Carl Schuricht conducts Mozart & Brahms

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As readers of this magazine most likely already know from my previous reviews of two major collections of his recordings by SWR, I am an admirer of the art of Carl Schuricht (1889–1967), and so I requested this CD for review with anticipation. At the same time, from past experience I was aware of two things: Mozart was not always his strongest suit, and his Brahms interpretations were highly variable and unpredictable.

“Unpredictable” turned out to be a good descriptor for both performances, preserved in clear mono sound that is tilted somewhat toward the treble frequencies. The Mozart looks forward with almost uncanny prescience to certain aspects of recent HIP practices. While the booklet provides no information on this count, my ears tell me that the Swiss Festival Orchestra was (at least for this performance) a body of reduced size from a full-scale modern symphony orchestra. Textures are transparent and light as a soap bubble; articulation is crisp and pointed; tempos are sprightly though not rushed. Casadesus is at one with Schuricht; he uses virtually no pedal, and his fleet-fingered touch brings his modern instrument as close to the realm of the pianoforte as is possible to do. This is Mozart of great elegance, but (unlike Schuricht’s live concerto performances with Clara Haskil) chary of the weight and shadows of emotional depth. I tremendously admire the execution, without being entirely won over by the interpretation.

I was previously prepared for Schuricht’s potential idiosyncrasy in Brahms by a 1953 performance of the First Symphony with the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande (Archiphon, nla), which has the most eccentric rendition of the finale of that work I think I am ever likely to hear. For the Second Symphony, my previous exposure was his 1966 performance with his longtime base ensemble, the Stuttgart Radio Symphony, and his 1953 studio recording with the Vienna Philharmonic for Decca. The Stuttgart performance is one of great autumnal ripeness, with very relaxed tempos throughout. This 1962 outing with the Vienna Philharmonic, by contrast, is far more impulsive, belying the work’s reputation as Brahms’s “Pastoral.” Every movement is up to a minute faster; but even more striking is the sense of underlying tension and unsettled waywardness. (Although its studio predecessor is slightly faster yet, it is characterized instead by far greater equipoise and serenity.) String passages have a febrile edginess; brass chords are far more prominent and given an almost snarling edge. Portions of the first movement development section bristle with nervousness; the normally wistful second movement suddenly turns stormy and even menacing at the 4:00 mark; the scherzo is more jumpy than bucolic; the finale is almost defiantly punched out at points. The audience bursts into enthusiastic

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applause at the close; I am far less sure what to make of it all. I admire the responsiveness and razor-sharp execution of the Vienna Philharmonic, but this simply is not how I customarily hear this work.

The two easiest types of reviews for a critic to write are those for performances that are either truly great or truly awful. Much harder to compose are those for performances that are either solid but not outstanding, or are very good but still seem to have something essential missing. By far the hardest kind of review to write, though, is one for performances where the interpreters provide top-notch executions that are at odds with the critic's preconceptions or preferences, in ways that he or she cannot readily resolve. That is the situation here. I remain intrigued but unsettled by what I hear—interpretations far too thoughtful and well played to set aside, but ones that lie outside of my usual ambit. I have sought to give objective accounts of these two performances, so that readers can make their own judgments. With a cautionary yellow flag, strongly recommended to those who believe they might find these approaches appealing.

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