

KARAJAN AND THE VIENNA PHILHARMONIC (1946-48 RECORDINGS)

Mozart: Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, K. 525; Masonic Funeral Music, K. 477; Adagio and Fugue in C Minor, k. 546; Le Nozze di Figaro, K. 492; Overture; Beethoven: Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 125 "Choral" (with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Elisabeth Hoengen, Julius Patzak, Hans Hotter, and the Singverein der Musikfreunde in Wien); Brahms: Ein Deutsches Requiem, Op. 45 (with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Hans Hotter, and the Singverein der Gesellschaft der musikfreunde in Wien); R. Strauss: Metamorphosen for 23 Solo Strings; Schubert: Symphony No. 9 in C Major, D. 944 "The Great"; Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 6 in B Minor, Op. 74 "Pathetique". Pathe-Marconi 2C153-03200/5.

The contents in this album were previously reviewed by me for this journal in 1977, as part of a twelve record series released by Japanese EMI that included almost all of Karajan's Vienna Philharmonic recordings made immediately after World War II. The present album is beautifully packaged with a rather perfunctory essay on Karajan in French and English; the transfers are the same as on the previous Japanese issue with Anthony Griffith now receiving the credit due him. Also, the Beethoven Ninth is now spread over three sides and one is accordingly spared the hideous fade-out that the Japanese provided for the side break in the slow movement, and the French pressings are excellent. My main regret about this set is the absence of the Beethoven Fifth which, in my opinion, was certainly the finest performance of the entire Japanese collection. In general, I suspect that most collectors will prefer to buy the Japanese issues, as they are available separately and offer much more material.

In the past year there have been several reviews of the Karajan VPO series in which the authors have stated their preference for these performances over his more recent ones with the Berlin Philharmonic, an opinion with which I must respectfully disagree. Before proceeding any further, I must state that despite my fervent admiration for much of Karajan's work, I certainly do not enjoy or agree with all of it. I often find his Mozart rather soggy, and his excursions into the Baroque repertoire are at best (Handel: Concerti Grossi, Op. 6 DG 139 012, 139 035, 139 036, and 139 042) only decent and at their worst (Italian Christmas Concerti DG 2530 070) almost laughable. However in the German Romantics, the Impressionists, and in certain twentieth century works, Karajan together with the Berlin Philharmonic has, in my opinion, achieved a standard of excellence that must rank him as one of the greatest re-creators of our time. Yet, he remains a controversial figure; often, I suspect, for extra-musical reasons. Many still hold his activities in World War II against him, others react negatively to his vain personality, some simply resent his success, and many others, no doubt, do not respond to him musically. However, I do feel that I

can elucidate on what it is in his recent work that has given me so much pleasure. This is not to totally denigrate the VPO performances, as several of them, the Schubert Ninth, Tchaikovsky Sixth, and Strauss Metamorphosen are quite successful on their own terms. In these Karajan turns in reliable and often exciting readings, but there is also a lack of true individuality. He is, in short, an extremely gifted young conductor, and it is to his everlasting credit that he was not satisfied with his early success but kept expanding and demanding more of his artistic sensibilities.

This can be demonstrated in several specific instances, the most important of which concerns the use of phrase inflection as it regards the musical flow and ultimate shape of an entire movement. In many of the VPO performances one is very conscious of static phrasing, by this I mean each note of each beat of each phrase receiving equal weight, which results in a serious impediment to the musical flow. Examples of this can be found in the opening of the fourth movement of the Brahms Requiem and in the first movement introduction of the Schubert Ninth. Compare these two places with Karajan's remakes on either DG or EMI. Notice how in the Schubert (DG 139 043 or Angel 3862) the music now floats ever so gently between beats one and three, as opposed to the stodgy four equal beats of the VPO recording or how in the Brahms (DG 2707 018 or Angel 3838) there is now a marvellously flowing one-to-a-bar feeling that does not allow this movement to stagnate as it does in the earlier recording. One might also cite the famous second subject of the first movement of the Tchaikovsky Sixth; in the Berlin recordings (Angel 36886 or DG 2530 774) everything surges and flows to its natural conclusion, while the Viennese performance is not nearly so effective. It must be emphasized that this is accomplished not so much by speeding up the basic tempo, but through beautifully executed phrase inflection. However, Karajan does not stop there; he goes on to shape entire sections or movements as he has already shaped the individual notes in each phrase. Phrases are clearly related to one another, and the result is a sensation of incredible sweep that can allow such massive structures as the movements of a Bruckner Symphony or for the purposes of this review, the first movement of the Beethoven Ninth (DG 2740 172) to be molded into a monumental, yet seamless, arch. Comparisons with the VPO performance are entirely to its disadvantage. With its fussy rhythmic point-making Karajan sounds uncharacteristically unsure of himself. Of all of his Beethoven recordings, this one is surely the worst.

This extraordinarily refined approach to interpretation requires, of course, a truly staggering level of orchestral execution, and this is another one of Karajan's achievements, the present state of the Berlin Philharmonic. This is not to imply infallibility; in fact, on recordings one can occasionally find blemishes that should have been corrected. However, one cannot deny that this is one of the world's greatest orchestras and that Karajan deserves a great deal of credit for it. Just as he also must be commended for eliciting from the war-ravaged Vienna Philharmonic orchestral playing of an often admirable

standard.

Another feature of a contemporary Karajan performance is the often extraordinarily wide dynamic range, which is, of course, carefully related to the previously discussed matter of phrase inflection. The use of subtle dynamic control to increase tension without an increase in tempo is one of the more striking differences between these early VPO recordings and the recent Berlin ones. One could point to numerous examples, such as the development section of the first movement and much of the third movement of the Tchaikovsky Sixth and the first and last movements of the Beethoven Ninth. However, it must be admitted that he does sometimes carry his dynamic extremes too far as in the opening of the Brahms Requiem, which is surely much too soft for Brahms single piano on either of the Berlin recordings.

Also, as stated earlier, I do not find Karajan's approach to Mozart to be particularly successful. His reliance on linear inflection often robs the music of its rhythmic vitality, although his recent recordings of the final Mozart Symphonies (DG 2709 080) does represent a substantial improvement in this regard over the earlier Berlin one (Angel 36770-2). But the major drawback of these performances is one also shared by the earlier VPO recordings, too many strings. Karajan has recorded *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* four times, and each time this little jewel has been crushed.

In short, these discs provide a fascinating glimpse into the development of a great conductor; one longs for this sort of documentation of the careers of Toscanini and Mengelberg, but it is, of course, not available. With Japanese EMI's upcoming release of all of Karajan's non-operatic mono Philharmonia recordings, all that is needed is for DG to re-issue his recordings from World War II, which would provide a truly thorough picture of this amazing musician's recording career. However, despite the pleasure that these VPO recordings have given me, I must again emphasize that their main interest is historical and documentary; their musical value is surely superseded by Karajan's more recent recordings with the Berlin Philharmonic.

Walter Pate