

SCHURICHT'S BEETHOVEN NINE

Beethoven: Symphonies. Paris Conservatory Orchestra, Carl Schuricht, conductor. Japanese Angel EAC-30113 (1 & 2); -30114 (3); -30115 (4 & 5); -30116 (6); -30117 (7 & 8); -30118/9 (9). All mono except No. 9. Recorded between April 1957 and October 1958, Salle Wagram, Paris. In No. 9: Wilma Tipp, soprano; Marga Hoffgen, contralto; Murray Dickie, tenor; Gottlob Frick, basso; Elisabeth Brasseur Choir.

A friend of mine likes to tell about the time he went to hear Carl Schuricht and the Vienna Philharmonic in Cleveland's Severance Hall during one of the Orchestra's first American tours. The players were on stage practicing when a figure came through the stage door and briskly approached the apron. The audience, thinking it was Schuricht who had never conducted in Cleveland before, broke into a storm of applause. It was the concertmaster. He and his colleagues tuned for a while and then fell silent, followed by the slightly chagrined audience; and after a moment another figure came on stage, welcomed by more applause strengthened this time by the conviction that it had to be Schuricht. But it was the librarian. Silence resettled over the orchestra and embarrassed audience, and then the stage door opened and yet another figure entered -- short, unprepossessing, white-haired. The twice-burned audience, thinking he must be yet another functionary (and didn't look magnetic enough to be a conductor), sat on its hands until it was sure who he was - and was even more embarrassed than before when it realized that it was letting Schuricht walk on stage in silence.

Since my friend says that Schuricht seemed to find the incident amusing and the concert went as well as a tour concert can be expected to, the incident can't be assigned any particular significance. It does demonstrate, however, how little known Schuricht was to Americans even when his continental fame was at its peak, and why this extraordinary set should be heard not only by everyone interested in Beethoven's symphonies but by those who have been led by Schuricht's other recordings to view him as an insignificant interpreter.

This is, frankly, one of the most thought-provoking -- and frequently exciting -- integral sets of these works to appear in the last twenty years. None has ever been issued on an American label. Recorded in 1957 and 1958, the cycle was apparently the first product of the contract Schuricht had signed with "His Master's Voice" a short time before. He was a recording veteran by that time but like this set, many of his earlier discs had not received American distribution. He had begun in the early 1920s with German Homocord acousticals and done much work for Polydor (and a little for HMV) in the '30s and '40s, little of it issued outside of Central Europe. Recognition seemed to come to him between 1947 and 1957 when his numerous English Decca discs appeared around the world: but the performances frequently seemed to lack weight and intensity, due in part to their thinnish sound, and may have contributed to the widespread impression that Schuricht was not particularly interesting

(whereas in Europe he was famous for the febrile brilliance of his performances).

The HMV contract got off to a good start with this set; Schuricht was a famous Beethoven conductor (he had recorded some of the overtures and five of the symphonies for Polydor, and there had been two Decca/London versions of No. 2 and one each of 1 and 5). Unfortunately, the distribution problem re-emerged. For some reason, French HMV, which made the tapes, did not start recording in stereo until early 1958, when several of the symphonies had already been done. Worse, the only one they ever used it for was Number 9; the 1st, 2nd, and 5th symphonies, recorded in the fall of that year, were made in mono. One is overcome. With stereo taking hold, the records were obsolescent almost before they were issued, and Cluytens' Berlin-made HMV stereo cycle (made at the same time) made them even less competitive. It also had to compete with the Klemperer cycle then coming from EMI Columbia with cyclonic fanfare. After short-lived issues on British, French, and a few other HMV branches, this cycle disappeared. In the United States, Capitol/Angel never touched it. They are currently available in France on Trianon 33333/9.

Their reissue here is something to be grateful. Even if one has to search a bit of them, these Japanese discs reward the listener, not only with a great Beethoven cycle but, probably, the monument of an underrated conductor. Schuricht could become electrical when music possessed him, and descriptions of his performances frequently refer to their intensity and architectural grip. Both of those things are essential for Beethoven; and both are here, not to mention a quite remarkable grasp of these works both unto themselves and as part of the whole. Rarely does a cycle of them, heard straight through, project as strong a feeling of growth from one to the next. It is as though the symphonies, created over a quarter century that contained nearly all of Beethoven's mature artistic years, were a single emotional and intellectual stream growing from the First to the Ninth. Each is presented clearly and directly, free of any exaggeration, and is satisfying by itself; but only after hearing them all does one understand that the conductor is thinking simultaneously of each section in each movement, each movement in each work, and each work in the entire cycle. And when one reaches the end of the Ninth, one feels that one has both gone a vast distance and come full circle.

Symphony No. 1, C Major, op. 21 (Between 9/21 and 10/28/58)

Forceful, vigorous, direct, but graceful. The tempi are nicely balanced, and Schuricht avoids the common tendency to play fast sections slowly and slow sections quickly to achieve a spurious feeling of "unity". (One can assume that when Beethoven wrote "andante" he meant a slower tempo than "allegro." He wasn't stupid.) The second movement has a particularly warm and easy flow, with the agogic freedom that one is to encounter throughout the cycle, and there is a contagious lilt in the finale. The first and last movement repeats are observed.

Symphony No. 2, D Major, op. 36 (September 1958)

Seems to be part of another world: Schuricht's style is broader with considerable drama, pointing up clearly the intellectual and emotional changes in Beethoven since the creation of No. 1. The introduction has several beautiful touches of dynamics and shading, and the transition to the allegro is managed with unusual skill. Some may want more forceful woodwind in that section (their interjections seem more inclined to warmth of tone than intensity), but on the other hand, Schuricht is alert to Beethoven's occasional discords and emphasizes them to good effect. The second movement is warm and flowing and the scherzo and finale are powerful, big in scope, with many interesting touches of shading and tempo. No repeats, interestingly.

Symphony No. 3, E-flat Major, op. 55, 'Eroica' (Between 12/18/57-2/5/58)

"Eroica" Brilliantly incisive. Schuricht gets playing of extraordinary clarity, energy, precision, and sharpness; one would think from the opening chords that Toscanini were conducting. (It certainly doesn't sound like the P.C.O. of the 1950s!) Although the propulsion and sharp definition of accent and texture seem to lessen after the first 100 bars (another take? -- see the separation of recording dates), the first movement still has great power, and its coda is particularly strong. The slow movement is on the quick side, like Schuricht's performances of Bruckner adagios, but it also is powerful, with a superbly constructed climax. The tremendous energy returns in the scherzo, with some very sharp accents that work well, and carries into the finale, which goes well, with a particularly jubilant coda. (It also has a couple of ritards toward the beginning that some may dislike and Koussevitskyan distentions of the final string chords.) Altogether, an Eroica of striking emotional, intellectual, and rhythmic strength. No unusual repeats.

Symphony No. 4, B-flat Major, op. 60 (4/25 - 4/29/57)

Again, there is a sharpness of line indicative of great care: the little felicities of balance and accent are unusual, and the incisiveness of accent and rhythmic propulsion are exciting. Overall, however, the performance is less impressive than its predecessors. Schuricht seems to view the work as a slightly small-scaled rest between the heroics of its neighbors, and -- although it is fresh and engaging -- it isn't the experience it is in the hands of Walter, Mengelberg, Weingartner, Furtwangler, Toscanini, or Beecham. The first movement repeat is observed.

Symphony No. 5, C minor, op. 67 (Between 8/31 - 9/26/58)

Superb. Like other conductors of his generation, Schuricht understood tempo modification: Wagner's concept of the melos, of slight, flowing modifications of pace had not given way to the boring rigidity of the Soltis or Maazels. The flexibility of Schuricht's pulse here, together with his knowledge of how to keep it from interfering with

continuity, is very striking. The first movement is similar to Bruno Walter's performances, particularly the skillful blending of warmth and drama and the care in phrasing. The andante is warm and beautifully paced; the scherzo good, again exquisitely colored. Its mystery and diablerie is excellently caught. (There is particularly good playing in the trio, by the way, and the wind lines are unusually clear - to good effect.) The finale, paced rather quickly (as is the entire work), is joyous and triumphant, with strongly-built climaxes and - again - skillful use of rarely-heard inner voices to add to the cumulative effect. This is the equal of anyone else's Fifth, and it far outclasses Schuricht's earlier Decca version with this same orchestra. The first movement's repeat is played; the finale's isn't.

Symphony No. 6, F Major, op. 68, 'Pastoral' (4/30 - 5/6/57)

"Pastoral" A warmly lyrical account in which the combination of emotional involvement without heaviness again reminds one of Walter. (Unfortunately, so does the omission of the first movement repeat.) The tempi tend more toward Walter's than some other German conductors, and Schuricht combines some unusual and effective tempo modifications in the first movement with interesting legato phrasing. The string playing is exceptionally sensitive, as is the woodwind work.

Symphony No. 7, A Major, op. 92 (5/13 - 6/12/57)

Arresting from the first note - sharp, firm, Toscaninian chords. There is a feeling of grip, purpose, and propulsion in the introduction, and Schuricht strongly projects the feeling from the very beginning that it's part of something larger: as elsewhere in this set, the sense of structure is very strong. The introduction is on the fast side, making the transition unusually seamless. The balance of the movement is slightly less impressive, but the way Schuricht avoids sensationalism of tempo while maintaining pulse and structure is exciting. The very fast slow movement works because, again, the orchestra is balanced so well that all lines can be heard; and Schuricht demands such sharp (and novel) accents that the music makes a strong point in a very unusual way. He also obeys Beethoven's tempo markings: the scherzo (well done) is a real presto and the finale is taken slower - but so con brio, deeply involved, and brilliantly articulated that it sweeps to a really smashing conclusion. This is a superbly satisfying and exciting version. No repeats.

Symphony No. 8, F Major, op. 93 (Between 5/7 - 6/12/57)

I found all of the performances in this set satisfying; but if there are any that others would feel differently about I imagine they would be this and Number 4, which are distinctive mainly because of subtleties of detail. This is relaxed and lyrical, with what could probably be called the standard Germanic tempi. There is delightful clarity of articulation in the second movement and the finale contains some very interesting accentuation. The recording contains two engineering

failures: the sound is bass-shy, perhaps because Number 7 is on the same disc (although its low end is better), and the first movement repeat is clumsily spliced in.

Symphony No. 9, D Minor, op. 125 (3/4 & 5; 5/27-29 & 31/58)

The beginning of the first movement, taken at the standard Central European tempo, lacks the impact some have brought to it, but after a bit one understands that Schuricht has planned it that way: in the development he unleashes the power he has been holding back, and the effect is tremendous. (Younger conductors who insist upon battering the listener with the first tutti, fortissimo, could learn something from this sensitivity to structure and drama.) The scherzo is also strong, very pointed rhythmically, with lovely coloring. (Interestingly, the trios are quite a bit faster than the "A" sections, creating a light and warm effect which emphasizes that this is the work's first music in a major key.) The third movement is on the slowish side and provides a feeling of true repose although it is well-integrated into the score as a whole; it's also well-integrated internally: the alterations between adagio and andante, which with some conductors seem to break the movement apart, flow seamlessly. In fact the effect is reminiscent of Mengelberg (Philips 6767 003); and so, in spots, is the finale - the "vocal" eloquence of the double-bass recitative, the unusually sensitive painting of the text ("mit diesem KUSS der Gouzan Welt..."), and the intense emotional fervor. It's Schuricht's own conception, however, and aided by the superb choral and solo singing (Frick particularly) it provided a memorable conclusion to a distinguished cycle.

The playing is excellent throughout. In fact, it's astonishing. The Paris Conservatory ensemble made so many lackluster records in the '50s and '60s that it became almost synonymous with orchestral mediocrity, and the clean, energetic, beautifully colored playing here is almost incredible. Much of the credit must belong to Schuricht, who had a long and close association with the group and made many records with them from the early '40s onward; but they rarely played this well for him - or anyone else. His influence is audible also in the way the brass usually avoid the customary French vibrato, although it does appear occasionally, such as in the trio sections of Numbers 3, 8, and 9.

Except for the weakness in No. 8, the mono sound is clean and well-focused; the stereo effect in No. 9 is not particularly pronounced, but it is well-balanced and adds dimension. Unfortunately, though, there's been some lab work done, and it's not entirely to the good. A comparison with the 1960 British HMV issue of No. 9 showed that it had a warmer, more natural tone, particularly in the strings and winds. The peaked highs in this set make the strings sound coldly thin, and the French woodwinds - which have a tightly focused tone to begin with - sound cold too, and occasionally shrill. (The added reverberation also contributes to this.) But heard on their own, these discs do have excellent clarity and presence.

Overall, then, this is one of the best Beethoven cycles of the last twenty-five years, well worth looking for.

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Japanese Angel EAC-30113/9 are available from Tower Records, 2525 Jones Street, San Francisco, CA 94133.