audite



Edition Wilhelm Furtwängler – The complete RIAS recordings

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For anyone new to the legacy of Wilhelm Furtwängler, this 12-CD box set is the ideal place to begin exploring his art. Let me first sketch in some necessary background. The superiority of Furtwängler's live recordings over his studio ones has become a byword among collectors. Now seems like a particularly apt time to return to this issue, however, after Warner released a massive 56-CD box set of every studio recording by Furtwängler over a span from 1926 to 1954, just months before he died. (The collection also includes a handful of live performances that he approved for commercial release.)

The Warner set has become a bestseller, indicating that interest in Furtwängler is still alive. What remained untouched were the scores of concert broadcasts that contain the most intriguing portion of the Furtwängler discography. These are also the murkiest and most baffling recordings, not only for newcomers but even experienced collectors. In the past, sifting through them has been like the hunt for the snark, leading to many blind alleys and false sightings. John Ardoin's landmark book "The Furtwängler Record" attempted to cover every available recording, live and studio, up to the time of its publication, 1994. Because the conductor was lionized and an object of fascination decades after his death, Ardoin had no scarcity of material to work with. He would never have suspected, however, that the floodgates had barely opened. (Ardoin died in 2001 without updating his book, but it remains essential for his reliable opinions when it came to separating the sheep from the goats among existing Furtwängler performances.)

Since 1994 the surfacing of new broadcast material hasn't been as important as advances in remastering techniques. The poor sound on many Furtwängler reissues, particularly from Italian pirate labels, was notorious, and chronically frustrating. Today the problem has essentially been solved. The Warner set presents restorations that surpass the previous versions on EMI, often by a sizable margin (see Henry Fogel's detailed review in this issue). The Berlin Philharmonic released a beautifully renovated compendium of Furtwängler's radio broadcasts 1939-45 on 22 CDs (at a lavish price). Finally, DG issued what should have been an ideal collection, the complete Deutsche Grammophon recordings on 34 CDs. It had the potential for improving the ragged sound found on many previous DG issues, which suffered from shrillness in the upper frequencies and glare from early-digital processing. But Fogel found the new DG restorations spotty and often hard to distinguish from their previous inadequate incarnations (Fanfare 43:6). Happily, in many cases the slack has been taken up by Pristine Audio, Naxos Historical, and private restorations by Eduardo Chibás of Venezuela (available at furtwanglersound.com).

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I've provided this overview to underscore how fortunate we are to have arrived at the point where Furtwängler's art can be appreciated without the screen of inferior, at times antiquated, sound and with no need to scramble after individual recordings; the whole of his discography is available in big chunks as never before.

By comparison, this moderately sized set of Furtwängler's broadcasts on RIAS (Radio in the American Sector, the AM station established by American forces remaining in Berlin after the war) might seem like small potatoes, but it stands out for some special qualities. Although none of this material was new when the set was released in 2009, the quality of the sound was much improved, thanks to using the original RIAS master tapes for the first time. For whatever reason, it took decades before record labels made the effort to gain access to the original source material for a range of Furtwängler broadcasts, and since he was the pre-eminent German conductor, there was no lack of these tapes. The first prominent use of them appeared on Tahra, a French boutique label that unfortunately is now defunct. Another French label, Andante (also defunct) gained exclusive access to the archives of the Vienna Philharmonic. Andante's Furtwängler releases were extremely limited, and the orchestra has no house label, which makes it unlikely that we'll get more archival releases any time soon.

The strongest reasons for nominating audite's set to the Hall of Fame are musical. Here we get all the hallmarks of Furtwängler's artistry at its best; his personal involvement in the score (a legacy of the Romantic tradition he belonged to), his aim to raise the great Austro-German composers to the stature they deserved, his profound regard for the music, and finally the stylistic gestures he made his own, especially his unrivaled sense for transitions. Since Henry Fogel is Fanfare's resident Furtwängler authority, and he reviewed the contents of this set in detail (33:1), I won't try to duplicate his coverage.

I'll content myself with a single memorable performance, the Beethoven Violin Concerto with Yehudi Menuhin from September 28, 1947. It stands as one of the great recordings of the concerto, to begin with, because the conductor and soloist are so like-minded. What they are like-minded about is passionate expression. Dynamics rise and fall in the first movement, tempo becomes urgent and then relaxes, tension is powerfully built in order to be released, beginning a new expressive arc. These are not externalized gestures. They represent a cherished Romantic ideal, which charges the performer to recreate the inspiration felt by Beethoven at the time he wrote the music.

This aesthetic was also brought to life in recordings of the Beethoven Violin Concerto by Bronisław Huberman and Josef Szigeti. In Menuhin's version and theirs the notion of the concerto being essentially placid and lyrical is totally overturned; we find ourselves in the heroic world of Beethoven's middle period. Another quality emerges strongly in Menuhin's reading, his ability to make the violin "speak" through highly expressive bowing. This allies beautifully with Furtwängler's urge toward spontaneity. Together they convey the sweeping arc of each movement, including Menuhin's reading of the Kreisler cadenza, which seems to flow from a single breath. In all, this performance perfectly exemplifies what I think of as music-making from the inside out.

It must be acknowledged that not everyone will respond ecstatically. The recorded sound for the orchestra is rudimentary, and the placement of (presumably) a single microphone makes the timpani a distant, blurry presence. Menuhin isn't forwardly placed, but his tone is clearly and faithfully captured. Some might be irritated at how the first clarinet in the Larghetto is more prominent than Menuhin, or by the very occasional sour intonation in a passing note from the soloist. But 1947 still found

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Menuhin with a strong technique compared to the upcoming decades. In any event, this is a performance where expression is all.

Should it be? That was the challenge thrown down by Toscanini, who for me exemplifies music-making from the outside in. He took two important virtues, precision and intensity, elevating them to a height unequalled before, and I'll accept, with a touch of skepticism, that he made orchestras play better than ever before. But music-making reduced to two virtues is incomplete. One notices among Toscanini's admirers that propulsion, drive, precision, and intensity are repeated time and again, but not expressivity, imagination, originality, tenderness, sensitivity, and spontaneity. Toscanini was proud of a performance if it was perfectly well drilled; Furtwängler was proud if a performance wasn't.

That he had much more to offer enraptures his admirers but is repudiated by his detractors. I don't find the Berlin Philharmonic under Furtwängler seriously imprecise, but clearly the playing can sound blurred when the conducting becomes abandoned. That was a prime feature during the war, when Furtwängler's style took on the frenzied desperation he must have felt. In the postwar era his temperament became more settled (sometimes too settled, as in the dull Beethoven symphonies done for EMI with the Vienna Philharmonic). What I search for after the war is a contained rapture of the kind we hear in this Beethoven Violin Concerto and elsewhere: the Bayreuth Beethoven Ninth, the Brahms First Symphony from Hamburg, the Mahler „Songs of a Wayfarer" with the young Fischer-Dieskau, and above all, every Bruckner performance.

By a quirk of fate, two composers that Furtwängler interpreted in excelsis, Bruckner and Brahms, are scarcely represented in the big Warner box of studio recordings. Of Bruckner there is only a single movement, the Adagio from Symphony No. 7. So the indispensable nature of the live Bruckner and Brahms recordings is paramount. A good start is the Bruckner Eighth included in this audite box set, dated October 15, 1949. As Fogel points out in his review, access to the RIAS master tapes makes this the best-sounding version among a number of reissues.

It's always a pleasure to discuss a conductor you hold in loving admiration, and for me Furtwängler is irreplaceable. I've taken time here to introduce him to newcomers and, more importantly, to say why Furtwängler's art matters. Music-making has become more processed, uniform, and focused on externals like technical virtuosity. I love virtuosity, but I hate the notion that expert execution might stifle the reason we listen to the classical masters in the first place.

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