

Mozart Piano Works Walter Giesecking

In the light of his close identification with French music, especially in the latter part of his career, it is sometimes a matter of surprise that Walter Giesecking was German. In fact he was born in France, at Lyons, on November 5th 1895, his father being a distinguished German entomologist. During the pianist's boyhood the family journeyed extensively in France and in Italy, and he was privately educated. Though beginning to play at four, he did not start systematic instruction until sixteen, at the Hanover Conservatoire. Giesecking's debut came within a year, though, and at twenty he gave a nearly complete cycle of Beethoven's piano sonatas.

His career was interrupted by World War I, but afterwards he soon became noted for his adventurous programmes, including then-unfamiliar scores by Szymanowski, Schoenberg, Busoni, Hindemith. His first London appearance was in 1923, in New York in 1926, in Paris in 1928. From then until his death — in London on October 26th 1956 — Giesecking enjoyed worldwide fame and success. Despite the outstanding refinement of his interpretations of French works, his repertoire extended far into many other fields, and unlike some comparable international figures he listened to himself intently until the end. A characteristic example of his powers and scope is this complete set of all Mozart's solo piano music. At the time of his death he was engaged in recording the complete sequence of Beethoven's piano sonatas.

Mozart's piano sonatas do not chart his

overall growth as a composer as Beethoven's virtually do his, nor does his keyboard output convey the full, and of course extraordinary, emotional range of his music as a whole. But a study of the gradual development of Mozart's piano style, facilitated by these records, is a fascinating experience. His childhood pieces, with whatever help he was given by his father, begin conventionally enough and probably date from 1761-2, his sixth and seven years. K.1-5 *etc.* are melodies with simple accompaniments, and the variation sets K.24-5 of 1766 do not take matters much further.

Serious business commences with the Sonatas K.279-83, apparently composed as a set early in 1775, but it is with the "Dürnitz" Sonata K.284 of later the same year that Mozart's genius erupts for the first time in his piano music. Brilliant and positively orchestral in conception, this was for the Baron von Dürnitz, an amateur for whom he also wrote the Bassoon Concerto. Composed at Mannheim in 1777, the Sonata K.309 has some features, such as the opening gesture, which reflect the Mannheim style. It was for Rosa Cannabich, daughter of a prominent Mannheim musician, and the *Andante* is a portrait of her. Also from that time is K.311, but a far weightier affair is the Sonata K.310, written in Paris in 1778 and his first minor-key sonata. It is also his earliest great work in the form, as is suggested by the immediate call to attention of its precipitate opening.

Not all the sonatas can be mentioned here,

still less their individual movements, but the especially beautiful *Andante* of K.330 must be noted. This is one of three sonatas now known to have been composed either in Munich or Vienna during 1781-3. Once the most familiar of Mozart sonatas, K.331 is also the one to depart farthest from the normal sonata groundplan. It opens with highly resourceful variations on a theme in his sunniest A major vein, continues with a very striking Minuet and ends with the famous *Rondo alla Turca*, reminding us of his larger essays in this "exotic" idiom in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, first heard in 1782. A more usual plan is followed by K.332, a large, elaborate piece with rich figuration and much drama. Harmonic and rhythmic audacities are features of K.333, written in 1783-4, not least in the *Andante* — for instance after the double bar.

Another landmark is the Sonata K.457 of 1784, which Mozart aptly published with the *Fantasia* K.475 of the following year. Although they are independent works, when performed together each heightens the effect of the other and these two C minor compositions form the summit of Mozart's contribution to piano solo literature. No mere prelude, the *Fantasia* is extraordinarily imaginative, free yet disciplined; and presumably like the other fantasias it gives us an idea of what his improvisations were like. The Sonata's movements are all developed on a large scale with the final rondo perhaps the most remarkable. With its syncopated main theme and dramatic pauses, this highly charged movement brings a great, often agi-

tated, work to a particularly memorable conclusion.

Almost as exceptional is the compound Sonata K.533 of 1786 with a revision of the earlier Rondo K.494. Containing the most consistently polyphonic writing to be found in his piano sonatas, the first two movements must have been composed to please himself. Austere, even harsh, they are full of severe dignity yet, as ever with Mozart, all the technical ingenuity yields beautiful music. So it does again in the last sonata, K.576 of 1789, where, for example, in the *Allegro* and *Allegretto* the main second group ideas are derived contrapuntally from those of the first.

To these works must be added a considerable number of miscellaneous pieces, for instance the two Rondos K.485 and 511, the latter, in an introspective A minor, being of high poetic content. It dates from 1787 and stands with the following year's *Adagio* in B minor K.540 as one of Mozart's finest independent movements. There also are many sets of variations, highly placed among which is K.455 or 1784. These are on the song "Unser dummer Pöbel meint" from Gluck's *Die Pilgrime von Mekka* which Mozart first adapts for his own needs and then varies with great but light-fingered inventiveness, sometimes evoking his orchestral writing, especially for woodwinds. Closer to the level of the Rondo in A minor and B minor *Adagio*, though, is the Gigue K.574 of 1789, a brief yet lively and surpassingly clever piece, packed with contrapuntal sleight-of-hand turned to expressive ends.

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