

## WEINGARTNER REDIVIVUS

BEETHOVEN Symphony No. 1\* (19 October 1937); Symphony No. 2\*\* (2 March 1938); Symphony No. 3\* (22/23 May 1936); Symphony No. 4\*\*\* (13/14 November 1933); Symphony No. 5\*\*\* (31 January/2 February 1933); Symphony No. 6\*\*\*\* (18/19 January 1927); Symphony No. 7\* (24/25/26 February 1936); Symphony No. 8\* (25/26 February 1936); Symphony No. 9\*+ (2/3/4/5 February 1935); Sonata for piano No. 29, Op. 106 (Hammerklavier) (orch. Weingartner)\*\*\*\* (26/27/28/31 March 1930); Eleven Viennese Dances\*\*\* (7/8 October 1938) \*Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, \*\*London Symphony Orchestra, \*\*\*London Philharmonic Orchestra, \*\*\*\*Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, †with Luise Helletsgruber (soprano), Rosette Anday (contralto), Georg Maikl (tenor), Richard Mayr (bass) and the Vienna State Opera Chorus; conducted by Felix Weingartner. Toshiba-EMI (Japan) EAC 60079-84, BRC 8023. (To be imported by Capitol Imports, Hollywood, Calif. 90028)

For that majority of collectors and chroniclers of historical orchestral discs who never encountered Felix Weingartner in the concert hall, this set will bring him closer to reality, to actuality, than anything hitherto experienced. Toshiba-EMI is to be congratulated in making available all the Beethoven Symphonies, in all cases the last recording where more than one version was made; and so, too, is Anthony Griffith, who once again has us all in his debt for the sonic wonders emerging from his transfers. Few will have suspected that many of the 78 originals contained quite so much beautiful, clear and balanced sound as is here revealed, and any cavils which follow must not obscure this central achievement.

To dispose first of two major cavils. Nothing would be more coherent than a box containing the nine symphonies; particularly as they are presented here, complete with booklet (in Japanese) and individual outer sleeves each with the composer's portrait and conductor's signature, and wrapped in inners which, for once, should avoid scratching their contents. By what inscrutable logic, then, is the Hammerklavier and its filler tucked in, separately numbered and with separate notes? The choice is the more mysterious when the concertos and overtures were available, if need be, for further discs.

The second major drawback is not to be laid at the doors of anyone responsible for the present discs. Unavoidably, the transfers of Symphonies Nos. 6-9, as well as the Hammerklavier and Viennese Dances, had to be made from shellacs. It is regrettable but not surprising that the metal parts of recordings dating from the 1920's should have disappeared. But posterity will not love the purblind fools who, after the Pathé transfers from new, vinyl pressings of Nos. 8-9 in the late 1950's, supervised the destruction of so many of Weingartner's Vienna Philharmonic masters. Thankfully, this policy has now been reversed and EMI keeps all it has got; but this set involuntarily bears the marks of the havoc already and, it seems, irremediably wreaked.

The Hayes massacre makes impossible a blanket answer to the question whether in all cases the present transfers are superior to their predecessors. Each demands examination on its individual merits.

Little need be said of Symphony No. 1, coupled with the 7th, whose first movement ends the first side. Apart from a surprisingly noisy start to the second movement (it sounds like shellac but apparently is not) and momentary disturbance near the end of the Minuet, there is no audible surface, the sound is exemplary in its clarity and the side joins are cunningly matched. Inevitably the brightness of sound now highlights the occasional scrappiness of the VPO's playing and the agonizing intonation of the bassoon and horn just before the first movement allegro. I suspect that by October 1937 Weingartner's relationship with the VPO had reached its all-time low, for the same faults are to be heard in the other recordings of that date. Nonetheless, this No. 1 is in every sense a classical example of greatness of conception shining through shortcomings of execution: its litheness, suppleness, and in the finale its witty inflections, are worth a score of today's glassy run-throughs.

This Symphony No. 2, coupled with No. 4, has perhaps never been fully appreciated, possibly because the recording for its date was rather dull and the LSO at the time by no means the equal of the LPO or BBCSO. To my ears, though, this performance, once past the sticky seventh measure, drives straight to the heart of the matter: perfect tempi in all the movements, perfectly reined on Weingartner's near-infallible rhythmic pulse, sharply-etched treatment of the dynamics and a Larghetto of Olympian serenity and lucidity which, for once, does not outstay its welcome. All this is now heard with unprecedented immediacy in a near-faultless transfer, marred slightly only by a minor pressing fault in the finale's source material, where I found an intermittent hiss in some tuttis. This transfer now confirms that CAX 8208, the final matrix of the Larghetto, is a dubbing, made (as recollected by Ralph Nicholson) to accommodate a nervous principal horn in his tricky solo; the sound here flutters audibly and the treble is veiled.

Symphony No. 3, as heard in the present transfer, is alone worth the price of the box. The Grosse Musikvereinssaal here has a room-filling warmth and a brightness and clarity throughout the frequency spectrum which is nothing short of startling. No other transfer, past or present, has come near to matching this. In consequence Weingartner's ultra-staccato chording from measure 123 in the opening Allegro, his dramatic handling of the fugue, the infinitely consolatory strings from 180 in that movement, the spectacular virtuosity of the horns in the trio—all this and much else leaps from the speakers with extraordinary impact. There is a minor penalty here: the first two movements, save for the recapitulation of the first, were recorded in one session, the other two, together with a retake of the first movement recapitulation, on the following day. The microphone positioning for this second session was very different, with a preponderance of violins and lack of bass. Mr. Griffith has matched the differing sound qualities in the first movement as much as can be (the bass, I fancy, has been boosted) and here,

as throughout most of the set, the matching of sound at the side-joins is remarkably achieved. Finally, it is worth noting that, unlike the recent transfer on HMV RLS 717, no attempt has been made to correct the oboe's intonation at the beginning of the second movement. His flatness is the one major flaw in the performance.

For the most part Symphony No. 4 repeats the success of the similarly studio-bound No. 2 in the quality of transfer. But as in that symphony's finale, there is a similar minor fault in the finale's source material; and like No. 3 (although not to the same degree), the different microphone positioning for the two sessions is reflected in the second movement in the greater treble emphasis on its second matrix (CAX 7013). This in itself, however, is a measure of how much has been extracted from the originals, allowing us to hear Weingartner's performance, with its ideal marriage of grace and athleticism, almost unhindered. Almost, but not entirely; not even EMI's ace transferer could eliminate the studio thumps and bangs near the start of the first movement's development; and I have to report one of the only two moments of faulty editing in the set in this same movement, where the first note of the development, which ends matrix CAX 7010 and begins CAX 7011, unfortunately appears twice.

The next disc pairs Symphonies Nos. 5 and 6; 65 minutes of music and little, if any, falling off of quality at the end of sides. There is, however, some falling off in Weingartner's contribution: the first movement of No. 5 does not, I feel, capture that electricity of a live performance which led Carl Flesch to remark that this movement under Weingartner was one of his greatest musical experiences, while the finale in its coda peters out disappointingly. Perhaps Weingartner felt inhibited on his first visit to Abbey Road, for both of the earlier electric recordings fared better in these movements. On the other hand the Andante, now occupying 2 1/2 matrices, has time to expand to the conductor's recommended tempo, and the trio is striking in its energy. As for No. 6, despite its admirable control, I am pretty sure that Columbia's problems with side lengths in its early electric recordings was responsible for at any rate some of the conductor's tempi. Confirmation of this is found in the first movement: normally Weingartner was completely successful in picking up his chosen tempo in successive 78 sides, but here there is a distinct slackening near the commencement of the second, rather less cramped matrix (WAX 2364), which is maintained to the end of the movement.

The LPO 5th Symphony, although not one of Weingartner's very best performances, was one of his most popular recordings; the competition for some five years after 1933 was none too hot. It is not altogether surprising, therefore, to hear signs of wear in the masters rather more serious than those evident in the first four symphonies; to my ears to an unpleasant degree in the second half of the first movement and the first part of the second. Wisely, the transfer leaves truth naked, to be adjusted by those with flexible controls, rather than solving the problem by a smudge of echo. Indeed, I can detect little, if any, such enhancement in the studio-bound recordings of Nos. 2, 4 and 5. One problem

which has been solved in this transfer is the awkward side-join between sides 6 and 7 of the 78's. Commencing the 7th side with the finale's second subject, Weingartner makes his customary expansion of tempo, clearly heard in mid-side on the 1932 recording which breaks at a different spot. In 1933, however, the expansion was greater than usual, and to overcome the hiatus four measures have been borrowed from the recapitulation. The solution is perfectly successful in terms of continuity, but there is an audible difference in the sound of this insert.

With the 6th comes the first of the shellacs, in this case of good quality, efficiently deticked, with a surface disturbing only towards the end of the second movement. The matching of sides is a complete success, but for my own taste, as in Mr. Griffith's transfer of Elgar's 2nd Symphony (a recording also dating from 1927), the treble boost is excessive. But better too much than too little; it is easily adjustable. Not so, however, the pitch of the last matrix which sounds fractionally up - the second of my two editing complaints in all these ninety-six 78 sides. One day, perhaps, someone will have the courage to indulge in a little excusable faking with this set. Both Beethoven and, I'm sure, Weingartner wanted the scherzo twice, but Columbia could afford it only once. The playing of Léon Goossens and (I believe) Aubrey Brain provides an irresistible excuse to rectify this omission.

It is particularly unfortunate that Symphony No. 7 has to be the low point in this set, for (if a personal choice be permitted) this performance comes as near perfection as an imperfect world will allow: its peculiar amalgam of rhythmic resilience, just proportioning and humanity - too feeble a term for such distilled wisdom - has never been duplicated. And furthermore, new 78 pressings would have allowed us to hear it in recorded sound of matching warmth. This was not to be; and, while the sound here has much that is clean and clear, the shellac set used for transfer has, to my ears, substantial shortcomings. There is some high-frequency distortion (I suspect wear on the masters rather than the pressings) and, most seriously, a nasty wow throughout the first matrix (CHAX 79) ending at measure 88, which is acutely painful during the woodwind lead into the Vivace. Discographers will be intrigued at the reason for this: the particular set used for transfer contained a take 6 for this side, being a late and singularly unsuccessful dubbing of the take 5 used on all earlier pressings. Collectors, on the other hand, will be well advised to retain their 78's or the early US Columbia transfers.

Symphony No. 8 coupled with the first two movements of No. 9, provides a welcome contrast. The shellac set used here was clearly in good condition, despite some slight but audible evidence of deticking near the start. The surface has throughout no more than a gentle hiss, and the resultant sound has a presence and clarity which I doubt could have been much improved on even with new pressings. This is, then, vastly superior to the other versions at present available from Japanese Angel (GR 2149-50) and Vox, which both stem from the Pathé transfer (unaccountably strangled in sound) of the late 1950's. Save for some distortion at the end of the last movement, it permits us to hear untrammelled the knowing, beautifully

balanced and rhythmically alert performance; and I found particularly striking in this transfer the clear string articulation at the conductor's modest pace for the finale.

Symphony No. 9, occupying three sides, the last two movements with a side apiece, is also better in sound than anything now available, if not by such a wide margin as No. 8. Such minor defects as it has are entirely due to the shellacs used. The sound, if transferred to disc at rather a low level, is nevertheless natural and well-balanced with a full bass response, by contrast with the (again) strangled Pathé transfer on Japanese Angel and Vox. The bite of the strings and timpani in the scherzo is now keenly felt and the conductor's marvelously pointed phrasing of the trio is heard against a quiet background. I did notice, however, that the first 78 side (CHAX 61) appeared to have more wear than the second, and there was again some roughness of sound in the first choral side leading up to "vor Gott" (CHAX 73). It is clear, also, that the deticking at the beginning of the third movement could not cope with what seems like a deep dig in the grooves sounding for several seconds; a better copy should have been sought. But in the context of the whole these are not major drawbacks, and it is worth emphasizing that this classic interpretation is heard more vividly than ever before.

As one of the many who admire the skill, but neither the purpose nor the result, of Weingartner's orchestration of the Hammerklavier, I have to admit that the present transfer makes out a better case for it than any other I've heard. The shellac copy used for transfer seems to have been satisfactory save for one very eccentric side in the third movement, while the sound is far warmer than the "Pastoral" and without its excessive treble emphasis. The scherzo in particular now sounds very clear and alert; but too much of the rest of the performance still seems what it undoubtedly was - vigorous sightreading by an orchestra largely unfamiliar with the piece. The first performance in England had taken place only a few days before the sessions, but with the LSO (then under contract to HMV), only part of whose personnel also played in the old RPO. Weingartner's difficulties are evident from a glance at the recording sessions which were unusually unmethodical by his standards.

This disc raises my sole complaint about layout: side one should have contained the filler and first movement in order to avoid the present, extremely awkward break between the third and fourth movements.

The transfer of Weingartner's charming and alert Viennese Dances makes for an illuminating comparison with that on Past Masters PM 3. The surfaces of the shellacs used for the latter are superior to the English pressings used in the new transfer and its sound is remarkably faithful, representative of the best in amateur work. But the EMI transfer has the advantage of being completely deticked and the sound has still greater brightness and presence.

I have said little of Toshiba EMI's transfer to disc - simply because

there is no need. These are immaculate pressings which add not a murmur to the sound on the tapes. If EMI release this set elsewhere, those concerned will have their work cut out to come anywhere near this achievement. Reiteration of the gratitude expressed at the beginning for the efforts of those responsible for this set is, I feel, a lame conclusion: anyone with an interest in vintage orchestral material and the history of the conductor's art will be missing major revelations if he fails to obtain it.

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