

REPLAY

Rob Cowan's monthly survey of historic reissues and archive recordings



A Giesecking anniversary collection

Last year marked the 130th anniversary of the birth of the great French-born German pianist Walter Giesecking, a prolific if variable studio recording artist widely acclaimed for his interpretations of works by Classical, Romantic and early 20th-century composers, Debussy and Ravel in particular. Back in 2022 Warner Classics released a 48-disc set of Giesecking's Columbia Graphophone recordings (1/23), reaching from early shellac discs to the stereo era (including a near-completed Beethoven sonata cycle). With its 29-CD set Meloclassic picks up where Warner left off, adding, among many new items, Beethoven's last sonata, Op 111, which Giesecking never recorded for Warner, with its reckless first movement (no repeat) and perfectly paced chords at the start of the Arietta. The whole of the second movement sounds improvised, especially the 'Beethoven does boogie' variation (if you'll forgive the somewhat irreverent reference), which Giesecking storms through like a devil possessed.

As for Mozart, in his book *Speaking of Pianists* (Alfred A Knopf: 1957) pianist/music journalist Abram Chasins bemoans the pianist's extensive Mozart sequence for Warner (then Columbia) with the words 'a fragile sonority for Mozart the dramatist is damaging enough, but a curtailed expressivity renders him lifeless. One can shrug a shoulder and smile sadly at some uncomprehending pianist who will take a visionary and passionate Mozart masterpiece and treat it with the cool efficiency of a respectful robot,' but from Giesecking, 'whose flaming power in the French repertoire is a lesson for all, it is impossible to accept a strait-jacketed Mozart ...'. The Mozart broadcasts and live recordings included by Meloclassic come to life more willingly but when you consider the set's real highlights (and there are many), it's difficult to fathom why the EMI of the day (and bigwig producer Walter Legge in particular) didn't commission more than a couple of Scriabin

recordings – music by an Impressionist on fire – from Giesecking, leaving the Mozart to a Solomon or a Kentner.

I mention Scriabin because in addition to a number of highly charged shorter pieces, here Giesecking demonically throws himself at the Third, Fifth, Seventh and Ninth Sonatas, none of which he recorded commercially. The Seventh Sonata is one of Scriabin's most advanced works but notable Scriabin masters such as Horowitz or Sofronitsky didn't either play or record the piece. Mind you, the concise but explosive Fifth Sonata seems to nurture burning embers that anticipate the Seventh and Ninth. Other rarities include works by Hans Pfitzner, whose Piano Quintet in C, Op 23, survives in an incomplete recording where Giesecking joins members of the Strub Quartet as manned in 1941. Rachmaninov's Second and Third Concertos (conducted by Willem Mengelberg in Amsterdam and John Barbirolli in New York respectively), although heated to a fault, are inclined to boil over (the Third especially). Pfitzner's sombre-hued Piano Concerto is superbly played by Giesecking (Albert Bittner conducts) whereas Brahms's First Concerto, where Giesecking is fully in his element, is masterfully conducted by Hans Rosbaud. On home turf Giesecking offers us both sets of Debussy *Préludes* complete.

There are recorded interviews in French and German, while the DVD – which contains the only visual records we have of Giesecking playing – is very short measure. That said, it's an inspiration to watch (especially in part of 'Clair de lune') this giant of a man with huge hands – which he crosses frequently – caressing the keys as if weightlessly, his tone full yet delicate, his finger velocity unostentatiously deployed. There are also extracts from Tchaikovsky's B flat Concerto filmed for a movie, *Finale 1948*, where we see the youthful actor Peter Schütte at the keys and the orchestra directed by one Winfried Zillig (who in real musical life was responsible for completing the score of the oratorio


Die Jakobsleiter, which his former teacher Arnold Schoenberg had left unfinished, at the request of the composer's widow).

Aside from being a dedicated musician, Giesecking himself was a lepidopterist, devoting much time to the collecting of butterflies and moths. Evidence of this love is on the DVD and his private collection can be seen in the Natural History Collections of the Museum Wiesbaden. Parallel to Giesecking's work as a performing artist, he was also a composer. During his lifetime his compositions were hardly known, and he made no attempt to publicise them, though some are included by Meloclassic.

And there's Michael Waiblinger's 640-page book *A Pianist's Journey Through the 20th Century*, which includes more than 190 photographic images, some of them factually uncomfortable (Wilhelm Backhaus gleefully shaking hands with Adolf Hitler) and some certainly unexpected (Giesecking at a table where at the other end sits James Dean). The war years are covered in depth. We learn of artists who appeared at Kraft durch Freude ('Strength Through Joy') events, a German NSDAP-operated leisure organisation in Nazi Germany. Names that crop up include Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, Pina Carmirelli, Gioconda de Vito, Emil Telmányi and Dinu Lipatti. I don't quote these musicians in an accusatory way, just in order to stress, as Waiblinger points out, that none of them faced subsequent criticism for their wartime performances before Nazi audiences. Others weren't so fortunate. Even more interesting is the full printing of a post-war US military interrogation of Giesecking. This and so much more to ponder, printed on luxurious gloss paper. A fabulous release.

THE RECORDING



130th Anniversary Edition 
Walter Giesecking
Meloclassic (29 CDs + DVD)
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