

PISTON FROM BOSTON

PISTON: Symphony No. 6; MARTINŮ: Fantaisies Symphoniques (Symphony No. 6). Boston Symphony Orchestra; Charles Munch, conductor (Piston recorded 12-14 March, 1956; MartinŮ recorded 23 April, 1956). RCA Gold Seal AGL1-3794, stereo.

This reissue of two sixth symphonies commissioned for the seventy-fifth anniversary season of the Boston Symphony Orchestra appropriately coincides with the orchestra's ongoing centennial celebrations. This is the first time that these recordings have appeared in their stereo versions, continuing a fairly recent and welcome RCA policy of reissuing important performances in previously unreleased stereo incarnations. If I recall correctly, this started in 1977 with the Brahms D minor Piano Concerto with Artur Schnabel and Fritz Reiner (ARL1-2044) and has continued with first stereo issues of the Munch/BSO Brahms Second (AGL1-2702) and the classic Cantelli account of the Franck D minor Symphony (ARL1-3005; see ARSC Journal, Vol. XII, No. 1-2, p. 117).

I had known of the existence of a stereo tape of these performances for some time and while the sound is not quite as "stunning" as a former RCA A&R representative had led me to believe, it is certainly not disappointing either. The most noticeable gain is an improvement in clarity of orchestral textures, especially where percussion is spotlighted as in the scherzo of the Piston symphony. Unfortunately, it seems that this has been accomplished at the expense of a greater richness and solidity of tone that was more evident in the original issue, LM-2083. There, string tone is sweeter and the entire tonal ambience warmer resulting in fuller and weightier bass sonority. (The Piston symphony, incidentally, has also appeared domestically on New World Records NW 286, coupled with Leon Kirchner's Piano Concerto No. 1. The monaural sound on this transfer is decent, if not quite as warm as the old RCA or as sparkling as the new stereo version.)

I continue to enjoy Munch's way with both symphonies and not surprisingly so since both were written with an ear to the fluid characteristics of his conducting style. If I prefer Anserl in the MartinŮ work (Supraphon SUA 10327, also Everest 3316; both out of print), it is because Anserl's deliberate, less overtly virtuosic approach seems to penetrate deeper to the dark core of the fantastic and often terrifying nature of this music, revealing unsuspected links with the bleak, despairing mood of the later Shostakovich symphonies. There is also a more recent account of the MartinŮ Sixth with Vaclav Neumann and the Czech Philharmonic on Supraphon 1410 2096 which I have not heard.

The Piston symphony, a personal favorite, is an intentionally more entertaining and less probing work and is better served by the brilliant interpretation it receives here. The scherzo movement, a gem of a piece which flies by at lightning speed, permits an amazing display of orchestral virtuosity. I can recall once hearing an acetate of the world

premiere performance recorded at Symphony Hall in which the scherzo was taken at an even quicker tempo than the one chosen for this recording, leaving the audience audibly "wowed" at its conclusion. By the way, has anyone else noticed the more than superficial similarities between this movement and the Capriccio notturno section of Lutoslawski's Concerto for Orchestra, completed in 1954, a year before the Piston symphony? Coincidence?

Surfaces on my review copy were rather noisy with numerous pops and ticks on the Piston side. The brief liner notes by John N. Burk are reproduced from the original issue.

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