



George Szell conducts Dvorák & Brahms

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Herzlia
 Another release in Audite's new series of archive performances from the Lucerne Festival. The sources for both performances are original broadcast tapes; the concerts were recorded and transmitted by Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen (SRF) and it must be said straightaway that the sound quality is good and Audite, as they usually do, seem to have made a fine job of the transfer process.

This generously filled disc brings two performances by George Szell, who appeared on several occasions at the festival in Lucerne from 1956; this concert with the Czech Philharmonic was his last appearance there before his death in 1970.

The Brahms First Symphony was central to Szell's repertoire. According to the very informative notes he programmed it in no fewer than fourteen of his twenty-four seasons in Cleveland. He'd made the first of two commercial recordings of the work with the Cleveland Orchestra in 1957 - a second was to follow in 1966, also in Cleveland. One assumes, therefore, that he knew the score like the back of his hand yet there's no trace of the routine here. The sostenuto introduction to the first movement has excellent forward momentum, a characteristic sadly lacking in a performance by Simone Young which I reviewed only recently. At this point in the Szell reading I wrote down in my notes 'purposeful' and that wasn't the last time that term was to be written down as this performance unfolded. The main allegro is athletic and muscular. The rhythms are taut - this is pretty lean Brahms - and momentum is maintained even when Szell relaxes with the music. The exposition repeat is not taken; that may be a pity but the conviction and drive of the performance set aside any objections. This is, overall, a powerful and thrusting reading of the movement and, played like this, it makes one wonder why Brahms had such trouble over composing his first symphony; Szell imbues the music with great certainty.

The Andante sostenuto is perhaps a bit less mellow in character than some readings I've heard. I think I'd characterise Szell's way with the music as strong and serious. However, there's also nobility in his reading, not least when we reach those lovely concluding pages with the horn and violin solos, here expertly delivered. When the finale is reached Szell achieves considerable tension at the start. The horn solo really does sound like an alphorn - perhaps a modest degree of hand-stopping? The big tune is launched with fine momentum and thereafter the music is full of energy and drive - this was another occasion when that word 'purposeful' was scribbled down. As the finishing line comes into view Szell really increases the tension - and the drive - bringing this gripping reading to an exciting end.

If anything the Dvořák performance is even finer. This was the last of a series of three concerts given by the Czech Philharmonic on what was their first visit to

Lucerne and it appears that this concert – an all-Dvořák programme – was the only one conducted by Szell. Like the Brahms First, this was a symphony with which Szell identified strongly. By the time this Lucerne performance took place he'd recorded the symphony twice and he was to make one more recording of it – his very last – in 1970. This Lucerne performance benefits, therefore, from having a conductor on the podium who was really familiar with the score and directing an orchestra whose members had the music in their blood: it's a potent combination and, my goodness, does it work!

The performance gets off to a most promising start: that glorious opening melody is warmly sung. Thereafter the lyrical side of the movement comes over excellently but Szell also imparts drive and fire into the performance when it's required - for example around 7:00. The nostalgic, affectionate Adagio is beautifully done and sounds thoroughly idiomatic. One relishes also the occasions when Dvořák's writing becomes more passionate and the players respond accordingly. The third movement is an absolute delight, especially the trio. Szell and his players put just the right amount of 'give' into the rhythms without ever sacrificing the shape or momentum of the music. I've seen the finale described as 'footloose variations'. That's not a bad description but there's nothing footloose about this performance. Szell keeps a tight rein on the proceedings - as you'd expect from this conductor – but the miracle is that he manages to do so in such a way that the music never sounds constrained. Instead the performance has plenty of high spirits and is full of life and colour. The closing pages are very exciting indeed.

What is it about hearing Czech music played by a fine Czech orchestra? Everything sounds just right, not least the orchestral colours and the way the rhythms are inflected. This performance of my favourite Dvořák symphony is a very good example of the Czech accent in Dvořák.

I enjoyed this disc enormously. Neither orchestra is technically flawless but both play extremely well for Szell and the minor blemishes, such as they are, are more than offset by the sense of spirit in both performances. As for Szell, he's on excellent form here, conducting two excellent and charismatic performances.

I'm delighted that these two performances have been made available on CD. Since the presentation standards are up to Audite's usual high standards, which enhances the appeal of this release, this disc is a very enticing proposition.