



Sergiu Celibidache: The Berlin recordings

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It was inevitable that music would play no small part in the regeneration of Germany following the destruction of the Nazi empire. Amid the wreck and the rubble, the anguish and the finger-pointing, the music never stopped: as before, it lent ambiguous expression to a plenitude of conflicting sentiments and aspirations. Berlin's musical institutions, no less than the divided city's material infrastructure, were in immediate need of reconstruction. With Furtwangler, the musical moral compass, temporarily sidelined, much of the task of rebuilding fell to his place-holder at the Philharmonic, Sergiu Celibidache (1912-96), who was principal conductor from 1945 to 1952.

Much has been made of Celibidache's peculiarities – his Buddhism and refusal to make studio recordings – but what one hears in this massive retrospective of his postwar work with the Philharmonic and Berlin Radio Symphony is in one important respect almost conventional: his allegiance to the Nikisch approach to music-making, the grand style that for two generations had been the dominant mode in Europe and America. It was about to go out of fashion – and Celibidache's nascent career with it – but in these remarkable post-war recordings, as with Furtwangler's, it achieved an apogee.

The Nikisch way was less a style than a principle. Its chief exponents all had their own individual style, but the principle was ever to seek out and heighten the dramatic elements in a composition. Celibidache, comparatively new to conducting, did not in 1945 have much of a personal style; and the performances here might be easily mistaken for Furtwangler, Walter, or Beecham (how glorious is that?). They are marked by strong contrasts of tempo, timbre, and volume and not a little freedom taken with shaping melodic lines.

Listening to this long parade of emotive performances is exhausting enough to demonstrate Celibidache's point about the unnatural quality of recordings, which drain the contextual and dramatic elements from musical drama. Such potent medicine as this is best taken in small doses. But we can report that, while all is compelling, Celibidache is most comfortable and effective in German repertoire – and outside the realm of the familiar he can be odd – but still compelling.

Recall the circumstances under which these broadcast performances were made: most of the music had not been performed in Germany for two decades, if at all. It was new to the conductor, new to the musicians, new to the audiences. O brave new post-war world! The collection opens with Mendelssohn's Italian Symphony, given a zest implicitly expressing the joy of music without limits. French and Russian works are abundantly represented in dramatic if strikingly unidiomatic interpretations. Here are long-forbidden decadent Jewish moderns: Milhaud, Copland, David Diamond.

Appalachian Spring in Berlin! And Britten's Sinfonia da Requiem, more appropriate to the occasion. No Wagner.

The electrical excitement of the original broadcasts, the experience of all these musical novelties, reverberates across the decades and is given a strong boost by the conductor's wayward way with a score. But most memorable for this listener is a small, familiar item tucked away in the middle: the most perfectly insouciant, most perfectly executed Till Eulenspiegel I have ever heard – which is saying a lot. That, like the whopping explosion in the Haydn Surprise Symphony, gets to the essence of the Nikisch way of doing things. This mode was not to last, and the joyful historical moment here captured would dissipate amid the dull proprieties of the Karajan regime. There must have been a little of Till Eulenspiegel mixed up in Celibidache's other-worldly character: though pushed from the throne he would not go away, and decades later was still reminding concert-goers who cared that there had been a time when giant-conductors stalked the earth – wayward, [...]