

KARAJAN AND GIULINI REISSUES

BRAHMS: Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73 (Recorded May 24 and 25, 1955); SCHUBERT: Symphony No. 8 in B Minor, D.759 "Unfinished" (Recorded May 18 and 19, 1955) HMV Concert Classics SXLP 30513

BRAHMS: Symphony No. 4 in E Minor, 98 (Recorded May 26 and 27, 1955) HMV Concert Classics SXLP 30505

ROUSSEL: Symphony No. 4 in A Minor, Op. 53 (Recorded November 22 and 28, 1949); STRAVINSKY: Jeu de Cartes (Recorded May 3 and 5, 1952) HMV Concert Classics XLP 60003

All of the above with Herbert von Karajan and the Philharmonia Orchestra

TCHAIKOVSKY: Symphony No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 17 (Recorded September 29, 1956); Fantasia after Dante: Francesca da Rimini, Op. 32 (Recorded April 9-11, 1962) Carlo Maria Giulini and the Philharmonia Orchestra

The three Karajan discs are the most recent issues on EMI's Concert Classics label featuring long withdrawn performances, newly re-mastered from the original tapes, made by the conductor in the early to mid-fifties mostly with the Philharmonia. In terms of the sound, all one needs to say is that the company is maintaining the high standards that it achieved on previous releases in this series, such as the spectacular Britten-Vaughan Williams coupling on XLP 60002. The Brahms and Schubert works are being released for the first time in stereo, and the results are stunning. In no way could one begin to guess the age of these recordings. In comparing these new transfers to the mono ones in Toshiba-Angel's Karajan-Philharmonia boxes (EAC-37001-19; EAC-37020-38; reviewed in this Journal Vol. XI, Nos. 2/3), one finds, besides the expected increase in depth and perspective, greater dynamic range, improved clarity, and a much more natural string sound; the Japanese issues were rather hissy in this regard. In fact, these twenty-five year old recordings are much more pleasant to listen to than the conductor's most recent ones of the Brahms Symphonies with the Berlin Philharmonic (DG 2711 022), which tend to be rather strident and overbearing.

The Roussel-Stravinsky coupling contains performances of two outstanding scores that Karajan has not subsequently re-recorded. In fact, this release is the first British issue of the Jeu de Cartes which was available in the early fifties in France on FCS 163. It is a superb performance featuring some wonderful orchestral playing and plenty of the rhythmic bounce so essential for Stravinsky that is often missing in Karajan's readings of this composer. The music really "dances"; one can easily visualize dancers performing to this interpretation. One should note that Karajan repeats two measures at fig. 202 near the end of the score. According to Eric Walter White in his Stravinsky: The Composer and His Works (University of California Press, 1979), this repeat was sanctioned by the composer.

The Roussel Symphony is less successful. The admittedly thick textures seem more dense than is necessary and the music often lacks a sense of direction. The climax of the slow movement is rather flat and the conclusion of the finale, which can be tremendously bracing, seems matter-of-fact. A comparison with Charles Munch's wonderful performance with the Orchestre de l'Association des Concerts Lamoureux, recently reissued in a fine-sounding transfer on Erato MUS 19004, shows just what is missing. I suspect that Karajan and his players had insufficient time to become fully acquainted with this complicated, yet enormously rewarding score.

In many ways this Philharmonia performance of the Brahms' Second is the most successful of the four recordings of this work which Karajan has made. It certainly represents a dramatic improvement over his earlier one with the Vienna Philharmonic, re-issued a few years ago on Toshiba-Angel EAC-30106. The recording under review has a beguiling lyricism which allows the first movement to gently unfold, yet without robbing the movement of its necessary momentum. Also, listen to the delightful swagger with which Karajan opens the third movement and to his wonderful rhythmic control in the following presto and in the finale where so many conductors rush madly ahead. Of his subsequent recordings, the one from the mid-sixties with the Berlin Philharmonic (DG 138925) contains an exciting traversal of the finale, but the third movement lacks the wonderful grazioso quality, specified by Brahms, of the earlier Philharmonia reading. His most recent one, also with the Berlin Philharmonic, strikes me as not being very well prepared with the final two movements being rather sloppy and square. The harsh recording quality of this performance has been mentioned earlier.

It is a measure of the high regard with which Karajan holds the Brahms Fourth that all three of his recorded interpretations are of the highest caliber. One can point to certain slight alterations, but his view of the work remains extraordinarily compelling. The Philharmonia performance is slightly slower; there is a tendency to linger a bit at the ends of phrases and in transition passages. The earlier of the Berlin readings (DG 138927) tends to take such moments in tempo, while the most recent one nudges them gently ahead! Compare bars 19-20 in the slow movement and the transition to the meno section of the third movement to see what I mean. Unlike his recent recording of the second, his new one of the fourth shows evidence of most intense preparation. The tonal blend and intonation in the woodwinds is simply staggering. The Philharmonia recording tends to be a bit disappointing in this regard particularly in the flute playing in the finale, but this is still a most radiant and highly recommended disc.

The Philharmonia reading of the Schubert "Unfinished" provides a most generous filler to the Brahms Second. The first movement flows with both power and grace and the second movement is most poetic. However, the conductor's mid-sixties recording with the Berlin Philharmonic has an extra burnished intensity about it in the first movement and a greater sense of direction and flow in the finale. His later version of

the work (Angel 37058 or Electrola 1C 065-02 643), like that of the Brahms Second, does not seem to have been produced with as much attention to detail. The intonation between the supposedly unison oboe and clarinet near the opening of the first movement should have caused everyone to have stopped and gone back to the beginning. The slow movement seems rather dead in this performance and the Electrola sound is overly resonant and opaque. It is perhaps churlish to complain, but in view of the generous Brahms-Schubert coupling, it seems a shame that Karajan's beautiful Philharmonia reading of Brahms' Variations on a Theme by Haydn could not have been coupled with the Fourth Symphony. The variations were the original coupling of the Schubert and were done in the same sessions in May of 1955. Presumably, stereo tapes exist of this performance, but barring that, a clean mono transfer would have been most welcome.

The next Karajan re-issue on Concert Classics will be the Tchaikovsky "Pathétique" making its first stereo appearance. One hopes that EMI will continue this series as the conductor made several very impressive recordings in this period. As candidates for future issues, I would suggest the Tchaikovsky Fifth, the Sibelius Fourth, La Mer, Till Eulenspiegel, all with the Philharmonia, and a collection of Wagner Overtures and the Schumann Fourth with the Berlin Philharmonic.

Readers may recall my earlier review of Giulini's recording of the Tchaikovsky Second (Vol. XII, Nos. 1/2), on Toshiba-Angel EAC 30297. In it, I complained of the rather dull sound and a serious lack of rhythmic drive or momentum in the outer movements. My reservations about the performance remain, but EMI's new transfer is again amazing with greatly increased presence, dynamic range, and clarity. Francesca da Rimini receives a first-rate reading; the conductor's affinity for cantabile lines is very much in evidence, and the conclusion is suitably dramatic and powerful. This is one of the best Francesca's on records, and it is sonically quite impressive. If all modern recordings sounded this natural, it would be a cause for considerable rejoicing.

Walter Pate