

Alice Krieger: “The Legacy of Brahms” restored

“..... besitzt eine geistiger Betiefung im Vortrag der Stücke, welche heute selten anzutreffen ist”

“[She] possesses a spiritual profundity in the performance of the works such as is seldom encountered today”

From a testimonial by Eugen d’Albert

If we have never heard of Alice Krieger, the blame lies with persecution and war rather than her musicianship. In her youth a promising student of d’Albert and Schnabel, her life and career torn apart by injustice and hardship, she entered the recording studio just once, to set down evidence of performance style in Brahms’s solo piano music as she had experienced and learned it in her earlier days.

Alice was born in Karlsruhe in 1895, into a family with connections both musical and culinary to Brahms. They owned an inn where the composer was a frequent and appreciative customer during his visits to the city in the 1860s; they were also musical, and came to be on such friendly terms that they asked him to select a new piano for their household, and in due course Alice learned on the same instrument.

More substantial links to Brahms came through her musical education. In 1903 she entered the Karlsruhe Conservatory and from 1909 to 1913 was taught by its founder Heinrich Ordenstein, a former pupil of Clara Schumann. Her later teachers included the protean Eugen d’Albert, among the foremost pianists of his time and one of Brahms’s favoured interpreters, and Artur Schnabel, also closely linked to Brahms in his early days.

By 1913, at the age of 18, she was appearing as an adult soloist and a flourishing career seemed to lie ahead. But then war came, and her brother was killed in action; peace brought chaos, cold and hunger. She married the industrialist Adolf Isaac in 1918 and moved to Köln (Cologne), where she continued her performing career (now as Alice Krieger-Isaac) while bringing up two children.

But they were Jewish, and all normal life ceased when the Nazis came to power. Soon she could perform only for Jewish audiences under the auspices of the Jüdische Kulturbund (Jewish Cultural Association), now playing challenging modern works as well as her classical repertoire. In 1939 she and her husband obtained permission to emigrate to Palestine, but Alice was forced to leave her dying mother behind. Her son and daughter went to England and then on to America, and after many hardships the family was only reunited in New York in 1945.

She continued to play in public, giving a recital at Carnegie Hall in 1951, but she concentrated mainly on teaching, particularly after her husband suffered a stroke and she devoted herself to his care until his death in 1961.

Then in 1964, aged 69, she went into the Nola studios in New York to record “The Legacy of Brahms” for the independent Lyricord label, with the explicit aim of “transmitting Brahms’s traditions to a younger generation”. In the 1960s, however, the odds were stacked against such a project. A disc by an unknown pianist, for a small company with limited publicity and distribution, was unlikely to make much impact. And while interest in historic performing practice was growing for earlier music, playing styles from the early twentieth century, when

they were known at all, were seen as undisciplined and outdated, and certainly not respected or studied.

Today the situation is quite different, with early recordings enjoying careful restoration, informed appreciation and musicological analysis in depth. "The Legacy of Brahms" can thus be placed in context. Four pianists in particular were individually guided by the composer and later made records of his music: Ilona Eibenschütz, Etelka Freund, Adelina de Lara and Carl Friedberg, all born in the 1870s. They play very freely by later standards, with fluctuating tempi, emphatic rubato, separation between left and right hands and so on. They also differ markedly from each other, and lively debate continues as to what all this implies about Brahms's own wishes and their relevance to modern performance.

Alice Krieger was one of a later cohort of pianists who consolidated the work of these pioneers. Some of them heard Brahms when very young, others not at all, but they could hear his music played by his early champions, and play it themselves with no burden of inherited tradition. D'Albert and Friedberg later became teachers (in d'Albert's case a rather informal one), and passed on their ideas to their students as part of their tuition across the classical and romantic repertoire. However, recordings of Brahms's solo output by this group are still not plentiful. Among d'Albert's students, Wilhelm Backhaus stands out in both quantity and quality with his records of some 40 solo works, but beside these we have only a scattered selection by pianists from this background. "The Legacy of Brahms", which includes three pieces not recorded by Backhaus (opp 76/1, 116/7 and 119/4), thus adds substantially to the recorded evidence of this generation of performers.

Standards changed from the 1950s onwards. With no disrespect for the talent and integrity of later performers, it would be fair to say that interpretations became more classical, with tempi steadier and often slower and an emphasis on clarity and precision, in line with scholarly and critical principles of the period. By comparison, Krieger is much closer to the style of Backhaus and other early performers – rhythmically impetuous, lyrical and with strong contrasts of dynamics, tempo and characterisation. One can see how she could have found modern interpretations disturbingly different from those she had known in earlier times, and made "The Legacy of Brahms" to reassert the values of the pianists who played this music when it was new.

Recording well-prepared pieces of her choice, she plays freely as though in concert. The opening B minor Rhapsody shows her in full technical control, with firm, driving rhythm. A powerful and eloquent left hand immediately suggests the influence of d'Albert, and the bass is prominent throughout the recital, to great expressive effect. Her rounded tone and legato phrasing were qualities promoted by Clara Schumann's influential teachings, which we may reasonably assume were passed on to her by Heinrich Ordenstein in Karlsruhe. Touches of rubato in melodic passages are unselfconscious, natural pauses for breath or reflection.

Comparisons are intriguing. Krieger's op 79 Rhapsodies are close in style to Backhaus, though differing in detail, and op 119 no 4 – a tour de force – is along similar lines to Etelka Freund's exuberant private recording, all providing evidence of a historic Brahms style. But the Intermezzo op 118 no 6 is unlike Backhaus, Freund or anyone else. Her liner notes for the LP quote the composer on the main theme: "It moves very slowly, like somebody who has not the strength to take the next step". She takes it slowly (six and a half minutes to the normal four or five) but never drags, implacably building and then releasing a unique tension and atmosphere. She is equally original, and convincing, in the spectral fantasy of the Capriccio op 76 no1, and the brief, furious outburst of op 116 no 7 which closes the recital.

Test pressings also exist with the Variations op 21 no 1 and all six pieces of op 118. These discs have poor sound, but we have included the Variations as an appendix. It is one of Brahms's less familiar works, only Backhaus having recorded it in the 78rpm era, and he omitted most of the repeats to fit it on two sides. Krieger's appears to be the only full-length recording of the piece by a pianist with such close links to Brahms.

Today a growing appreciation of the artistic and historical value of recordings such as those presented here is prompting an active re-evaluation of Brahms performance style. Alice Krieger died peacefully in New York in 1974; nearly fifty years on, the time has come for her splendid performances to be assessed at their true value.

(c) Roger Smithson, November 2021

Alice Krieger: The Legacy of Brahms

Recorded 1964, Nola Studios, New York

- 1 Rhapsody, B minor, op 79 no 1
 - 2 Rhapsody, G minor, op 79 no 2
 - 3 Rhapsody, E flat major, op 119 no 4
 - 4 Intermezzo, A minor, op 118 no 1
 - 5 Capriccio, F sharp minor, op 76 no 1
 - 6 Ballade, G minor, op 118 no 3
 - 7 Intermezzo, E flat minor, op 118 no 6
 - 8 Capriccio, A minor, op 116 no 7
 - 9 Variations, op 21 no 1 (previously unissued, from a test pressing)
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