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# Artur Schnabel's little-known recitals in Istanbul

Ömer Egecioğlu

Department of Computer Science, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106 Email: omer@cs.ucsb.edu

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.



Artur Schnabel in 1945.  
(César Saerchinger, *Artur Schnabel, A Biography*, Cassell & Company Ltd., London, 1957.)

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 Saerchinger's Schnabel biography

In his biography of Schnabel, César Saerchinger 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. Saerchinger 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 Saerchinger 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  | <i>Sonata in B-flat Major, D. 960</i>  |
| J. Brahms    | <i>4 Klavierstücke, Op. 119: 3 Intermezzi (B minor, E minor, C major) and Rhapsody in E-flat major</i> |
| W. A. Mozart | <i>Sonata No. 8 in A minor, K. 310</i>   |

- |                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| L.-v. Beethoven | <i>Sonata No. 21 in C major, Op. 53 'Waldstein'</i> |
|-----------------|---|

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

- |                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| J. Brahms       | <i>Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5</i>   |
| W. A. Mozart    | <i>Sonata No. 12 in F major, K. 332</i>   |
| L.-v. Beethoven | <i>Sonata No. 31 in A-flat major, Op. 110</i><br><i>Sonata No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111</i> |

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 Licco 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 *Türkische 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.

**Voranzeige I**

Am Sonnabend den 14. und Montag den 16. März um 18.30 Uhr spielt im Französischen Theater der berühmte Berliner Pianist.

**Arthur Schnabel**

Kartenvorverkauf an den Schaltern des Theaters.

The advert that ran in *Türkische Post* beginning March 3 to March 14, 1931, the day of Schnabel's first recital in Istanbul.



Morgen, Montag, den 16. März  
18 Uhr 30  
im Französischen Theater  
Abschiedskonzert  
des gefeierten Pianisten  
Arthur Schnabel.

*The advert that ran in Türkische Post on March 15, the day before the artist's second recital in Istanbul on March 16, 1931.*

A week before the first recital, Ritter writes about the impending visit of Schnabel in the *Türkische Post* in his colourful style as follows:

#### Arthur Schnabel

On the 14th and 16th of this month Arthur Schnabel will appear in the *French Theater* for a piano recital. This visit of the famous German pianist is a first-rate event for the music lovers of our city, because Schnabel is not only one of the significant virtuosi of the present, but this pianist par excellence is considered by many as simply the best of the living pianists. His interpretation of the great classical piano works of Beethoven, Mozart and Schubert is certainly unequalled, and stands proud all by itself, its stature undisputed by anyone.

The special feature that has made him famous over other artists, which as such elevates him high above everything that is sheer virtuosity, is a talent that we can with confidence particularly refer to as a fruit of German music culture and the wonderful faculty to capture the internal content of a musical work, up to the last mystery of the inner form, and moreover to alongside capture its soul, and portray it with the utmost urgency and concomitant devotedness so that the last trace of the arbitrary aspects of the subjective seem to be stripped. One, when listening to his performance – this is at least what we experienced, as often as we were granted the opportunity to listen to him – even forgets the outrageous virtuosity of the presentation on the even higher value of the deeper interpretation that advances up to the final frontier of empathy.

Arthur Schnabel, whose own compositions are – by way of a strange contrast – downright subversive and atonal, is deservedly the purest representative and star of German piano music there is. His interpretation of the great classical piano

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.



*dated March 9, 1931.*

*The likeness of Artur Schnabel that appeared accompanying Ritter's article announcing his forthcoming recitals in the Istanbul newspaper Türkische Post,*

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

#### Arthur 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 cherished 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 intrinsic affinity of truly musical people towards austere 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 decried 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 the utmost complete 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 composer who is focused on his inner being seems to be alone with himself – as if the oppressive presence of the three greats had shooed 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 astringency that it deserves. What came out wonderfully was the vagrantly skittering last movement, driven by nervous haste and restlessness, in which the blissful rays of the sun of the major break through the hazy cloud cover for brief moments.

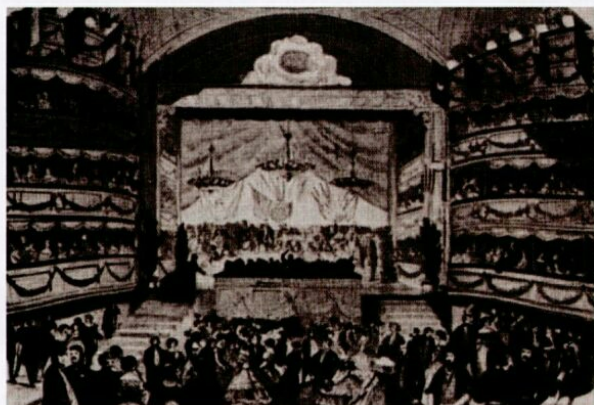
Schnabel's presentation of the *Waldstein* Sonata has long been recognized and renowned as masterful, although each new presentation again offers something new, and as such constitutes a new development. As always in the case of this artist, the virtuoso passage work was not used for the purpose of offering a brilliant concert performance, 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 culminates in a quiet interlude of masculine contemplation that replaces an earlier adagio that was much too relaxed according 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-



onic 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

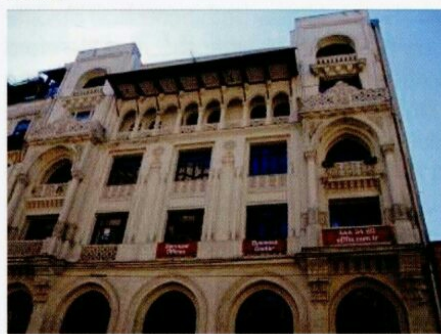
Both of Schnabel’s recitals took place in the *French Theater* in İstanbul, a for-profit venue in Pera. Constructed by a Genoese named Giustiniani in 1827, the structure burned down in 1831, but redesigned and rebuilt immediately after. During the course of a century to 1930, it has survived at least 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 lyric 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



*The interior of the French Theatre in Istanbul where Artur Schnabel gave two recitals in March 1931, as it looked in the middle of the 19th century. (Metin And, Türkiye’de İtalyan Sahnesi, İtalyan Sahnesinde Türkiye, Metis Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 1989, p. 51.)*

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/ İstanbul, the arcade that housed the French Theatre where Artur Schnabel performed in 1931. (Ömer Eğecioğlu)*

The second and the last recital of Artur Schnabel in İstanbul 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 he 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 rococo 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 airs 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 indignation 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 a 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. ▶



# Late reviews

## 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.*

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank François Mottier, Thijs van Dorssen, Andreas Schachner, Anouk Jeschke, Aydin Karlibel, Astrid Menz, Kevin LaVine and the CSO Archive personnel for their interest, courtesy and kind help.

## 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