

KNA LIVE

- BEETHOVEN: Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 5 in E-Flat, "Emperor", Op. 73. Paul Badura-Skoda, piano; North German Radio Orchestra, Hans Knappertsbusch, cond. (Broadcast performance of March 14, 1960) RECITAL RECORDS RR-483 (Published by Discocorp).
- BEETHOVEN: Symphony No. 3 in E-Flat, "Eroica", Op. 55, Vienna Philharmonic, Hans Knappertsbusch, cond. (performance from 1962 Salzburg Festival) JAPANESE SEVEN SEAS K20C-78.
- BEETHOVEN: Symphony No. 5 in C, Op. 67. Dresden Staatskapelle, Hans Knappertsbusch, cond. (Performance unidentified) JAPANESE SEVEN SEAS K20C-58.
- BEETHOVEN: Symphony No. 6 in F, "Pastorale", Op. 68. Dresden Staatskapelle, Hans Knappertsbusch, cond. (Performance unidentified) JAPANESE SEVEN SEAS K20C-76.
- BEETHOVEN: Symphony No. 8 in F, Op. 93. SCHUMANN: Symphony No. 4 in D, Op. 120. Dresden Staatskapelle (in the Schumann); North German Radio Orchestra (in the Beethoven), Hans Knappertsbusch, cond. (Performances unidentified). JAPANESE SEVEN SEAS K20C-57.
- BRAHMS: Symphony No. 1 in C, Op. 68. Dresden Staatskapelle, Hans Knappertsbusch, cond. (1961 performance). JAPANESE SEVEN SEAS K20C-53.
- BRAHMS: Symphony No. 2 in D, Op. 73. Munich Philharmonic, Hans Knappertsbusch, cond. (Performance unidentified) JAPANESE SEVEN SEAS K20C-54.
- BRAHMS: Symphony No. 2 in D, Op. 73. Munich Philharmonic, Hans Knappertsbusch, cond. (Performance same as previous listing); WAGNER Die Meistersinger: Prelude to Act I. Berlin State Opera Orchestra (Performance unidentified). RECITAL RECORDS RR-388 (Produced by Discocorp).
- BRAHMS: Symphony No. 2 in D, Op. 73, HANDEL: Concerto Grosso Op. 6, No. 5. Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, Hans Knappertsbusch, Cond. RECITAL RECORDS RR-536 (Produced by Discocorp).
- BRAHMS: Symphony No. 3 in F, Op. 90. Vienna Philharmonic, Hans Knappertsbusch, cond. (Performance from July 26, 1955, Salzburg Festival). JAPANESE SEVEN SEAS K20C-55.
- BRAHMS: Symphony No. 4 in E, Op. 98. (Performance from May 8, 1953); WEBER Euryanthe: Overture (Performance from May 14, 1962). Cologne Radio Orchestra, Hans Knappertsbusch, cond. RECITAL RECORDS RR-543 (Produced by Discocorp).

BRAHMS: Symphony No. 4 in E, Op. 98 (Performance from 1957). Cologne Radio Orchestra, Hans Knappertsbusch, cond. JAPANESE SEVEN SEAS K20C-56.

BRUCKNER: Symphony No. 4 in E-Flat; BRAHMS Symphony No. 3 in F, Op. 90. (Performances unidentified). Berlin Philharmonic, Hans Knappertsbusch, cond. I GRAND INTERPRETI IGI-383 (Produced by Discocorp).

BRUCKNER: Symphony No. 8 in C. BEETHOVEN Symphony No. 8 in F, Op. 93. (Performances unidentified). Vienna Philharmonic (Bruckner); North German Radio Orchestra (Beethoven), Hans Knappertsbusch, cond. I GRANDI INTERPRETI IGI-375. (Produced by Discocorp).

BRUCKNER: Symphony No. 9 in D. Bayerische Staatskapelle, Hans Knappertsbusch, cond. (Performance unidentified). JAPANESE SEVEN SEAS K20C-52.

MOZART: Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra in A, K. 622. Wolfgang Schroder, clarinet; Munich Philharmonic, Hans Knappertsbusch, cond. (performance of July 6, 1962). JAPANESE SEVEN SEAS K20C-77. (This performance is coupled with Mozart's K. 482 Piano Concerto, with Paul Badura-Skoda, the Vienna Philharmonic, Wilhelm Furtwangler, conducting).

WAGNER: Gotterdammerung: Rhine Journey; Siegfried's Funeral Music; Immolation Scene. Tristan and Isolde: Prelude and Liebestod. Berlin State Opera Orchestra (for all except Immolation Scene); North German Radio Orchestra, with Christa Ludwig, sop. (Immolation Scene), Hans Knappertsbusch, cond. RECITAL RECORDS RR-535 (Produced by Discocorp).

This series of releases from two sources, with very little overlap, gives the record collector the clearest insight that has ever been possible into the art of Hans Knappertsbusch. "Kna", as he was affectionately called by his friends and colleagues, was reputed to be at his least persuasive in the recording studio. But here we have a batch of live performances, catching him in front of audiences and at what should be his best.

To those who would have it that Knappertsbusch was one of the great conductors of this century, this series of discs will give only partial support. However, to those who have maintained that all the evidence heretofore available has shown Knappertsbusch to be a frustratingly uneven musician, inspired and noble at his best, but disjointed and heavy-handed at his worst, this series of releases offers considerable evidence to back those claims.

Those who were close to Knappertsbusch have written of his unevenness. John Culshaw, in Ring Resounding, noted his inconsistency in performance and his reluctance to apply care to making of studio records. "In vain did I try to get him into the control room to listen to points of balance and intonation which needed his attention. He would take every possible suggestion any recording director cared to make, and would faithfully do his best to carry out what he had been told--but, personally, he was not involved. The truth was that Knappertsbusch took very badly to recording conditions, and, no matter what we did, the genius which he so certainly revealed in the theatre refused to come alive in the studio." "It is hard work to try and make a good record with someone with whom you do not have a personal or musical contact. It is heartbreaking to make a poor record of a performance by someone you respect and admire as we respected and admired Kna." Culshaw's touching tribute could, in fact, raise hopes that hearing all of these broadcast performances would be far more satisfying than listening to Knappertsbusch's studio records.

In point of fact, there are some truly horrible performances here, and the general average is fairly depressing. Knappertsbusch was famous for disliking rehearsals, and for often dismissing his musicians early and putting his faith in the pressure of the performance to bring everything together. But there are reasons for rehearsing. Many of the performances here, even where superb in conception, are sloppily executed. I'm not talking of the occasional ragged entrance, which one can hear, for example, in any Furtwängler performance due to his own imprecise stick, but the total lack of ensemble that comes from poor preparation. Musical dialogue between instruments is not phrased in the same way when it is repeated as it was on original statement. Tempo changes are very badly handled, with different instruments making the changes at different rates. Part of this may well have to do with the improvisatory nature of Knappertsbusch's conducting, since he may well have done things differently on one night than he did at a different performance or earlier rehearsal.

As an overview of Knappertsbusch's art, these releases are surely valuable. The massive approach, the broad phrasing, the enormous rhythmic weight, and the singing phrases are all heard throughout these records. But for satisfying performances, the above list will have to be pruned very carefully. Most instructive are the two performances of Brahms' Second Symphony. The Brahms Second on RR-388 is identical to the Japanese release of K20C-54, except that Discocorp's release also gives you a Meistersinger Prelude. On the other hand, the Japanese sound has the advantage over Discocorp's. A direct A-B comparison of the two shows the Discocorp to be thinner in overall sonority, more cramped and a bit more distorted, and with notably weaker bass response. The Brahms Second on RR-536 is, of course, a different performance -- and the comparison of that Berlin Philharmonic reading (identified only as "Wartime") with the Munich Philharmonic performance is fascinating. The Munich performance is significantly

better -- and indeed represents the greatness of Knappertsbusch when all of the elements that made up his art came together.

While I do not want to go over all of these releases at great length, I thought it would be instructive to compare in some detail one movement of the Brahms Second (the Finale) in both performances. This comparison will make clear the astonishing inconsistency of the conductor, even though both performances can be said to start from the same basic approach to the music. Surprisingly, the Munich performance not only hangs together better, but it is even better played. The very opening of the finale is marred on the BPO reading by an early trumpet entrance. If you listen to measures 2-14 of the finale, you can hear the BPO performance already bogging down, with its sluggish, beat-by-beat phrasing. The MPO performance is not only a bit faster, but the individual beats are not emphasized at the expense of the musical line. At bar 23 there is an accelerando. The BPO performance, after a very sloppy forte attack, is typical of the worst of Knappertsbusch's tempo adjustments. It is not together, and the shakiness takes a measure or two to even out. The MPO performance, on the other hand, is a model of smooth gearshifting. At bar 78, the BPO performance suffers from a slowing down (at the largamente marking) so severe that the pulse is lost; the tempo adjustment simply calls attention to itself, and away from the momentum of the music. The MPO performance at this point is interesting. It is still a severe tempo change, but because it is better prepared and more confidently established, the flow of the music is maintained; that is the difference between success and failure with this type of interpretive device.

Going on with our comparison, there is a sluggishness in the tempo and phrasing of the BPO performance at bars 100-120, and much more rhythmic tension and forward motion in MPO. The wonderful rhythmic writing in measures 138-141 lacks snap in the BPO reading, but crackles with the MPO. The passage between 275 and 280 is rhythmic chaos in the BPO performance -- almost completely falling apart. This must have been the kind of moment orchestral musicians dreaded in a Knappertsbusch performance. The MPO performance is much more precisely organized. At bar 345 and following, the 16th dotted 8th pattern is not well articulated by the BPO, whereas it is quite clean in the Munich reading. Once again at measure 387, the Berlin reading features a ritardando that is so monumental and out of context that all momentum is lost. Then when they attempt to regain the fast tempo, it is sloppily and insecurely done. The Munich performance is again much more successful. The rit. is much more carefully prepared, and the return to the faster tempo is structured rather than haphazard.

The differences noted above would seem to be simply the differences between a Knappertsbusch performance on a night when the stars were in the right position, the mood was right, or whatever it took to make the best in him come out was present, and a performance when none of those factors were working for him. The point of the detailed analysis was not to talk about those specific details, but to examine why it was

that one performance caught fire, and one did not; to show how the same conductor in the same piece can achieve wildly different degrees of success in different performances.

As to those performances here that are truly worth investigating, I would recommend the following: Brahms' Second Symphony (Munich), Mozart's Clarinet Concerto (the Badura-Skoda/Furtwangler performance on the other side is also worth having, and is in fairly good sound), Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto, Beethoven's Fifth, and Beethoven's Sixth. All of those represent Knappertsbusch at his finest -- warmly flowing, the broad phrases never becoming flabby, the grandeur never slopping over into heavy-handedness or ponderousness.

The Beethoven "Pastorale" is actually one of the finest performances of that work I've ever heard, and makes a strong case for an elevated stature for Knappertsbusch. The first two movements are warm, gentle, even intimate -- and they move along at a nice pace. The third movement finds a good balance between warmth and genial relaxation on the one hand and energy on the other. The rhythms are firm, and there is a nice spring even within the context of the rounded contours. The transition into the fourth movement, as well as that movement itself, are rather quick. In the fourth movement there is a wonderful sense of mystery in the dynamic shading Knappertsbusch and his musicians bring to the score. The finale lacks the intimacy we sometimes hear in this music, but is nonetheless highly attractive in its warm-hearted richness of sonority.

The Beethoven Fifth is also a ringing performance, filled with the celebration of power. Knappertsbusch surprises by taking the last movement repeat. The "Emperor" is a thoughtful and probing reading, with real concentration and a sense of drama on the part of soloist and conductor in the first two movements. The finale is, sadly, a bit disorganized, and has some ensemble lapses.

The Handel Concerto Grosso as filler on the Berlin Brahms Second is heavy-handed and ragged, and the Meistersinger Prelude on the Discorp version of the Munich Brahms Second is not a first-rate performance either, so I would opt for the Japanese pressing without the Wagner for its better sound.

There are some other performances that have their interest, but also drawbacks. The "Eroica", for instance, is majestic and eloquent for the first two movements, but bogs down in the last two. The Scherzo is impossibly slow and disjointed, and it loses its momentum because its rhythms are so blatantly pounded out. There is a huge pause before the trio section (that seems to be a Knappertsbusch trait, and it certainly does interrupt the flow of things). The Bruckner Ninth also has power and appropriate weight in its first movement, but that same movement suffers from disorganized tempo adjustments. So often we find in these readings a basically fine conception which falls apart because

the tempo changes are poorly prepared or executed. One cannot step on the brakes as if a dog ran in front of the car when one is shaping a Bruckner symphony! The scherzo is heavy but good and solid, but the finale, interestingly, lacks grandeur and scope. Here Knappertsbusch seems afraid of the naturally large scale of the music, and sounds restless.

Although Knappertsbusch was one of the few conductors of his generation to regularly conduct Bruckner, I am now thoroughly convinced that he was not, by nature, a Bruckner conductor. His studio recording with the Munich Philharmonic of the Eighth has always struck me as highly idiosyncratic, and the three Bruckner performances here have such major problems that none of them can be called successful. Besides the Ninth described above, there are the Discocorp releases of Nos. 4 and 8. The latter has technical problems in the reproduction (thin, wiry sound and some speed irregularities), but also is destroyed by the lack of a firm conductorial hand on the pulse. There is no unity, no overall shape. The Fourth is curiously bland, seemingly led without any viewpoint. There are too frequent tempo shifts over and above those called for in the score.

The Beethoven Eighth performances are so heavy-handed as to be perverse. Here Knappertsbusch is at his most outrageous, with extraordinarily slow tempos and sledgehammer rhythms that are caricatures of his own conducting style. The two releases (one as filler for the Bruckner 8th, one with the Schumann 4th) feature the same orchestra and no date identifications. It is possible that they are the same performance, but the sound is so different (in this case the Discocorp being far superior in all ways) that it becomes difficult to tell for sure. The basic approach is identical, but I do not believe they are the same performance. In any case, I cannot imagine anyone responding positively to this approach to Beethoven's Eighth. Even if you like it in the heavier style of Mengelberg, Stokowski, etc., Knappertsbusch simply goes farther than the music can take. The Schumann Fourth has its moments, but it too is very uneven. The very radical tempo shifts play havoc with the work's structure, and the orchestral playing is anything but suave.

The two Brahms Third's are also mixed bags. The Berlin Philharmonic performance on Discocorp's IGI-383 is more successful than the Salzburg Festival/Vienna Philharmonic 1955 reading on the Japanese disc (K20C-55), but both are characterized by extraordinarily slow tempos. The Berlin performance is played with more instrumental security, and it features more taut rhythms and better sound. But in both Knappertsbusch mars his performance by gigantic ritardandos at the "big moments", reminding me of the once-published "red letter" edition of Shakespeare's plays, where all of the famous quotes were printed in red! In both readings, there is a lushness and lilt more appropriate to Lehar than to Brahms.

The Brahms First is somewhat more successful, an intensely lyrical performance but with a good deal of "digging into the music" by the strings, and by Knappertsbusch. But it still lacks the firmness of pulse needed, and with so many truly great performances of this work around (Furtwängler's DG reading still heading the list), this one just doesn't measure up. Knappertsbusch's self-indulgence, the feeling one gets that he is living for the effects of the moment without an overall sense of the structure of the piece, does him in.

I have saved for last the Discocorp Wagner disc, for it has some unique problems. For one thing, the jacket indicates that Christa Ludwig is heard in the "Liebestod" from Tristan, when she is not; it is an orchestral performance.

More damaging, though, is the fact that while this claims to be a live performance from 1959 (all excerpts save for the "Immolation Scene") there is clearly a splice right after the first climax of Siegfried's Rhine Journey, and a change at that splice to a different performance. The tempo after the splice is notably faster than it was before, and even Knappertsbusch would not have indulged in such an abrupt change (indeed one could never get such a sudden change executed with such unanimity). Also, the acoustic is different. In general, I find the three all-orchestral excerpts not reflective of the best in Knappertsbusch's Wagner (such as is heard on his two commercial live Parsifal sets), and the momentum of the Rhine Journey is, of course, totally shot by the splice and performance change. The splice also calls into question the authenticity of all of the material on the disc, since clearly there cannot be a splice in a live performance.

As to the Immolation, Ludwig and Knappertsbusch make a powerful team. She sings with nobility and grandeur, and rides the orchestra powerfully. He conducts with weight, but with the proper harmonic and linear motion, so that there is a magnificent scope to the reading. But here too, there are those moments of frustration when Knappertsbusch simply calls attention to himself. When Ludwig finishes singing, the orchestral postlude begins so slowly as to jump right out of the overall context of the piece.

And so it is with Hans Knappertsbusch: one glorious moment followed by a lapse. The value of these releases is that we now can be said to have a valid picture of Knappertsbusch's art as his audiences heard it. On the whole, I'm afraid it was too inconsistent, too wayward. There are certainly individual performances here that show blazing insight and a firm grip on the whole. But there are too many that lack those qualities, and in the end Knappertsbusch seems a highly talented, gifted musician brushed with genius, but lacking in the discipline to apply that genius to his art in the most consistently productive way.

Henry Fogel