



# Wilhelm Kempff:

Rare Recordings  
(1936-1945)

From the Collections of  
Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv  
and  
Norddeutscher Rundfunk

## Wilhelm Kempff: An Appreciation

"In my artistic existence, I have experienced many crises. That was necessary. Crisis leads to growth, and growth is the best thing we can wish for ourselves. Everyone enters life with his own potential for artistic expression, and each of us must strive to realize that potential." These words from Wilhelm Kempff represent a viewpoint that sustained this great pianist through seventy years of public performances and musical exploration. Although Kempff remained firmly tied to his solidly German background and upbringing, this did not prevent him from rapidly developing a distinct, instantly recognizable individuality that permeated his interpretations of the most significant piano literature.

Kempff was born in Jüterborg (near Berlin) on November 25, 1895, the son of an organist and cantor also named Wilhelm Kempff. The family moved to Potsdam in 1899, and the following year Kempff's musical training began in earnest under the supervision of Ida Schmidt-Schlesicke. By the age of nine Kempff could play the entire Well-Tempered Clavier of Bach and in fact could transpose any of the Preludes and Fugues to any requested key. This was more than sufficient to gain him entrance to the Berlin Conservatory, where his teacher was Heinrich Barth (the same Barth who taught the young Arthur Rubinstein just before the turn of the century). "Barth watched over a whole regiment of young pianists," Kempff later said. "He was, as we would say, a Prussian through and through, even in his appearance. He used to say, 'Boy, what I cannot give you must come from heaven.'"

By the age of 16 Kempff had mastered all 32 Beethoven sonatas and had immersed himself in studies of philosophy and history. His early concert appearances (as both pianist and organist) lead to his Berlin Philharmonic debut in 1918 in the Beethoven Fourth Concerto under the baton of Artur Nikisch. Performances in the Scandinavian countries soon followed. With a secure European reputation, Kempff now expanded his horizons geographically, beginning with a 1934 South American tour that brought him to Buenos Aires on the Graf Zeppelin. Two years later he made his first appearances in Japan, quickly gathering a devoted following. His French debut was in 1938 at the Salle Gaveau in Paris; 43 years after that event he would play his last recital in the same city. However, it was not until 1951 that Kempff played in England for the first time, and his initial North American concerts had to wait until 1959 (in Canada) and 1964 (in New York). Additional tours

took Kempff to locations in the Middle and Far East as well.

Not surprisingly for a musician of his background, Kempff's active repertoire strongly favored the masterworks of the greatest Austro-German composers from Bach and Mozart through Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann and Brahms. Kempff expanded this list somewhat with a carefully chosen selection of larger Chopin compositions and the more lyrical productions of Liszt (mainly from the *Années de pèlerinage*). An examination of recital programs from the pre-1950 phase of his career, however, reveals a number of more esoteric choices. For instance, for a period of time Kempff regularly played the massive *Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Bach* by Reger, the *Opus 47* piano pieces of Hans Pfitzner, and several works by Sibelius. In his younger days he ventured into such major virtuoso items as the *Liszt Sonata* and the *Brahms-Paganini Variations*, but these gradually disappeared from his inventory.

It goes without saying that Kempff was a frequent chamber-music player whose collaborators included Georg Kulenkampff, Pablo Casals, Pierre Fournier, Yehudi Menuhin, and Henryk Szeryng. It was Menuhin, in fact, who described Kempff as "the outstanding example of the noblest musical tradition of Germany. His self-discipline, his sense of style and respect for the composer's intentions have achieved a supreme integration between the natural and the spontaneous on the one hand and the rigorous on the other. He is an intensely humane person and it is this humanity which is at the core of his music-making. Perhaps nothing will convey more convincingly the quality of Wilhelm Kempff and of the great worth of the music that he represents than his recordings."

Kempff's extensive discography spans more than 60 years, beginning in 1919-20 when he made his first acoustic 78s for Polydor. From then until World War II his discs concentrated overwhelmingly on the music of Beethoven, including the first-ever recording of the *C Major Concerto* (with an anonymous conductor leading the Berlin State Opera Orchestra). Contrary to several printed references, however, Kempff completed only two, not three, integral Beethoven Sonata cycles. The first of these became available in the early 1950s (in Europe on Deutsche Grammophon and in this country on American Decca). It was followed by a 1964-5 stereo remake (now on CD). The early 50s also saw Kempff recording for English Decca (London Records in the US); these LPs offered major works of Bach, Brahms, Liszt, Mozart, Schubert, and Schumann. At the end of the decade Kempff

taped three LPs of his Chopin repertoire for Decca/London, then remained with DG for important Bach, Schubert and Schumann surveys, a half-dozen Mozart Concertos, and re-recordings of earlier undertakings.

Three of Kempff's most elusive DG discs contain some quite fascinating, off-the-beaten-path material. On one of them (138 946) Kempff accompanies Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau in four of Kempff's own Lieder. On another, Kempff is heard as organist in the Bach Passacaglia and Fugue at the Church of World Peace in Hiroshima, and also gives a short speech describing his feelings about the occasion. There is also an LP that includes Kempff's comments to a master class in Positano. Perhaps DG could be persuaded to assemble these rare items, together with a judicious selection of Kempff's early 78s, for an appropriate memorial release.

Like many European performers of his generation, Kempff devoted considerable time and effort to composing, obviously believing that a definite symbiotic relationship exists between creative and re-creative musical activity. His output was large, including at least three operas (one of these-Fasnacht von Rottweil-features Kempff's own libretto, too). There are also several symphonies (No. 2 was premiered by Furtwängler), oratorios, chamber works, a violin concerto, solo piano pieces (including a 1945 Sonata), and numerous Lieder (to texts by Goethe, C. F. Meyer, and others). Kempff would occasionally offer one of his compositions on recital programs, but did relatively little to promote his own music. Following the examples of Liszt, Busoni, and d'Albert, Kempff prepared an impressive series of piano transcriptions. He drew his material largely from Bach's cantatas and chorale-preludes, and from works by Handel, Gluck, and Mozart. Most of these transcriptions were published in Germany by Bote & Bock and were recorded by Kempff on one or more occasions. Another 19th-century pianistic tradition embraced by Kempff was the writing of cadenzas to concertos of Mozart and Beethoven. These too have been published, and Kempff's cadenza for the first movement of the Beethoven Third is part of the 1966 Montreal performance on Music & Arts CD 768.

A further portion of Kempff's energies was devoted to teaching young, aspiring pianists. This activity began in the early 1920s at the Wurtemberg Music School in Stuttgart (where he held the directorship for five years). During the following decade Kempff taught summer courses in Potsdam (alongside Gieseck, Fischer, Erdmann and others). In 1957 Kempff established the "Fondazione

Orfeo" in Positano in southern Italy, where he gave yearly master classes on the interpretation of Beethoven. Kempff maintained a home in Positano until his death on May 23, 1991.

The distinctive qualities of Kempff's mature musicianship are many and varied. He has been called, with justice, a master of understatement. This observation refers not only to his abhorrence of eccentricities, histrionics, and ostentation; it applies equally to Kempff's preference for a moderate spectrum of tempo choices wherein fast movements are often taken at less than their maximum limits, and slower sections are never stretched to the extreme lengths to which certain other pianists seem addicted. Similarly, Kempff never forced his instrument into anything resembling tonal ugliness. Instead he cultivated an extraordinary command of the mezzo piano to pianissimo range, enhanced by a variety of touch and a control of subtle nuance that is rare among players of any school or generation. Kempff's avoidance of typically Germanic ponderousness is what imparts the remarkably airborne quality to his phrasing. At the same time his interpretations disclose a unique serenity, a calm unfolding of events no matter what the technical challenges. Indeed, the word "nobility" is the one which is perhaps most often applied to Kempff's musical approach. It must be added that few pianists have Kempff's sense of fresh discovery at every performance, which is all the more exceptional considering the many hundreds of times Kempff played the standard items in his repertoire. From a purely technical angle Kempff occasionally reveals that his equipment is not quite in the super-virtuoso category. However, as Jan Holcman perceptively noted in 1962, Kempff "has mastered an effortless, flexible and precise technique of which not all major virtuosos can boast. Always honest, efficient, and tactful in his approach to technique, Kempff is capable of maintaining perfect equilibrium even at the lowest dynamic level: his superb trills, for instance, combine fluency, sonority, and evenness. His meticulous apparatus and good sense of instrumentation, combined with well-developed dynamic and rhythmic faculties, make him an artist, stylist and craftsman capable of delivering beautifully regulated pianism."

It is in the poetic and introspective vein that Kempff particularly excelled, yet there are further dimensions to be perceived: wherever appropriate Kempff brings a caustic wit, a true profundity, and a clear ability to rise to the big moments. Like several elder statesmen of the keyboard, Kempff strove to combine the freshness of youth with the wisdom of maturity—to imbue his playing with that spirit of innocence that is really the distillation of experience. Kempff himself seemed very

much aware of this inner necessity when, in a 1975 interview, he said "There are still things in life that provide new experiences, and I am thankful for that because I always say that you remain as young as you are impressionable." As a constant seeker of what he called "spiritual repose," Kempff observed that "it can't be studied, only experienced. It is wonderful to come to a foreign country where one has not played before and then to see that living spark in action. As long as concert life does not run down, as long as artists do not doubt their mission but believe in it, and are completely wrapped up in spreading the word in person. Although I am now at an advanced age, I feel young enough to travel with a joyful mind to give my gifts fearlessly to the world and to send out this message."

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**CD 1** (67:19) Recordings from the collection of Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv:

**Mozart: Piano Concerto No. 21 in C, K.467 (28:12)**

Großes Leipziger Sinfonie-Orchester, cond. Hans Weisbach (3 April 1939, RRG)

- 1) Announcer (:41)
- 2) Movement 1 (Allegro maestoso) (14:26)
- 3) Movement 2 Andante (6:55)
- 4) Movement 3 Allegro vivace assai (6:51)

**Beethoven: Piano concerto No. 5 in Eb Major, Op. 73 (38:21)**

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, cond. Peter Raabe (1936; from DG 78s LM67082/86)

- 5) Movement 1 Allegro (20:20)
- 6) Movement 2 Adagio un poco mosso (7:41)
- 7) Movement 3 Rondo. Allegro (10:20)

**CD 2** (66:38) Broadcast recordings from Norddeutscher Rundfunk (Hamburg):

- 1) Bach: Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue in d minor (11:51) (10.10.1945)
- 2) Bach: from Cantata No. 147. "Wohl mir daß ich Jesum habe," arr. for piano by Kempff (3:42) (18.8.45)
- 3) Chopin: Berceuse, Op. 57 (4:57) (10.10.45)
- 4) Chopin: Mazurka in f minor, Op. 7 No. 3 (1:53) (18.8.45)
- 5) Chopin: Mazurka in C major, Op. 57 No. 2 (1:55) (18.8.45)
- 6) Chopin: Fantasie Impromptu in c# minor, Op. 66 (4:41) (10.10.45)
- 7) Liszt: Au lac de Wallenstadt from Première année of Années de Pèlerinage (3:10) (18.8.45)
- 8) Liszt: Eglogue from Première année of Années de Pèlerinage (3:40) (18.8.45)
- 9) Liszt: Au bord d'une source from Première année of Années de Pèlerinage (3:43) (18.8.45)
- 10) Liszt: Il Penseroso from Seconde année of Années de Pèlerinage (4:34) (18.8.45)
- 11) Liszt: Sonetto 123 del Petrarca from Seconde année of Années de Pèlerinage (4:34) (18.8.45)
- 12) Liszt: Gondoliera from Venezia e Napoli of Années de Pèlerinage (5:05) (10.10.45)
- 13) Faure: Nocturne No. 6, Op. 63 (9:20) (10.10.45)

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