinct Ottoman empire’s lost lands in the Middle East, possibly Palestine. Indeed, Schnabel visited Jewish settlements and gave concerts in Jerusalem and elsewhere, and in his memoirs he writes “My concerts, I am bound to tell you, were not too popular. They were not quite to the people’s taste and did not arouse much enthusiasm” These could be the strange lands that Saechinger had in mind.

Schnabel’s recitals in Istanbul took place on March 14 and 16, 1931 in the French Theater in Beyoğlu (old Pera). The first programme was as follows:

| F. Schubert | Sonata in B-flat Major, D. 960 |
| J. Brahms | 4 Klavierstücke, Op. 119: 3 Intermezzi (B minor, E minor, C major) and Rhapsody in E-flat major |
| W. A. Mozart | Sonata No. 8 in A minor, K. 310 |


His farewell recital on March 16, 1931 in the same venue was:

| J. Brahms | Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5 |
| W. A. Mozart | Sonata No. 12 in F major, K. 332 |


The reviewer of Schnabel’s Istanbul recitals in the local press was none other than the eminent German Orientalist Prof. Hellmut Ritter [1892-1971], an erudite individual, a first rate writer, and an excellent musician. Ritter played in an amateur string quartet in Turkey with the émigré Hungarian violinist Licio Amar of the Amar-Hindemith quartet fame. The collected list of his research output contains 26 books, over 100 articles, and over 220 reviews of varying length. His account of Schnabel’s visit appeared in three different issues of a German language Istanbul newspaper Türksiche Post.

Türkische Post writings on Schnabel As early as the 3rd of March 1931, Türkische Post started running advance notices for the upcoming concerts of Schnabel and daily advertisements for the tickets.

The advert that ran in Türkische Post beginning March 3 to March 14, 1931, the day of Schnabel’s first recital in Istanbul.
works is considered today as classic and final.

Artur Schnabel is now 38 years old and
stands at the peak of his artistic powers.
We are delighted that he is coming to
Istanbul and we hope that he will find
the sympathetic audience that he may rightly
expect in this city, where the appreciation
of German music and German way of
making music has recently gained ground.

The likeness of Artur Schnabel that
appeared accompanying
Ritter's article announcing
his forthcoming
recitals in the
Istanbul newspaper Türkische Post,
dated March 9, 1931.

Two days after Schnabel's first recital in
Istanbul on March 14, 1930, Ritter wrote
in Türkische Post:

Artur Schnabel's first concert
An attentive, appreciative and enthusiastic
audience gathered on Saturday in the
French Theater to hear the performance
of the renowned, however still mysterious
pianist Artur Schnabel. One could be
curious as to whether the master's rigorous
art of relentlessness, not rendering
any concessions to the 'tastes' or
enriched habits of the audience would be well
perceived, and as such trigger the right
response. One should thereby take note
that his success proved Schnabel right in
his optimistic faith in the efficacy of natural
innocent affinity of truly musical people
towards austerely higher music and to the
audience in this country.

We were however richly rewarded on
all accounts. What Schnabel offered, from
the very first piece, the presentation of
Schubert's posthumous Sonata in B-flat
major, can only be perceived as miraculous,
and a surprise even for those
familiar with his art. This musical piece
that is deemed and in part regarded as hardly
accessible among piano players due to its
length and uniformity (to say the least),
was transformed into a captivating, multi-
coloured, astonishingly beautiful creation
in his hands and - from a true Schubert
perspective - structured with utmost
completeness, inner feeling to which the
audience breathlessly listened up to the
last note. A warm, lively torrent suffused
through the entire piece up to the most
insignificant characters and movements,
which in turn, on account of being treated
with such great love, began to shine in
gratitude. Gold and precious stones sparkled,
where one is otherwise used to
seeing grey sand.

The remarkably lively applause after
this sonata demonstrated that the
presentation was a surprise and revelation
for the majority of the audience. - The
musical work from Schubert was followed
by three Intermezzi (B minor, E minor and
C major) and the Brahms Rhapsody in
E-flat major, the first in part embodies
severe melancholy, in which the compo-
sor who is focused on his inner being
seems to be alone with himself - as if the
oppressive presence of the three greats
had shone the late born to resign in
sorrow and thereby return to his own
inner self.

The A minor sonata from Mozart, the
first tragic sonata of the Master, which on
its own was suitable to destroy the legend
of the eternally smiling cheerful young
god, was played by Schnabel with all the
male stringency that it deserves. What
came out wonderfully was the vaulting
skittering last movement, driven by nerv-
ous haste and restlessness, in which the
blissful rays of the sun of the major break
through the hazy cloud cover for brief
moments.

Schnabel's presentation of the Wald-
stein Sonata has long been recognized
and renowned as masterful, although
each new presentation again offers some-
thing new, and as such constitutes a new
development. As always in the case of this
artist, the virtuoso passage was not
used for the purpose of offering a brilliant
certainty, but instead made
entirely subservient to the expression. A
torrent of demonic aggressiveness
accompanies the triumphant chasms of the
certainty of victory in a breakneck chase
beyond the abysses. This thereby culmi-
nates in a quiet interlude of masculine
contemplation that replaces an earlier
adagio that was much too relaxed accord-
ing to the composer's feeling, on to the
wonderful singing of the Rondo. Schnabel,
in contrast to the other players, here
introduces the tremendously bold, harm-
ronic changes that audaciously depart from the regulation of the pedal setting by Beethoven. (Compare the sonatas that he has procured from the Ullstein publishing house). As a result, a special pictorial effect is achieved: The delightful topic can be equated— as expressed by the artist himself — to having been inserted in a ‘cloud of pollen,’ which is rolled out by the accompanying hand with the sound of an Aeolian harp. But of course, not only this or that ‘conception’ of this or that effect constitute the great charm of this piano performance, but rather the intensity that impacts tremendously therein, embracing the individual parts from a holistic perspective, and is yet rich enough to pursue even the smallest branches and lovingly bring them to shine. We look forward to the next concert.

The venue of his Istanbul recitals
Both of Schnabel’s recitals took place in the French Theater in Istanbul, a for-profit venue in Pera. Constructed by a Genoese named Giustiniani in 1827, the structure burned down in 1831, but redesigned and rebuilt immediately after. During the course of a century to 1930, it has survived at least one massive fire that destroyed its main rival, the Naum Theater located a few blocks up the street in June 1870. Rebuilt again in the first half of the 20th century, it has been used as a venue for many European dramatic and lyirc troupes, as well as Turkish plays. The venue changed hands and character many times, sometimes functioning as a theatre, and sometimes as a cinema. After yet another fire gutted the building in 1999, the theatre closed down for good. Situated directly across the avenue from the St Antoine Catholic church, today it functions as a nightclub.

The entry to the theatre is through an arcade, known today as the Elhamra Passage. Because of the massive glass ornaments in the entrance to the ballroom built in the same arcade in 1861, the theatre was also known as the “Crystal Palace”. In its early days the entry to the ballroom was a corridor lit by 16 gas lamps leading to 18 columns supporting a number of galleries. The six-storey structure had 26 loge boxes accommodating eight people each, surrounding the large main parterre which had a painted dome ceiling. The theatre was decorated luxuriously with majestic statues, velvet and gold glitter ornaments and leather seats.

The present day exterior of Elhamra Passage in Beyoğlu, Istanbul, the arcade that housed the French Theatre where Artur Schnabel performed in 1931. (Ömer Eşecioglu)

The second and the last recital of Artur Schnabel in Istanbul took place on March 16, 1931 again in the French Theatre. Ritter reviews it in the March 18, 1931 issue of the Türkische Post:

The farewell concert of Artur Schnabel
The second piano recital of Artur Schnabel constitutes one of those memorable highlights of musical life and experience, in which we come very close to the genius of music and which in turn shockingly engages itself in our lives, and where the critic is not ashamed to admit that he forgot the critical attitude, his judgments as such constitute admiration, whereby the admiration in turn constitutes emotional gratitude. Which should be in effect praise more: the crystal bright clarity of the presentation that allows for nothing shadowy, unclear or else blurred, and as such lights up the darkest depths of the late works of the great lonely ones, or the wealth of the faculties of the capricious jumps that almost in a kaleidoscopic manner string together ideas of the romantic early work by Brahms, and as such appear to effortlessly do justice to the F minor Sonata or the pearly sound of the drive in a typical roccoco piece that is known to every piano student (even though not ‘known to all’), the F major sonata by Mozart, or was it finally that warmth of feeling and power of expression of the so brittle appearing Fugue Opus 110, that was partly perceived as a moving lamentful, blissful expression of an imminent newly-bestowed life? A peak was hereby reached; it is not possible to play better.

It may well be some listeners harboured within themselves parts of the presentation of the two ‘last’ memory images of another presentation and to this end were not immediately able to cope with the new impression. Bear in mind that all reasons for doubt will disappear if it would be possible to attend the oral explanations, which the master occasionally aims to justify his style of play, in smaller circles and to likewise hear his comments on other ways of performing, which has hitherto been a topic of discussion for more than a century. It is enough for you to know that everything is well thought out and felt through so that one cannot do better than willingly entrust oneself to this guide in the mysteries of the last sonatas.

And how he knew how to guide one! When after the magnificent and wrathful beginning of the simple theme of Arietta in Opus 111, he places us right before the gate of the sanctuary, and then the door opens and with each variation, a new veil is lifted, and the listener is in a visionary indagination allowed to enter in transcendental spaces, to be a witness of a happening that is delineated from all that is of earthly life; to listen to sounds that cannot be heard by an irreverent ear, then the act with which the listener befits the soul guide, is one of heartfelt gratitude, and with a word of inner gratitude we also want to conclude this concert report, to which we also express our request that this first visit of Artur Schnabel in our beautiful city should not be the last.
Notes
It appears that Schnabel played on a Bechstein in Istanbul. He Remarks in his autobiography that "it is very amusing how someone, perhaps a competitor, spread the rumour that Bechstein pianos could not endure different climates. That seems not very credible, for I saw Bechstein pianos in Australia, Russia, Turkey, Greece and Norway, in tropical and arctic climates, yet they were always the same."

On the return journey Schnabel appeared in Athens, and the success of his performance there is also reported in March 29, 1931 issue of Türkische Post.

This was the only visit by Schnabel to Turkey. Alas, Ritter’s wish "we also express our request that this first visit of Artur Schnabel in our beautiful city should not be the last" did not come true.

A dinner party at Pera Palace of Istanbul in 1931, the luxury hotel which rolled out the welcome mat for the visiting dignitaries to Istanbul, the likes of whom included Agatha Christie, Sarah Bernhardt, Mata Hari, Ernest Hemingway and Queen Elisabeth II. Possibly the hotel where Artur Schnabel and his wife stayed during their visit to Istanbul.

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Hereford Choral Society at Hereford Cathedral

All praise to Geraint Bowen for steering his Hereford Choral Society (HCS) away from the usual oratorio-fodder and conjuring instead a journey into time back over 400 years to perform (March 21) the first large-scale, extended choral work ever written, the Monteverdi Vespers of 1610.

This amazing piece, basically written for a job-application with perhaps no thought of a performance in its entirety, is such a compendium of contemporary styles, reaching back to the past, embracing the new, and is a glorious fusion of the opera-house and the sanctuary (anyone who sniffs at Verdi for his Requiem should sniff at this, too).

Though I know both acoustics, it’s difficult to decide whether those of Hereford Cathedral and Venice’s St Mark’s are similar. Certainly the opening Orfeo-derived fanfare failed to penetrate, despite the brilliance of the period wind-group QuintEssential and the remarkable Marches Baroque, but the choral delivery was magnificently full-toned and sturdy, with articulation achieving an amazing degree of clarity.

Choral sections, always well-balanced despite the thinness of an heroic octet of tenors, contrasted dramatically with the sustained intimacy of the solo ensemble. Voces8 in remarkable form, despite the unavoidable imperceptibly of the men’s lowest notes in this acoustic and at this pitch.

Instrumental contributions were exhilaratingly pungent, the HCS were commendably self-effacing in the face of such spectacular solo vocal display (stile concitato and goat’s trills and all), and Bowen is so much to be congratulated for this rewarding enterprise.

Christopher Morley

Bromley Symphony Orchestra/
Adrian Brown Mahler Symphony 7

Whilst it is undoubtedly true that orchestral standards in this country have improved considerably since the end of World War II – the conflict having decimated orchestras across the continent – to the point where semi-professional or even wholly amateur orchestras can programme mainstays of the 20th-century repertoire with confidence, not too many of them would feel confident today at tackling Mahler’s Seventh Symphony, its five movements and 80 minutes playing time stretching the technique and concentration of any body of players, this concert demonstrated that the Bromley Symphony Orchestra, now approaching its centenary, was fully up to the challenges it poses.

That the BSO was able to mount this programme at the Langley Park Arts Centre on March 21 was due in no small measure to the musicianship, skill, technique and vast experience of their conductor, Adrian Brown, who prefaced the performance with a talk on the work and on his own Mahlerian journey. But no sooner had those low thudding chords opened the Symphony, and the tenor tuba intoned his mournful solo, that one instinctively knew that the work was in safe hands. More than that, it was in the hands of a skilled interpreter who had the full measure of this still-astonishing work, for throughout this performance the tempos were admirable, fully in accordance with Mahler’s detailed instructions but also enhancing the essential coherence of this vast symphony.

The first movement expanded in a variety of ways, yet all were held together by Brown’s admirable control of tempo and orchestral dynamics. So it was throughout the remaining four movements – vastly different though they be in character and emotional expression.

The Seventh, as Brown indicated in his opening remarks, has become the Cinderella of Mahler’s symphonies – simply because it is made up of a succession of varied ‘mood-movements’, each different from the others, and thereby forming in some eyes a symphonic suite rather than a symphony. But that depends on the conductor, and Brown’s ability if revealing the connections between the outer movements was such as to convince this listener anew that the works fully deserved the appellation ‘Symphony’.

Of course, in technical demands, not everything was perfect in terms of orchestral playing, but very little fell below a high standard of individual and corporate accomplishment.

Robert Matthew-Walker