
ORFEO: HISTORIC RECORDINGS OF THE BAVARIAN RADIO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

By John Swan

Igor Stravinsky, *Apollon Musagete* and *Jeu de Cartes*, conducted by the composer (live recording, Deutsches Museum concert, October 4, 1957), Orfeo CD, C 198 891 A (monaural), playing time: 54:57.

Paul Hindemith, *Symphony in B-flat for Concert Band* and *The Four Temperaments* (Theme with Four Variations), and Alban Berg, *Chamber Concerto for Piano and Violin with 13 Wind Instruments*, all conducted by Paul Hindemith (live recordings, Herkulesaal concerts, October 8, 1959, and August 28, 1961), Orfeo CD, C 197 891 A (monaural), playing time: 76:32.

Arnold Schönberg, *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra*, Op. 36, with Louis Krasner as soloist, and Sergei Prokofiev, *Symphony No. 5*, Opus 100, both conducted by Dimitri Mitropoulos (live recording, Herkulesaal concert, July 9, 1954), Orfeo CD C 204 891 A (monaural), playing time 74:17.

With understandable pride, the Munich label Orfeo has embarked on a series of live-recording CDs celebrating the fortieth anniversary (1949-89) of its distinguished hometown orchestra. There are fourteen issues in this “Orfeo d’Or” series, each featuring a trilingual essay on the history of the orchestra, as well as good notes about the conductors—although precious little about the music itself. These particular CDs document three conductorial guest appearances of obvious importance; the results in all cases live up to the billing, if not always to the same degree.

Stravinsky’s career as a conductor of his own works is well covered on records, but many of those recordings are not in print. Indeed, these Orfeo CDs are currently the only available composer-led versions of these important ballets, despite the fact that Stravinsky also conducted each of them on two commercial recordings. The 1928 *Apollon Musagete*, or just *Apollo*, the name that Stravinsky came to prefer by the 1960s, receives the best performance; a warm, beautifully played rendition with lots of dramatic urgency, but also its share of neoclassical serenity. It clearly supplants the early Victor recording (*date?*) (LM 1096) with a pick-up orchestra, not so much on the grounds of performance—that is also an excellent piece of work—but because its spacious and well-balanced sound is vastly superior to the extremely dry acoustic of the Victor, despite the unobtrusive digital edge on the sound of the CD. The mid-1960s studio recording with a Columbia pick-up orchestra (MS 6646) is not so easily disqualified. The approach is somewhat different from earlier versions, a bit cooler and more sharply etched, as if the composer were attempting to put into more emphatic interpretive practice his claim that

the “real subject” of this work “is versification.” In this recording the celebration of the artifice of art combines, paradoxically enough, with exquisite deeply felt execution to produce a performance memorable for both its elegance and its emotional depth. In other words, the Columbia recording very much deserves reissue, but this infectious and superbly realized Bavarian entry into the Stravinsky canon is very welcome.

The 1936 *Jeu de Cartes* is given a fine performance. This aspect and its sonics quality are superior to the post-war Stravinsky-led Berlin Philharmonic effort on Mercury (MG 10014). That vigorous account is thoroughly undone by its clotted sound. We tend to forget that before Mercury developed some of the best sound in the history of the medium, it produced some of the worst, perpetrated through a series of otherwise-interesting imported tapes. The 1957 performance at hand is much preferred. But for all its propulsive energy, it is not equal to Stravinsky’s great Cleveland Orchestra version of the sixties (MS 6649), a dazzling account which leaves no doubt that the key to this card game is the Joker.

Like Stravinsky, Hindemith previously conducted recordings of his two works on this present CD. This recording of the Berg, however, is the first recorded evidence of his late interest in the music of the Second Viennese School. Although all three of the offerings on this generous CD merit attention, it is this performance that is the most interesting.

Least interesting is the Symphony in B-flat, not because of the music itself, which is a near masterpiece recognized by band people. This is a fine performance, with Hindemith getting much expressivity out of both the wind and brass choirs, particularly in the first two movements. However, the technical demands of the brilliant Fugue are a little too much, especially for the winds, and especially at the chosen tempo. The result is some tentativeness and unclear articulation. Although not disastrous, it is disqualifying in the face of Hindemith’s great recording of November 1957 with the Philharmonia, last produced by Seraphim (60005) and, one assumes, destined to be digitized. At that time, the Philharmonia arguably had the best wind and brass talent in the business, and it is on full, enthralling display in this spacious recording.

Its strongest competition comes from a very different quarter in that same year. In March of 1957, Frederick Fennell and the Eastman Symphonic Wind Ensemble made the premiere recording of this work in the presence of the immortals of Serious Audio: Wilma Cozart and the Mercury crew. The close-up sonic punch and the musical energy of Mercury 90143 (and also its mono version MG50143) produce a very different effect from that of the EMI triumph. At this exalted level, however, there ought to be room for the spit-and-valve-oil excitement of the Mercury 9000 series, but at the moment the Orfeo CD seems to be the only version of this wonderful work in print. The sound is very good, if not in a class with its out-of-print competition.

The Orfeo performance of Hindemith’s theme-and-variations exploration of the *Four Temperaments* also has fine live-concert monaural sound worthy of its time. Yet that could not have been August 28, 1961, as claimed on the CD box, because the soloist died on December 7 of the previous year from complications arising from a fall in a Brussels railway station. Clara Haskil had broad sympathies, but her recorded legacy contains very few works of this century. It is therefore an odd, if fortunate, circumstance that there are two Haskil-Hindemith live-performance recordings of this arresting work. Largely because of her enlivening presence, they both outclass the “official” Hindemith-led performance with Hans Otte, now on DG (427407-2 GDO). The ORTF performance, from September 22, 1957 (now on a Stradivarius CD, and the Curtain Call LP, No. 230, which is preferred for its natural non-digital sound, dropouts and all) has

a small edge over the present offering because of its dramatic climax in the final variation along with the expressiveness of the violin solo in the “Melancholisch” variation. Overall, however, the playing of the Bavarian Radio is sufficiently superior to that of the Paris Radio to make this recording the decisive choice. The French strings are in palpable difficulty, for instance, in the agitated section of the “Melancholisch” variation, where the Bavarians are assured throughout. Haskil devotees will want both recordings, but for the Hindemith canon the present recording is indispensable.

Hindemith's way with Berg exhibits the expansiveness and warmth heard in his recordings of other people's music. These include the Bruckner Seventh, a heavily inflected Beethoven First Concerto with Gulda, the pioneering early music recordings at Yale for Overtone, and the lovely Bach Motet performance on Overtone 4. Although his skills as a conductor sometimes came under fire, he shows here a commendable ability to clarify textures and control pace. The soloists contribute fully to this success. Like Haskil, Carl Seemann was better known for his work in classical repertoire. Yet he sounds at home, with a lyrical tone and a lucidity in even the knottiest passages.

Wolfgang Marchner, descendent of Heinrich, the composer of *Der Vampyr* and *Hans Heiling*, is a gifted and important violinist with a career in Europe. In this country that should have gained him more fame than it has. His most famous recording is the Schönberg Concerto, with Michael Gielen, last seen on Turnabout (TV 4051 and, in fake stereo TV 34051), and deservedly esteemed for its technical command and expressive power. He was a longtime champion of Berg even though he did not record him commercially. Another live recording with his participation, which waited until the CD era to emerge, is the Stradivarius STR-10023 recording which has the young pianist Paul Jacobs and the Cologne Radio Orchestra players conducted by the great Hermann Scherchen. Unfortunately, this reviewer has not heard it. Judging from the promise of the soloists, and the excellent realization of the score in Scherchen's 1964 commercial recording (Westminster WST-17086, with Gerle and Shetler), it must be a fine recording. In the present recording, Marschner plays with a full, responsive tone and dependably agile technique. Like everyone else, he approaches with trepidation the double-stopped scales at the close of the second movement, rendered treacherous because of the ghostly *pianissimo* context. In the final scale *in alt*, going from *pp* to *pppp* in fifths, Marschner takes the unchorded *ossia* which Berg thoughtfully provided. This alternative is just fine, for even when the soloist does manage the chords at that point, they are usually all but audible.

Berg's Chamber Concerto was a fiftieth birthday present to Schönberg which was written in the years 1923-25. It is a numerological *tour de force*, with multiple playing upon the number three and the musically transcribable letters in the names of the master and his disciples Berg and Webern. Despite—maybe also because of—these mental gymnastics, it is a masterpiece of lyricism and instrumental texture, as well as of form. Hindemith captures the vital Viennese waltz elements well, and although others bring more intensity to the dramatic moments, he delivers breadth and force when it is needed.

Like most conductors, he does not take the third movement repeat (marked *ad lib*). In his introduction to the Philharmonia score, Pierre Boulez argues against the repeat, it being there in the first place because of Berg's application of numerology, not for musical reasons. “It goes against the principle of constant variation systematically set in relief throughout the work.” Boulez is persuasive to this effect in his own recordings of the work (especially the earlier). However, there are important recorded arguments for the repeat, especially the work's first recording (Dial 9) led forcefully, if with some

uncertainty, by Second Viennese School maven René Leibowitz. The recording that may well be the best of them all, is the 42-minute rendition of the Moscow Conservatory Ensemble, with Oleg Kagan and Sviatoslav Richter, led by Yuri Nikolayevski (a Melodiya recording, and heard to best advantage on EMI C 065-03 672). Whether or not the 180-measure repeat is important to you, the Hindemith performance is important both for its own qualities and for a glimpse at one composer's appreciation of a very different genius.

The last of these three Orfeo offerings also features a composer who was a conductor. But for Dimitri Mitropoulos, composing was chiefly an early preoccupation. His fame rests securely on his many achievements as a conductor although he also was a brilliant pianist, famous for performances and a recording of Prokofiev's Third Piano Concerto. The performance of Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony is of considerable interest in part because Mitropoulos left no commercial recording of the work. As might be expected, Mitropoulos does very well with this big, open-hearted work. Indeed, the characteristically sinuous breadth and power of the Mitropoulos approach to the opening Andante and to the Adagio make these movements the equal of any other recordings. The second and last movements are not quite on this level; there is plenty of *marcato* energy and muscle, but not quite enough spring in the step, at least not on the level reserved for great orchestras in those days, such as the recording of the Schippers-Philharmonia and Leinsdorf-Boston performances.

For all the attractiveness of the Prokofiev, it is the other work on this memorable Hercules Hall concert that is of particular interest. In discussing his own Violin Concerto in *Dialogues and a Diary*, Stravinsky expressed a dislike of all the "standard" works of the genre—Mozart, Mendelssohn, Beethoven, Brahms—and he rendered a judgement that many would find surprising even now. "To my mind, the only masterpiece in the field is Schönberg's, and that was written several years after mine." Putting aside his dismissal of the earlier concerti, Stravinsky's esteem for the work at hand is shared now by many, even though it is still one of those masterpieces that is more talked about than played. To date, only seven violinists have dared—that still seems to be the right word—to make recordings of it. Besides Krasner and Marschner, they include Israel Baker, Zvi Zeitlin, Hyman Bress, Liana Isakadze, and most recently, the incredibly secure Pierre Amoyal. All of them are at least good, serious efforts; even in this era of ubiquitous technical mastery, the Schönberg weeds out the unserious. Among the seven, Louis Krasner takes obvious pride of place, as the work's first, and for a time only, performer and champion. As a superb, heroic fiddler, he brought unique experience and insight to this task, which we are lucky enough to hear in three different recordings, all with Mitropoulos at the helm. Two of them are from live performances: this and one with the West German Radio Orchestra in Cologne from a week later. The latter is found on an extremely valuable GM LP (GM 2006) with excellent sound (a bit smoother, if less clear and bright) which is backed by the historic 1938 performance of the Berg Violin Concerto with Fritz Busch in Stockholm. It will be remembered that Krasner commissioned and then, after its composer's death in 1935, gave that masterpiece (by my count the most-recorded 12-tone work) its first performance.

Both of these broadcast performances have technical and musical advantages over the first Krasner-Mitropoulos recording of the Schönberg made in 1952 with the New York Philharmonic and released on Columbia ML 4857 with the 1940 (also the first) recording of the Berg, with Rodzinski and the Cleveland Orchestra. That recording is more distant, less vivid and less secure, mostly because of severe rehearsal limitations, although Mitropoulos still generates considerable momentum and excitement.

This Orfeo CD may, however, have the most exciting rendition of the three and possibly even the other six. The vivid, up-front sound conspires nicely with the heat of the interpretation to reveal the heroic side of this work more spontaneously than elsewhere. This is demonstrated most clearly in the march of the finale and in the first movement cadenza, which conjures up clouds of rosin and a palpable feeling that this work is indeed rooted in the epic virtuoso concerti of the past. Yet Krasner was not the total technical master and it is still a matter of regret that Heifetz refused to play the work when Schönberg brought it to him as his first choice. But Krasner was a musical master who could make the element of struggle for this piece for “a six-fingered violinist” an intrinsic part of the heroism it both celebrates and demands.