

WALTER'S BERLIOZ

BERLIOZ Symphonie Fantastique, Op. 14. Bruno Walter, conducting;
Orchestre de la Societe des Concerts du Conservatoire. (Recorded May
19 and 20, 1939 in Paris) PATHE MARCONI 2C 051-03611.

This is the kind of re-release one would like to greet ecstatically. After all, it brings to us a side of Bruno Walter not often heard, and it should provide us with a different view of his conducting because of that. Unfortunately, the view it provides us with is not all that attractive, and this performance will remain nothing more than a curiosity. Those who study Walter closely will want it, but those who are looking for Berliozian pleasure won't find it here.

This is a highly mannered reading and one which shows little familiarity with the piece as we know it today. Granted in 1939 the Symphonie Fantastique wasn't as much a repertory piece as it has become in the past three decades or so, and granted "tradition" is not always a positive factor. But this performance just sounds wrong. Climaxes, particularly in the first movement, are rushed. There is precious little lilt in "Un bal". The "March to the Scaffold" has none of the sinister quality inherent in the music and lacks weight; the timpani are often too reticent, and much of the music here is rushed and underarticulated, resulting in a hectic sound. The opening of the finale, that wonderful upward running figure in the celli and basses, completely lacks the mystery that would seem to me to be an integral part of the music. The macabre quality of the clarinet solo is defeated by a bouncy, rather snappy approach. And on it goes.

One wonderful moment: the bells in the last movement. Berlioz's score calls for six (!) pianos doubling the chimes one and two octaves below. I'd love to encounter a conductor who could convince whoever was paying the logistical bills to get six pianos into a performance, just to see what it would sound like. But Walter captures the dark, mysterious quality that Berlioz obviously wanted here better than any I've heard. I am not sure what he does use (it sounds like a piano or pianos, although the 1939 recording is not really clear enough to be sure), but the effect is wonderful.

The transfer is a bit thin sounding, and the balance of the original recording favors the strings rather too much--so that at times even accompanying figurations in the strings take precedence over melodic material in the winds. All in all, this cannot be recommended except to the Bruno Walter scholar.

Henry Fogel