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Gramophone (Rob Cowan - 01.01.2012)

GRAMOPHONE

REPLAY – Rob Cowan's monthly survey of reissues and archive recordings

Klemperer revived – A clutch of recordings from tto Klemperer • Furtwängler duo•• Danish Delius collection

Otto Klemperer has featured prominently on recent lists of reissues and CD bargains, among which Audite's 'Otto Klemperer: RIAS Recordings, Berlin, 1950-1958' has to be something of a priority, with generally warm sound quality and performances that subscribe to the familiar middle-period Klemperer template of 'power and patience'. Klemperer's reading of Beethoven's Second was always a highlight of his EMI Philharmonia cycle and this Berlin RIAS Orchestra recording from a year later is equally satisfying, even though the Larghetto's course lasts a mere 11'46" by comparison with a more measured 13'08" in 1958. Not that you would suspect the difference from a spot check of the movement's opening: it's a gradual process and very much in keeping with the higher intensity levels of the live performances. Similar observations might be made about the Pastoral and Eroica Symphonies, the latter in particular a superbly balanced reading, Klemperer pacing every episode with his eagle eye focused securely on the overall structure, a ploy that pays highest dividends in the last two movements, the finale a triumphant homecoming. Nowadays, so many conductors rush their fences and the music suffers because of it. The Third Piano Concerto features Hans-Erich Riebensahm as a solidly reliable soloist, the performance a good few minutes broader than the one Klemperer conducted for Barenboim in the late 1960s.

I've always had a fondness for the best of Klemperer's Mozart and was happy to encounter his well-judged RIAS renditions of Nos 29 and 38, while the fiery first movement of No 25 (the 'Little' G minor) keeps consistently to the fast lane. Mahler's Fourth, with a rather wobbly soprano Elfriede Trötschel, is warmly and often emotionally played: you can actually hear Klemperer urge his players on. Add a robust account of Hindemith's eminently listenable 'ballet for orchestra' Nobilissima visione and overtures by Mozart and Beethoven and you have a generous sampling of a great conductor captured on the wing, while getting the best from a good if hardly exceptional orchestra.

More Klemperer conducting Beethoven arrives courtesy of ICA, an affable account of the Eighth Symphony with the Cologne Radio Symphony Orchestra (1955), which serves as a fill-up to the main work, Mendelssohn's Overture and Incidental Music for A Midsummer Night's Dream (also 1955). Again, the comparison with the EMI

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Philharmonia recording (1960) is telling, not only because of an extra adrenalin boost in Cologne but because you actually get a smidgen of extra music – the 50-second Allegro vivace between the 'Dance of the Clowns' and the finale which is in effect a reprise of the 'Wedding March' that quietens for a brief return of the fairy music.

Andromeda has issued a three-CD set of selected live Bruckner recordings under Klemperer, all of them fine examples of the conductor's uncompromising approach. My favourite among them is a version of the Sixth with the Concertgebouw Orchestra from 1961 (also on Music & Arts CD247) which, although less carefully prepared than the later studio version with the New Philharmonia, has a far firmer grip on the structure, its dramatic contrasts and its strategically placed shifts in pace and volume. This is especially noticeable in the first movement, which is given a magnificent reading. I'd previously bought the Berlin Philharmonic Seventh (1958) and Cologne Radio Symphony Orchestra Fourth (1954) on a Europa Musica set (051 054, which also includes a fine Eighth from 1957): both are compelling, the Fourth being one of Klemperer's most impressive Bruckner recordings. A shame that the Eighth wasn't included, because of all the Bruckner symphonies that's the one where we really do need a livelier alternative to the conductor's late, tired EMI recording (72 as opposed to 84 minutes! – and both use the same edition).

Finally, from Guild, a real curio, Klemperer conducting Bach with the Budapest Radio Symphony Orchestra in January 1950. The highlight is undoubtedly a performance of the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto with pianist Annie Fischer as soloist, who is virtually the equal, in terms of elegance, energy and style, to Alfred Cortot on his delectable old pre-war recording with the École Normale. Granted, the other instrumentalists aren't up to much (the violinist Tibor Ney has his off moments), certainly not in Bach's Magnifcat, and neither is the singing of the Budapest Chorus, though some of the soloists are good, notably the ardent tenor Lajos Somogyvári. Klemperer directs fairly fleet performances, which is more than you could say for his expansive, sweetly expressive 1945 Los Angeles Philharmonic renditions of the Air from the Third Orchestral Suite and his own arrangement for strings of 'Bist du bei mir' from the Anna Magdalena Notebook, both of which are cast rather in the manner of Stokowski's Bach. Interesting, though, and the sound is pretty serviceable, given its age and source.

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