

The Forgotten Danish Pianist Arne Skjold Rasmussen



The Complete Solo TONO Recordings 1951 - 1956
Beethoven Sonatas · Carl Nielsen · Brahms a.o.

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His excellent shaping ability in connection with a mimosa-like sensibility for the rich values of the piano sound, endows his performances with an unusually beautiful and characteristic musical plasticity.'

The above quotation – from a Tono record sleeve-note by the music critic and writer Frede Schandorf Petersen – encapsulates the main characteristics of the exquisite art of the Danish pianist Arne Skjold Rasmussen (1921-80), a now sadly forgotten figure. An unassuming man who made relatively few records, shunned the limelight and for long periods completely withdrew from public performance owing to nervous strain, he did little to promote himself and his reputation, and after his untimely death at the age of 59 faded into oblivion. He was, however, a pianist of the highest distinction, and it is to be hoped that the present issue – comprising his complete solo recordings for the Danish Tono record label – will contribute to the restoration and preservation of his memory.

Arne Skjold Rasmussen was born on May 19, 1921 in Copenhagen, the son of a typographer. His musical talent was obvious at an early age, and he was admitted to the Royal Danish Academy of Music in 1938 where he studied under two eminent pianists of whom he was later to speak very fondly, namely Christian Christiansen, the leading Carl Nielsen interpreter of his day, and Johanne Stockmarr, a more romantically inclined artist of international renown. Skjold Rasmussen graduated as a pianist in 1942 and as a musical pedagogue the following year, and made his debut as a professional pianist in Copenhagen in 1944. After the war he studied with Jules Gentil in Paris (1945-6) and followed Edwin Fischer's masterclasses in Lucerne (1947-51). In 1954 he was appointed as a teacher at the Royal Danish Academy of Music and, in 1959, made a professor there. He also taught at the Aalborg Academy of Music in Northern Jutland, where one of the leading Danish pianists of the next generation, Mogens Dalsgaard, was among his pupils:

'Skjold Rasmussen succeeded the renowned pianist and composer Herman D. Koppel as my piano teacher in Aalborg, and Koppel told me before he stopped that

his successor would be a markedly finer pianist than he was himself. When Skjold Rasmussen arrived, however, he said to me: "Don't expect that I am equal to Koppel as a pianist or teacher; his repertoire is much larger, and his technique is much better."

This utterance not only testifies to Skjold Rasmussen's characteristic personal modesty but also hints at a performance anxiety that would torment him throughout his career and from time to time completely paralyse him. Shortly after his professional debut in 1944 he was to give a concert in a minor provincial town; he got on the train and started the journey, but one railway station before the destination he was so overwhelmed by stage-fright that he alighted and simply stayed away from the concert. Because of his nervous disposition he retired from the concert stage for long periods, and his distaste for the limelight made him prefer chamber concerts to solo recitals. Concerto performances with orchestra made him ill at ease and were rare occasions.

Mogens Dalsgaard describes Skjold Rasmussen as 'a bunch of nerves. His antipathies, idiosyncrasies and phobia were innumerable, but normally he did not appear touchy or irritable. Rather, he was friendly, helpful and modest, almost self-effacing, if occasionally slightly remote.' When Dalsgaard was transferred from the Aalborg Academy of Music to the Royal Danish Academy of Music, he got to spend more time with Skjold Rasmussen. 'He was my teacher in Copenhagen as he had been in Aalborg, and he continued to give lessons at the Aalborg Academy of Music one weekend a month. Since my parents lived in Asaa, a small town some 35-40 kilometres from Aalborg, Skjold Rasmussen and I often accompanied each other from Copenhagen to Aalborg. We took turns to drive his Opel Rekord, and when we got to Aalborg, he very generously lent me the car and I continued to Asaa. Our journey lasted some 4-5 hours each way so we talked a lot, though I do not remember the conversation as particularly profound. In personal matters he was relatively reserved and evasive, and though I spent much time with him I cannot say that I came to know him intimately. He generally held his inner thoughts to himself and remained in many ways something of an enigma to me.'

Mogens Dalsgaard's assessment of Skjold Rasmussen as a teacher is mixed. 'He possessed the very sympathetic trait never to force his personal views on you, but his modesty could occasionally be too much of a good thing: His comments were often rather vague, and he hardly ever sat down at the piano to exemplify his points and ideas. In that respect he differed vastly from my next teacher, Alicia de Larrocha. She was very involved and articulate and used the instrument a lot. She was, to tell the truth, my first real teacher. Her inspiring and efficient way of teaching made me realize that I had, hitherto, been de facto self-taught. But people are different and interact in different ways, and Skjold Rasmussen had other students who found his tuition much more rewarding than I did.'

One such student was the Norwegian pianist Tom Ernst, who studied with Skjold Rasmussen at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in the 1960s and with whom Skjold Rasmussen was to forge a very special bond: 'Skjold Rasmussen was the best teacher I ever had. He was, to me at least, warm, kind, generous and highly inspiring, both musically and technically. He always blamed himself for being a bad technician, and it must be admitted that quite a few of his students found his advice on matters of execution somewhat wanting. To me, however, his suggestions always seemed perfectly right, perhaps more by accident than design, for we happened to have a very similar physique, and what worked for him usually worked for me. Perhaps this explains why he was, in my case, not at all hesitant to demonstrate from the piano.'

Tom Ernst recalls a very special incident when Skjold Rasmussen did indeed, if rather unexpectedly, demonstrate from the piano. 'I attended a masterclass with the famous Swedish pianist Hans Leygraf, and Skjold Rasmussen was present. Like Skjold Rasmussen, Leygraf was, interpretatively, a literalist, but the two were nevertheless very different from each other: Leygraf was a cerebral interpreter with a lean and crystalline sound, whereas Skjold Rasmussen had a more emotionally rooted approach and favoured a subtle, warm, and rounded tone. I had prepared Beethoven's Opus 111 for the masterclass, and at the beginning of the Arietta

Leygraf stopped me again and again, insisting every time that I bring out the melody line and suppress the underlying harmony. This felt utterly wrong, and to his persistent and – to my ears rather stupid – question: ‘What did Beethoven mean?’ I could only answer: ‘I don’t know.’ Skjold Rasmussen, who was usually a polite and unassuming man, had become more and more irritated and finally lost his patience. He got up, approached us, sat down at the piano, and – remarking: ‘This is how we think it should sound’ – played the Arietta more beautifully than could possibly be imagined and, of course, dead against the instructions just given by Leygraf. Leygraf just sat there dumbfounded and looking rather sheepish.’

Like Mogens Dalsgaard, Tom Ernst remembers Skjold Rasmussen’s extreme nervousness as well as his generosity: ‘His affection for his students made him a nervous wreck when we took examinations. Unfortunately, his nervousness was highly contagious, at least in my case, making these events even more nerve-shattering than they already were. Generally, however, his devotion for us manifested itself in an entirely positive way, and I felt his wholehearted generosity time and again. I remember that my fellow-countryman Ole Bøhn and I were to play Nielsen’s Violin Sonata No.2 and the Brahms A Major Sonata in Gentofte outside Copenhagen and, subsequently, to record the Nielsen for the Norwegian Radio. While rehearsing the Nielsen piece for the concert we found ourselves at a loss interpretatively and got more and more desperate. In my distress, I telephoned Skjold Rasmussen, though I felt rather badly about it, because I knew he had a concert himself the following night and really should not be disturbed. But he was completely understanding and unhesitatingly suggested we jump into a taxi and visit him at his home without delay. We arrived at half past seven in the evening and for the next two hours Skjold Rasmussen encouraged and guided us, and everything fell into place. Both the concert and the recording came off very well indeed!’

Skjold Rasmussen once said to Tom Ernst that it would benefit his career if he made some gramophone records, adding in the same breath – somewhat self-contradictory – that he had in the past made some rather inconsequential records himself.

Mogens Dalsgaard experienced a similarly self-disparaging attitude from Skjold Rasmussen. He had bought Tono LPK 32010 – containing Skjold Rasmussen's recording of Beethoven's E major Sonata Op.14 No.1, and four of Brahms's late piano pieces – and brought the record with him to the subsequent piano lesson, assuming his acquisition of it would please his professor. Skjold Rasmussen's reaction was to ask him: 'Why on earth did you buy this trash?'

Skjold Rasmussen's recorded legacy is sparse. His first solo records – a mix of classic-romantic standard repertoire and Carl Nielsen – were made for the Tono label in 1951-6 and are presented here. In addition he recorded, in the stereo era, Carl Nielsen's complete piano music on two LPs, an LP of piano sonatas of Niels W. Gade and J.P.E. Hartmann and – with Henrik Sachsenskjold – another LP of violin sonatas by, again, Gade and Hartmann. His limited recorded output may be due both to his severe self-criticism and to a dislike of the recording process in general. According to Dalsgaard, Skjold Rasmussen once borrowed a tape recorder to record and analyse his own playing at home, only to realize that its mere presence in his house gave him a mental block; he could not touch his instrument until the machine had been returned to its owner. No wonder he was a rare guest in the recording studio.

The present selection opens with music of Beethoven. Skjold Rasmussen's 1951 *Appassionata* bursts with youthful energy, and he favours an unusually swift and unsentimental approach. A comparison between timings bears this out.

Pianist	Year	I	II	III	Total
Claudio Arrau	1954	10.29	7.32	8.07 [5.19]*	26.08 [23.20]*
Wilhelm Backhaus	1952	9.13	5.55	5.03	20.17
Robert Casadesus	1954	8.59	5.53	4.51	19.43
Edwin Fischer	1952	9.15	5.58	5.24	20.37
Orazio Frugoni	1951	8.30	6.01	4.45	19.16
Walter Gieseking	1951	8.52	6.38	7.19 [4.48]*	22.49 [20.18]*

Wilhelm Kempff	1951	9.39	6.10	5.33	21.22
Yves Nat	1954	8.52	5.51	5.05	19.48
Elly Ney	1956	9.58	6.50	5.30	22.18
Victor Schiøler	1950	9.22	6.30	5.08	21.00
Victor Schiøler	1958	9.33	6.18	5.19	21.10
Rudolf Serkin	1947	8.36	7.04	7.51 [5.08]*	23.31 [20.48]*
Arne Skjold					
Rasmussen	1951	8.33	5.36	4.46	18.55
Solomon	1954	8.42	7.16	4.44	20.42

* Where the third movement repeat is observed the estimated playing time without the repeat is indicated in brackets to make comparison possible.

Of the 14 performances Skjold Rasmussen's has the shortest total playing time, and in all three movements he is either the fastest or among the fastest. His performance is also among the least inflected. It is not stiff and rigid, however, as Skjold Rasmussen's discreet handling of rubato, in combination with a most subtle touch and shading and a natural sense of phrasing, endows the performance with an organic flow without hampering its Beethovenish bite.

The 1953 *Waldstein* recording, though slightly less relentless than the *Appassionata*, has similar qualities, and it could be argued that Skjold Rasmussen's characteristic blend of no-nonsense objectivity, tonal sensitivity and subtle nuancing works even better in this, more Apollonian, piece of music. The first movement is a brisk and concise affair with sparse but masterly applied rubato. The *Molto adagio* is heartfelt and sublimely beautiful without a hint of sentimentality or mannerism, and with a magical transition into the finale, which is not at all hasty, but a true *Allegretto moderato* as Beethoven asked for.

The Sonata No.9 in E Op.14 No.1, taped in 1956, is cut from the same cloth as the *Waldstein*, and Skjold Rasmussen works wonders with his delicate touch and supple handling of tempo, the quiet melancholy of the *Allegretto* being particularly moving.

Equally fine is Skjold Rasmussen's intimate and profound rendition of four of Brahms's late piano pieces, recorded at the same session as the Beethoven E major Sonata. Skjold Rasmussen was very much at home with the music of Brahms, as he seems instinctively to have sensed the composer's guarded feelings of longing and resignation; and his playing style – with its weighty, rounded sonority, delicate shading, and gentle flow – lends itself to the Brahms idiom.

Skjold Rasmussen's Chopin seems to have been more of a mixed bag, judged by the two pieces presented here. The Nocturne Op.9 No.2 exists in a beautiful recording with Skjold Rasmussen's teacher, Johanne Stockmarr (DACOCD 442-443), and one would have hoped he had followed in her footsteps. This is, alas, not the case. To be sure, Skjold Rasmussen's performance offers occasional instances of the pianist's inimitable touch in the softer passages, but the pacing is stiff and unyielding, and the overall effect is disappointingly detached and flat-footed. Luckily, his performance of the *Tristesse* Etude Op.10 No.3 is anything but that. With its tender phrasing, richly faceted tone, and a rubato applied with the utmost delicacy, the performance could scarcely be more sincere and affectionate.

According to Frede Schandorf Petersen (in the Tono sleeve-note mentioned above) Skjold Rasmussen was 'the type of musician who, having carefully listened and adapted himself to the special characteristic features of a composition, places himself as a servant *behind* the work.' This attitude – which in many ways resembles the work of a method actor who achieves a lifelike performance through personal identification with the feelings and motives of the character he is playing – could produce wonderfully congenial results. When, on rare occasions, the required inspiration and intimate connectedness with the music eluded him, the result could be pedestrian and workmanlike, as the startling difference between the two Chopin performances illustrates. Some pianists use pretended profundity in the form of wayward rubato, affected phrasing and violent contrasts in order to camouflage an absence of affinity with a piece, and sometimes they get away with it. Whereas Skjold Rasmussen – musically a literalist and personally the antithesis of a

showman - would rather err on the side of blandness than play for the gallery.

Like the Chopin Nocturne, a handful of piano miniatures on CD2 find Skjold Rasmussen less than ideally inspired. Grieg's *To Spring*, while beautifully played, is a bit faceless; *Wedding Day at Troldhaugen* could do with more power and abandon; and Sinding's *Rustle of Spring* is rather prosaic and monotonous. Mendelssohn's *Spring Song* fares better, but is still slightly more matter-of-fact than one would ideally like it to be; and in Schubert's Impromptu in A flat Op.142 No.3 the A-section is somewhat under-characterized and over-cautious, though the gently flowing and exquisitely nuanced and voiced rendition of the emotionally more complex B-section makes amends. One should, perhaps, have expected Skjold Rasmussen to show more sympathy with the aforementioned works, but the music seems to have bored him - or perhaps it was forced upon him before he had fully absorbed it. Could it be that Tono wanted these popular pieces in their catalogue and talked Skjold Rasmussen into recording them against his better judgement? Luckily, the rest of the programme finds Skjold Rasmussen in excellent form.

The performance of Schubert's Marche Militaire No.1 has lilt and perfect poise and is notably interesting in that it presents Skjold Rasmussen in ensemble with his then wife Inger Skjold Rasmussen, née Klüver (1915-2013), who had graduated as a pianist from the Royal Danish Academy of Music in 1936, but whose main occupation was, after their marriage, that of a housewife. She was much admired by her husband - her technique was second to none - and according to Mogens Dalsgaard it was said, half-jokingly, that of the two she was the better pianist.

Skjold Rasmussen's rendering of Schubert's wistful Moment Musical Op.94 No.2 has all the poetry and sincerity one could possibly ask for, and the same goes for Schumann's Romance Op. 28, No. 2, in which the warm, hushed atmosphere is captured with complete understanding and great sensitivity.

Insofar as Skjold Rasmussen is remembered at all it is mainly as an interpreter of

Carl Nielsen's piano music. As a pupil of Christian Christiansen (1884-1955), who had been the Nielsen pianist par excellence of the preceding generation and a very strict taskmaster, Skjold Rasmussen had the Nielsen idiom – for which he seems, furthermore, to have been naturally inclined – in his bones, and he took up Christiansen's mantle as a leading Nielsen expert. In 1965 he made what is by many considered his crowning achievement, two LPs on the FONa/Turnabout label (hopefully to be issued on CD someday) featuring the complete Nielsen piano music which he had already recorded nine years earlier as a radio production for the BBC. His first gramophone recordings of Nielsen's music – of the Suite Op.45, the Theme and Variations Op.40, and the Three Piano Pieces Op.59 – were made for Tono in 1952-3 and are presented here.

Skjold Rasmussen's only rival as a Nielsen interpreter was the slightly older Herman D. Koppel (1908-1998) whose musical pedigree was also quite impressive as he had known Nielsen personally and played his music in the composer's presence. The two pianists, though largely formed by the same musical tradition, were not always in accord as to how these pieces should be interpreted. Tom Ernst recalls being present while Skjold Rasmussen had a somewhat heated telephone conversation with Koppel, castigating the latter for playing Nielsen's piano music too fast. A comparison of the two pianists' recordings of the Suite Op.45 bears out this contrast of approach (though, to be fair, timings of other works tell us that Koppel was not always the fastest Nielsen performer of the two):

Pianist	Year	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	Total
Skjold Rasmussen	1953	3.25	2.06	5.16	1.50	1.12	6.45	20.34
Skjold Rasmussen	1965	3.26	2.10	5.29	1.51	1.16	6.53	21.05
Koppel	1952	2.55	2.03	4.30	1.31	1.10	6.20	18.49
Koppel	1981	3.10	2.28	4.46	1.48	1.10	6.54	20.16

While the early Koppel recording is markedly the fastest, he seems to have mellowed in his later years, arriving at a total playing time closer to that of the early Skjold Rasmussen version (though the distribution between movements is different). Timings are only part of the difference between the two pianists, however. Koppel is relatively dry and volatile with marked tempo variation, endowing his performances with a certain expository character, whereas Skjold Rasmussen brings his usual virtues of gentle handling and an organic sense of tempo and phrasing to the music, letting it speak for itself in a completely unforced manner.

When Tom Ernst continued his education with the Austrian pianist and musical educator Josef Dichler in Vienna, he brought with him, as a gift for his new teacher, Skjold Rasmussen's complete recording of Nielsen's piano music. Dichler, reluctantly, had to admit that Nielsen's works were not entirely to his liking, but added: 'The pianist is a world-class musician!' Hopefully, music-lovers in Denmark and farther afield will agree with Dichler after hearing the present issue.

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The Great Danish Pianist
Victor Schiøler




Recorded at Erik, Telemønt
Henry Holst & Erling Blühdal Bangsboen

DACOCD 491-492

The Great Danish Pianist
Victor Schiøler

VOL. 2




Recorded at Erik, Telemønt
Henry Holst & Erling Blühdal Bangsboen

DACOCD 781-782

The Great Danish Pianist
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VOL. 3




4 important Beethoven concertos
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VOL. 6



Live Beethoven and Brahms Concertos
Händel's Saint-Saëns Variations

DACOCD 962-963

DACOCD 966
DACOCD 967

2 CD

MONO ADD

Total playing time

CD 1 78:26

CD 2 76:32

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transfers
Claus ByrthDigital sound restoration
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Jesper Buhl

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DACOCD 966 CD 1

Arne Skjold Rasmussen (1921-1980), piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827)

Piano Sonata No. 23 in F minor, Op. 57 19:06
‘Appassionata’

- [1] I. Allegro assai 8:37
[2] II. Andante con moto 5:37
[3] III Allegro ma non troppo 4:48

TONO A 166-68. Mtx 3992-97. Rec. June 6-7 1951

Piano Sonata No. 21 in C Major, Op. 53 21:35
‘Waldstein’

- [4] I. Allegro con brio 8:17
[5] II. Introduzione. Adagio molto 3:28
[6] III. Rondo. Allegretto moderato - Prestissimo 9:46

TONO A 186-88. Mtx 4516-21. Rec. May 26-28, 1953

[1] - [6] also as LPA 34004

Piano Sonata No. 9 in E Major, Op. 14,1 10:43

- [7] I. Allegro 4:20
[8] II. Allegretto 3:22

[9] III. Rondo. (Allegro comodo) 2:59
LPK 32010. Rec. 1956

Frédéric Chopin (1810 – 1849)

[10] Nocturne in E flat major, Op. 9,2 3:45

[11] Étude in E Major, Op. 10,3 4:16

TONO A 196. Mtx 4852 [14] Mtx 4851 [15]. Rec. April 16-28, 1954
Also as EP 45052

Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897)

- [12] Capriccio in G minor, Op. 116,3 2:57
[13] Intermezzo in E Major, Op. 116,4 4:23
[14] Intermezzo in A Major, Op. 118,2 5:44
[15] Rhapsody in E flat Major, Op. 119,4 5:05

LPK 32010. Rec. 1956

Transfers for this edition are made from the vinyl versions
except for CD 2 track [11]

DACOCD 967 CD 2

Carl Nielsen (1865 – 1931)
Suite for Piano, Op. 45 20:46

- [1] I. Allegretto un pochettino 3:27
[2] II. Poco moderato 2:06
[3] III Molto adagio e patetico 5:14
[4] IV. Allegretto innocente 1:52
[5] V. Allegretto vivo 1:12

[6] VI Allegro non troppo ma vigoroso 6:46
TONO A 189-91. Mtx 4567-72. Also as LPA 34005. Rec. August 19 1953

[7] Theme and Variations, Op. 40 15:02

TONO A 177-78. Mtx 4152-55. Also as LPK 32002. Rec. January 18 1952

Three Piano Pieces, Op. 59 9:41

- [8] I. Impromptu. Allegro fluente 2:36
[9] II. Molto adagio 2:11
[10] III Allegro non troppo 4:52

TONO A 179. Mtx 4168-69. Also as LPK 32002. Rec. January 18 1952

Franz Schubert (1797 – 1828)

[11] Marche Militaire No. 1 in D Major 4:41
Four hands with Inger Skjold Rasmussen

TONO A 198. Mtx 4911. Rec. 1954

[12] Impromptu in A flat Major, Op. 142,3 4:17

TONO A 197. Mtx 4854. Rec. 1954 [12] - [13] EP 43033

[13] Moment Musical in A flat Major, Op. 94,2 5:25

TONO A 198. Mtx 4912. Rec. 1954

Robert Schumann (1810 – 1856)

[14] Romance in F sharp Major Op. 28,2 3:18

Felix Mendelssohn (1809 – 1847)

[15] ‘Spring Song’ in A Major Op. 62,6 2:25
[14] - [15] EP 45052. Rec. April 21-28 1954.

Edvard Grieg (1843 – 1907)

[16] Weddingday at Troldhaugen Op. 65,6 4:55

TONO A 195. Mtx 4847

[17] To Spring Op. 43,6 2:29

Christian Sinding (1856 – 1941)

[18] Rustle of Spring Op. 32,3 2:20

TONO A 195. Mtx 4849. Rec. April 26-28 1954. [16]-[18] also as EP 43029