



Edition Otto Klemperer

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After the second world war, Klemperer never resumed the central place in Berlin's artistic life that he had held when Director of the Kroll Opera House between 1927 and 1931. His late career was centred more on London, Amsterdam, Vienna and Budapest rather than Berlin. Klemperer conducted the Berlin Philharmonic for a few engagements in the 1950s, but his main Berlin appearances during that decade were with the RIAS Symphony Orchestra (later called the Radio-Symphonie-Orchester Berlin and now known as the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin). Audite have conveniently brought together the surviving recorded evidence of this partnership, mainly devoted to the classical repertoire. Almost everything Klemperer performed with Berlin Radio forces is included except for the Clock Symphony, which preceded the live 1956 account of Mahler's Fourth Symphony: the tape of the Haydn was scrubbed. Live performances (some with applause) are interspersed with studio accounts. The performances are edited from the original RIAS tapes (nowadays Deutschlandradio Kultur). Some of these recordings have been released previously, but this set is superior in all respects to earlier releases.

The second volume of Peter Heyworth's biography of Klemperer (Otto Klemperer – his life and times, Cambridge University Press, 1996), which has detailed information on the conductor's concert appearances, barely mentions these performances. The implication is that the Berlin outings were minor affairs within the totality of Klemperer's post-war career. A different perspective is offered in Habakuk Traber's booklet notes. These provide a detailed interpretative commentary on the performances, concluding that they "surely rank amongst the most important documents of cultural rebuilding in post-war Germany." These opposing positions are, to my mind, both incorrect. The performances were worth issuing because they illuminate Klemperer's conducting practice in his core repertoire. This suggests that Heyworth was remiss in giving them short shrift. On the other hand, Traber's case is one of special pleading. While the recordings are musically valuable, they can hardly be said to occupy the cultural position he ascribes to them.

The Mozart recordings were all made within a few days in late 1950. They document Klemperer's first encounter with the RIAS Symphony Orchestra. Listeners expecting to hear the conductor's late monumental style and steady pacing in these works will be surprised at the swiftness of some tempi. The main Allegro of the Don Giovanni overture and the first movement of the Prague Symphony, for example, are both bracing. All the Mozart performances are strongly led, but Symphony No. 29 is less ebullient than one usually hears today and the strings of the Serenata notturna compete with booming timpani. In these performances, one senses that Klemperer and the orchestra have just become musically acquainted. The strings play with keen, precise articulation and contrapuntal passages are deftly handled; but the overall ensemble is not as polished as one remembers from the orchestra's

recordings with its then music director, Ferenc Fricsay. The steely sound of the tutti is wearing on the ears, though the recordings capture a wide dynamic range.

The three Beethoven symphonies are all live recordings. They are similar in conception to Klemperer's various other accounts of these works. The Second Symphony proceeds boldly, with careful attention to wind solos that often take a thematic lead in this work. The Eroica is suitably weighty, grave, and structurally cogent. In the "Marcia funebre", the orchestra seems to be playing slightly quicker than Klemperer's beat and, as the booklet note points out, the ensemble becomes slightly ragged. The finale is classically cogent and Klemperer eschews playing the variations as a virtuous showpiece, much to the music's advantage. The Pastoral is gently bucolic in the first two movements. Klemperer then whips up a dramatic storm followed by an energetic rather than a serene finale. Though they make for interesting listening, none of the Beethoven performances is truly outstanding and the conductor's credentials in these symphonies are better displayed in his Philharmonia studio recordings.

The soloist in Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto is Hans-Erich Riebensahm, a Berlin-based pianist, teacher and Schnabel pupil, whom some listeners may recall from his LP of Beethoven's Pathétique and Appassionata sonatas (Opera 1174). The booklet note supplies no information about him, which is an oversight given his low profile among recording artists. His performance of the Beethoven is certainly worth hearing. He is in accord with Klemperer's spacious tempi in the first movement and delivers a forthright cadenza, which is marred by a few wrong and smudged notes. In the second movement Riebensahm offers a hushed, intimate reading, and carefully shades his arpeggios to allow the flute and bassoon to project their solos. In the finale, he plays lyrically while Klemperer's accompaniment is somewhat abrupt, but this is not problematic because Beethoven's music partly suggests such a tension between the solo part and the tutti.

Works by Hindemith and Mahler complete these discs. Klemperer of course knew both composers and also led premieres of their compositions. He preferred Hindemith's earlier works and felt an affinity with the ballet suite Nobilissima Visione. This performance of February 1954 is something of a dry run for Klemperer's Philharmonia recording of the work some eight months later. The serious and reflective string sonorities of the Hindemith are well projected in this Berlin performance, along with delicate woodwind playing in the second movement and confident brass chords in the finale. Klemperer was clearly attuned to the restrained warmth and orchestral invention of one of Hindemith's stronger pieces. Mahler Fourth is a suitably classically conceived interpretation of a work that Klemperer programmed frequently. Wistful passages of nostalgic playing are found in the first movement; bitter irony, conveyed through the retuned solo violin, dominates the second movement; the third movement flows peacefully. Despite the soprano's lack-lustre singing in the finale, this is a well-proportioned, steady and idiomatic performance that provides an appropriate capstone to these recordings.