Week Three
Listening to Pianists, Part 2

Beethoven: Sonata Op. 53 “Waldstein”
Bach: Prelude in E Major, WTC Vol. I
Brahms: Intermezzo in A Major, Op. 118 No. 2
Piano Sonata in C Major, Op. 53 “Waldstein”

Artur Schnabel
Byron Janis
Friedrich Gulda
Emil Gilels
Vladimir Ashkenazy
Beethoven’s piano sonatas evolved into symphonic scope by his middle period. Among the sonatas of this time the “Waldstein” sonata, Op. 53 in C Major, stands tall.

The first movement is a torrent of energy, stormy and propulsive. A more reticent secondary theme calms things down for a bit, but soon enough the energy returns.

We’ll hear the Exposition of the first movement — that is, the first main division that presents all of the critical thematic material.
Artur Schnabel

❖ 1882 - 1951
❖ Recorded 1934
❖ Schnabel was nicknamed “The Man Who Invented Beethoven.” That’s a bit hyperbolic, but in fact he was deeply identified with the Beethoven piano sonatas, probably because he was the first to record the entire cycle.
❖ His busy schedule limited practice time, and his technique had never been all that strong. But no matter: it was his mind that mattered, and his complete absorption in the music he played.
Byron Janis

❖ b. 1928
❖ Recorded 1956
❖ A superlative pianist with tone, technique, intelligence, and authority, Janis belongs to the generation of remarkable American pianists—Leon Fleisher, Gary Graffman, Julius Katchen—who squelched any remaining doubts about the ability of American pianists to compete on the international level.
❖ His career was cut short by severe psoriatic arthritis.
Friedrich Gulda

- 1930 - 2000
- Recorded 1967
- Almost alone amongst the great pianists, Gulda performed jazz as well as concert music—he often partnered with Chick Corea, in fact.
- Unorthodox and inspiring, he taught a number of important students, including Martha Argerich and the conductor Claudio Abbado.
Emil Gilels

1916 - 1985

Recorded 1972

This quintessential Russian pianist was actually Ukrainian, born in Odessa, and trained in the Soviet system.

Rachmaninoff considered him to be his successor. That’s apt: Gilels was a pianist very much in Rachmaninoff’s mode: meticulous, technically sound, imaginative, and possessed of a hall-filling golden tone on even the most recalcitrant of pianos.
Vladimir Ashkenazy

❖ b. 1937
❖ Recorded 1975
❖ Russian by birth, but nowadays a citizen of the world, Ashkenazy has concertized extensively both as pianist and conductor, and is continuing to amass an extraordinary recorded legacy.
❖ Like Rachmaninoff and Gilels, Ashkenazy is known for his meticulous preparation and steadfast accuracy to the composer’s text. He produces a big, very bright tone that projects his intentions to the farthest balcony of the hall.
Johann Sebastian Bach

Prelude in E Major, from the Well-Tempered Clavier Book I

Harriet Cohen 1928
András Schiff 1986
Sviatoslav Richter 1970
Glenn Gould 1963
Till Fellner 2004
Angela Hewitt 2009
Robert Schumann once described Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* as the Old Testament of the piano literature, with the Beethoven sonatas being the New. It’s an apt metaphor given the critical importance of the WTC to all keyboard players. It’s part of every pianist’s growing up, and it’s part of every pianist’s life from then on.

Bach wrote the first volume of preludes and fugues in about 1718 or thereabouts. The second volume dates from the 1740s.

Six pianists perform the E Major prelude from Volume I, each bringing his or her own insight and ideas to this exquisitely fashioned morceau.
An extraordinary person and marvelous pianist, Harriet Cohen tended towards the “boundaries” of the repertory—i.e., playing Renaissance, Baroque, and contemporary music instead of the standard repertory.

She was considered the finest English Bach pianist of her generation, and with good reason.
András Schiff

❖ b. 1953
❖ Recorded 1986
❖ Sir András Schiff is something of our present-day Artur Schnabel, except with an astoundingly complete technique. He is an advocate of the Austro-German tradition—Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms—and is known for his gigantic concert programs.
❖ His recording of Bach’s WTC is one of today’s benchmark renditions; he has also performed the entire WTC in concert, always by memory.
Sviatoslav Richter

❖ 1915 - 1997
❖ Recorded 1970
❖ You wouldn’t think that a great Romantic-and-Beethoven pianist would be all that comfortable playing Bach, but in this as in everything, Richter is the exception.
❖ His recording of the WTC remains one of the gold standards for Bach piano performances. It is informed by the historical performance movement, but only peripherally: first and foremost, this is piano playing at the highest level.
Glenn Gould

❖ 1932 - 1982
❖ Recorded 1963
❖ Love him or hate him, Gould is never like anybody else.
❖ His Bach playing is hailed as the last word by some, or impossibly quirky and headstrong by others.
❖ Fascinating. Infuriating. Inspiring. There’s nothing quite like Gould playing Bach, from his weirdly-voiced Steinway to his singing in the background.
❖ But he’s Glenn Gould, a bonafide genius of the keyboard. Always worth hearing!
Till Fellner

❖ b. 1972
❖ Recorded 2004
❖ I present Austrian Till Fellner’s performance as the un-Gould rendition.
❖ He tends to take the less-travelled road, performing and recording repertory that is less commercial.
❖ He seems more in the Clara Schumann tradition of lyrical, intensely dedicated pianists who eschew overt virtuosity in the interest of bringing the composer’s intentions alive.
Angela Hewitt

❖ b. 1958
❖ Recorded 2009
❖ Like Glenn Gould, Angela Hewitt is a Canadian—even from Ontario, just like Gould.
❖ Like Gould, she has also acquired quite the reputation as a Bach pianist.
❖ She’s also in the Clara Schumann mold—intensely musical, avoiding overt displays of virtuosity, but never academic or dry. Her Bach playing is much freer than you might expect, with generous (and very welcome) rubato that points out structural divisions.
❖ This is her second recording of the WTC, made after a world tour playing the entire cycle of 48 preludes and fugues in concert.
Johannes Brahms

Intermezzo in A Major, Op. 118 No. 2

Julius Katchen 1965
Emanuel Ax 1992
Van Cliburn 1971
Murray Perahia 2011
As of the early 1890s, Clara Schumann’s brilliant career was winding down, due to a combination of neurological problems in her hands and generally declining health.

To boost the sagging morale of the woman who might have been his wife, and was his closest friend and confidant—even if they fought bitterly sometimes—Brahms wrote a series of short piano pieces for her that encapsulate the radiance of his late style.

Eventually he had them published in four collections: Opp. 116, 117, 118, and 119. They rank amongst the crown jewels of the piano repertory, treasures beyond price, cherished by music lovers and pianists alike.

We’ll hear the Intermezzo Op. 118 No. 2 performed by four American pianists.
Julius Katchen

- 1926 - 1969
- Recorded 1965
- A serious, dedicated American pianist who spent his life mostly in France, Julius Katchen died in his early 40s from cancer.
- Although his repertory was broad, he is best remembered for his traversal of Brahms’s complete solo piano music for Decca. It remains a landmark achievement, indispensable to anyone exploring recordings of this music.
Emanuel Ax

- b. 1949
- Recorded 1992
- Born in Ukraine, then raised in Poland and Canada, Ax eventually resettled in the United States.
- A pianist of wide culture, who has premiered the works of modern composers such as John Adams, Ax is noted for the care and intelligence he lavishes on his performances and recordings. He can be described as a connoisseur’s pianist—possessor of a superlatively honed technique and distinguished musicianship.
Van Cliburn

❖ 1934 - 2013
❖ Recorded 1971
❖ The golden boy of American piano playing after his taking the gold medal at the Tchaikovsky Competition at the height of the Cold War at age 23, Cliburn was a pianist of formidable gifts and burnished promise.
❖ His career was short, albeit brilliant. Given time and less celebrity-driven pressure, he may have developed into a much finer artist. This recording shows him simultaneously at his best—authoritative with beautiful, room-filling tone, and at his worst—thoughtlessly weighty, like a naïve piano student clinging to a simplistic sound-byte notion of Brahms as heavy and thick.
Murray Perahia

❖ b. 1947
❖ Recorded 2011
❖ No musician ever had a more luminous education than Murray Perahia—from his piano teachers Mieczyslaw Horszowski and Rudolf Serkin, to his work with Pablo Casals, Benjamin Britten, and Peter Pears.
❖ He may be the only pianist ever to turn down the rare opportunity to study with Vladimir Horowitz, although the two became close friends.
❖ Hand injuries have sometimes interrupted his career, but he remains a supreme pianist and a magnificent artist.