



Sergiu Celibidache: The Berlin recordings

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EAN: 4022143214232



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www.musicweb-international.com (John Quinn - 2014.02.01)

At the end of World War II the Romanian conductor, Sergiu Celibidache (1912-1996) enjoyed a meteoric rise to fame. Having studied composition and conducting at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin from 1936 onwards he was propelled, almost from nowhere, to conduct the Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin in 1945. Later that same year, he rose even higher and faster when he was named Chief Conductor of the Berliner Philharmoniker (BPO). Famously, he declined to make any commercial recordings after 1953 though a good number of concert and broadcast recordings made in the later stages of his career have been issued on CD since his death. However, with this hugely important release Audite shines a spotlight on those amazing years when he was so prominent in post-war Berlin. This is a follow-up to their earlier three-disc set of recordings that he made in roughly the same period for the RIAS broadcasting station (Audite 21.406) which I hope to review shortly.

Celibidache held his post with the BPO from 1946 to 1952. In his note accompanying the set of RIAS recordings, mentioned above Peter T. Köster states that the conductor regarded himself 'merely as Wilhelm Furtwängler's vice-regent'. When Furtwängler returned to Berlin in 1952 the two conductors shared the orchestra's podium until 1954 but on Furtwängler's death that year the orchestra dumped Celibidache in favour of Karajan. By a sad irony Celibidache led the orchestra for the last time on 30 November 1954, the very day on which Furtwängler died. There was just one final BPO appearance; that was in 1992, I think, when he was invited back to conduct the orchestra in Bruckner's Seventh Symphony.

In this set we find 45 performances, recorded for radio transmission. The bulk of them - thirty-five - were with the BPO and were given between November 1945 and November 1953. There are nine with the Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin, dating from 1945-46, and a single, incomplete one with a third orchestra that took place in 1957. What leaps out from a reading of the track-listing is the sheer variety and enterprise of the repertoire. True, there are works by Haydn, Mozart, Brahms and Mendelssohn in here but look what else there is. The Tchaikovsky symphony is one of his less familiar symphonies; there are then-recent pieces by American composers - Copland, Diamond, Piston and Barber, all in one programme; Carlos Chavez is represented; so too are Milhaud, Roussel, Cui and Glazunov. These are pretty adventurous repertoire choices.

Disc 1, however, contains standard fare. The Mendelssohn symphony comes from his last significant sessions with the BPO and it's a pleasing reading in good recorded sound. The first movement is light and athletic; the second movement, taken quite steadily, benefits from smooth lines while the third movement is relaxed and elegant; by contrast, the finale is very fast and driven. The playing in the Mendelssohn overture is not as cultivated and the sound is rather thin and

treble-biased: bear in mind, however, that this is a much earlier recording and not with the BPO. In the Mozart concerto Lilia d'Albore (1914-?) is a good soloist. The first movement is spirited, the second elegant and well-shaped, while the finale is graceful.

Disc 2 also contains central repertoire. The Chopin concerto features the Polish pianist, Raoul Koczalski (1885-1948). He's not flattered by the clangy tone of the piano, as recorded, but he displays a light touch. Koczalski plays fluently and though the piano is placed rather forwardly in the sound picture, somewhat masking the orchestra, the accompaniment seems good. In the slow movement Koczalski's playing has poetry and no little feeling. Both the Berlioz overtures are done well. The Bizet symphony benefits from the best recording on this disc. Celibidache and the BPO do it well, giving a most enjoyable reading of Bizet's zestful symphony.

Disc 3 includes the Brahms Fourth Symphony in an impressive reading. There's strength and purpose in the first movement though the music is allowed to relax where appropriate. The second movement is taken pretty slowly and is expressively moulded. Celibidache is by no means the only conductor who has taken this movement at a broad tempo but here we get, perhaps, a glimpse of the expansive Celibidache of later years. The finale is paced quite deliberately, the music strongly projected. The slow variations in the middle of the movement are taken very broadly but when the music picks up speed once again the reading is very fiery, especially as the end approaches. The performance of *Till Eulenspiegel* was recorded live. It's vividly characterised though the recording struggles to accommodate the climaxes. The disc is completed by another live performance, this time of some orchestrated Wolf songs which are sung by the contralto, Margarete Klose (1899-1968), who was then a soloist at the Berlin State Opera. She has a large, full voice. I liked particularly her dedicated performance of 'Gebet' and her account of 'Anakreons Grab' is also very expressive.

Disc 4 is devoted to Russian music. The performance of the 'Little Russian' Symphony is a good, lively one and it's interesting to find Celibidache giving an outing to what was then a far from standard repertoire piece. Much of Romeo and Juliet is dramatic and passionate. However, I'm unpersuaded by the love music which is taken pretty deliberately with the horn part surprisingly prominent both times this music is heard - and I don't think this is just a question of recorded balance. Overall, I find these sections of the piece somewhat mannered. Then the closing pages are taken very broadly and, to compound matters, the chordal passage for horns and woodwind is not well played, the tuning imprecise. Overall, this is something of a disappointment. The Rimsky piece is one of those which has something of a slow-burn start, well-shaped here. When the music gets cracking, so does Celibidache though his way with this very colourful score is slightly hampered by the limitations of the sound.

Much of Disc 5 is devoted to a performance of Dvořák's great Cello Concerto. Here the soloist is the Hungarian, Tibor de Machula (1912-1982). At this time he was principal cellist of the BPO, a post to which he'd been appointed by Furtwängler in 1936. He was to leave the BPO in 1947, two years after this performance, to spend thirty years as principal cellist with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. The tone produced by de Machula in the first movement is somewhat gritty and also his intonation is not always infallible. There are also one or two moments of tape distortion. However, matters improve in the second movement which receives a good performance, though I don't care for the aggressive way the orchestral tutti comes crashing in at 2:51 after the tranquil music we've been hearing. The performance of the finale is spirited and the poetic end is well achieved. The first 20 bars of the Glazunov overture are missing. This is by no means a front rank piece though the

conductor clearly thought it merited an airing. The six-movement suite by Cui was completely new to me. I suppose the music is slight but it's most attractive and Celibidache does it well and with no little warmth and affection.

There's a good deal of French music on Disc 6. Margarete Klose sings the Saint-Saëns aria 'Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix' but it loses a good deal of seductiveness in this German translation and her big voice is rather too large for the music. A rather better-suited matching finds Erna Berger (1900-1990) in Glière's Concerto for coloratura soprano and orchestra. The pity is that the music isn't more interesting but Berger makes a good job of it; her gleaming soprano is used to good effect both in the long, soaring lines of the first part and in the vocal acrobatics that follow. Otherwise it's the music of Debussy that fills the disc. There's only one of the Three Nocturnes: Fêtes. The outer sections are urgent and gay but the middle section, the approaching march, is much less satisfactory for Celibidache adopts a ponderous speed. The rather thin, one-dimensional sound doesn't help, either. It's a surprise to read in the notes that after the 1948 performance of Jeux that's preserved here Celibidache never returned to the score. I wonder why, for on the evidence of this often light-footed reading he seems to have had the measure of this elusive score. Interpretatively, La Mer is something of a mixed bag. In 'De l'aube à midi sur la mer' one can discern the conductor's famed care for textures and balance despite the limitations of the sound. The movement is taken very expansively - Celibidache takes 10:20 to play it whereas most versions that I know play for between 8:30 and about 9:00. However, despite the slow speed there's no denying that there's poetry in the reading. When the climax arrives (9:45), the conductor's shouts are clearly audible. 'Jeux de vagues' is well done: the music flickers, darts and sometimes blazes. 'Dialogue du vent et de la mer' is more problematic: parts of it are turbulent and elemental but Celibidache is prone to linger too much for my taste at times. All that said, it's a most interesting reading of Debussy's great score although the orchestral playing is not always as sophisticated as I'm sure the maestro would have wished.

Disc 7 brings a performance of Shostakovich's Ninth Symphony with much to recommend it. The anacrusis at the very start of the work is missing but that's not a huge issue. It's worthy of note that this performance took place only two years after the score was completed. Also fairly recent was Stravinsky's neo-classical ballet score, Jeu de Cartes (1936/7). This performance, set down on the same day as the Mozart violin concerto discussed above, is alert and does justice to the pungency and rhythmic energy of Stravinsky's writing. Rudi Stephan's Music for orchestra which is described in the booklet as a 'masterwork', was new to me. Stephan was killed in action during World War I. He wrote two works with this title, one in 1910 and a second in 1911. We're not told in the notes which piece is included here but I see that Rob Barnett reviewed a Chandos disc containing both pieces in modern recordings a few years ago. To judge from the timings of the two works on that disc and Rob's descriptions of the pieces I surmise that what Celibidache plays is the second of these compositions. It's an impressive piece. The disc is completed by a performance of Busoni's Berceuse élégiaque. This shadowy music is presented in an atmospheric performance that has clearly been well prepared.

Disc 8 brings us a sizeable helping of Prokofiev. The 'Classical' Symphony receives a good performance overall though once or twice the performance sounds a bit heavy for my taste. The scampering finale is great fun. It appears that later in his career Celibidache, like many other conductors, played his own synthesis of Prokofiev's Suites from Romeo and Juliet but here we get the Second Suite, as stated in the booklet track listing, not the First Suite as the notes suggest. Much of the performance is admirable. 'Romeo and Juliet before parting' is tender at first and then ardent, though I don't care for the tone of the horns and brass, which rather

spoils the ardent passages. The final movement, 'Romeo at Juliet's Grave', is taken very broadly, the emotion heavy. It's gripping in its way but I feel Celibidache flirts with danger in adopting such expansive speeds. By comparison, Karel Ančerl, in his classic 1959 recording (review) takes 7:29 whereas Celibidache spins it out to 9:24. This disc also includes Roussel's Petite Suite. Celibidache was partial to this quirky music but I can't pretend it's music to which I warm particularly. I don't know if it's the nature of the music or the result of the quality of the tapes but in the first two of the work's three movements the music seemed to me to have a mildly 'seasick' feel to it, the music giving the impression of coming and going.

Music by Darius Milhaud - to which Celibidache was also partial - opens Disc 9. His attractive Suite française (1944) receives a likeable performance. The two slow movements, which are the most substantial, are warmly done while the livelier movements are despatched with brio. Three of the five movements of Suite symphonique (1919) are offered. The Nocturne is very pleasing but the other two are in Milhaud's garrulous vein. Günter Raphael's Fourth Symphony was new to me and it must have been pretty new to Celibidache and the BPO when they made this recording in 1950 for the work was written just three years earlier. On a first hearing several passages in this symphony put me in mind of Hindemith. I found it difficult to see where the music was leading in the first of the four movements. The slow, third movement is serious and mainly subdued but though the music is earnest it never really seems to me to get anywhere and it struck me as rather grey. The finale is vigorous and contrapuntal and at least provides a positive conclusion to the work. No doubt I'm missing something but I felt no emotional engagement with this symphony. However, so far as I could judge Celibidache and his players give it committed advocacy. Finally, we hear another novelty, the First Symphony by Carlos Chavez. This short work is well described in the notes as 'an ascetic, laconic piece.' The language is quite tough and the musical syntax terse. The symphony is strongly projected by the BPO: did they ever play it again, I wonder?

Most of Disc 10 is given over to a concert of what were then extremely recent pieces by composers from the USA. The exception, though also by an American, is the little piece by Edward MacDowell, recorded in 1945, in which the soloist is Hans Bottermund (1892-1949) who I believe may have been a principal cellist of the BPO around this time. He plays with rich, warm tone. The other pieces were all recorded together on 6 April, 1950. The three soloists in the Barber concerto were, I suspect, BPO principals. They give a good account of themselves in a crisp performance of this pithy work. The exposed writing in the opening pages of Appalachian Spring finds the tuning of the BPO a bit fallible at times. However, things settle down and the performance as a whole is spirited and enjoyable. The lovely, tranquil ending is well done. There's also Walter Piston's Second Symphony. I wonder if a note of his music has been played in Berlin since this performance. Celibidache does it well, conveying the vigour and rigour of the outer movements. The central Adagio accounts for half the symphony's length. In mood it's akin to a nocturne and this performance brings out the poetry in the music.

Disc 11 opens with Britten's Sinfonia da Requiem, another example of recent music finding its way into Celibidache's repertoire at this time. The first movement is very broad - in fact, it's too slow, frankly - but despite the measured pace the performance is gripping. And in judging the pacing we must not forget that the piece was only about five years old and its performance tradition was still developing. The music is as bleak as I've heard it. Celibidache speeds up for a while in mid-movement, which I don't think is in the score. The second movement spits and snarls while the third movement is deeply expressive, the climax (from 3:40) very passionate. This music must have roused some strong emotions in Berlin some 18 months after the end of the war in Europe. Turning to Purcell, it's fascinating to hear a Romanian conductor

in Berlin playing music by a seventeenth-century English composer. Of course, the performance is with a full contingent of strings, employing lots of vibrato - the performance is of its time. But although speeds are often quite steady the Allegros always go with a nice lick. The same is true of the Vivaldi concerto in which the soloist is Helmut Heller, who I think was a Concertmaster of the BPO at this time. He plays well. The outer movements are trim and the slow movement sings nicely.

There's a good performance of David Diamond's Rounds, which was recorded at the same session as the other modern American works included on Disc 10. The outer movements are lively and athletic here while the excellent performance of the central Adagio is dignified and nobly sung. Finally, we hear a piece by Celibidache's mentor, Heinz Tiessen, Vorspiel zu einem Revolutionsdrama (1926). This piece is an earnest affair which I'm afraid I found unappealing.

Disc 12 brings two pleasing Haydn performances. In both symphonies the Menuetto is rather too sturdy for my taste, though that was the fashion in those days. However, there's much to enjoy elsewhere: the first movements are alert; the slow movements are well done - the slow movement of No. 104 is given with elegance; both finales are lively. Oddly, I find the sound on the earlier performance - No 94 - preferable; the sound seems more clear and present. I'm afraid I simply can't get on with what seems to me to be an eccentric, even perverse interpretation of the Leonore Overture No. 3. The introduction is very spacious, though, to be fair, tension is generated. However, when the Allegro begins (5:17) I've never heard the music at so measured a speed. Then, to make matters worse, after about a minute Celibidache indulges in a wholly unauthorised accelerando and thus eventually achieves a speed that's pretty much what one is used to hearing. Thereafter, there's some dramatic music-making though the passage around the trumpet calls is unusually spacious.

There's more Beethoven on the bonus disc. This incomplete performance of Beethoven's Seventh - part of the tape was destroyed - comes from a concert in October 1957 to mark the seventieth birthday of Heinz Tiessen. Three works by Tiessen were played - the performances are included in the other Celibidache box to which I referred at the start of this review - and, at Tiessen's request his favourite Beethoven symphony was also programmed. The tape is cut off part way through the second traversal of the trio in the third movement. That movement features a splendidly energetic account of the scherzo material and the second movement is also well done. What fatally hobbles the performance, however, is the treatment of the Vivace music in the first movement. The slow tempo adopted by Celibidache has nothing remotely 'vivace' about it. The music sounds ponderous and has feet of clay. The author of the notes states that 'The vivace tempo of the first movement is wider than usual but only like this can the actual rhythm come into effect'. I'm sorry but that sounds like special pleading and I can't accept that statement: has the writer never heard Carlos Kleiber in this music? He and many other conductors have articulated the rhythms perfectly well without resorting to Celibidache's leaden speed. When one adds in the fact that there are also several instances of the conductor audibly urging on the players I think the inclusion of this performance can only be justified by completeness: it might have been better left in the vaults.

This Beethoven performance is one of a few instances where Celibidache courts controversy in this collection of recordings. However, there's never any feeling of sensationalism: even when the listener may not agree with his interpretative decisions the power of the conductor's musical personality demands respect. And if his performances are sometimes provocative is that a bad thing: should we not be challenged by the performances we hear? As I said at the start of this review the enterprise of the programming is amazing and Celibidache must have possessed an iron will and great determination to put on so wide and esoteric repertoire in these post-war years and to train the musicians to play so many unfamiliar scores. The

performances that he obtains from the orchestras are not infallible but any momentary failings of execution aren't sufficient to vitiate the spirit of the performances. At this distance of nearly seventy years one can only guess at the sheer physical challenges of making music, let alone to a high standard, in Berlin as the city emerged from the ravages of the war.

Audite's presentation of these recordings is up to their usual high standards. The extensive notes in the booklet, though not entirely error-free, contain much useful comment and information. Readers may be slightly puzzled by detailed references to the Concerto for Flute and Chamber Orchestra by Harald Genzmer (1909-2007) and three works, including the Second Symphony, by Heinz Tiessen. In fact, all these pieces are included in the other Audite box of Celibidache recordings but the note reads as if purchasers of this present set can expect to hear the performances.

Crucially, the re-masterings have been very well handled by Ludger Böckenhoff, who's also been responsible for Audite's excellent editions of Bach performances by Karl Ristenpart (review review). As usual with this label, only original tapes have been used as the sources - a policy which has led to the exclusion of one or two performances for which original tapes were not available. Inevitably the sound shows its age but given that we're dealing with recordings many of which are getting on for seventy years old the quality is remarkable and any sonic limitations don't impede enjoyment.

Through a succession of CD releases the later part of Celibidache's career has become well documented - despite his aversion to making commercial recordings - but this new Audite set is invaluable. It illuminates his early to an unprecedented degree. More than that, it opens up a window onto an aspect of cultural life in Berlin in the years that followed the end of World War II.

This is a set of great importance.