

## BÖHM IN DRESDEN

Volume I: MOZART: Violin Concerto No. 5 in A major, K. 219 (Jan Dahmen, violin; recorded 1938); Horn Concerto No. 3 in E-flat major, K. 447 (Max Zimolong, horn; 1940); Serenade in G major, K. 525, "Eine kleine Nachtmusik" (1938). BEETHOVEN: Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37 (Lubka Kolessa, piano; 1939); Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58 (Walter Giesecking, piano; 1935); Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 73, "Emperor" (Edwin Fischer, piano; 1939); Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 61 (Max Strub, violin; 1939); Leonore Overture No. 3, Op. 72a (1938); Egmont Overture, Op. 84 (1935). Saxon State Orchestra, Karl Böhm, cond. EMI/Electrola 1C-137-53500/4 (five discs, mono)

Volume II: BRAHMS: Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 83 (Wilhelm Backhaus, piano; 1939); Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 77 (Wolfgang Schneiderhan, violin; 1940); Hungarian Dances: No. 5 in G minor, No. 6 in D major (1938). SCHUMANN: Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 54 (Walter Giesecking, piano; 1942). SCHUBERT: Marche militaire in D major, D. 733/1. BERLIOZ: Le damnation de Faust--Rakoczy March. LORTZING: Zar und Zimmermann--Holzschuhtanz; Undine--Ballet Music from Act II. TCHAIKOVSKY: Capriccio italien, Op. 45 (abridged). Saxon State Orchestra, Karl Böhm, cond. EMI Electrola 1C-137-53505/7 (three discs, mono)

Volume III: BEETHOVEN: Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125 (Margarete Teschemacher, soprano; Elisabeth Höngen, alto; Torsten Ralf, tenor; Josef Herrmann, baritone; Dresden State Opera Chorus; 1941). BRAHMS: Symphony No. 4 in E minor, Op. 98 (1939). BRUCKNER: Symphony No. 4 in E-flat major (1936); Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major (1936). REGER: Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Mozart, Op. 132 (1938). PFITZNER: Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 46 (1940). THEODOR BERGER: Rondino giocoso, Op. 4 (1940). STRAUSS: Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche, Op. 28 (1940); Don Juan, Op. 20 (1938). Saxon State Orchestra, Karl Böhm, cond. EMI/Electrola 1C-137-53508/13 (six discs, mono)

Volume IV: STRAUSS: Der Rosenkavalier - Mit ihren Augen voll Tränen (Esther Rethy, soprano; Elisabeth Höngen, alto (1940); Waltzes from Act III (1938); Ist eine Traum (Rethy and Höngen; 1940); SALOME: Salomes Tanz (1938); DAPHNE: O wie gern blieb'ich bei dir (Margarete Teschemacher, soprano; 1938); Götter! Brüder im hohen Olympos! (Torsten Ralf, tenor; 1938); Wind, spiele mir mir! (Teschemacher; 1938). MOZART: Die Entführung aus dem serail--Overture (1939); Le nozze di Figaro--Overture (1939). WEBER: Oberon--Overture (1939); Der Freischütz--Overture (1938); Was gleicht wohl auf Erden (Dresden State Opera Chorus; 1939). SMETANA: The Bartered Bride--Overture (1939). HUMPERDINCK: Hänsel und Gretel--Overture (1939). WAGNER: Der fliegende Holländer--Overture (1939); Tannhäuser--Overture (1939); Freudig begrüßen wir die edle Halle (Dresden State Opera Chorus; 1939);

Lohengrin--Gesegnet soll sie schreiten (Dresden State Opera Chorus; 1939); Prelude to Act III (1939); Treulich geführt (Dresden State Opera Chorus; 1939); Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg--Prelude to Act I (1939); Fliedermonolog (Josef Herrmann, baritone; 1940); Act III complete (Teschemacher, Helene Jung, Ralf, Martin Kremer, Hans Hermann Nissen, Eugen Fuchs, Sven Nilsson, Arno Schellenberg, et al., Dresden State Opera Chorus; 1938). VERDI: Aida--Prelude to Act I (1939); Otello--Si, pel ciel (in German; Ralf, Herrmann; 1940). GOUNOD: Faust--Soldier's Chorus (in German; Dresden State Opera Chorus; 1939). LEONCAVALLO: Pagliacci--Intermezzo (1938). PUCCINI: La Fanciulla del West--Ch'ella mi creda libero (in German; Ralf; 1940). MASCAGNI: Cavalleria rusticana--Easter Hymn (in German; Christel Goltz, soprano; Dresden State Opera Chorus; 1939); Intermezzo (1948). STRAUSS: Die Fledermaus--Overture (1939); Tausend und eine Nacht--Intermezzo (1938); Kaiserwalzer, Op. 437 (1939). REZNICEK: Donna Diana--Overture (1938). Saxon State Orchestra, Karl Böhm, cond. EMI/Electrola 1C-137-53514/9 (six discs, mono)

Electrola's reissue of Karl Böhm's 78 RPM recordings with the Saxon State Orchestra inspires some initial reflections. What if there had been no Nazi revolution to send Fritz Busch into exile? Might we now be listening to four fat boxes of Busch recordings with the orchestra that, in the event, he led from 1922 to 1933? Very likely not, for my guess is that many of these recordings were made principally as replacements in the Electrola catalogue for non-Aryan versions of the same standard works, no longer marketable in the Third Reich.

In his annotations for the single-disc French issue of the Fischer/Böhm "Emperor" Concerto (EMI/Pathé-Marconi 2C 051-45660), Andre Tubeuf misses this point when he expresses regret that the soloists in the concerto recordings include Lubka Kolessa and Max Strub--instead of, presumably, such exiles as Schnabel and Adolf Busch. It's the other way around, of course: Electrola needed recordings of these central works that did not involve the likes of Schnabel or Busch, Kreisler or Huberman, Toscanini or Bruno Walter. Whatever his considerable qualifications as a musician, Karl Böhm did not then have the international celebrity to compete in the international catalogues; his virtues were availability and professionalism--and his position in charge of one of Germany's best orchestras. (No doubt Furtwängler would have been Electrola's first choice for such assignments, but his unwillingness to cooperate consistently with the regime, and his general allergy to the recording studios, probably combined to put most of the plum assignments into Böhm's hands.)

Be that as it may, this LP reissue constitutes a substantial documentation--indeed, something like twice as much as we would have of Furtwängler up to the same year if we had to rely on studio recordings alone. Much of it was originally released only in Germany, the exceptions being the unusual repertory of the earlier sessions: the Bruckner symphonies, the Reger variations, the Daphne selections and the third act of Die Meistersinger were all released here by RCA Victor,

while Columbia picked up the Giesecking Beethoven Fourth Concerto. (Later, the Hänsel and Flödermaus overtures turned up on RCA Bluebird LPs and 45s: LBC/WBC-1048).

In general, the recordings confirm David Hall's observation in The Record Book of 1948: "Of all the German orchestras, this one impresses us, on records at least, as having the finest musicians, and while Bohm is not a great conductor, he is remarkably competent and often brilliant." The Dresden tone is rich, warm, and cohesive. Much fine solo playing is to be heard from the winds. The brass playing is consistently remarkable, especially in the Bruckner symphonies. The strings disappoint only occasionally (in the highest positions near the start of Don Juan, for example, and in very fast passagework); while the intonation sometimes falls below the best modern standards, it is on a par with much work of its period.

The first two boxes in the Electrola series concentrate on concertos, one's reaction to which will be conditioned primarily by the work of the soloists. The violinists in the Mozart/Beethoven set are particularly disappointing. Max Strub, until 1928 concertmaster at Dresden and thereafter in Berlin, is a squeaky, ill-tuned fiddler in the Beethoven, and his musical, even sensitive phrasing is continually contradicted by his tonal quality. One admires the bite and dash and accenting of the double-stopped second subject in the Rondo, for example, but the actual sounds are unlistenable. In the first movement, Strub plays an adaptation of the timpani-accompanied cadenza that Beethoven wrote for his piano transcription of the concerto; that side only was included in Thomas L. Clear's "Augmented History of the Violin" anthology.

Jan Dahmen, Dresden concertmaster in the Böhm years, is not much better technically in Mozart's "Turkish" Concerto, and his playing is unattractively rigid and forceful. The Third Horn Concerto brings us the orchestra's first horn, Max Zimolong, a facile and secure player, but with little of the variety and charm that Dennis Brain taught us to look for in this music; he has some trouble with repeated notes in the slow movement, and the episodes of the Finale tend to drag.

The pianists are a more distinguished lot. Lubka Kolessa is more fluent than graceful or sparkling or profound in the C minor Concerto; the second subject of the Finale lumbers, the Scotch-snap rhythm heavily exaggerated. Giesecking is glib and glittery in the G major, a superficial but very brilliant performance. (The side layout here is ill-considered, placing the break at the suspenseful juncture between second and third movement; this could easily have been avoided by putting the filler Egmont Overture before the concerto rather than after.) Much more important is the "Emperor," Fischer playing in a less rhetorical style than in 1951 with Furtwängler. The last movement is particularly vivid, Fischer living dangerously and getting away with it in wonderfully clean and articulated scales. The tutti are rather faceless, however, and it is mainly the solo playing that one attends with fascination.

(The French edition, in the "Références" series, stems from the same tape transfer, but is mastered with more top cut.) The fillers in Volume I include a soggy reading of Eine kleine Nachtmusik, in which the intonation is below par (it was, too, in Bruno Walter's 1936 Vienna version--but there the playing was a good deal more graceful). The Beethoven overtures are routine versions in the taut, efficient style.

In Volume II, Backhaus is a solid but stolid soloist for the Brahms B-flat Concerto, missing the lightness that others have found in some parts of the work. Böhm manages the tutti well, though the faster tempo of the coda of the last movement seems to have been stumbled into rather than reached by a positive decision. (There are single issues of this recording, in France 2C-051-01362, in Germany 1C-053-01362; both are based on the same master tape, but have been more heavily filtered than the version in the Böhm box.) A considerable musical pleasure, on the other hand, is the Schneiderhan Brahms Violin Concerto, securely, cleanly, forcefully played in the outer movements; only his octaves at the slow-movement recapitulation disappoint. Probably one of the rarest recordings in the set, this is, alas, the noisiest of the lot, and has been subjected to some obtrusive declipping. The last of the Dresden recordings is Giesecking's Schumann concerto, another noisy original, and another cool, glib performance; perhaps because of wartime conditions the orchestral work is sometimes scrappy. Among the fillers for this set, the Brahms and Lortzing dances are the best, the Tchaikovsky Capriccio italien (with its slow introduction trimmed in half) the most pointless.

The third box focuses more directly on Böhm as symphonic conductor. After a taut, clean, clear first movement, the Beethoven Ninth offers a fast, aggressive Scherzo, a tense, reposeless Adagio, and an uneven Finale, marred by a scrawny chorus (wartime conditions again?). The soloists, leading figures from Bohm's Dresden Opera company, are serviceable--Herrmann more friendly than hortatory in his opening solo, Ralf tending to outpace the orchestra in the Alla marcia. It all makes quite a contrast to Bohm's very last recording, nearly forty years later, with the Vienna Philharmonic (DG 2741 009), much slower and less steady of tempo, a somnambulistic sort of "interpretation" that appears to deal with only one measure at a time and shows little sign of shaping toward destinations.

The highlight of this volume is the Brahms Fourth, played with both vigor and subtlety; the strings, especially, offer fire and sweetness in equal measure. The Bruckner performances are historically important, as the first complete recordings of these works (and in the editions by Robert--not Joseph, as he is called in Böhm's liner reminiscence--Haas, then relatively new). These are not ruminative performances--the principal interpretive strategy is to keep things exciting; repose or pensiveness is eschewed. Bruckner's repetitive symmetries are underlined by this under-inflected approach, but Böhm is not inflexible about tempo in the Fifth (though hardly as charismatically free as Furtwangler in the recently-published Berlin performance of 1942, one of the all-time great Bruckner recordings: Discocorp RR-538).

The Reger Variations are vigorously and stylishly played; it's hard to imagine a performance of comparable conviction today. The Pfitzner Symphony in C, recorded in the year of its first performance, is less vigorous and texturally various than the composer's contemporaneous version (which suffers from a trumpet-concerto balance), less grandly phrased and energetic than Furtwängler's 1949 performance (Discocorp RR-437), albeit well played. The final novelty (originally the filler to the Brahms Violin Concerto), Theodor Berger's Rondino giocoso for strings, is diverting enough; has it ever been recorded again?

Finally, we come to Böhm's specialty, Richard Strauss. Of the two tone poems here, the earlier recorded, Don Juan, is the best; after a slightly stiff treatment of some early tempo modifications (and the already-mentioned high string problems), it turns into a propulsive, committed, even lush performance, distinguished by a superb oboe solo. In the later Till, the orchestral work is less distinguished.

Strauss dominates the opening sides of the fourth volume, devoted to opera. The duets from Rosenkavalier are disappointing (Rethy not in tune), though the Waltzes are well-tailored. The Daphne records feature the principals of the premiere, which took place under Böhm at Dresden; both singers are tried by the writing, which is heard to better advantage from Güden and King in Bohm's 1964 complete recording (though even twenty-five years later the intricacies of Strauss's scoring were not completely realized).

Among the many overtures, choruses, and such, there is much competence, rarely any special illumination. The German selections fare better than the Italian--there is no slancio in the playing of the big tune of the Pagliacci Intermezzo, for example, and Christal Goltz sounds like Weber's Agathe on a package tour to Sicily. The Wagner excerpts are vastly preferable to Bohm's late Vienna versions (DG 2531-214 and 2531-288), which are slack, shapeless and ill-balanced--and should never have been released. The third act of Meistersinger is not a particularly warm or humorous performance, but within its style it is effective, even compelling; the competent soloists offer little of the subtlety that we have heard elsewhere in this music (e.g., Schorr, Schoeffler, Kunz, Schwarzkopf, Güden, etc.).

The technical work on this series is variable--a circumstance perhaps in part attributable to the use of earlier transfers where they exist (notably Meistersinger III, the Bruckner Fourth, and the Brahms Second Piano Concerto). Most of the rest appears to have been freshly made, from commercial pressings in indifferent condition. Some swingers are evident (the slow movement of the Beethoven Third Concerto, and Leonore No. 3), and various hums crop here and there (during the violins' cadenza in Leonore No. 3, for example, and at several points in Meistersinger III), and some thumping as well. The surface noise sometimes reaches obtrusive levels; it's too bad that better copies could not have been found (doubtless some of these recordings are fairly rare) and the

most recent techniques of noise reduction used. The best of these transfers are certainly listenable (e.g., the Brahms Fourth), but all of them could surely have been better. Each box includes a trilingual booklet with the same memoir by the conductor of his Dresden years, individual historical essays on the Dresden orchestra and opera, and brief notes on the works and soloists.

Böhm's virtues as a conductor, until he was beset by the infirmities of old age, were principally in the areas of technique (his ability to achieve orchestral discipline, sonorous balance, and textural clarity) and energy, rather than in profound interpretive insight or individuality. His most effective moments, in my experience, were in the theater, where he could control the building of tension and instill his energy in his collaborators--a particular virtue in the later operas of Strauss so prone to sink of their own weight. In the standard symphonic literature, other and more interesting strategies are possible, and Böhm's performances have less enduring value. Often hailed as the last of the old-style German conductors, he seems to me to have been, rather, a transitional figure, nurtured in the older German tradition but practicing an essentially "objective" interpretive style. Curiously, the major influences cited in Böhm's autobiography are Walter and Knappertbusch (the name of Toscanini occurs only peripherally) but he seems to me to have been closer to the axis Busch-Szell-Reiner than to his Munich mentors.

David Hamilton