

Subject: PRISTINE NEWS 19th August 2010: Josef Wolfsthal - Mozart & Beethoven Violin Concertos

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Pristine News: Thursday 19th August, 2010 (a day earlier than usual)



Dr. Frieder Weissmann, conductor (c. 1935)

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- [Review](#): Reiner Rarities at Audiophile Audition:
The brilliant and sometimes ferocious Fritz Reiner in exquisite gems that generally elude his standard discography.

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Editorial - Perfect Sound Forever

In anticipation of the latest “Toy Story” movie, we sat down a few days ago with our 9-year-old son and watched the original 1996 film. At the time it was a real milestone in the development of digital animation, setting new technical standards in just about every department whilst also managing to be one of the better family movies of its era. Fourteen years later, it's still a great film – but you can't help but notice how far things have come in the computer animation stakes since then; for all its cutting edge technology, it looks just a little dated, and you can see where they've made what would today be seen as compromises – lots of very smooth textures and little evidence of hair, for example – in order to get the thing actually processed and made with mid-90s computers. But back then it was as good as it got, and we were all duly wowed by it and ignorant of the multiple refinements to come.

This week we release Mark Obert-Thorn's transfers of violinist Josef Wolfsthal's Mozart and Beethoven concertos, and something similar springs to mind. I don't suppose that back in 1929 many, if any, discerning listeners would have noticed the change in sound quality for the final side of the Mozart, re-recorded a year after the original, but when you listen closely you can certainly hear it now, and there's nothing a remastering engineer is ever likely to be able to do about it.

Coincidentally almost exactly the same thing happens with Emanuel Feuermann's otherwise marvellous Dvorak Cello Concerto recording, made at around the same time (and with the same orchestra) for the same company. In the case of the Feuermann, the entire final movement was (re-)recorded in 1929 following the rest of the work's 1928 recording, and the shortcomings are remarkably similar to the Wolfsthal,

with a severe roll-off of the bass below 200Hz, something even more vital and obvious for a cello-centred recording than a violin concerto. It's a fair bet that the exact same equipment change Mark refers to in his notes for the Wolfsthal applied to the Feuermann as well.

I happen to have an HMV wind-up gramophone that was made in 1929, the last of their pre-electric range of players. On the plus side, it benefits from having just about the best in British sound-box technology of the day, the HMV 5A; on the minus side, it was their basic, run-of-the-mill model – I've heard its top-end big brother and tonally it's in another world. My own model resolves very little if any bass by comparison, and I'm sure the average 1929 listener on this typical kind of equipment would have no clue about the sonic differences within these recordings that strike one today. Saying all that, it's not going to stop me from enjoying either the Feuermann or the Wolfsthal recordings any more than the latest Toy Story movie's technology is going to detract from my enjoyment of the original. But I am a more educated viewer and listener than I may once have been, my replay technology is now superior, and I can now spot the differences.

The introduction of new technologies in recording can easily sidetrack the listener away from what later on seem like glaring problems. Next week we're issuing a pair of Paul Paray recordings, derived from four Mercury LPs from 1953 and 1955. Naturally all have been XR remastered, which involves the analysis of tonal characteristics in the recordings and, where necessary, their correction. In the case of the Paray, three of the four LPs were pretty good, making the most of the new LP technology with its quieter surfaces and enhanced frequency range – but the fourth can surely be classed as a howler, and it's hard to believe it passed any kind of listening quality control at the time, with a big frequency hole in the upper midrange followed by an alarming boost in the treble, centred around 4500Hz.

But if you're a newcomer, listening to the bright, shiny new sound of vinyl for the first time, you might not notice the resultant unrealistic orchestral tone of this particular recording, especially on an early-1950s record player – but within a few years it would surely become apparent. Likewise, we've all today grown accustomed to CDs and high quality digital audio, such that we can now revisit some of those early CDs we raved about in 1983 and hear that they're not exactly as good as they should or could have been. Were we blinded to their shortcomings by the novelty of a lack of clicks, scratches, surface noise and wow and flutter? Were our ears focussing on the wrong thing? Were the listeners of 1929, meanwhile, still too overwhelmed by the novelty of electric recordings over their acoustic forebears to notice the discrepancies between recording systems which brought us a side of bass-free Wolfsthal, assuming they had equipment capable of resolving that bass?

Let's now return firmly to the 21st century. I remember first coming across MP3 recordings and being unable to hear the difference between 128kbps copies of original CDs. Too used to the downgrading of sound caused by cassette reproduction, I naturally listened out for increased background hiss, a loss of treble, any change in tonal quality, and on

first hearing it wasn't there. But of course I was busy focussing my attention in the wrong direction, failing to spot the smeared transients and unrealistically splashy top-end percussion that characterises the worst digital compression techniques, and which now stick out like a sore thumb even when listening in the car. I read discussions 10 years on the merits or otherwise of different encoding algorithms and simply didn't understand how to hear the differences between them that now seem so clear.

Yet it's hard to draw any conclusions from all of this which allow us to predict the future of music replay in any meaningful way. We have seen patterns in the past, where a new recording technology which promises a step change in the listening experience is adopted with a fanfare (remember 'perfect sound forever?'), only to discover that within a few years the technologies had been refined as they became better understood. Meanwhile associated technologies developed alongside them improved aspects of recording independent to the playback medium. Thus in the 1940s the usable frequency range of shellac 78s more than doubled; in the late 1950s the LP suddenly started to replay stereo; today our CDs are usually recorded at 24-bits, with clever dithering allowing us to benefit from much of this extra resolution even on the standard 16-bit disc. Even our MP3s sound better than they did just five years ago, thanks to better algorithms, higher bit rates, faster Internet connections and much bigger hard drives changing the way they tend to be made.

But are we reaching the end of the road? Whisper it quietly, but some very honest high-end mastering engineers might suggest that with the right approach on their part, a 16-bit CD is more than capable of matching any of the higher-resolution formats when replaying the same recording, so as to be indistinguishable even using the very best ears and the very finest studio equipment. The numbers may be different, but if the ears can't hear it, does it matter? Or could it be that we're not listening in the right way, being misled just as we were over our Feuermann finale, our Mercury LP, our 1983 CD and our splashy MP3? Perhaps we've yet to develop the replay equipment that's up to the task of distinguishing between the ultra-high-resolution modern digital recording and the CD version carefully derived from it.

Ultimately though I will make one prediction: in a future world, free from the tyranny of a single musical carrier medium such as the 78, the LP, the CD or the SACD, this will cease to be an all-important issue. Recording technology was lagging behind the replay possibilities of the LP in 1948, but by 1982 it had in many respects far outstripped it – just as the 78 was very much showing its age by the early 1950s and died a very rapid death during that decade as its inability to resolve the modern taped recordings of the era quickly showed up its shortcomings.

But recorded music as 'raw' audio software files is free of so many of the restrictions that plagued earlier generations of audio media. Length is no longer an issue – a digital music file can be as long as you like as it's unlikely ever to be constrained by its container. Sound quality is up to you – a FLAC file can be 16-bit or 24-bit, at 21kHz, 44.1kHz, 192kHz or higher, mono, stereo or (I suspect) as multichannel as you like – 5.1,

7.1, or even 27.1 – it's all possible as long as your replay software can read your music software – and if it can't yet, there'll be a fix along in a moment.

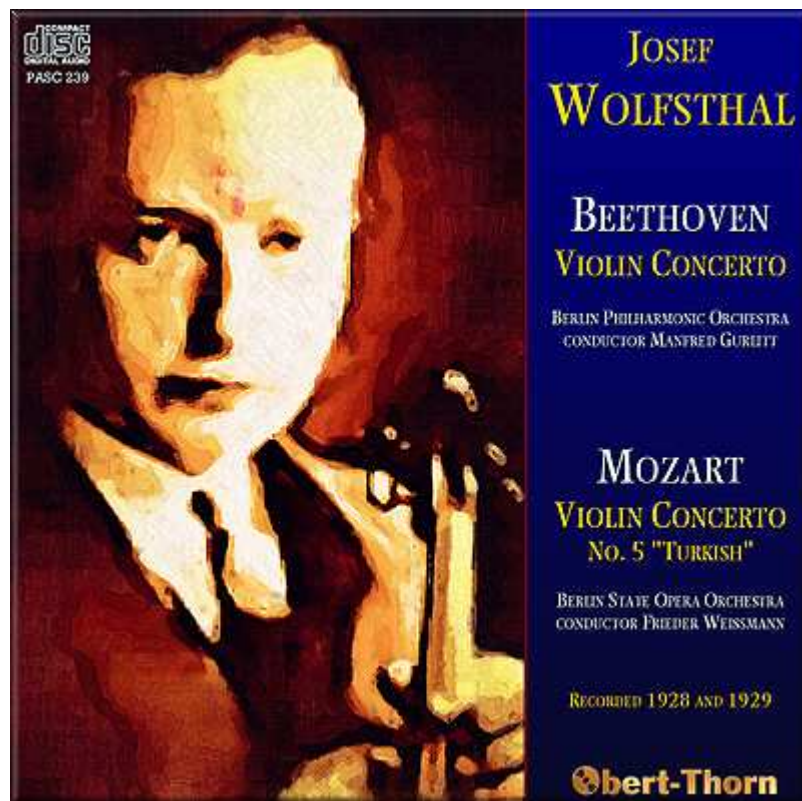
So many of the restrictions which have been imposed on music replay systems since the first Edison cylinder have begun to fall away for increasing numbers of listeners. Can it be that now really is the era of perfect sound forever – or have we not yet learned to hear the faults in our own generation's finest efforts in the field?

Andrew Rose

New release today:

[WOLFSTHAL plays Beethoven and Mozart Concertos](#)

Pristine Audio PASC 239



Josef Wolfsthal, violin

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra

conductor Manfred Gurett

Berlin State Opera Orchestra

conductor Frieder Weissmann

Recorded 1928 & 1929

Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn

Cover artwork based on a photograph of Josef Wolfsthal

Total duration: 67:21

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The downloads:



Josef Wolfsthal's two 1920s electric concerto recordings

A tragic early death robbed the world of a possible violin superstar

MOZART: Violin Concerto No. 5 in A Major, K.219, "Turkish" [[notes/score](#)]

Frieder Weissmann / Berlin State Opera Orchestra

Recorded 15th and 19th September, 1928 and *9th September, 1929 in Berlin
Matrix nos.: 20911, 20916, 20918, 20919, 20927, 20928, 20929 and *20930-2
First issued on Parlophon P-9359, 9360, 9457 and 9458

BEETHOVEN: Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 61 [[notes/score](#)]

Manfred Gurlitt / Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra

Recorded 1929 in Berlin
Matrix nos.: 1534 ½ bm, 1535 ½ bm, 1536 bm, 1537 bm, 1538 bm, 1547 ½ bm, 1548½ bm, 1549 bm, 1550 bm and 1551
bm
First issued on Grammophon 95243 through 95247

Josef Wolfsthal, violin

Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn

BEETHOVEN & MOZART Violin Concertos

Were it not for an influenza epidemic, more people might now have known the up-coming violinist Josef Wolfsthal, who died in 1931 having barely begun his recording career.

As a performer he already boasted a high reputation, and his close musical associations with the likes of Richard Strauss, Paul Hindemith, Gregor Piatigorsky, and Emanuel Feuermann may well have elevated his name to the same heights.

Instead we have fragmentary evidence of his brilliance - and these two concerto recordings from the late 1920s. Take a good listen to Mark Obert-Thorn's excellent new transfers and hear what might have been.



BEETHOVEN: 3rd mvt. - Rondo: Allegretto

Notes on the recordings:

Pupil of Carl Flesch, teacher of the young Szymon Goldberg, chamber recital partner to Hindemith and Feuermann, Josef Wolfsthal (1899 – 1931) seemed to have a bright future before him when he was cut down at the age of 31 during an influenza epidemic.

Although he recorded fairly extensively during the 1920s for a number of German labels, most of his discs were of short encores. The selections presented here are his only electrical concerto recordings. A comparison of the Beethoven with his acoustic version of some four years earlier shows that he was already beginning to move away from the use of portamento in favor of a more modern, streamlined style of playing.

In the Mozart, there is a brief cut of some orchestra-only material in the middle of the second movement, made in order to fit the work onto eight sides. In addition, the final side (starting at Track 3, 6:25), made a year after the rest of the recording, was set down after Parlophon had switched from the Western Electric system to their own proprietary (and decidedly inferior) technology, which tended to make upper frequencies sound uncomfortably harsh.

The sources for the present transfers were American Columbia “Viva-Tonal” pressings for the Mozart (the most quiet form of issue for this inherently noisy recording) and German Polydor pressings for the Beethoven.

Mark Obert-Thorn

Available as **320kbps mono MP3, 16-bit mono & Ambient Stereo FLAC, 24-bit mono FLAC, Mono & Ambient Stereo CD**
or listen on demand with [Pristine Audio Direct Access](#) (PADA)

New MP3 transfers at PADA Exclusives

by Dr. John Duffy
in Ambient Stereo

Clara Haskil's 1947 Beethoven 4th Piano Concerto



Clara Haskil

Beethoven
Piano Concerto
No. 4 in G, Op. 58

Clara Haskil, piano
London Philharmonic Orchestra
cond. Carlo Zecchi

rec. 1-3 July 1947,
Kingsway Hall, London

First issued in October 1948 as Decca 78s (A)K1944-47

"In my lifetime I have met three geniuses; Professor Einstein, Winston Churchill, and Clara Haskil. I am not a trained musician but I can only say that her touch was exquisite, her expression wonderful, and her technique extraordinary."

- Charles Chaplin

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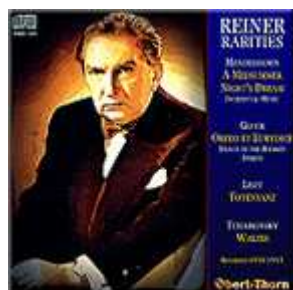
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Pick of the reviews

Audiophile Audition



Reiner Rarities:

MENDELSSOHN: A Midsummer Night's Dream: Overture; Scherzo; Nocturne; Intermezzo; Wedding March

GLUCK: Dance of the Blessed Spirits from Orfeo ed Eurydice

LISZT: Totentanz

TCHAIKOVSKY: 5 Waltzes

Alexander Brailowsky, piano

RCA Victor Symphony Orchestra/ Robin Hood Dell Orchestra, Philadelphia

Fritz Reiner

Pristine Audio PASC 235, 78:37

Assembled from RCA Victor records inscribed 1950-1953, Pristine and its engineer-producer Mark Obert-Thorn vividly resurrect a tribute to the less familiar repertory led by Fritz Reiner (1888-1963), the Hungarian maestro whose small but articulate beat and fiery temper dominated musicians in the concert hall and the operatic theater. Collectors will recall with some pride their ownership of RCA LM 1724 and the ten-inch LP LM 103, respectively, the Mendelssohn and the elusive Tchaikovsky Waltzes Reiner inscribed around the time he recorded his RCA excerpts from *Der Fledermaus*. Only two of the selections--the *Totentanz* (with Byron Janis) and the *Waltz of the Flowers*--received a second recording from Reiner.

Reiner leads the summer "version" of the Philadelphia Orchestra (30 June 1951) for the five-movement suite of *Overture and Incidental Music for a Midsummer Night's Dream*. Reiner coveted the Philadelphia Orchestra, despite his glowing successes in Pittsburgh and Chicago, the latter ensemble having under his reign become what Stravinsky called "the most flexible and precise ensemble in the world." Reiner's exquisite layering of Mendelssohn's dragonfly colors for the *Overture* captures the sweet, magical dalliance and mock heroics of the stage play. The effervescent *Scherzo* features flute principal Burnett F. Atkinson. The clarity of the Philadelphia strings in their shimmering haste proves no less engaging than the flute pyrotechnics. The French horn principal adds his talent to the *Nocturne*, a sumptuous affair in silver and sylvan nuances. The *Wedding March* does not dawdle, the Philadelphia brass and cymbals in foursquare motion, imparting a vigorously noble authority to the conclusion of this familiar suite.

The aura changes significantly with Gluck's *Dance of the Blessed Spirits* (16 June 1953, taken from LM 2141), its diaphanous grace augmented by the efforts of flute soloist Julius Baker. The RCA pickup ensemble, comprised of NBC Symphony and New York Philharmonic players, constitutes what passed for Leopold Stokowski's "orchestra" in fellow RCA archives. Reiner takes an expansive view of the *Dance*, imparting to Orfeo's flute lament the soul of the lover bereft of his divine light. The Liszt *Totentanz* (6 March 1951) receives the praiseworthy collaboration of Russian virtuoso Alexander Brailowsky (1896-1976), a pianist who always attended to rounded tone if not digital accuracy. The original RCA LP (LM 1095) featured

Brailowsky and Jean Morel in the Franck Symphonic Variations as its B side. The performance has all the hair-raising venom and savage gloating we could demand from Liszt's response to the Traini fresco of Death's universal triumphs.

The group of Tchaikovsky waltzes (21-22 September 1950) opens with the Valse from the E Minor Symphony No. 5, a work Reiner never recorded in its entirety. The attention to the cello line, low strings, and clarinet-oboe-bassoon progression gives us a well-breathed sense of Tchaikovsky's color palette. The ensuing chugging figures enjoy enough plasticity and aerial spaciousness to convince us that they belong to Sleeping Beauty. The Waltz from Eugene Onegin resounds with the heat of a minor detonation, a true rival to the famed inscription by Sir Thomas Beecham. Vivid attacks and eminently clear voice entries attest to the fearfully rewarding discipline of the Reiner experience. The same passion for soulful clarity drives the waltzes from Swan Lake and Sleeping Beauty, renditions to urge Reiner in the same league as Stokowski in this repertoire, and even more electric. By the time we've swayed and lilted to the Dance of the Flowers, we wonder if Reiner made these exquisite gems to spite us in repertory RCA would not allow him to pursue, or just to embarrass the likes of Eugene Ormandy.

-- Gary Lemco

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Andrew Rose
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