



Edition Hans Knappertsbusch & Berliner Philharmoniker – The complete RIAS recordings

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GRAMOPHONE

Rob Cowan's monthly survey of reissues and archive recordings

A tale of three maestros: Knappertsbusch, Barbirolli and Toscanini

If ever there were a conductor whose work often confounded expectations, it was the German conductor Hans Knappertsbusch. Commonly daubed a Teutonic slow-coach, "Kna" (as he was known) proves to have been anything but a slouch, especially in that popular haven for slouches of the baton, Anton Bruckner. Audite's five-disc collection of "The Complete RIAS Recordings" includes Knappertsbusch's Berlin Philharmonic versions of Bruckner's Eighth (1951) and Ninth (1950) symphonies, the latter presented in two versions, just days apart, one studio-recorded, the other live ... and what a difference! The fact that the live version features a broader Adagio is of marginal interest but more to the point is its highly charged atmosphere and the added intensity of the string playing. The finale is surely one of the great recorded Bruckner performances, in spite of some interpretative (editorial?) peculiarities (a "Gates of Heaven" episode that rockets from ppp to fff and an abrupt final chord for the last tortuous climax). Both symphonies approximate, in Knappertsbusch's hands, the billowing storm clouds of Wagner's music dramas and bring the music newly to life, though collectors versed in Bruckner scholarship might balk at the editions used. There are also two versions of Schubert's Unfinished, again quite different in detail (Knappertsbusch plumbed the depths of this piece just as Furtwängler did), as well as an affable Haydn Surprise Symphony and a gruff though solidly built Beethoven Eighth. As for the lighter fare (The Nutcracker Suite, Otto Nicolai, Johann Strauss II, Karel Komzák II), Knappertsbusch certainly knew how to relax, though never to the extent of losing the shape of a piece. It's here more than in the classics that we smile at his fat textures, broad tempi and warmly arched phrasing, his humanness, which makes this set such a pleasure to dip into.

Although recorded a few years later, "Sir John Barbirolli in New York" (1959) isn't quite so pleasing, sound-wise, though the pleasure of hearing Richard Lewis, Maureen Forrester and the less familiar Morley Meredith enter fully into the spirit of Elgar's The Dream of Gerontius soon banishes any doubts about the variable sound quality. The Introduction and Allegro is given a big, broad reading, weighty and impassioned, and there's a suite of five movements from The Planets, opening with a particularly gruelling "Mars". A warm-hearted Mahler First Symphony has already been released as part of the New York Philharmonic's Mahler symphony collection (1/99), and there are chunky and communicative versions of Brahms's Violin Concerto (with Berl Senovsky), Haydn's 88th, Vaughan Williams's Eighth and, least appealing perhaps, Barbirolli's own Elizabethan Suite. But the Elgar items are surely

essential listening for all fans of this great conductor.

The Barbirolli Society's own sizeable catalogue includes a good number of New York Philharmonic broadcasts but their latest programme hales from the Royal Albert Hall, a Prom, again from 1959, featuring Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony in a performance that marries the expected warmth (how lovely to hear those cello portamentos in the Andantino) with an imposing level of drama: the climactic moment in the finale where the opening fanfares return is mind-bogglingly powerful. The programme also includes the first UK performance of Bohuslav Martinů's Oboe Concerto, H353, with Lady Barbirolli as soloist, a performance that also haunts the memory.

Barbirolli's 1959 Tchaikovsky/Martinů recordings are in mono but Pristine Audio have recently achieved the unimaginable by releasing Arturo Toscanini's hair-raising 1951 NBC Verdi Requiem in stereo. What we have are two separate recordings with independent microphone placements, and the result, although strictly speaking not stereo in the "two-track tape" sense of the term, does allow for some directional information – which is especially noticeable in the choral singing and the echoing trumpets in the "Tuba mirum". The one trivial disappointment is that Toscanini's urging shouts, which were such a thrilling component on the dry, mono RCA transfer (12/56), are inaudible. True, there is some vinyl surface noise and some minor clouding of detail, but the effect is still pretty stunning, a version to own alongside RCA's straight tape transfer I'd suggest, an added dimension rather than a replacement. Toscanini's vocal line-up for 1951 was Herva Nelli, Fedora Barbieri, Giuseppe di Stefano and Cesare Siepi, whereas for his 1940 NBC broadcast he chose a partially superior team consisting of Zinka Milanov, Bruna Castagna, Jussi Björling and Nicola Moscona. The 1940 performance, another excellent transfer, is broader and tighter than the one from 1951, and the vocal team is very much dominated by Milanov and Björling. Sound-wise, the balance engineers thrust the singers in your face, but given the overall quality of the singing, who's complaining? Both performances stand head and shoulders above most recorded rivals. The 1940 set also includes Toscanini's NBC broadcasts of Verdi's original, discarded Aida Overture (exciting but no masterpiece) and Castelnuovo-Tedesco's attractive Taming of the Shrew Overture.

Toscanini's 1943 English-language NBC relay of Brahms's German Requiem (with Vivian della Chiesa and Herbert Janssen) is both warmly phrased and, in the mighty second movement (taken very slowly), extremely imposing. Mediocre transfers have come and gone, some with hum and distortion, but Pristine achieves a cleaner, fuller sound than most, so that we can appreciate this elevating interpretation afresh.