

The Artistry of Myra Hess: Recent Reissues

Dame Myra Hess—Vol. I Pearl GEMM CD 9462 [Pearl I] (69'40")

Contents: Bach: French Suite no. 5, BWV 816; Gigue; Schubert: Sonata in A Major, D. 664; Schubert: *Rosamunde*, 'Ballet Music' (arr. Ganz); Beethoven: Sonata in A Major, op. 69 (with Emanuel Feuermann, 'cello); Chopin: Nocturne in F-sharp Major, op. 15, no. 2; Mendelssohn: Song without Words in A-flat Major, op. 38, no. 6; Brahms: Capriccio in B Minor, op. 76, no. 2; Dvorak: Slavonic Dance in C Major, op. 46, no. 1 (with Hamilton Harty, piano); Debussy: *Images*, Book II, 'Poissons d'or'; *Préludes*, Book I, 'La fille aux cheveux de lin' and 'Minstrels'; Bach: Chorale, 'Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring' (arr. Hess)

Dame Myra Hess—Vol. II Pearl GEMM CD 9463 [Pearl II] (66'02")

Contents: Schumann: Piano Concerto in A Minor, op. 54 (with Walter Goehr/Symphony Orchestra); *Carnaval*, op. 9; MacDowell: *Sea Pieces*, op. 55—no. 3, 'A.D. MDCXX'; Griffes: *Roman Sketches*, op. 7—no. 1, 'The White Peacock'

Myra Hess: A Vignette APR Recordings CDAPR 7012 [APR] (56'01", 62'23")

Contents: Mozart: Piano Concerto in C Major, K. 467 (with Leslie Heward/Hallé Orchestra); Haydn: Sonata in D Major, Hob. XVI: 37, i, Allegro con brio; Schubert: Sonata in A Major, D. 664; *Rosamunde*, 'Ballet Music' (arr. Ganz); Piano Trio in B-flat Major, D. 898 (with Jelly d'Aranyi, vio-

lin, Felix Salmond, 'cello), Brahms: Piano Trio in C Major, op. 87 (with Jelly d'Aranyi, violin, Gaspar Cassadó, 'cello)

Dame Myra Hess (1890-1965) EMI CDH 7 63787 2 [EMI] (75'57")

Contents: Beethoven: Piano Sonata in E Major, op. 109; Piano Sonata in A-flat Major, op. 110; Scarlatti: Sonata in C Minor, K. 11/L. 352; Sonata in G Major, K. 14/L. 387; Beethoven: *Für Elise*; Bagatelle in E-flat Major, op. 126, no. 3; Mendelssohn: Song without Words in A Major, op. 102, no. 5; Granados: *Goyescas*—no. 4, 'La maja y el ruiseñor'; Brahms: Waltz in A-flat Major, op. 39, no. 15; Intermezzo in C Major, op. 119, no. 3; J.S. Bach: Toccata, Adagio, and Fugue, BWV 564: Adagio (arr. Hess); Six Little Preludes, no. 4, in D Major, BWV 936; Chorale, 'Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring' (arr. Hess)

Dame Myra Hess: Public Performances, 1949-1960 Music & Arts CD-779 [M&A] (70'35", 58'23", 59'46", 77'17")

Contents: Beethoven: Concerto in E-flat Major, op. 73 (with Efrek Kurtz/New York Philharmonic—February 8, 1953); Concerto in G Major, op. 58 (with Adrian Boult/BBC Symphony Orchestra—1952); Mozart: Concerto in A Major, K. 414, Concerto in B-flat Major, K. 595 (both with Robert Scholz/American Chamber Orchestra—March 20, 1956); Brahms: Sonata in A Major, op. 100, Schubert: Sonatina in D Major, D. 384, Beethoven: Sonata in G Major, op. 96 (all

with Isaac Stern, violin–Edinburgh Festival, August 28, 1960); Brahms: Concerto in B-flat Major, op. 83 (with Bruno Walter/New York Philharmonic–February 11, 1951); Mozart: Concerto in C Major, K. 467 (with Leopold Stokowski/New York Philharmonic–February 6, 1949)

Dame Myra Hess suona W.A. Mozart; R.

Schumann Melodram MEL 18024 (68'23")

Contents: Mozart: Concerto in E-flat Major, K. 271 (with Pablo Casals/Perpignan Festival Orchestra–July, 1951); Schumann: Concerto in A Minor, op. 54 (with Dimitri Mitropoulos/New York Philharmonic–February 10, 1952)

Mozart Piano Concertos Music & Arts CD-275 (54'32")

Contents: Mozart: Concerto in E-flat Major, K. 449 (with Bruno Walter/New York Philharmonic–January 17, 1954); Concerto in D Minor, K. 466 (with Bruno Walter/New York Philharmonic–March 4, 1956)

Brahms Sony MPK 52535 (69'05")

Contents: Trio in C Major, op. 87 (with Joseph Szigeti, violin; Pablo Casals, 'cello–Prades Festival, 1952). Also contains: Violin Concerto in D Major, op. 77 (Joseph Szigeti, violin, with Eugene Ormandy/Philadelphia Orchestra)

Myra Hess (1890-1965) was surely one of the twentieth century's most beloved pianists. The indelible image of Hess' saintly efforts on behalf of the National Gallery concerts during World War II lies at the core of her reputation: it is hard to recapture today just what a powerful beacon of hope she must have been for the citizens of London. The scene at the first Gallery concert, on October 10, 1939, is unforgettable: Sir Kenneth Clark wrote that he

*stood behind one of the curtains and looked at the packed audience. They had come with anxious, hungry faces, but as they listened to the music and looked at Myra's rapt expression, they lost the thought of their private worries. I had never seen faces so transformed, and said to myself "This is how men and women must have looked at the great preachers who gave them back their courage and faith."*¹

To some extent this image of Hess has passed into the realm of mythology. Take a biographer's hagiographic comment on Hess' return to the New York stage after the war: "Never before in the two-hundred-year history of public concerts had any musician embodied such near-perfection in art and humanity, and so singularly the courage of an entire people. How much the ovation that day was for the woman and how much for the artist, it is hard to say."²

That final observation is precisely the crux of the matter. The extraordinary warmth and effusiveness sparked by Hess the person has not always been matched by fulsome praise of her playing. Abram Chasins is a typical commentator: "She has warmth rather than burning temperament. She plays easily but carefully. Of soaring declamation and technical daring, there is almost none. But never has she sounded less than a great lady. The way she plays and talks and conducts herself reveals the breadth of her intelligence and the refinement of her spirit and emotions."³ Virgil Thomson, reviewing a 1951 Hess recital of the last three Beethoven Sonatas, a frequent Hess program, treads with equal caution:

Dame Myra is a comforting artist. She is thoroughly musical and thoroughly dependable. She gives ever a calculable pleasure. Delight, thrills, anything in the way of excitement one cannot

*expect of her. But she never lets you down one least little bit. She plays a piece – any piece from the nineteenth century, which is where most of her repertory lies, as everyone would like to be able to play it for a friend. She indulges in no ‘effects’, makes no error of technique or of taste, offends by not one tittle of ugliness in the tone or any lack of grace in the line. She is not memorable like a love affair; she is satisfactory like a good tailor.*⁴

In a sense Hess’ gift was an absence of glaring musical flaws, as is suggested by Arthur Mendel’s assessment of her playing:

*To try to analyse what made her playing unique is frustrating – since in a sense it can all be summed up by saying that it simply lacked anything clumsy, anything literal, anything arbitrary, anything unmusical. That seems faint praise until one remembers how literally true it is, and how different hers was from almost any other performance one has known.... Other performers achieve the perfectly musical gesture occasionally; she, it seemed, never had to achieve it – she could not avoid it. The phrase took its place perfectly in the larger framework of the whole piece, but it was the perfection of the shaping – rhythmic, dynamic, colouristic – of each phrase that came forth from her that seems to me what she shared with Kreisler and with no one else in my experience.*⁵

One essential element of Hess’ art, many observers agree, lay in her ability to communicate meaningfully with her audience. Mendel suggests that “she was *essentially* a public performer. I think performance for her was *essentially* communication to an audience.”⁶ This suggests that the inevitable separation between live and recorded performer was gaping in Hess’ case, forcing those of us who never had the privilege of hearing her perform to reconstruct that live persona from the recorded legacy. Mendel, for one, found that gap to be problematic:

*I doubt that any of Myra’s records will convey to future generations what we found unique in her. Why is this? I used to think that in the pieces she played best ... she succeeded better than any other musician I knew in putting the listener in direct contact with the music. She was so completely, so unerringly musical that it seemed to me that she became the instrument through which the music realized itself. But with the best will in the world one rarely hears this in the records.*⁷

David Dubal agrees that Hess’ commercial discs do not do her credit: “Her art on disc gives only an indication of her impact on concert audiences.” In his view, this is the result of discomfort in the recording studio: “Hess looked for a ‘truth’ in her performance, and perhaps for this reason she intensely disliked making records. The recording studio was too cold for her, and she felt helpless without an audience.”⁸ To what extent Hess really did dislike recording is unclear. Hess’ biographer Marian McKenna cites an early comment (1927) that suggests the artist found some merit in the process: “from the standpoint of self-criticism it [making records] is invaluable...” This hypothesis – offered without supporting evidence – is that “as time went on Myra came more and more to detest the entire business of record-making. She hated the sight of that red light – the final signal to begin playing; even more she loathed the numerous test recordings that had to be made before engineer and artist were ever fully satisfied.”⁹ But the success of some of Hess’ studio recordings mark this objection as too facile.

Indeed we can learn a great deal from the Hess recordings, even though the out-

put is relatively modest. During and following her centenary in 1990, a number of recording companies issued compact discs devoted to Hess' playing. We now have access to a large portion of the important commercial recordings. Also available now is a sizeable number of live concerted and chamber performances. We are able to ask what kind of an interpreter was she? How do the live performances differ from the studio performances? Is there a disjunction between Myra Hess in the studio and Myra Hess in concert? Can it be said that these live performances are superior? How do they round out our picture of Hess' playing? An evaluation of the Hess legacy is in order.

There are three loosely defined periods of Hess studio recordings. The earliest group was made in the late 1920s in the United States (along with a few sides made in England in 1931). A less-unified "middle" group falls in the years just before and during World War II. A final small group of LP recordings was made mostly in the mid 1950s. (The available live performances are primarily concerto and chamber-music appearances in the fifteen years following the war.) Perhaps the place to begin is with Hess' most famous work; she made three commercial recordings of her beloved transcription of Bach's 'Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring', one during each of these informally designated periods. These three performances – all of them lovely – make instructive listening. The 1928 recording (Columbia 2063 D, now on Pearl I) is marginally faster and fleeter than the two later performances (even if one adjusts for possible changes in pitch standards). By no means is the pulse metronomic, but that pulse is relatively unyielding and the larger triple meter carries the day. The second chorale entry (in the soprano, *piano*) is beautifully shaded (and represents some of the loveliest *piano* playing in the early Columbians). By comparison, the 1940 performance (HMV B 9035), my favorite of the three (and the one not currently available), features greater control over voicing, and a subtle freedom of pulse, with graceful adjustments at the ends of, and even within, phrases. Here, there is an exceptionally subtle, shifting balance between the triple meter and subordinate compound meter. The pulse is slightly slower, the character more reflective (after a slightly rocky beginning). In a word, Hess' playing is more mature. By the 1957 performance (HMV BLP 1103, now on EMI), there is a slight lessening of control over both dynamics and voicing, and, as a result, a lessening of the extraordinary sense of peacefulness; in compensation Hess allows a slightly larger climax.¹⁰

These characteristics are typical of the Hess recordings as a whole. There are numerous delights in the early Columbians, but also some signs that Hess has not yet solved how most effectively to communicate musical meaning. There is a confidence and subtlety in the middle group of recordings that marks an interpretive step forward. The later recordings have less of this quality, replaced by a generalized warmth and nobility that is at times distinctive, but also at times bland.

Hess began her first series of disc recordings (there had been some piano rolls earlier in the decade) for American Columbia in late 1927 with an extended chamber music work, the Schubert B-flat Major Trio, D. 898. In 1928 she recorded some twenty solo works, the largest of which is the Schubert A-Major Sonata, D. 664; most of the rest are smaller works, only a single side in length. Some of the early Columbians, the Schubert titles in particular, have circulated frequently; other have not been reissued. About half of them are currently available. Nine of the solo titles can be found on Pearl I, one on Pearl II.¹¹ The Schubert Sonata and its companion selection from *Rosamunde* are now on both Pearl I and APR.

The American Columbians thus give us a concentrated dose of Hess' playing in her

late thirties. Certainly there is nothing immature in her playing at this time, and as a whole these performances are moderately successful. There is always present a sense of solid musicianship, although caution is an interpretive watchword. In certain performances Hess demonstrates an interpretive fire and passion, though there is little sense of humor or wit. Technique is always well-controlled. There are hints of unfamiliarity (or discomfort) with the recording process in, for example, Hess' seeming inability to play really softly, and in her relative lack of subtlety in the playing of inner voices.

One of the important features of these first Hess recordings is that they offer evidence of a portion of her repertoire that was later purified away: works by Debussy, Ravel, Griffes, Falla, and Palmgren (and in 1931 MacDowell and Chopin). And, perhaps not surprisingly, it is in these works that Hess is most imaginative and least cautious. Among the more successful are the two Debussy sides (7151 M, on Pearl I): 'Poissons d'or' from *Images*, Book I, and two *Préludes* from Book I, 'La fille aux cheveux de lin' and 'Minstrels'. These are richly conceived and satisfying performances. 'Poissons d'or' is solid and meaty, and overall quite coherent; compare the leaner, more linear work of the very different 1930 performance by the work's dedicatee, Ricardo Viñes. The two *Préludes* are very nice indeed, with 'The girl with the flaxen hair' very fluidly played, and 'Minstrels' played with a very personal rubato. This latter performance compares favorably with the Cortot versions (which themselves have some interesting interpretive differences). Hess had a very idiomatic way with Debussy (unlike Paderewski, whose 1930 version of 'Minstrels' shows absolutely no feeling whatsoever for the idiom). Be careful, however: the *Preludes* are pitched about a half-step high on Pearl I (as they were on GEMM-288).

The Griffes 'White Peacock' (50149 D, on Pearl II, pitched a bit low) is equally idiomatic. Falla's 'Ritual Fire Music' from *El Amor Brujo* (50149 D) was for some reason not transferred along with the rest of GEMM 288 (where it is pitched low) to the Pearl CDs. This is a performance of energy and flair, if little dynamic shading (again Viñes makes an interesting comparison). Performances of the 'Cradle Song' from Selim Palmgren's *Preludes*, op. 17 (2512 D), and the Ravel *Pavane for a Dead Princess* (157 M) have not been reissued.

In 1928 Hess recorded four sides of Bach; but these are not as interesting as the performances of the then-contemporary works. The Gigue from the G-Major French Suite (2063 D, Pearl I), coupled with her first recording of 'Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring', offers generally 'sprung' rhythms, although occasionally the playing is slightly labored. Hess voices nicely, and there is some lovely dynamic shading, but she doesn't sustain interest. Two sides that have not been reissued are the C-sharp Major Prelude and Fugue from Book I of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* and the Allegro from the Toccata in G Major, BWV 916 (1951 D); these are marked by well-judged tempi and lively rhythms (though in the fugue the spinning out of the episodes works better than the entries of the fugue subject). Hess also recorded two Scarlatti Sonatas, L. 104/K. 159 and L. 352/K. 11 (168 M, not reissued).

The only extended solo work made at these sessions is a justly praised performance of Schubert's A-Major Sonata, D. 664 (Columbia set M 87; both Pearl I and APR are pitched slightly high). This is a relaxed, genial performance, with a compelling sense of rightness. Hess' tone is lovely. The slow movement is particularly nicely shaped, while the last movement is fleet and cleanly played (in a single take). The sixth side of the set was a transcription of music from *Rosamunde*, also included in both CDs: this is thoroughly charming playing. Both current transfers are sonically acceptable, with the APR featuring a mellower sound, and the Pearl a brighter top end

(my preference would be for a transfer sonically somewhere in between the two).

In other nineteenth-century repertory, the A-Minor Capriccio from Brahms' op. 76 (50199 M, Pearl I) is an example of a more straightforward, even cautious, playing that is sometimes found in these 1928 performances. Here the right hand dominates the texture; Hess highlights inner voices in an aggressive, non-legato manner. Overall, there is little sense of fun or playfulness; compare the impulsiveness of Rubinstein's 1928 HMV recording (DB 1258). Closer in spirit to Hess, but more convincingly played, is the 1916 Moiseiwitsch interpretation (HMV D 96). Hess' texture is fuller on a performance of Schumann's 'Vogel als Prophet' from *Waldscenen* (2512 D, not reissued). An additional side included a Beethoven Bagatelle (op. 119, no. 11) and Brahms Intermezzo (op. 119, no. 3) (168 M).

The Pearl I reissue cannot be particularly recommended. The first problem is an unacceptable number of pitching inaccuracies. (Pearl did not correct faulty pitching in the move from the 1985 LP to CD.) The programming, which follows the company's familiar sampler approach, also may be questioned; I would suggest that this approach is not of particular interest to collectors. Why not issue the American Columbias as a chronologically comprehensive set, with better discographical apparatus? (Please provide take information and dates!) The unissued titles are missed. The sound itself (and on the Griffes title on Pearl II) is quite adequate, somewhat of an improvement over the LP issue, brighter, slightly less filtered (presumably the sources are the same).

It seems appropriate to include the two solo discs recorded for British Columbia in 1931 in a discussion of the early Hess recordings. Three of the four 1931 sides may be found on Pearl I and II (with further pitching problems, severe in the case of the Dvorak Slavonic Dance). These 1931 discs were engineered with a full and rich piano sound. In the Chopin F-sharp Major Nocturne, op. 15, no. 2 (DB 1232), Hess offers a performance that concentrates intensely on the ornamental detail; to some extent this works against a natural flow. The shape of the whole is focused on a massive climax in the middle section. Dvorak's four-hand Slavonic Dance in C Major, op. 46, no. 1 (DB 1235), with Hamilton Harty, is joyous, though hardly the last word in precision. MacDowell's 'A.D. MDCXX' (DB 1235, on Pearl II), admittedly not the most interesting of pieces, is suitably ponderous. But why did these Pearl reissues, neither overly long, not make room for the fourth 1931 side, a Field Nocturne?

The second group of Hess recordings, extending from the mid 1930s to the end of the war, includes chamber, concerto and solo works, and is thus less unified than the earlier group. Hess made two more recordings for British Columbia in the mid 1930s: these are both large chamber works, the Brahms Trio in C Major, op. 87 (LX 497/500, recorded in 1935), and the Beethoven A-Major Cello Sonata with Feuermann (LX 641/643, recorded in 1937). From 1937-45 Hess made some discs for HMV, beginning with her first concerto recording, the Schumann Piano Concerto (C 2942/2945); two later concerto recordings were made, the Franck Symphonic Variations in 1941, and in 1942 an unissued Mozart C Major, K. 467. Major solo works recorded during this period include Schumann's *Carnaval* (C 3008/3010, recorded in 1938) and Ferguson's Sonata in F Minor (C 3335/3337, recorded in 1943). Hess also recorded around a dozen shorter works, including a Brahms group in 1941, the second 'Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring', and works by Scarlatti, Matthey, Ferguson, and Purcell (arr. Hess), and Haydn (unissued).

Except for the familiar Beethoven Cello Sonata performance, which makes yet another appearance on Pearl I, these 1930s and 1940s performances have appeared

less frequently. Pearl II offers the Schumann Concerto and *Carnaval*. APR offers the Brahms Trio and two previously unissued items, the Mozart Concerto and the first movement of the Haydn Sonata in D Major, Hob. XVI: 37 (recorded in 1945). The second side of the Haydn appears to have been destroyed, as were the Mozart masters. In the 1970s, test pressings were discovered for all but the last of the eight sides of the concerto; a tape dubbing made from the same test pressings was found that contained the final side, and was substituted.

None of the shorter HMV solos from this period are currently available. This is unfortunate, because, as I suggest above, this is a fine period for Hess. There is little sense in this confident playing of her apparent dislike of the recording process. The Schumann *Carnaval* (Pearl II) is quite convincing. This performance is well-played and generally strongly characterized; it is not high-powered playing, but is full of lively contrasts, and there is never any sense of loss of control. The side joins on the Pearl reissue are quite acceptable. I was interested to hear a number of unexpected octave doublings and registral adjustments in the bass for greater weight. (Another quibble with Pearl's programming: if a thematic program is desired, why include the MacDowell and Griffes sides with the Schumann items on Pearl II rather than the 1928 'Vogel als Prophet'?) The Haydn Sonata movement (APR) is a nice find, despite the dim recorded sound. The tempo is sprightly, the character is witty, and the conception as a whole is successful.

After the war Hess made a few LPs for HMV. It is sad that more commercial recordings were not attempted by this artist in these years. The solo works include a single 78-rpm disc of Bach made in 1949 (C 3960), the Beethoven Sonatas in E Major, op. 109, and A-flat Major, op. 110 (ALP 1169, recorded in 1953), the Schumann *Études symphoniques*, op. 13 (BLP 1061, recorded in 1954), and a disc of encores (BLP 1103, recorded in 1957). In addition Hess also made a second recording of the Schumann Concerto in 1954 (BLP 1039). The Beethoven Sonatas and the shorter works have been collected in the EMI reissue; the Schumann works last appeared on Seraphim LP 60009.

The Beethoven Sonatas are justly acclaimed. Without having the LP original on hand, I can't say exactly what changes have been wrought, but the sound on the EMI reissue is fine, mellow, even a bit tubby (typical of the period); the disc indicates that the sound has been computer-enhanced using the NoNoise process, fairly unobtrusively. Op. 109 is beautifully shaped and proportioned, expansive and autumnal but not under-energized. David Dubal calls this Hess' "greatest recording – and one of the glories of Beethoven performance."¹² It is, indeed, the recorded performance that comes closest to suggesting her art of communication, her ability to envelop and draw in her audience: it does not overwhelm, but does glow with a sense of rightness. Op. 110 is also probing, with a kind of relaxed focus; a magical moment is the return to the fugue in inversion. Still this performance lacks the final element of involvement that is said to have marked Hess' many live performances of these sonatas.

The recording of the *Symphonic Études* is consistent with the Beethoven sonata performances. Hess plays the usual confluence of Schumann's first and second versions. The autumnal character of her playing – Schumann for a late night! – is less appropriate in this work than in the Beethoven; and the contrast with the lively 1938 *Carnaval* is marked. Hess, in no hurry, plays thoughtfully rather than energetically; tempi are generally moderate, especially in those sections that are usually highly energized. The moderate tempo enhances the *agitato* quality of Étude 6; another delightful étude, particularly Mendelssohnian, is no. 5. The shape of the whole is

directed toward the penultimate étude, which is expansive and ever so delicately textured: on its own this quality would seem excessive, but it works in the context because of the scale of the whole.

Of the shorter works collected in the EMI reissue the highlights for me are the lovely, sensitive Granados 'Lover and Nightingale', the moving arrangement of the slow movement from the Bach Toccata, Adagio, and Fugue, BWV 564, and a charming Mendelssohn Song without Words. The playing elsewhere is undeniably musical, but not particularly involving. Still, the EMI issue is a valuable addition for the re-appearance of the Beethoven sonatas.

Hess excelled as a chamber musician. As Bryan Crimp puts it in his fine liner note for the APR release, "chamber music was, quite simply, a lifelong love that inexorably grew to a passion and which, perhaps, reached its climax with appearances at Casals' Prades Festival in 1951 and 1952." Hess' interpretations, Crimp writes, "are obviously rooted in the very heart of the music's substance and realised via an intimate yet direct playing style. Such an approach made her an ideal chamber player, one who could only work towards a common, shared goal." We are left only three studio chamber-music performances; these leave us wishing for more.

The recording of the Schubert B-flat Major Trio, D. 898, dates from December, 1927 (67436 D/67439 D, in set M 91; on APR). The performance is one of the highlights of the Hess discography. The work gets an impressive reading; the players are highly communicative and musically balanced. Salmond is an elegant player, and d'Aranyi plays with warmth and directness. Tempi are well-judged and well-integrated (somewhat less cohesively in the finale, which has some thorny shaping problems). The first movement in particular is nicely shaped. The slow movement is somewhat noisier. The sonic balance favors the strings, as it always does in early chamber recordings, but the transfer on APR is clear and otherwise natural.

The Beethoven Cello Sonata in A Major, op. 69 (Pearl I), is a famous performance about which much has been written; it has been available off and on since its initial release (LX 641/643). Feuermann is strong and direct, with dead-center intonation; the piano is relatively distant (one wishes for a more reasonable sonic relationship, at the slow introduction to the finale, for example), but Hess' playing is splendid. Overall the collaboration is integrated, a meeting of equals. The performance is disciplined and modern in outlook: energetic, muscular, and rhythmically straightforward, with few tempo adjustments. In the Scherzo Hess is crisp and business-like, and the two negotiate the syncopations most effectively. The Finale, after the players resolve some minor disagreements about tempo, is scintillating. (Pearl has also issued this performance in its series of Feuermann performances, on GEMM CD 9446, as has EMI, on CDH 7 64250 2, which I have not heard for comparison.) The present disc is reproduced vividly, although the source is rather noisy.

The piano is terribly distant in the 1935 recording of the Brahms C-Major Trio, op. 87 (LX 497/500, on APR), but it appears that again here is a partnership of equals. This is an impassioned and generally impressive performance. Cassadó is more distinguished here than is d'Aranyi, who plays with less suavity of tone than in 1928; both have a dark color. (Discounting for the problems of perspective, the ensemble produces an impressively big sound.) The performance is well-shaped, with general agreement about tempi. The slow movement is fairly lean and unexaggerated. Hess is brilliant in the Scherzo, which is stormy and intense. The performance as a whole is end-directed, pushing headlong into the finale, and continues to rush forward, yet Hess remains

admirably relaxed in the passagework.

The live performance of the same work from the 1952 Prades Festival (with Szigeti and Casals, Columbia ML 4720, reissued on Sony) is quite different in character. Here are three great musicians enjoying themselves in a performance that is all of a piece. Casals called this performance "one of the most beautiful and moving of chamber-music recordings."¹³ The first movement is genial, well-behaved and expansive, and the stormier aspects are downplayed; as a result the concluding pages don't work terribly well. The centerpiece of the performance is the slow movement, which is extremely moving, full of *Innigkeit*; the pulse is not much slower than that of the earlier performance, but it seems so. The Scherzo is also relaxed, which lends the movement a ghostly character. Only the Finale sounds under-energized, but improves as it proceeds. Intonation is generally secure.

The Brahms C-Major Trio is not the most distinguished of the Hess Prades performances, but it is the only one currently available (surprising, since much Prades Festival material has appeared on compact disc). Other Hess performances include the Brahms C-Minor Quartet, op. 60 (with Szigeti, Katims, and Tortelier, on ML 4712); Brahms B-Major Trio, op. 8 (with Stern and Casals, on ML 4719); Schubert A-Major Sonata, D. 574 (with Szigeti, on ML 4717); the Schumann E-flat Quintet, op. 44 (with Stern, Schneider, Katims, and Tortelier, on ML 4711). These should certainly be returned to circulation without delay.

Another significant addition to our picture of Hess as a chamber player is most of a 1960 Edinburgh recital with Isaac Stern (M&A). These three mostly lyrical works offer evidence of a fine partnership. The Brahms A-Major Sonata is imbued with warmth and has many treasurable moments. The Schubert Sonatina is essayed in suitably *galant* style. The Beethoven suits the players well: in this lyrical work, their approach is genial and gracious. The slow movement is quite intimate and moving. In the lighter variation finale they don't seem to me to be entirely on the same wavelength: Stern strives for a bit more rustic charm, Hess is more suave. Stern's tone is generally warm, just a bit edgy, while Hess' technique is generally sound. The sound reproduced on the M&A discs is fine.

A work that was particularly associated with Hess was the Schumann A-Minor Concerto. She made two commercial recordings, and there is also a live performance available. Her first recording of the work was made in 1937 (C 2942/2945) with a pick-up orchestra conducted by Walter Goehr. Charles Haynes observes in his liner note for the reissue on Pearl II that "the recorded orchestral overlap on the original 78s is imperfect to such an extent that a seamless join between the first two sides is impossible to achieve" [also between the several other sides as well, for that matter]. In the 1937 Concerto, the highlight for me was the *Andante espressivo* section in the first movement, which is remarkably atmospheric. Haynes writes, "Goehr's direction of what is presumably an *ad hoc* and not particularly wonderful studio orchestra seems to lack vitality," a comment which applies particularly to the orchestra's contribution to the tricky last movement (in parts of which there is also some poor intonation from the winds). Still the performance has good ebb and flow throughout, and a good deal of alertness and crisp energy on Hess' part.

A commercial remake followed in 1954, with Rudolf Schwartz leading the Philharmonia Orchestra (BLP 1039, most recently available as Seraphim LP 60009). I remembered this performance to be more lethargic than it is, but a rehearing reveals a very convincing performance of the lyrical type: thoughtful, spacious, relaxed, affec-

tionate, and beautifully played. The piano is a little too distantly recorded. The change in Hess' playing between the 1937 and 1954 recordings of this concerto is entirely consistent with the differences between the 1938 recording of *Carnaval* and the 1954 recording of the *Symphonic Études*.

A live performance of the Schumann Concerto from February 10, 1952, has been published, with the New York Philharmonic under Dimitri Mitropoulos (on Melodram MEL 18024, which gives the date as 1958, and also available on AS Disc AS-627, where it is properly dated). Mitropoulos and the live context add an element of intensity and a flexibility to the flow of the phrasing that is lacking in the 1954 studio performance; to my mind the change is convincing. Throughout, the orchestral playing is distinguished and fully committed. An excellent example in the first movement is the build-up before the cadenza to the end of the movement. In that same movement the *Andante espressivo* section is indisputably gorgeous. In the hands of Mitropoulos, the orchestra takes the lead in the slow movement, and plays beautifully. As in the two commercial recordings, the third movement is not completely convincing. The sound on this aircheck is barely adequate on either CD issue; tutti are clouded and unpleasant, though quiet passages and piano solos are clear enough.

Hess performed all of the Mozart concertos during the National Gallery concerts during World War II. A number of Mozart concerto recordings are currently available; unfortunately none of the available live performances makes a completely convincing case for Hess as Mozartean. We are lucky to have both a commercial and live performance of the C-major Concerto, K. 467. In this case, the winner is the studio performance (on APR). This 1942 recording with Leslie Heward – not previously published – is both flexible and involved. I found myself quite swept along by the flow of the middle of the first movement. The orchestral contribution is tonally edgy (though better in the slow movement), but musically sensitive and committed; Hess and Heward see eye-to-eye. Some of the side joins do not match exactly; Crimp observes in his liner notes that the project “was bedevilled by pitch fluctuation presumably as a result of erratic electricity supplies then prevalent in war-torn Manchester,” where this recording was made. Otherwise the transfer from the shellac test pressings is excellent.

A concert performance of K. 467 with Stokowski, dating from February 6, 1949, has been issued in the recent Music & Arts set. The artistic collaboration here shows less affinity than Hess/Heward, but is fascinating.¹⁴ In the first movement, the pace is very relaxed and mellow at the beginning, Stokowski seemingly wishing to be supremely suave; things heat up a bit later. Unusual for her, Hess even shows signs of impatience in the recapitulation, and there are a few smudges in her playing. The slow movement is very smooth and connected, with some nice contributions from the woodwinds; Hess' phrasing is personal and carefully crafted. Yet the result is not hypnotic, but rather bland. The finale is spirited, but again I detect a fundamental lack of sympathy between pianist and conductor about tempi. The reproduction is acceptable, but the source is noisy at the beginning.

The E-flat Major Concerto, K. 271, with Pablo Casals, from the Perpignan Festival of July, 1951, appears on the Melodram disc with the Schumann (originally on Columbia ML-4568; as with the companion Schumann Concerto on this Melodram issue, the date is incorrectly given). The first movement is spirited, in the modern manner. The conductor is gruff and rustic, and Hess comes along for the ride. Of course it is in slower tempi that our view of late eighteenth-century tempo has changed most, and, in the slow movement, Hess sounds decidedly old-fashioned; her *andantino* is way too slow, of course, but it is also intense and beautiful – a tragic

operatic *molto adagio*. Hess gave credit to the conductor, lauding this “wonderful Casals quality in the slow movement. He made the orchestra play with their hearts...”¹⁵ The finale – except in that movement’s unusual interpolated minuet, which is nicely played – romps along, lacking only the requisite element of humor. Generally I enjoyed the performance. (There is a tape problem in the first of the last-movement cadenzas.) The sound is fine, pretty much the same as on a Columbia LP reissue I had on hand. The packaging of this disc is pretty shoddy and there is no liner note.

There are two other Mozart performances in the M&A set (the A-Major, K. 414 and B-flat Major, K. 595, with Robert Scholz and the American Chamber Orchestra, from a March 20, 1956 performance) that are more easily dispensable. The A-Major Concerto is thoroughly bland: Hess’ approach to the first movement is well-articulated, but not terribly interesting. The underpowered and undistinguished orchestra is generally not up to the task, and the strings especially enervated. Things go better in the B-flat Major: Hess’ playing in the slow movement is very beautifully shaded, and the finale is rollicking and spirited. The acoustic is very dry, and there are some annoying flaws in the source signal in the first movement.

More significant are two other Mozart performances, with Bruno Walter and the New York Philharmonic. These have been issued on Music & Arts CD-275 (and on AS Disc AS 401): a 1954 E-flat Concerto, K. 449, and a 1956 D-Minor Concerto, K. 466. The D-Minor Concerto fails to convince completely, though it’s hard to isolate the problem. Indeed, the audience seems thoroughly delighted at the end. For one thing, Hess tends to hold back a bit at big moments and is in general too polite for this stormy music. The slow movement is intriguing for Hess’ properly *alla breve* treatment of the first theme (she does the two-in-a-bar much better than does the conductor), though she does not maintain her initial brisk tempo for the secondary theme. Critic Louis Biancoli reported that the return of the opening music of the slow movement (after the stormy G-Minor section) was like the dawn itself; he noticed several people in the audience “wiping tears from their eyes from the sheer ache of the beauty heard and shared.”¹⁶ Walter’s orchestra tends to underarticulate throughout, and the sound is boomy in the orchestral tuttis.

The E-flat Major, K. 449 suffers from a touch of the same problem of underarticulation, but to a much lesser degree: this performance is quite impressive. The initial orchestral ritornello crackles from the start; at Hess’ entry the pianist is overly controlled, which releases some of the momentum. In the development, the pianist and conductor communicate effectively. The *andantino* slow movement is lovely. After a shaky start to the finale (insecurity of tempo), things improve considerably; the charm here is palpable. This concerto is the finest of the available live Mozart performances.

In the Music & Arts set, the nineteenth-century concertos – by Beethoven and Brahms – offer a more natural Hess voice, one that helps considerably to round out our picture of her playing. What we get in places here is a greater feeling of fluidity: ebbs and flows in both pulse and dynamics. Though Hess is rarely a viscerally exciting performer, she makes up for this in these performances by a living, breathing vitality, a sense that the work is being composed out in front of us. This is a different Hess than we have seen.

The two Beethoven collaborations – a Beethoven G-Major (Boult, 1952) and ‘Emperor’ (Kurtz, 1953) – are quite successful. (I have never heard Hess’ highly praised Beethoven C-Minor Concerto collaboration with Toscanini from 1946, currently available on Melodram MEL-28031.) The 1953 ‘Emperor’ with Efrem Kurtz and the New York Philharmonic is a fine reading. It is a performance that moves fluidly

between propulsiveness and relaxation. Kurtz tends to move things along briskly, the orchestra plays well, and pianist and conductor are very sympathetic partners. There is no shortage of power from either contributor in the fluid first movement, and here some moments are decidedly exciting. The players make an effective dynamic shape that suggests a global view of the work. By contrast, the slow movement is reticently characterized, pale and understated. The Rondo is marred only by rather clumsy treatment by Hess of the first few appearances of the main theme. The sound is quite good.

The G-Major Concerto with Hess' frequent partner Boult (from a 1952 Beethoven cycle) is another successful performance. The first movement catches Hess in a generally lean but mercurial mood. Pulse is quite fluid; here again the two partners communicate with each other flawlessly. Some of the playing is quite exciting, including the first movement cadenza. The last movement is very impassioned. The sound of the BBC Symphony is tonally warmer than that of the New York Philharmonic and their playing is very responsive. The recorded sound is thin but adequate.

In the Brahms B-flat Major Concerto with Walter, from 1951, it is Hess, not Walter, who is the conceptual driving force. For Hess, the B-flat Concerto is clearly a work that must be conquered. To achieve that goal, Hess compellingly throws caution to the wind, and allows a smoldering passion to emerge. Especially in the first movement she grabs the music by the scruff of the neck and shakes it. Her playing is nonetheless accurate, and even exciting when she goes over the edge. The heartfelt slow movement should also not be missed. Louis Biancoli observed "Under [Walter's] baton she played as if every phrase was in the safe-keeping of a loving heart. Beyond the mere succession of notes audiences could feel the greatness of soul in these two artists. This concerto of Brahms was the perfect ground on which they could unite."¹⁷ The sound is fine.

In summary, then, much of the material in the new Music & Arts set is valuable, especially the impressive Brahms and Beethoven concertos. Should these ever become available separately, snap them up, if you've not already sprung for the larger set. The rest of the set is hardly indispensable, but Hess aficionados will find much of interest. (The informative liner note by Donald Manildi also deserves mention.) There is much to enjoy in the individual Melodram and Music & Arts concerto discs as well. For the Schubert and Brahms trios and the newly released material, the APR is a valuable issue, and nicely produced. EMI is invaluable for the reissue of the Beethoven sonatas and a few other gems. The Pearl issues are more mixed. The mostly Schumann disc (Pearl II) is generally acceptable, while Pearl I is less so, for the reasons discussed above.

A remaining hole in the available Hess discography is the series of recordings made during the loosely defined middle period. During this period Hess' playing had an impressive energy and confidence; these performances from the late 30s and early 40s would make a nice set. Any takers? I would also like to see publication of a more accurate, comprehensive, and scholarly issue of the early recordings; what we have now is inadequate.

It is clear that the live performances do round out our picture of the playing of Myra Hess. In the better of Hess' concerto performances one striking quality – a quality not to be found in her studio recordings – is a fluidity of pulse and dynamics that helps us to understand her famed gift for communication. At times there is even a degree of visceral excitement. On the basis of the recorded evidence, however, I am

unconvinced that there is a glaring disjunction between Hess in live performance and Hess in the studio. The overall picture presented by her recorded legacy is for the most part all of a piece. Hess was a solid and always musical player. If she was not a glowingly insightful interpreter, she did present an impression of the musical work largely unadulterated by personal mannerism. At times, in chamber-music contexts in particular, the music flows with an impressive naturalness. These are notable achievements, confirming Hess' stature as a significant twentieth-century artist.

Jeffrey Hollander, Assistant Professor of Music at Franklin & Marshall College, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, is a musicologist who writes on performance issues. His PhD dissertation from the University of California, Shaping the Interpretation, Interpreting the Shape, is a comparative performance study of four frequently recorded works of Chopin.

Endnotes

1. Lassimonne D., comp. *Myra Hess by her Friends* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1966): Sir Kenneth Clark, "Music in Place of Pictures," p. 57.
2. McKenna M. *Myra Hess: A Portrait* (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1976): p. 211.
3. Chasins A. *Speaking of Pianists* (3rd ed., New York: Da Capo Press, 1981): p. 152.
4. McKenna. *Myra Hess: Virgil Thomson, New York Herald Tribune*, January 14, 1951, p. 233.
5. Lassimonne. *Myra Hess by her Friends: Arthur Mendel*, "Myra and her Audience," p. 40.
6. Lassimonne D., *Myra Hess by her Friends: Mendel*, "Myra and her Audience," p. 39.
7. Lassimonne D., *Myra Hess by her Friends: Mendel*, "Myra and her Audience," p. 38.
8. Dubal D. *The Art of the Piano* (New York: Summit Books, 1989): p. 125.
9. McKenna. *Myra Hess*: p. 106.
10. A comparison between 1940 and 1957 performances of a Scarlatti G-Major Sonata (K. 14/L. 387) yields a similar result: the earlier (HMV B 9035) recording demonstrates the same control and exudes total confidence, while the later version (HMV BLP 1103, on EMI) is just slightly harried.
11. These ten titles plus one additional work were issued on a 1985 Pearl LP, GEMM 288.
12. Dubal. *The Art of the Piano*, p. 125.
13. McKenna. *Myra Hess*: "Un des plus beaux et émouvant enregistrements de musique de chambre", Letter to Szigeti, p. 108.
14. McKenna. *Myra Hess*: Hess' comments about her 1949 performances of K. 467 and the Brahms D-Minor. Concerto with Stokowski are equally fascinating. "The performances with Stoko were very odd... He worked terrifically, and thank Heaven changed his appallingly quick tempi, but although he took so much trouble and enjoyed the performance himself, I didn't feel there was anyone there...if you can understand what I mean?? You don't feel that there is any fundamental musicianship, in spite of his colossal talent as a conductor..." p. 219.
15. McKenna. *Myra Hess*: Hess letter to Ted Ferris, p. 234.
16. McKenna. *Myra Hess: Biancoli, New York World Telegram*, March 5, 1956, p. 242.
17. McKenna. *Myra Hess: Biancoli, New York World Telegram-Sun*, February 9, 1951, p. 233.