

BRUNO WALTER IN PERFORMANCE

SCHUBERT: Symphony No. 9 in C, D. 944. MOZART: Serenade No. 13 in G, K. 525 ("Eine kleine Nachtmusik"). Stockholm Philharmonic conducted by Bruno Walter. BRUNO WALTER SOCIETY BWS-207. (Produced by Discocorp).

Bruno Walter's fondness for the Schubert Ninth is evident from his having left three studio recordings of the work: a 1938 edition for HMV with the London Symphony (issued here by Victor and currently available from Turnabout in an excellent transfer made by Anthony Griffith), a 1946 performance with the New York Philharmonic (released by Columbia on 78's and later in vastly superior sound on LP), and a 1960 stereo version (also produced for Columbia but with an inferior ad hoc west-coast orchestra and still available from Odyssey). Were we to have only Walter's earliest and latest efforts, it would seem that his fondness for the score was not matched by an ability to project its heroic grandeur. But the New York version makes clear what Walter at his best could achieve with this music. It is a vibrant, often dramatic, rhythmically flexible reading boasting all of the gemutlich lilt of his other efforts without their excessive rhythmic slackness, occasional raggedness, and frequent stodginess. This live performance, recorded at a concert that took place on September 8, 1950 in Stockholm, falls somewhere between the relative blandness of Walter's stereo version and the vitality of his New York Philharmonic edition. It has moments of energy and power, but they are not sustained, and the orchestra is simply no match for the New York Philharmonic of 1946. This Stockholm performance, incidentally, has had a previous incarnation on Olympic 8123, a disc that may still turn up in bargain bins.

Newly issued, I believe, is the Stockholm version (drawn from the same concert) of Mozart's little exercise in perfection. Eine kleine Nachtmusik is one of the few works Walter recorded four times. This live account is more energetic and crisp than all save the conductor's earliest effort for English Columbia, but it is laden with Luftpausen--so much so, in fact, that at one point in the first movement one poor violinist makes the "mistake" of entering on the beat (or at least where the beat ought to be) rather than where Walter misplaces it. Thus, despite its prevailing liveliness, the performance becomes too sectionalized and too affected. The sound in both works is a bit shrill, muffled, and veiled by surface noise from the acetate sources. In sum, then, this release, though not without documentary value, should prove attractive only to those especially interested in Walter.

BRUNO WALTER CONDUCTS THE NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC. (Available from the New York Philharmonic, 132 W. 65th Street, New York, N.Y. 10023. Checks should be made payable to New York Philharmonic Radiothon: two discs, \$20.00). WEBER: Euryanthe Overture (February 22, 1948). MENDELSSOHN: Midsummer Night's Dream Incidental Music: Overture, Scherzo, and Nocturne (December 12, 1948). VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis (February 22, 1953). DEBUSSY: La Mer (January 19, 1941). BRAHMS: Concerto No. 2 in B-Flat for Piano and Orchestra (with Myra Hess, piano; February 11, 1951). Parenthetical dates indicate when each performance took place.

This two-record set published by the New York Philharmonic of live performances led by Bruno Walter comprises the sixth volume in that orchestra's series of Radiothon Editions and the first to be devoted exclusively to this conductor. (An earlier edition included Walter's performance of the Overture to Mozart's *Così*--the first LP release of an account used as the filler side in the Columbia 78-rpm set of Walter's first New York Philharmonic recording of Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony.) Both for the strengths and weaknesses of what it offers, this set proves fascinating.

Walter had a long association with the New York Philharmonic making his first appearance with the group in (I believe) 1932 and continuing to be a guest conductor almost every season thereafter until ill-health forced semi-retirement upon him in 1959. For two years (1947-49) he served as the orchestra's "musical advisor," while a permanent director was sought to succeed Artur Rodzinski. In 1941 Walter began to record with the orchestra, his first Beethoven "Eroica" also marking his first domestically produced set. If the history of Walter's career is ever written, it may well become apparent that he reached a peak of his powers between 1941 and 1954, a period that preceeded his first enervating heart attack and a period that yielded some of his finest discs. Certainly if one looks at the works for which he left multiple recordings, those of the New York Philharmonic years usually prove superior: better disciplined, more dramatic, and rhythmically tauter.

It is in the context of that superiority that this set immediately has appeal. With the exception of the Scherzo from Mendelssohn's Midsummer Night's Dream music, which comprised the filler side in the Walter-Milstein 78-rpm set of the composer's Violin Concerto, none of this music was recorded by the conductor in the studio. What is more, by including the Vaughan Williams Fantasia and Debussy La Mer, this set features significant composers with whom Walter is not ordinarily associated. Far more typical of the conductor's repertory are the Euryanthe Overture MND selections. Ironically, they are the most disappointing items here: Precision is often lacking, rhythm occasionally becomes flaccid, and the elfin

lightness one associates with the MND is rarely heard. Similarly the Euryanthe Overture suffers from rhythmic instability and fractured continuity--shortcomings also evident in a performance of the work Walter gave in Paris in the mid-fifties, which was broadcast in this country about a decade later. Interestingly, I listened to the Philharmonic performance with a well-known member of the orchestra at the time it was given. We then turned to a 1945 Philharmonic performance of the work under Toscanini (once available from the Toscanini Society). It was shocking to hear how much better--simply in terms of polish, precision, and clarity--the Toscanini effort was. The same orchestra playing in the same Carnegie Hall sounded like a totally different group.

Surprisingly, the Debussy and Vaughan Williams works fare far better. Here we have Walter at his best: a conductor capable of producing precise execution, drawing a taut line, and extracting a salient voice from a complex score. La Mer is at once atmospheric and dramatic, the Fantasia touchingly evocative without being sentimental or too thickly textured. And I would guess that if the reproduction (about which more later) were better, the Fantasia would prove especially winning simply because Walter made the Philharmonic strings sing with a gorgeous richness produced by few other conductors. Unfortunately little of the special sonority he favored is captured here.

As Myra Hess never left a studio recording of the Brahms B-Flat, this release adds considerable profile to her career. I was present in the Sunday afternoon audience for the performance and have always retained fond memories of it--memories this release fully confirms. As one might expect, Hess and Walter do not give the kind of kinetic, impassioned reading typical of the Horowitz-Toscanini or Gilels-Reiner recordings of the work. Rather they produce a more grazioso, more reposeful account, but one that nonetheless generates its own power and drama. Soloist and conductor are not always together, and the pianist occasionally smears a passage and (in one instance) drops a beat. But Hess's playing has shape, grandeur and, in the two concluding movements, a touching lyric grace.

I have withheld discussion of the sound mainly because the sonic shortcomings of this set reflect what was probably the Philharmonic's negligence in failing to build a representative archive of its own performances. When one notes the comparatively much finer technical quality of the transcriptions made by Dutch radio of Willem Mengelberg's Concertgebouw concerts or by NBC engineers of Toscanini's broadcasts (to cite but two examples), what is offered here seems embarrassingly poor. The Mendelssohn excerpts are muffled, the Weber is shrill and distorted, and the Vaughan Williams well below the quality of many studio products of 1953. La Mer, though sonically limited, is fairly good for 1941:

Little top exists, but things are well-balanced, and presence is more than adequate; damage to the acetates, however, has caused a loss of two measures near the beginning of the work. The Brahms is the best item here, but possibly it could have been even better: It is drawn from a Voice of America air-check; with the Philharmonic's broadcasts for the 1950-51 season being presented by tape-delay, it is one more generation removed from the source than might have been necessary, which may account for its rather hiss-ridden background. It also suggests little of the big, brassy sonority Walter projected in the performance, a shortcoming probably attributable to the excessively remote microphone placement favored by CBS for many of the Philharmonic's broadcasts.

A few final comments about the production: The set includes extensive notes on the music presumably drawn from the Philharmonic's program booklets and an appreciation of Walter by Nathan Stutch, Associate Principal Cellist of the orchestra. What would have also been welcome is some indication of the breadth of Walter's repertory with the Philharmonic. Few people may recall, for example, that he led performances of Schumann's "Spring" Symphony, Dvořák's Seventh Symphony, the Tchaikovsky Fourth and Sixth Symphonies and Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy, Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition, Elgar's Enigma Variations, Ravel's Rapsodie espagnol, and a complete concert presentation of Gluck's Orfeo, to cite but some items that he never recorded. Surely provision of this kind of information would have documentary value even if, as seems likely, none of these performances has been preserved. Also it should be noted that Recital Records has published editions of La Mer and the Brahms (the latter now deleted), both in slightly smoother transfers than those in this release. But purchase of these two discs supports the New York Philharmonic, and that is reason enough for anyone interested in this material to acquire them.

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