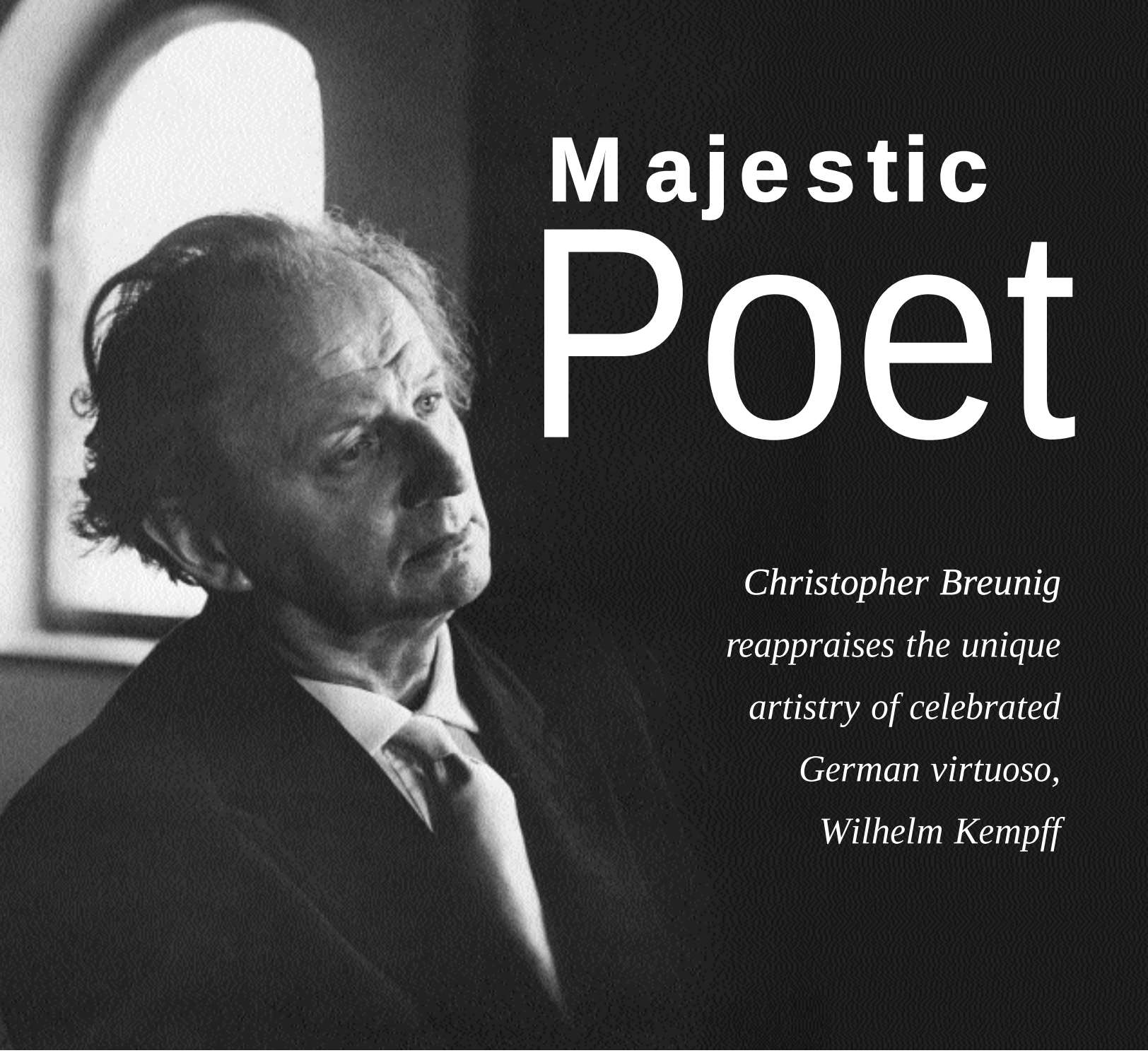


Majestic Poet

Christopher Breunig reappraises the unique artistry of celebrated German virtuoso, Wilhelm Kempff

His face fills the screen. You notice the shaving cut on his cheek, the skin pigmentation dots that come with old age. Listening intently, sometimes he glances down; just as often he's looking up, much as a man might watching the circling of gulls over the sea's edge. When the music moves into more adventurous harmonies, an expression almost of concern crosses Kempff's face. The medium, of course, is the DVD: a carrier of increasing, repeatable delight to the pianophile as archive material comes into the public domain. (Who could forget, for instance, the historic clip of Horowitz's hands, uniquely curved, flickering over the keys – part of Warner's *Art of Piano*?)

1970 colour film of Beethoven's Piano Sonatas Nos.14 and 27 is on the EMI/IMG disc devoted to Wilhelm Kempff (DVB 4 90447 9), together with the *Tempest* (where we hear Kempff speaking in French before the performance given in 1968 – part of the beginning of *(i)* is missing), Schumann's *Arabeske* and *Papillons* from 1961 – all from the ORTF Studios – and, best of all, the *Davidsbündlertänze*, filmed at the Besançon Festival in 1963. From this blurry footage we can appreciate Kempff's remark that his personal approach came 'from the spirit of the instrument', and we get that image of fusion, man and instrument, which was the hallmark of (to give another example) Michelangeli when seated at the piano. In the 1970 Paris film, we see Kempff, then 75, sitting relatively distant from the keyboard.

Beethoven was central to his art: the *Hammerklavier* won him the Mendelssohn Prize as a student of Heinrich Barth (also Artur Rubinstein's teacher); he played the Fourth Concerto under Nikisch when making his Berlin Philharmonic debut in 1918; the *Ecossaise*, WoO86, and C major *Bagatelle*, Op.33 No.5, were his first recordings, made in Berlin in 1920, where apparently he mutters '*Donnerwetter!*' after a finger-slip in Op.33. He began to record the sonatas on shellac from 1929, later completing two LP cycles, mono and stereo, for Deutsche Grammophon, but his 78rpm sets lacked Nos.3, 11, 13, 15, 17 and 28. The instruments were by Bechstein and Grotrian-Steinweg. *[See p.54.]*

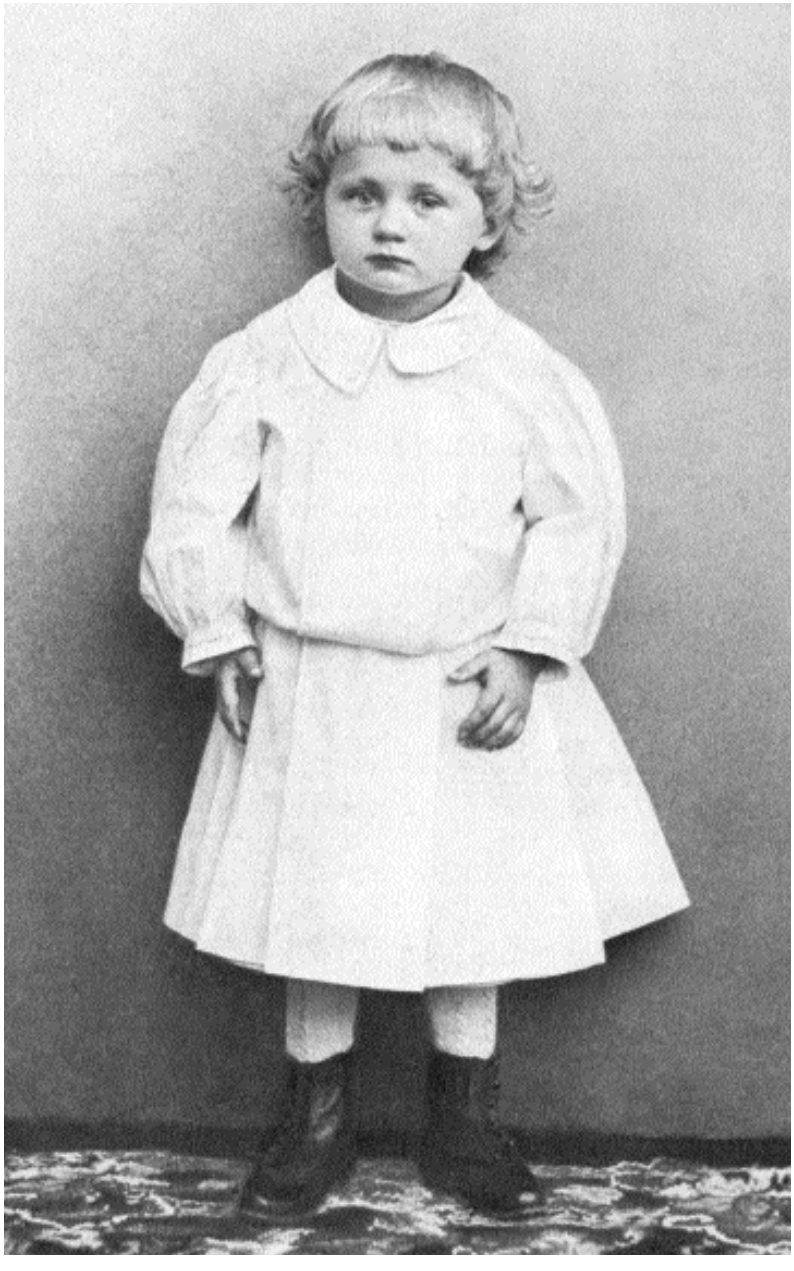
A reference discography by Frank Forman, updated in 1996, may be seen at http://www.trovar.com/Kempff.html. Subsequently, there have been CD releases from live performances given in London on BBC Legends and, on Orfeo, the one recital he gave at the Salzburg Festival in 1958. What we really need is a discography identifying the current numbers and availability of CD transfers. Forman believes that Kempff's last issued recordings of Bach and Mozart may have been undertaken well before the DG publication dates – Mozart's Concertos K467 and 482 with the Bavarian RSO under Bernhard Klee, for instance, appearing as late as 1982.

Kempff was born on 25 November 1895 at Jüterborg, in the Brandenburg province, to Clara and Wilhelm Kempff, cantor and organist (his grandfather was also an organist – it's not surprising then that Kempff's first autobiographical book, *Unter dem Zimbelstern*, should make reference to that instrument's stop with revolving star and small bells, played at Christmas-time). The family moved to Potsdam in 1899 and – although he did not take to the violin as his father had wished – he was playing and improvising at the keyboard as a small child; aged six he appeared at a Potsdam musical evening and played a Mozart sonata. He was only nine when he was sent to the Berlin Musikhochschule, where his skills in fugue improvisation and key transpositions impressed the examiners. Kempff studied composition with Robert Kahn, keyboard (as noted above) with Barth.

Heinrich Barth had been a pupil of Hans von Bülow, who had studied with Liszt (later becoming his son-in-law); he in turn had met Beethoven. Kempff would describe this as a 'genealogical descent' – I suspect more light-heartedly than the comparable Krause-Liszt-Czerny-Beethoven lineage, frequently voiced by devotees of Claudio Arrau! These 'musical family trees' are invariably suspect: take Kempff's three most renowned students – Idil Biret (his favourite, with whom he played Mozart's Double Concerto at a Paris concert with Keilberth conducting in 1953, when the Turkish pianist was only eleven), Gerhard Oppitz and Angela Hewitt. How dissimilar they sound!

Kempff's composing skills led to his election to membership of the Prussian Academy of Arts in 1932. Completing a Piano Sonata and Piano Trio in his teens, he had by then already written a Piano Concerto (B minor) and two symphonies, the First (E flat) for large orchestra, the Second (D minor) given by Wilhelm Furtwängler and the Leipzig Gewandhaus; also the tone-poem *Das verlorne Paradis*, and two stage works – S*zenisches Mysterium von der Geburt des Herrn* (1925) and *König Midas* (1930). Also heard that year were a

opposite **Wilhelm Kempff**
below **Wilhelm Kempff aged two, in 1897**
Photos Tully Potter Collection



above **Wilhelm Kempff**
opposite **Wilhelm Kempff sat at the piano, c.1955**
Photos Tully Potter Collection

G minor Violin Concerto (Georg Kulenkampff/Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt) and *Ein Totentanz* (for piano, string orchestra, percussion and choir). *Familie Gozzi* and *Die Fassnacht von Rottweil* (libretto also by Kempff) followed in 1934/37. 'An outstanding organist and pianist with an original and individual style,' noted an *Opera Guide* reviewer of Kempff. 'His operatic output is gaining increasing attention.'

Kempff continued to compose over the years – a G minor Piano Sonata in 1944; *Legende* for piano and orchestra; *Der Spiegel des Hamlet* in 1947; an *Italian Suite* in 1950; two pieces for string orchestra in 1958/59, *Positano-Suite* and *Epitaph* (the former recorded by Koch Classics with the 1939 orchestral suite *Arkadische* and *Ein Totentanz*) – but seems not to have promoted his own works strongly. His piano transcriptions of Bach, Gluck, Handel and Mozart were published in Germany by Bote & Boch. Given his long relationship with DG, it's surprising that nothing more was set down of Kempff's own music than four Lieder, settings of poetry by CF Meyer.

A 1964 recording with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau came on a bonus disc with the mono Beethoven sonatas cycle reissued on CD to mark Kempff's centenary year (DG 447 966-2). On that disc were extracts of Kempff speaking in a 1952 SDR programme, playing a Chopin nocturne and giving an improvised setting of Bach's BWV307/734. One of the tracks is an account, read from the autobiography, of being taken aged seventeen to meet Busoni. His light tenor voice and quick speech patterns somehow don't quite match our preconceptions of how he might speak. We also hear two Bach chorales played by Kempff at the Hiroshima World Peace Church, when the organ was dedicated in 1954.

Kempff's career as a soloist took off when he was 23; he gave his first Berlin Singakademie programme of late Beethoven in 1917 and played in Scandinavia in 1919/20, receiving a Swedish Arts Award. He was also welcomed by Sibelius who, in his last year, asked Kempff if he would play the *Hammerklavier* once more for him. 'It dawns on me during the *Adagio*,' wrote Kempff at that time (1957), 'this is the only work which may fittingly be played for this great and lonely man of Järvenpää.' Sibelius in turn remarked that he had played 'not like a pianist but like a human being'.

Kempff made his Athens debut under Mitropoulos in 1932; in 1934 he visited South America, flying in the Graf Zeppelin as guest of honour; his Japan debut came in 1936. He did not appear in London until 1951 and in New York in 1964 (Carnegie Hall), although he had played Beethoven's Third Concerto in Montreal, under Wilfried Pelletier, five years before that. (A 1966 Montreal performance, this time with Franz-Paul Dekker accompanying, has appeared on Music & Arts CD-4768, coupled with the *Emperor*, w/Toronto SO/Ozawa, also 1966.)

In 1942, he and Cortot appeared at a Paris exhibition of work by Kempff's sculptor-friend Arno Breker (who made a bronze bust of the pianist); they also took part in the occupied city's 1943 Beethoven Festival, along with Ginette Neveu, Elly Ney and Hermann Abendroth. At the end of the war Kempff became drafted into the Volkssturm as an instructor to an armoured section; he and his family had to leave their home in 1945. Kempff gave his final Berlin concert that spring (the Schumann Concerto, Robert Heger conducting) and after the collapse of the Nazis found his appearances temporarily blocked by the American forces.

The pianist's last public performance was in Paris in 1981; it was announced that he had Parkinson's Disease and he retired to Positano, Italy, where in 1957 he had founded a Kulturstiftung

(Foundation) to assist talented young pianists. Wilhelm Kempff died at his home there on 23 May 1991; his wife Helene von Gaertringen had predeceased him – they were married in Berlin in 1926 and had five children.

Interestingly, although he'd premiered his Second Symphony in 1924 (in which year Kempff also became head of the Württemberg Musikhochschule Stuttgart), Furtwängler invited Kempff to take part in only four programmes with the Berlin Philharmonic between 1922-1945: Gieseking, Schnabel and Fischer were more frequent soloists, but Kempff played just Beethoven's First Concerto in 1929, the Fourth in 1941, the Schumann in 1931, Bach's Triple Concerto in 1940 – and nothing post-war. In 1940, when Karajan was at Aachen, they performed Mozart's D minor Concerto, K466; there was a Cetra LP of the same work with Karajan and the BPO (live, 1956) but these Deutsche Grammophon 'stars' never recorded together for the yellow label. Indeed, the writer Gottfried Kraus implies in his note on Kempff and Salzburg that Karajan may have influenced the Board against further engagements there, on the grounds that he was of the 'old guard'. Another commentator, Stephen Plaistow, suggests that he was venerated in Germany only in his later years, otherwise 'marked down as an eccentric and undervalued'.

I saw Kempff only in the 1970s – a few recitals and a Mozart performance with Previn and the LSO. He looked a rather unassuming man (I'm

'Musical family trees' are invariably suspect: take Kempff's three most renowned students – Biret, Oppitz and Hewitt. How dissimilar they sound!

tempted to say he was like a classics teacher at a decent school, but things have so changed over the years I probably couldn't distinguish a master from some of the older boys at a school today!), unshowy, not creating the 'buzz' of Rubinstein or Michelangeli, Pollini or Brendel, when he came onto the platform. He looked as if he was listening to the music anew rather than giving 'a performance'. There was something private about these occasions, as if we were eavesdroppers.

That intimacy was to be found in the recordings. Variability too. Alfred Brendel said that 'he played on impulse ... it depended on whether the right breeze, as with an aeolian harp, was blowing. You would then take something home that you never heard elsewhere,' (*The Veil of Order*; Faber and Faber). Brendel – who had a hand in programming the Kempff volumes in Philips's 'Great Pianists' series – found him the most rhythmical of his confrères, one whose tempos were determined by the smallest note-values. Yet some critics noted 'a tendency to meander, to wander off into a kind of daydream' (Jeremy Siepmann); the *Gramophone* reviewer Joan Chissell thought Kempff was, in Schumann at least, 'a teller of tall tales'. It was this sort of negative writing, common in the British press in the 1950s-60s, which intrigued me; I began collecting the Beethoven sonata LPs invariably marked down in one review journal (*The EMG Monthly Letter*) on grounds of structure and fibre – Kempff was considered better suited to the less dramatic or profound works. Deutsche Grammophon, meanwhile, marketed these recordings with the tag line: 'A Poet of the Piano'.

Incidentally, it seems that Kempff was keen to keep up with contemporary scholarship in Beethoven: he returned three years later to a 1953 recording of the *Sonate pathétique* in the light of a new Henle edition, even acceding to a request then to remake the *Adagio cantabile* to fit a 45rpm side! For technical reasons a 1956 re-recording of Op.22 was substituted for the 1951 original side, keeping the same catalogue number and '*Moonlight*' coupling (some collectors must have the early version, unaware of its rarity). The popular *Moonlight/Pathétique/Appassionata* programme Kempff did twice in stereo: the May 1960 tapings recently reissued (DG 474 393-2) predate those in the approved cycle. There is also some mystery regarding logged repeats, observed in five sonatas at the mono sessions but never subsequently found among the assembled tapes.

If you listen, however, to the very end of the C major Concerto in Kempff's 1925 Berlin State Opera Orchestra recording (conductor unknown – probably just as well given the approximations taking place under his baton), you will find a flurry of repeated notes at *Tempo I* where the score shows rests for the piano. It was not surprising, though, to find Kempff's second recording, with BPO/Van Kempen, of that same movement (9:29 in duration as against the breakneck 7:53 of the 78rpm version) picked for a press/radio sampler CD when in 2002 Universal Classics launched its 'Original Masters' boxes. It was the *locus classicus* of Kempff at his most witty – notably in the *ben marcato* section from bar 191, and in his own cadenza. He played his own cadenzas in the first four Beethoven concertos, and these were acute, amusing: neither pastiches nor reaching into the dissonant regions which the sterner Schnabel thought appropriate for his time and to Mozart.

Staying with the same work but looking at the third recording, with Leitner conducting, there are marvellous examples to be heard of Kempff responding to, being at one with, the musicians around him. Kempff was no stranger to chamber music, although I don't think many of the commercial recordings – Beethoven again – find him at his best: neither in the cello sonatas and variations (Fournier's partnership with Gulda was more stimulating), nor the piano trios, where Szeryng joined Kempff and Fournier. That set was done for DG's ambitious 1970 bicentenary project, and Kempff also came to London to record, in Conway Hall, all the violin sonatas with Yehudi Menuhin. In Montsaingeon's *Violin of the Century* documentary (EMI 4 92363 9) Menuhin speaks of a certain distance between them – he had preferred working with Glenn Gould. The earlier Kempff/Schneiderhan cycle was on balance preferable, I think.

Kempff's more renowned *Kreutzer* Sonata with Kulenkampff, and (with cellist Paul Grümmer) Beethoven's A major Sonata, Op.69, appeared in Dante's 'Historical Piano Collection', a CD series that took in all the 78rpm piano sonatas. (I have seen, more recently, transfers which suggest the Polydors but on examination prove culled from the second cycle, parts of which are now out of copyright. Buyer beware!) In this 1936 Op.69 recording Kempff is the leading partner, yet there is give and take; Grümmer makes an invitingly warm sound but is occasionally fallible in upper-register intonation. His phrasing is sensitive and imaginative, portamento very sparingly used, and he matches Kempff's mercurial manner in the trio section of the scherzo. Kempff's soft accompaniment in the short *Adagio cantabile* is wonderful. On the same disc (Dante HPC076) is a remake of the C major Bagatelle, Op.33 No.5, which shows Kempff's ability to combine a sense of improvisatory flair with underlying authority. One of Alexander Berrsche's reviews from that period in the *Berliner Tagblatt* described 'a fragile looking man with such an exquisite touch. He is so conscious of this gift of sonority that one sometimes wonders whether he does not prefer his imaginary pianistic world to Beethoven's.' In Bach too, claimed Berrsche, Kempff was too often swayed by 'blissful sonorities'.

In the Beethoven piano sonatas, Kempff stands apart from his peers, Schnabel (especially), Arrau, Serkin, Backhaus – although he shares with Backhaus an understanding of Beethoven's fondness for simple, populist material: Op.31 No.3 *(iii)*, Op.79, Op.90 *(ii)*, etc. His speed relationships are more moderate than Schnabel's, *adagio*s more flowing, *allegro*s unhurried. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that, whereas I like (mostly) what he does, I don't necessarily see why he does it. The reverse might be said of Arrau in his late period! The danger, of course, is that the *Sturm und Drang* aspects are under-projected. Kempff takes like a duck to water to any fugal writing: how easeful he sounds in the *Hammerklavier* finale in contrast with, for one, Kovacevich. And what pleasure he gives when Beethoven is playful or relaxed: Op.2 No.2; the *Adagio grazioso* of Op.31 No.1. But why did he not vouchsafe us the *Diabelli Variations*?

At one time, Kempff's repertoire included the Liszt Sonata, and piano works by Pfitzner (his E flat

In the Beethoven piano sonatas, Kempff stands apart from his peers – Schnabel (especially), Arrau, Serkin and Backhaus

above **Wilhelm Kempff, c.1955**
opposite
Wilhelm Kempff at the piano, surrounded by his grandchildren
Photos Tully Potter Collection

Concerto was given with Raabe in 1940, with Abendroth the following year), Reger and Sibelius, but was later centred on Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann and Brahms. (*IP* reader Gerhard Wagner kindly informs me that Franck, Falla and Villa Lobos should be added to the above, according to George Kehler's two reference volumes, *The Piano in Concert*.) If there was a time when he was at his peak, ironically that was when, briefly, he had moved from Polydor/DG to Decca, coming to London in the early 1950s to record memorable Liszt – excerpts from the *Années de pèlerinage* and the two *Légendes* – and Brahms solo pieces. For Brendel, Kempff 'achieves things that are beyond him' in the First *Légende*, '*St Francis Preaching to the Birds*', which he considers to be 'on an unsurpassable level'; it was reissued in the 'Great Pianists' series.

The Brahms pieces now reappear, in a mix of DG and Decca material principally of Schumann and Brahms, in a five-disc set: DG 474 393-2. The subtitle 'complete 1950s solo recordings' slightly misleads, for we still don't have the Liszt, but we do have more Beethoven – also the transcriptions of Bach, Couperin, Handel and Rameau taped in the old West Hampstead studio. A complementary reissue set, where the material is rejuggled to fill out just five discs (474 024-2), has the mono concerto recordings of Beethoven (BPO/Van Kempen), Brahms's No.1 (Konwitschny), Liszt (LSO/Fistoulari), Mozart's K271 and 450 (Stuttgart CO/OSR Winds/Münchinger – first time on CD), and Schumann (LSO/Krips).

Kempff also recorded a group of Chopin pieces for Decca in March 1958; the three resulting LPs included Sonatas Nos.2 and 3, the impromptus, the *Fantasy*, Op.49 and *Polonaise-Fantasy*, Op.61, and other pieces. They have always appealed to me as having a scale and intimacy which seemed apt to this composer.

NDR Hamburg archive performances of two mazurkas, the *Fantasy-Impromptu*, Op.66, and *Berceuse*, together with six pieces from Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage*, all from 1945, can be heard on Music & Arts CD-1071 (reviewed in *IP* Sept/Oct 2002). This two-disc set includes the Fauré Nocturne, Op.63 No.6, and a preferable alternative to the 1953/Decca Bach *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue*. (Donald Manildi notes that Kempff had mastered the complete *Well-Tempered Clavier* by the time he was nine.) A similar Koch disc (3-1029-2) duplicates five of the items in better transfers and includes a short piece by Kempff himself: *Libellen über dem Froschteich*. It's a light, effervescent study in piano sonorities and motion, conservative in style, slightly Ravel-like.

At 72, Kempff embarked on a more extended but not entirely persuasive Schumann series (DG 471 312-2, four discs). This was his last major studio project, together with a set of 18 Schubert sonatas (DG 463 766-2, for which he provided a brief foreword, including a telling observation on the music which could well apply to listening to Kempff himself: 'do we not feel as though we are floating on a sea of sound, freed from everything material?'). Various commentators have suggested that he was completely at ease when recording, neither inhibited by the technology nor the lack of audience. But I was told that he had once confided to Gerhard Oppitz, 'when I pass those doors the spirit often eludes me'.

Thoroughly grounded in music, Kempff became one of its more wayward, inspirational messengers. His sound was unique but his playing was fallible by the standards of Pollini or Zimerman. He didn't desynchronise the hands as habitually as Backhaus, but used the device sparingly. A subtly eloquent stretch of playing might be punctuated by a ringing *forte*, which could seem disconcertingly over-sized; this was very much Kempff's manner. As with the conductors Barbirolli and Furtwängler, his live and studio performances are more widely available today than at any period during his lifetime. Ⓟ

above **Wilhelm Kempff**
Photo Tully Potter Collection