

A Review of the Complete Acoustic Solo Recordings

of

Harold Bauer

by

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Like many pianists of his day Harold Bauer believed that both acoustic recordings and reproducing piano rolls had a future. Therefore his time was divided, and not equally, between the two methods of recording. While he spent untold weeks editing reproducing piano rolls, he spent perhaps as few as twenty days of his entire career making solo acoustic recordings. This recorded history, in comparison with the scope of his repertoire and activity, is disarmingly slim.

Nevertheless it is possible to acquaint oneself with the character of Bauer's pianism through these recordings. His ideal was a self-effacing classic-romantic purity, in which the score was never sacred but neither was the performer's personality. His melodies were always projected and his textures always clear. And when in doubt, eschew rubato.

The solo acoustic recordings reviewed here were re-released by Biddulph but are now out of print.

Biddulph LHW 7

Beethoven

Sonata in C# minor, Op. 27 no. 2

Recorded on 14 June and 13 July 1926

Of the first movement of this sonata Bauer wrote:

A number of years ago while I was in San Francisco giving concerts, I received a telegram from the Victor Company enquiring if I would make a phonograph record of the Moonlight Sonata on my return to New York. My first impulse was to accept immediately, but a second thought made me hesitate. Was the first movement too long and too slow to be recorded on a 12-inch disc (the largest size)? I played it through and it took just over five minutes. The limit was four minutes and forty seconds. I tried it faster and did not like it. I thought of making a cut...horrible! I did not reply to the telegram, and wandered disconsolately into the Public Library (not having the Sonata with me), in order to see if the sight of the page would offer any kind of solution. The edition was an unfamiliar one, and the time signature – 2/2 – was so unusual that it caught my

eye at once. I had never seen anything but the ordinary common-time signature, and I had never played it or heard it played otherwise than with four distinct pulsations to the measure. The unfamiliar time notation intrigued me, and I returned to ask the librarian if he had another edition. He found two, one of which was similar to what I had studied from, and the other marked “alla breve”. I made further inquiries and discovered an old edition at the home of my friend Oscar Weil, which gave a time notation that I had never before seen, namely: 4/4. By this time I was thoroughly perplexed. What had Beethoven written, and why these differences? In the meanwhile, I tried the effect of the first movement with two instead of four pulsations to the measure. This obliged me to play it faster, although the rhythmical effect, on the contrary, was slower, and the more I played it the better I liked it this way. I could not decide what to do, but I remembered that I had, in my library at home, a facsimile of the composer’s manuscript (which I had never examined carefully), and also a copy of the first edition. Since neither of these was available in San Francisco, I determined to wait until I returned to New York, and telegraphed the Victor Company to that effect.

When I reached home, I could hardly wait to consult these authentic sources. I dashed to my bookcase and pulled out the first edition and the facsimile of the manuscript. The time signature was “alla breve” in the printed first edition, but the manuscript!...*There was no first page!* The original from which the facsimile was taken is carefully preserved at the Beethoven Museum in Bonn, and nobody knows how or when the first page was lost or stolen. The result is that all editors, ignoring the evidence of the first engraved edition, have considered themselves justified, ever since, in making any time notation they choose. This is a great pity, for no musician who has once been released from traditional and unreasoning obedience to the printed page can possibly doubt that Beethoven knew exactly what he wanted when he indicated two beats to the bar in the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata. And Beethoven was right, of course.

Indeed Bauer chose to play the first movement according to his discovery of the cut time signature. The effect on the tempo is pronounced: whereas Evgeny Kissin’s recording of this movement lasts 6:14, Bauer’s crosses the double bar at only 4:55. He stretches out the dotted eighth-sixteenth rhythmic figure, and frequently breaks chords between the hands, playing the bass first. Some bass octaves are even broken between lower and upper note, sounding as a roll.

The second movement displays a more customary tempo, and this time the rolls are barely perceptible. A light touch and discrete use of staccato create a naïve atmosphere, perfectly illustrating Liszt’s assessment of this movement as a “flower between two abysses.” Bauer’s repeat of the Minuet proper (after the trio) is indistinguishable from the first iteration except for a *rallentando* at the end.

The closing movement should once and for all put to rest the bedeviling rumor that Bauer’s technique was second-rate (partly due to his own self-effacing remarks). Such clean and clear passagework, at such a momentous tempo, could have come from

Rachmaninoff. Bauer omits the repeat (likely due to time limitations in recording technology) and heads straight into the development, actually accelerating the tempo slightly. There is no detectable labor or strain in this performance; every phrase and figure comes off with clarity and purpose. In sum, the man had chops.

Beethoven
Sonata in F minor, Op. 57
Recorded 10 May 1927

Apparently by 1927 longer recording discs were available, making the *Appassionata* a recording possibility. Bauer takes on the first movement with a driving seriousness; here there is little room for rubato. The dynamic contrasts are of the starkest variety.

The second movement is sturdy and articulately etched. The emphasis is on delineation of details: bass line, melody, harmony—and of form. The pianist's self-effacing musicality prefers that the listener hear more Beethoven and less Bauer.

An extremely fast finale closes off this reading of Op. 57, though the subsidiary themes are treated with a mild relaxation of the tempo. Bauer's coda is not the break-neck race that is now expected, but rather a notching-up of an already-energetic conception.

Bach-Bauer
Jesu bleibet meine Freude
Recorded 15 May 1928

Bauer's own transcription of this beloved chorale prelude is somewhat amplified compared with the oft-played version by Myra Hess; in particular he employs many densely-voiced bass chords and transposes the obligato passages up an octave from time to time. The tempo is on the brisk side and the left hand strums cheerfully away. The cantus firmus is held forth richly and without harshness—lyrical like a cello. Bauer creates moments of grandeur but overall his reading is rather straightforward and unsentimental.

Gluck-Saint-Saens
Air de Ballet
Recorded 8 June 1925

This charming transcription by Bauer's friend Saint-Saens illustrates the former's predilection for performing light music with eminent seriousness. The unforced ballet rhythm undergirds an unpretentious melody. In the brief variation in the minor mode, the pianist elects to emphasize the inner figuration, as if to suggest that the piece has more polyphonic possibility than first suspected. The filigree at the conclusion is cool and classical in presentation. This must have been a delightful encore in Bauer's hands.

Beethoven
Gavotte in F
Recorded 13 July 1926

There is no confirmation that this piece was written by Beethoven. According to Denis Condon, the 1927 Duo-Art catalog “relates that this piece was from a collection in the British Museum, and that it is ‘arranged and edited by Harold Bauer’. It is not listed in the New Grove, nor does it appear in print...Did Bauer actually write it?”

Another confirmation of Bauer’s seriousness in simplicity, this performance is a model of subtlety and understatement. He also made a piano roll of the Gavotte in 1921.

Schubert
Impromptu in A-flat, Op. 90 no. 4
Recorded on 3 June 1926

This harmonically indecisive composition receives a meticulous reading. The pianist values pearly evenness in the sixteenth notes and proceeds through the first section with almost no fluctuation in tempo. The trio is much more flexible and permeated with pathos, the tune prominently illuminated in the soprano. The recapitulation of the first section is slightly unbridled by means of more pedaling and more *forte*.

Schumann
In der Nacht (from *Fantasiestücke*, Op. 12)
Recorded 15 May 1928
(First of three recordings of this piece)

Bauer’s characteristic momentum serves well in this agitated rendering of one of Schumann’s psychologically turbulent visions. Despite a few wrong notes the pianist presents a clear tune (a trait almost never absent in Bauer’s playing) and a broadly lyrical middle section.

Chopin
Impromptu in A-flat, Op. 29
Recorded 15 April 1928

Delicacy is here eschewed in favor of directness. The B section is treated to an extroverted interpretation, with rolled chords. The repeat of the A section is unsentimental.

Chopin
Fantaisie-Impromptu in C# minor, Op. 66

Another straightforward performance, with little rubato; and as always, eminently clear.

Liszt
Etude in D-flat (*Un Sospiro*)
Recorded 15 April 1928

The sound is sumptuous, even through 75-year-old vinyl. The left-hand figuration tangibly pulsates beneath gorgeously lyrical playing.

Rubinstein
Kamenoi-Ostrow (Op. 10)
Recorded 17 June 1924

During the introduction the right-hand figuration jangles unpleasantly. Thereafter, all is good, healthy Slavic rhetoric.

Schutt
A la bien aimee Valse (Op. 59 no. 8)
Recorded 8 June 1925

Bauer indulged only rarely in salon music; this is one such piece. It is not without a certain Viennese charm, if indeed it lacks much musical substance.

Durand
Waltz in E-flat
Recorded 8 June 1925

This little piece is clearly a Chopin-derivation—a clone of the Minute Waltz. Whatever originality is absent in the composition does not prevent Bauer from playing up its delightful virtuosity, and perhaps making it sound like a better piece than it is.

Bauer
Tunes from the 18th Century

Barberini's Minuet
Recorded 2 June 1924

Bauer's affection for Baroque miniatures led him to compose some original pieces in that style. The *Minuet* is played with Rachmaninoff-esque clarity. Simplicity, charm, taste, and restraint are the order of the day. There is also a funny *alternativo* section—a cheerful and deliberate act of anachronism, wherein the harmony wanders from Wagner to the blues.

Motley and Flouish
Recorded 17 June 1924

This is a little scherzando piece in two discrete sections. One can detect the influence of Godowsky in the chromatic harmony. Bauer plays these bon-bons with purpose and effortless panache.

Biddulph LHW 9

Schumann

Novellette No. 2 in D, Op. 21 no. 2

Recorded 8 April 1929

(First of two recordings of this piece)

Compared with the 1942 rendering, this performance is not quite as antiseptically dry in the opening; Bauer indulges in just a bit more pedal. The entire first section rolls by with hardly a nod at rubato or dynamic contrast. The middle section, however, is sensitively nuanced—probably more so than the 1942 recording. Compositionally speaking the recapitulation is a near-verbatim reiteration of the beginning, and likewise is played that way.

Brahms

Capriccio in B minor, Op. 76 no. 2

Recorded 22 March 1929

Bauer emphasizes the dance quality of the piece with subtle accents on the off-beat left-hand chords. The feeling is very Hungarian, but not aggressive—suggestive not demonstrative.

Grieg

Albumblatt in A (No opus number listed)

Recorded 22 March 1929

This charming waltz is quite Chopinesque except for Grieg's signature minor dominant. Bauer emphasizes the nuances and subtleties of rubato.

Debussy

Clair de Lune

Recorded 21 March 1929

Moments of rubato are amplified ever so slightly by the rolling of chords. The tempo is fairly quick at the *poco mosso*, and the performance is very fluid throughout. It is not difficult to understand why Debussy approved of Bauer's playing with its cold sensuality.

Brahms

Sonata No. 3 in F minor, Op. 5

Recorded 1939 (no precise date)

The first movement, Allegro Maestoso, is generally brisk and monumental. There are a few exaggerations, such as the drawn-out bass triplets during the second theme, but overall the reading is direct, cogent, and unmannered. His sound must have been impressive in person; one can almost imagine the sonority trying to escape the strictures of scratchy vinyl.

The Andante Espressivo comes across as forthright and quasi-objective. One might even say, not very warm. One might also wish for more lingering over the tenderest moments.

Colossal dynamic contrasts characterize the Allegro Energico. Bauer outlines the latent polyphony of this scherzo. The trio undulates between a reflective chorale quality and the veiled threats of the bass.

Tension and darkness cast a shadow over the Intermezzo. The pacing is rhetorical, almost Shakespearean.

The final movement, Allegro Moderato ma Rubato, has a deliberate and laconic introduction. The playing is tightly-wound, giving forth an obsessive pulsation. An expressive Lisztian drama comes into play during the second theme with its bass tremolos. Bauer celebrates each transition to the relative major with a warm effusion of melody and his typical momentum. He closes this massive work with a bracing series of accelerandi which reinforce the triumph of final arrival in the major key.

Bach

Prelude and Fugue in C# major (WTC I)
(Incorrectly listed as “C# minor” on Biddulph CD)
Recorded 1939 (no precise date)

Here is a beautifully even and subtle presentation. The prelude is quick but not obsessively so. (It is healthy to remember that there was a vibrant Bach piano tradition before Glenn Gould—Bach playing was by no means “stagnated” before 1955.) The pianists of the 20th century valued legato in Bach, which did not stand in opposition to lively playing--as demonstrated by Bauer’s playing of this fugue. Brisk and optimistic, he presents exemplary, clear counterpoint. He reminds us of his Romantic roots by means of a long ritardando at the end of the piece.

Handel

Aria con Variazioni (“*Harmonious Blacksmith*”)
Recorded 1939 (no precise date)

Bauer seemed at home in rhetorically gallant pieces. Here he terraces the dynamics from *forte* to *piano* on each repeat, highlighting inner voices here and there. The Variations from seamlessly one into the next, and he shows much interest in the

activity of the tenor and bass. The forward motion only abates in a satisfied *rallentando* at the end.

Scarlatti
Sonata in A (L. 345)
Recorded 1939 (no precise date)

This metronomically even performance comes across as monochromatic, with a few wrong notes thrown in for good measure.

Couperin
Le Carillon de Cythere
Recorded 1939 (no precise date)

Bauer responds to the picturesque title by creating an evocative pedaled atmosphere. He plays both the Impressionist and the Classicist: pronounced interest in voice-leading converses with luminous trills and bell effects.

Schubert
Moment Musical in F minor (Op. 94 no. 3)
Recorded 1939 (no precise date)

The playing is dry and coquettish, playful and even tricky in tone and tempo. Momentary seriousness evaporates into casual drollerie.

Mendelssohn
Characterstück in A (Op. 7 no. 4)
Recorded 1939 (no precise date)

Here's a wild ride. This must have been thrilling in person. Perhaps it is difficult for the postmodern listener not to hear irony in the self-absorbed busyness of the figuration, but it was probably perfectly sincere. This is an absolutely clean and accurate reading.

Schumann
Romance in B-flat minor (Op. 28 no. 1)
Recorded 1939 (no precise date)

Bauer chooses to let the tune drive the piece, to the occasional exclusion of clarity in the triplet accompaniment. The psychological hysteria of this music is mildly suggested rather than dramatized. Musically speaking, Bauer was incapable of hysteria. He makes Schumann sound almost reasonable.

Brahms
Two Waltzes (Op. 39 no. 15 and no. 16)
Recorded 1939 (no precise date)

The famous A-flat lullaby is lilting, simple, and endearing. The left-hand chords become opulent rolls soaked in rich pedal. Bauer uses the second waltz as a B section, then returns to the first.

Chopin
Berceuse (Op. 57)
Recorded 1939 (no precise date)

A little nuance, a lot of sparkle—here is a piece for listening, not for sleeping. In normal Bauer fashion, everything is clear, accurate, and even.

Debussy
Reverie

Oddly, this piece is listed on the cover of the recording but the track is missing.

Biddulph LHW 11

Schumann
Fantasiestücke, Op. 12
Recorded 1935 (no precise date)

Bauer had great sympathy for the music of Schumann and played nearly all his major works. Fantasiestücke is the longest work he recorded acoustically.

The opening work *Des Abends* is presented as amorphous, floating, and tuneful. The tenor comes to the forefront in the second half of the piece.

Aufschwung is tossed off with ease. Bauer shows his affinity for Schumannesque dissonance by creating lingering nuances at important moments of harmonic tension.

Warum? is indeed *langsam und zart* (slow and tender) as the tempo indication requests. Bauer never breaks character.

Bauer begins to allow himself more rhythmic freedom, appropriately, in *Grillen* (Whims). He approaches this scherzando piece with sanguine good cheer.

Throughout *In der Nacht*—this is the second recording he made of it—melodic fragments emerge from a dolorous murk of F minor figuration. The *alternativo* is tender and suggestive.

Fabel is innocent and fantastic. The good-natured improvisatory demeanor gives way only temporarily to gestures of passion.

Traumes Wirren is motivated by brilliantly even figuration, sparkly and quiet. Bauer nuances the cadences. His sound is reminiscent of Lhevinne playing a Chopin etude—the *Black Key* comes to mind. The few wrong notes do not detract from the effectiveness of the performance.

Ende vom Lied is more good-natured than epic, although a solemn countenance appears in the valedictory coda.

Schumann
In der Nacht (from Op. 12)
Recorded 9 January 1942

This is the third recording of *In der Nacht*. (There are gaps of seven years between each recording.) It is perhaps less convincing than the 1935 rendering: less legato, more hesitant. Some inner phrasing does not quite come off, but the soprano melody is vintage Bauer—lyrical, plaintive, and simple. This recording date was Bauer's last for commercial recordings.

Schumann
Novellette in D, Op. 21 no. 2
Recorded 9 January 1942

This second recording of the Novellette is exciting and excitable. Bauer is exuberant as he exults in the energy of dotted rhythms. The main theme is bouncy and unpedalled. The B section is tender if not quite sentimental—the pianist does not linger over anything.

Liszt
Un Sospiro (S. 144 no. 3)
Recorded 9 January 1942

Also recorded in 1928, a few more wrong notes creep in this time. The lyricism is intact, as is the churning left hand. But perhaps Bauer was just beginning to slow down as he neared the end of his career.

Liszt
Waldesrauchen (S. 145 no. 1)
Recorded 9 January 1942

Bauer seems in good form. The figuration is light and even, and the melodic lines are nicely crafted. The music is always moving inexorably forward without rhythmic shenanigans.

Grieg
Various Pieces
Recorded 8 and 9 January 1942

Norwegian Bridal Procession (Op. 19 no. 2)

An outdoorsy march. A picturesque scene is created through ringing bells and a cheerful triplet rhythm.

Albumblatt (No opus number listed)

This improvisatory chordal piece features experimental harmonies. Bauer's reading is straightforward.

Albumblatt (Op. 28 no. 3)

This is a Chopinesque waltz, with Grieg's own harmonies—in particular the dominant 9th. Bauer's rubato is playful, but the middle section becomes a morbid mazurka.

Albumblatt (Op. 28 no. 1)

Papillon (Op. 43 no. 1)

These two works were recorded together with no pause. The *Albumblatt* moves like dance music as Bauer brings out the tenor's commentary upon the soprano line. The *Papillon* flutters about with clear, even chromatic scales.

To Spring (Op. 43 no. 6)

The pianist moves through the piece with a sense of urgency, longing and impatience.

Notturmo (Op. 54 no. 4)

This amorous tune faints away at the ends of phrases. Lingered over birdsong trills, Bauer etches a love duet.

Valse-Impromptu (Op. 47 no. 1)

Humoresque (Op. 6 no. 3)

Again, two works recorded as one. In the *Valse* one is reminded at least as much of a mazurka as a waltz. Bauer points out the exotic harmonies of augmented sixths and open fifths. The *Humoresque* is as light piece with no pretensions to importance, and Bauer plays it as such.

Berceuse (Op. 38 no. 1)

Bauer brings out the latent counterpoint in this simple piece. His standard lyricism and control serve him well here. The B section becomes slightly agitated in

rhythm, dynamics, and harmony, which ruins the effect of the lullaby and makes a recapitulation seem all the more necessary.