

#### MENDELBERG LIVE

SCHUBERT: Symphony No. 8 in B Minor, D. 759 ("Unfinished");  
Rosamunde: Overture Entr'act No. 3, Ballet Music No. 2.  
Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam conducted by Willem Mengelberg.  
Japanese Philips PC-5554.

BRAHMS: Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 68. Concertgebouw Orchestra  
of Amsterdam conducted by Willem Mengelberg. Japanese Philips  
PC-5552.

For a half century (1895-1945) Willem Mengelberg reigned as Director of the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam, an ensemble he transformed into a virtuoso instrument of world-class stature. Concerts he led for Nazi audiences sparked public indignity that enforced his retirement at the end of World War II, closing a career that otherwise might have continued until his death in 1951 at the age of 80.

The items featured here are part of a series of live performances recorded by the Dutch radio and released by Japanese Philips. Many of these performances were once available domestically: Bach's St. Matthew Passion, Brahms' German Requiem, the Mahler Fourth symphony, the Schubert Ninth, and the nine Beethoven symphonies. In contrast, the Schubert "Unfinished" (recorded on November 27, 1939) and the Brahms' First (recorded on December 13, 1940) have never been issued in this country. Sonically, both are uncommonly fine for their vintage: Somewhat limited in dynamic range, a bit gritty, and marred by surface noise from the glass or acetate sources, they nonetheless boast rich timbres, good clarity, and exceptional presence.

The "Unfinished" is the prize of the lot, a performance similar to Mengelberg's studio recording of the score for Telefunken reissued a few years ago by Past Masters. All of the traits typical of Mengelberg's style are in evidence here: a rich, brassy sonority, virtuoso execution, and unusual liberties with respect to phrasing and tempo. In this particular instance, however, these liberties are governed by good taste and musical sense so that lines are not unduly distorted or structure unduly fractured. This is an "Unfinished" of passion, power, singing lines, and stature, the last trait underscored by Mengelberg's observation of the first-movement repeat. To be sure, it is not the classically styled reading produced with the same orchestra by Beinum and Monteux, and purists may well object to Mengelberg's pattern of acceleration for loud passages and braking for soft ones in the slow movement. Let it be added, though, that these gear shifts are accomplished with a smoothness most of today's conductor's could not possibly match. The overside Rosamunde excerpts (recorded on November 27, 1941 and featuring the familiar Zauberharfe Overture) have been previously released on a Pearl disc. Sonically, the two editions are indistinguishable. The overture is played beautifully, with minimal

tempo adjustments and a dashing lightness that suits it perfectly. The Entr'act No. 3 is labored and fussy, but, in its somewhat zany way, quite beautiful. The Ballet Music No. 2 is a bit better, if hardly suitable for dancing.

Mengelberg left studio recordings for all the Brahms symphonies save the First. Thus this concert account has special documentary value. Unfortunately, it features the kind of extreme mannerisms that led to the Dutch conductor being tagged "mangelberg." Granted the performance boasts some wonderful features, most notable among them being a craggy, aggressive vitality in the first movement. But there and throughout the finale tempo adjustments are so extreme and occur so frequently, the score seems more like a musical jig-saw made up of scattered pieces that do not fit together. Most offensive in this regard is the main theme of the finale, which loses all of its shape and continuity as a result of being broken into little disconnected sections. And by today's standards, the violin solo in the second movement, with its surfeit of vibrato and portamento, sounds downright ludicrous.

What we have here, then, falls far short of the splendors Mengelberg achieved in his magnificent studio recording of the Brahms Third Symphony. But as a document of a great conductor in one of the most eccentric of his many mannered moments and of a performance tradition that has long slipped into history, this disc is unquestionably fascinating. Notes for both releases are in Japanese only, and these discs will most likely be available only from stores who import them directly from Japan. One other record in the series never released here previously--a live performance of the Franck symphony--has also been announced. When it appears, it will be reviewed in these pages.

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