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Wilhelm Furtwängler conducts Beethoven's Symphony No. 9

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American Record Guide (Paul L Althouse - 2015.05.01)

Furtwängler conducted the Ninth more than 100 times, of which about a dozen were recorded; none of these was done in studio (which he disliked on principle) and all were from concert performances. This was the last, recorded at the 1954 Lucerne Festival on August 22, 1954, about three months before he died. Of particular note here is the re-mastering of the original tapes (from Swiss Radio) by Ludger Böckenhoff. The recording is remarkably clear and without noise, though the sound is boxy and, of course, monaural.

This is, on the whole, a very fine performance and a good representation of Furtwängler's approach to the work. The very beginning has some rough moments of ensemble, but the Philharmonia settles in and plays quite well. The first movement has the gravity and seriousness we expect from the conductor, and the slow movement includes many transcendent moments, particularly in the junctions between themes. The finale is expertly gauged. The main theme begins almost inaudibly, and the build to a frenetic ending is very convincing. Chorus and soloists are all in good shape.

Particularly with the fine sonics, this issue merits a recommendation, though I think I would prefer the similar 1951 Bayreuth performance, which is a little quicker and creates a better sense of occasion. Also in the running would be a white-hot war-time performance (Berlin, 1942), which probably shows Furtwängler at the height of his power and imagination.

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