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Anthony Kershaw



Brahms: Piano Concerto No. 2/Wilhelm Backhaus, piano/Vienna Philharmonic/Karl Böhm—ESOTERIC Mastering vinyl reissue [2025]

I discovered this magnificent performance of the *Brahms Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 83 (1878-1881) on a Qobuz HiRes stream, researching a “Building a Library” segment for Audiophilia’s weekly livestream, Everything Classical Music Livestream. With the artists performing and the 1967 Decca Vienna recording lineage, I should have already been aware of it. After listening to it several times and its natural competitors (Gilels, Pollini, Curzon, etc), it vaulted to number one on my list of recommendations.

So it was fortuitous as I was searching for a used Decca first vinyl pressing of the Backhaus that ESOTERIC announced this great Decca for their vinyl remastering series. It was released sometime back on an ESOTERIC SACD and quickly sold out. That now goes for several hundred dollars on eBay.

I ordered the new ESOTERIC vinyl off a trusted seller from Japan on eBay so I was sure to get it quickly and bring a review to you. This surety comes at a premium—CAD 150 with shipping and import fees! But I really wanted this recording; a great Brahms 2 was a gaping hole in my collection.

Front and center of the recording is Wilhelm Backhaus's magisterial piano tone, perfectly suited to the grandeur of Brahms's often-described "symphony with piano".

Tempos right from the start are perfect, stately, profound and perfectly suited to Backhaus' drama. From the gorgeous horn solo opening (a little research suggests Roland Berger on 1st Horn), 'till the piano's fiery entrance a few bars after the intro, you'll soon realize what a perfect partner both the Vienna Philharmonic and conductor Karl Böhm are to Backhaus and his interpretation.



Karl Böhm

Karl Böhm allows all the beautiful melodies to unfold naturally from the intro flute to the lovely second subject. It's the same for all the movements.

The "Scherzo", oops, "Allegro Appassionato", it's not a symphony, is lively but in a heavy Brahmsian way. Böhm and Backhaus gauge the tempo and style perfectly. And the slow movement, featuring the beautiful cello solo, is all autumnal glow in the best Brahms/Viennese tradition. And when Backhaus intersperses his rhapsodic solo piano, the results are sublime.

Brahms took three years to write the concerto. The care and his genius show in every bar; not one note or phrase seems out of place. It's a monster to play but sheer, exultant pleasure to listen to.



And the typical Brahms "Allegretto grazioso" is both leisurely and beautiful, bringing this magnificent concerto to an end. As you listen to the final bars, you'll be aware you're in the company of musical giants bringing one of the greatest piano concertos to life. Sure, ESOTERICs are expensive, but this release is worth every penny and more.

The original was recorded at the Sofiensaal, Vienna (April 1967) by balance engineer Michael Mailes and produced by Ray Minshull. Typical with the ESOTERIC remastering team's vinyl reissues, they are very faithful

to the warmth, detail, power and supremely accurate instrumental timbre of the original Decca.

There are absolutely no digital tells from the single digital step—it's as warm and lovely as an ED1. A fantastic release and very highly recommended.

Purchase the ESOTERIC vinyl and SA/CD catalogue at [American Sound](http://AmericanSound.com).