

FRITZ BUSCH RESURRECTED

THE FRITZ BUSCH ALBUM, Danish State Radio Symphony Orchestra, 1947-1951, Fritz Busch, conductor. Poco Records PLP 8401-3 (available from Serenade Record Shop, 1713 G St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006) 3 discs, \$23.98. BEETHOVEN: Leonore Overture, No. 3, in C, Op. 72a; BRAHMS: Symphony No. 2, in D, Op. 73; HAYDN: Sinfonia Concertante, in B-flat; Symphony 88, in G; MOZART: Konertänze K. 609, Nos. 1, 2, 4; Deutsche Tänze K. 571, Nos. 1, 5, 6 & coda; Serenade No. 13, in G, K. 525 "Eine kleine Nachtmusik"; Symphony No. 36, in C, K. 425, "Linz"; WEBER: Der Freischütz Overture.

BEETHOVEN: Symphony No. 3, in E-flat, Op. 55, "Eroica." Niederösterreichisches Tonkünstler-Orchester, Fritz Busch, conductor. Relief RL 823.

BEETHOVEN: Symphony No. 7, in A, Op. 92. Vienna Symphony Orchestra, Fritz Busch, conductor. Relief RL 832.

BEETHOVEN: Symphony No. 8, in F, Op. 93; HAYDN: Symphony No. 101, in D, "Clock." Niederösterreichisches Tonkünstler-Orchester, Fritz Busch, conductor. Relief RL 824.

BRAHMS: Symphony No. 4, in E Minor, Op. 98. Vienna Symphony Orchestra, Fritz Busch, conductor. Relief RL 833.

Fritz Busch (1890-1951) is an honored name in the annals of both operatic and symphonic performance. Posterity will always cherish the conductor for his pioneering recordings of Mozart's Le Nozze di Figaro (1934), Così fan tutti (1935) and Don Giovanni (1936)--all of which remain in currency (most recently as Seraphim reissues) and are still considered--particularly the Così and Don Giovanni--models of cohesive ensemble and (notwithstanding such anachronisms as a piano accompaniment for recitativos!) aristocratic Motzartian style. In contrast to the autocratic and self-indulgent Mengelberg, the sensual Stokowski, the iconoclastic Beecham, the metaphysical Furtwängler, and the spiritual Walter, Busch was--in the words of Toscanini--"an honest musician." Toscanini recognized in Busch a stylistically kindred spirit and his affectionate regard for the musician grew into a warm bond of friendship for the Aryan man when he took as upstanding a position on the Nazi-Fascist question as the Maestro himself did. According to a biographical note carried on all four of the Relief issues, Toscanini declined an invitation to conduct at Glyndebourne in 1939 with the observation, "Busch can do Falstaff very well--at any rate, I could not do it better myself!"

Alexander Kipnis, though, gives a cooler appraisal of Busch in the book The Toscanini Musicians Knew, compiled by B. H. Haggin: "He [Busch] was a good, reliable conductor but of an entirely different caliber from Toscanini, the burning of a volcano that was always in Toscanini--there was no trace of this in Busch."

It is not terribly surprising to discover that both Toscanini and Kipnis knew what they were talking about, and while many of Busch's interpretations are strikingly similar to Toscanini's in their rectitude and discipline, their simplicity and directness of outline, and polished transparency of sound (the Busch Beethoven Ninth issued by Deutsche Grammophon a few years ago was surprisingly akin to Toscanini's familiar interpretation in tempos, ensemble sound, and sectional relationships, and--as we shall presently see--there are resemblances to the Toscanini manner in some of the Busch performances under review, but not all of them), Busch often did display another facet--a kind of Teutonic thoroughness and sobriety--that contrasted with the smoldering Toscanini temperament (without constricting the natural ebullience of the music as, say, Szell's sometimes did).

One could generalize a bit and say that Busch may have been a better classicist than Toscanini, and if his Haydn tended to be less intense, his Mozart was certainly more Olympian (though sometimes the earthiness that occasionally spoiled some of Toscanini's Mozart performances imparted a grandeur that the cooler Busch never made us experience). Yet, Busch was not without passion: an aircheck of Verdi's Ballo in Maschera, like the aforementioned Beethoven Ninth, came remarkably close to the Toscanini interpretation, and often in the heat of interpretation (whether in concert or in the recording studio), Busch's "honesty" was quite capable of igniting, just as Toscanini was, on occasion, capable of maintaining the greatest composure, for both men, for all their determination to let the composer speak for himself, were greatly gifted--and uniquely distinctive--interpreters.

The heat of interpretation, like the heat of volcanos, is often a matter of perception. Intensity often proves harder to obtain in the recording studio than in the concert hall--a fact as applicable to Toscanini as to others (compare his 1949 recording of "Eroica" with either the 1939 or 1953 broadcast performances, or, for that matter, to the performance he gave the work in concert a few days before making the record--not released on records), and it is perhaps no coincidence that Busch's most exciting performances were, more often than not, taken down in the concert hall.

Busch's relatively early death was particularly unfortunate as it put a finis to his work just at the threshold of a belatedly stepped-up recording career, when the long play explosion promised to crown his ripened reputation with permanent glory. Before the second world war, Busch made surprisingly few recordings: a Forza del Destino overture from Berlin and several excerpts from Die Ägyptische Helena from Dresden, to the best of my knowledge, all that remain of his work in pre-Nazi Germany, and--other than the aforementioned operas--only a "Linz" symphony with the BBC Symphony, a Till Eulenspiegel with the same ensemble, a Don Juan, with the London Philharmonic, and some Wagner snippets from his years at the Metropolitan saw publication before this (alas) final Indian Summer burst of activity. (There was, to be sure, a Beethoven Violin Concerto, with the New York Philharmonic and brother

Adolf as soloist, but for some reason Columbia failed to issue it; it was finally brought out as a memorial by the Bruder Busch Gesellschaft and by Recital Records.) Almost certainly, this modest discography would have tripled had Busch lived even one more decade.

For the most part, however, Busch has been well served by his records despite a few items hobbled by mediocre orchestras, there is more than sufficient evidence to prove that the conductor was a disciplinarian capable of shaping an ensemble to the highest executional standards--and keeping it there. This is particularly so with the Danish Radio Symphony performances, and it will be noted that the conductor was at that ensemble's helm from 1933 up to his death. He had, patently, built a world class orchestra--suave in sound, unanimous in attack, and, for all that, flexible as well. Taken along with the aforementioned Beethoven Ninth and another Deutsche Grammophon disc with Mendelssohn's Italian Symphony, the Brahms Tragic Overture, and Beethoven's Leonore No. 2, the performances in the Poco album comprise the heart of Busch's symphonic legacy. In these recordings, one hears the final distillation of Busch The Interpreter, as enunciated by a group of fine musicians thoroughly familiar with, and convinced by, his ways.

Rather, one might have heard this distillation had Poco not dissipated much of these performances' effect through amateurish transfers from the original 78-rpm pressings. In the 1949 remake of the "Linz," the Haydn Symphony No. 88 (from the same year) and the same composer's Sinfonia Concertante, (vintage 1951), there was such excellent sound to begin with that the performances still sound pleasant even after the damaging top cut and muddy equalization. But the comparison to a much brighter American RCA version on LHMV 1019 reveals sound which is infinitely brighter and cleaner in the two symphonies and one is forced to conclude that the Sinfonia Concertante (appearing on long play for the first time) is similarly degraded.

I mention this diminution of sound not because the performances are unlistenable (as noted, they are entirely agreeable to the ear), but to raise the question as to whether--or, rather, how much--the interpretations are emasculated as a result. Even on the old LHMV disc, the Haydn 88th is less intense, and more courtly, than the Toscanini and Cantelli versions with the NBC Symphony, but for spacing and clarity of thought, the Busch performance is a piece with theirs. Some will undoubtedly miss the courtly charm of the Walter and Furtwängler interpretations, but with its steady tempos and sturdy rhythms, Busch's version far outpoints the perfumatory Klemperer and the...well, over-Szellous mono version by the Clevelanders.

My own particular favorite remains Cantelli's 1954 broadcast (published by the Toscanini Society and the Italian label "CLS"), but Busch has given one of the finest performances of this ebullient masterpiece. The Haydn Sinfonia Concertante performance, more gracious and less intense than Toscanini's commercially issued 1948 broadcast, never bursts into songful ecstasy as an earlier 1939 Toscanini did, but for impecca-

ble ensemble and cool lyricism, Busch vies with the best of them (some favorites of mine among the commercial recordings are the Scherchen and --surprisingly--the Barenboim).

The "Linz" Symphony makes it possible to compare Busch with himself: this, aside from the Così excerpts recorded at Glyndebourne in 1950, is the only work the conductor recorded more than once. While the c. 1934 version with the BBC Symphony presented a wholly admirable account of the score, this 1949-remake scores with its greater incisiveness of attack and shows a purified, patrician simplicity that was less evident on the less developed earlier account. There, Busch tended toward the emphatic and the rhetorical (e.g., the first movement with its slower introduction and subsequent distentions of phrase for "characterization"). One also notes in the BBC's playing, a bluntness of accent and rotundity of sonority--a bit of Bruno Walter, if you will--that the later Danish version replaces with a finely distilled aristocracy more reminiscent of Kleiber, both père et fils. A very good performance had evolved into a well-nigh incomparable one.

"Eine kleine Nachtmusik", recorded in 1948, receives an intense, vehement, large ensemble performance--far removed in style from the quicksilver lightness of the 1936 Furtwängler, but more lithesome and with more tensile grace than Casals' almost brutally blunt Marlboro account. Busch leads the thrice-familiar serenade very much as I expect Toscanini might have done, and the dated recording suggests the sort of sonority familiar from the Toscanini BBC Symphony material--in other words, more billowing and resonant than that which Toscanini received in Studio 8-H or even Carnegie Hall). Poco apologizes for some surface defects in the first two movements--and one is glad to have this hard-to-come-by recording restored to circulation--but I seriously wonder whether every effort was made to obtain the best possible sources for this reconstruction. If no metal parts were available for vinyl custom pressings, surely there must have been a less worn, undamaged shellac pressing somewhere.

The assortment of Deutsche Tänze are a lot of fun. Busch plays them vigorously and rambunctiously, but with less than a modicum of finesse. Completely lacking is the kitsch redolent of Walter's enjoyable but less direct approach. The engineering here is more notable for "impactiveness" than for delicacy of timbre, with the "Turkish" elements left largely to one's aural imagination.

Weber's Overture to Der Freischütz, like the Nachtmusik, Tänze, and Leonore No. 3 (to be evaluated imminently) recorded in 1948, suffers most from the dim, poorly equalized transfer. What little can be heard sounds like an admirable performance, in the puristic Erich Kleiber manner--with fastish tempos but lacking Toscanini's galvanizing breadth and electricity. Here, the sound is really poor, and I have recently listened to many early electricals (c. 1926) with greater pleasure; surely, the originals were considerably less wretched.

On the third disc, POCO gives us the celebrated account of Brahms' Second Symphony which was twice before transferred to long play: first in a pseudonymous RCA Camden bargain reprint by the "Claridge Symphony Orchestra" which I never heard) and, in 1966, on the fine German Electrola E 80 896, which I continue to cherish. Busch favored a lean, inclusive, forward directed, and utterly unsentimental approach--something in the manner of Toscanini, Monteux-San Francisco, and Rodzinski, but even more akin to what Weingartner left us in his splendid 1940 Columbia recording. One notes with Busch (as with Weingartner) a reluctance to make minimal tempo adjustments even in connective bridge passages (where even Toscanini and Monteux tend to expand a bit). While it can be argued that POCO's equalization gives the performance greater effusive warmth, it is equally clear (or, rather, unclear) that much detail has been either mangled or lost completely in this dub. Conversely, one hears side-joints much more emphatically than one does on Electrola. One also hears Busch's more-rapid-than-usual tempo in the finale (which sounded most effective before) degenerate into a scramble as it loses "articulative" detail in this clumsy transfer. The Leonore Overture, a bit strait-laced but basically very much in the Toscanini manner, must have been overwhelming in its original 78-rpm pressing; even after obvious sonic degradation, its classicism is infused with red-blooded dynamism.

The album booklet eschews notes on the music and instead gives us a bit of background into the provenance of these recordings (a few of which missed being made). The story is told simply and touchingly by Waldemar Woising, the bassoonist in the Haydn Sinfonia Concertante. The cosi cosi quality of these restorations dampens my enthusiasm a bit, but since prospects for a better transfer of this hard-to-come-by material in the near future are extremely dim, perhaps you should consider the practical virtues of a Busch in the hand (or whatever). POCO's pressings, per se, are fairly decent.

Two of the Relief items are taken from a radio concert Busch conducted with the Vienna Symphony on 15 October 1950; the other two reissue recordings made for the budget Remington label which had its fling in the early years of long play. On Remington, the Beethoven "Eroica" and Eighth and Haydn "Clock" were attributed to the Austrian State Symphony Orchestra, presumably a translation for Relief's more formidable-sounding Niederösterreichisches Tonkünstler-Orchester. They certainly are helped by Relief's sonic upgrading and quality pressing, but--whatever language you choose--the effect is that of a village band with scraggly, undisciplined first-desk playing and an insufficiency of string tone. For all that, the execution of the more respected Vienna Symphony is even worse--the sounds they make are frequently downright uncouth and the blame cannot be put entirely on the on-location recording, full of boomy brass and harsh treble emphasis with little body in between. (In their way, these documents do have a certain corrupt forcefulness).

Even so, the rectitude of Busch The Interpreter shines through. The "Eroica" with its steady forward drive, reminds me somewhat of the

wonderful Weingartner performance, although the crisp regularity of its first movement tempo (with less gear-shifting than Weingartner sanctioned) is actually more akin to Kleiber, Scherchen, Dohnanyi, and the most recent, Karajan. As with Weingartner, a certain mellowness prevails, whereas Kleiber's astringency was more stinging than singing; and there is also a small-scaled, pleasantly old-fashioned aura to the interpretation. Busch favors the original scoring (e.g., without the revised trumpet parts in the coda to the first movement). One notes approvingly that the Marcia funèbre, broken at midpoint on Remington, is now offered complete on side one.

The Beethoven Eighth's outer movements are given with impressive strength but the famous device being parodied in the Allegretto scherzando must have been running slow (it sounds like more of an Andante--and anything but humorous--in this sober, lumbering presentation). The third movement is also a trifle heavy-footed here, but not distressingly so. Because of an oddity of the recorded sound, the Eighth Symphony suggests a bigger, more forceful ensemble than the (presumably same-sized) band participating in the "Eroica."

Haydn's "Clock" is heard in a bluff, genial interpretation, and Busch is one of the few conductors of his era to appreciate the composer's little joke in the trio of the Menuetto (others, on record, were--in alphabetical order--Ansermet, Harty in 1928, and Toscanini in 1947). Enjoyable though it is, the performance lacks the sophistication and elevated finesse that the Danish players would doubtless have brought to Busch's conception.

Of the two live performances, the Brahms Fourth makes a more vivid impression than the Beethoven Seventh. The chief flaw in the Beethoven (even greater than the scruffy orchestra and astringent sound, which, combined with Busch's driving outlook, lend a sort of gritty fervor) is the surprisingly lumbering second movement; it is less a matter of tempo (in fact, I prefer a slowish, expansive reading as in Toscanini's older New York Philharmonic version) than of scansion (Busch never begins to suggest that this movement is, in fact, written in alla breve rather than in 4/4).

Once again, it is tempting to contemplate whether or not this fault might have been alleviated, or removed entirely, had the orchestra been better--but one must consider what the record offers. Otherwise, this is a vital Seventh--the first movement begins with a businesslike introduction and evolves into a Vivace that really swings even though the ensemble's rhythm lacks the precision that such an approach really needs. The Scherzo has a rollicking, unbuttoned verve and the trio, as Busch viewed it, represents a sensible compromise between Toscanini's flicked-off haste and the protracted "Pilgrim's Song" of many conductors. The finale forges ahead, as noted above, but there is still sufficient time and spacing for inflection (note the slightly emphatic way of the opening, introductory bars--a bit like the Toscanini-New York Philharmonic recording).

Still, the Beethoven Seventh seems relatively stolid and faceless alongside the superbly galvanic Brahms Fourth. The latter's first movement may even seem a trifle rushed at first, but before very long, the listener (this listener, at least) was thoroughly caught up in the monolithic forward direction. The whole performance had a wonderfully granitic firmness of outline, with plenty of sentiment but no trace of sentimentality. And, save for one or two ever-so-slightly idiosyncratic details (probably arising from the heat of the moment), the final Passacaglia is admirably steady.

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