



Herbert von Karajan - The Early Lucerne Years

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GRAMOPHONE

Box-Set Round-up

Rob Cowan revisits great recordings of the past from four conductors and a pianist

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Having already released its complete **Otto Klemperer** recordings (excepting his Beethoven Ninth and some Mahler with voices – 1973), Warner Classics has followed up with a second volume centring on opera and sacred works. There's also a typically rigorous Jon Tolansky documentary, *Otto Klemperer: An Opera Staccato*, involving orchestras alone (excepting his Beethoven Ninth and some Mahler with voices – 1973), Warner Classics has followed up with a second volume centring on opera and sacred works. There's also a typically rigorous Jon Tolansky documentary, *Otto Klemperer: An Opera Staccato*, involving orchestras alone

A 1968 Wagner *Flying Dutchman*, although memorable, is less fiery than a live Royal Festival Hall performance given at around the same time and released on CD by Testament (10/08). Dittus Beethoven's *Fidelio*, where Klemperer preferred his Covent Garden cast to the one settled on for this generally marvellous (and far

better-engineered) Walter Legge stereo production, Jon Vickers's Florestan being a highlight. Don't be in two minds, I'd say! I was especially taken with a 1969 account of *Die Walküre's* Act 1 and Wotan's Farewell with Helga Dernesch (Sieglinde), William Cochran (Siegmund) and Hans Sotin (Hunding).

As to the sacred items, it's worth noting that the Christian convert Klemperer remained a practising Roman Catholic until 1967, when he left the faith and returned to Judaism. His towering renditions of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, Handel's *Messiah*, Beethoven's *Missa solenne*, Brahms's *German Requiem* and a superb disc of choruses from the *B minor Mass* (including an inaudible rendition of the *Sanctus*) all predate his conversion, whereas an elevated account of the complete *B minor Mass* (music that Klemperer considered the greatest ever written) dates from the year of his re-conversion. Put briefly, Klemperer's way with those mighty spiritual narratives, a cross between austerity and spiritual empathy, summons the aura of Old Testament prophets, specific damnation being, in context, a largely irrelevant issue.

If you seek evidence of just how good they are, try 'Denn alles Fleisch, es ist wie Gras' from the *German Requiem*, with its loudly ringing horns – magnificent. The refurbishments, by the way, are superb. A softer option for the Bach works can be found in Erato's *Bach: The Great Sacred Works*, featuring some distinguished soloists (Felicity Palmer, Kurt Equiluz, Werner Krenn, Anthony Rolfe Johnson, Barbara Schlick and others), Ensemble Vocal et Instrumental de Lausanne and the Lausanne Chamber Orchestra under **Michel Corboz**, a 10-disc extraction from 'The Complete Erato Recordings: Baroque and Renaissance Eras' (74 CDs on Erato, 12/22). By way of example, the *St Matthew Passion's* opening chorus (not up to 6'53" compared with Klemperer's 11'48", but

the tone is still affectingly reverential. These are considered performances, nearly always transparent, with varied tempos (sometimes sprightly, sometimes not) and devotional in spirit. We've offered the two great Passions, the *B minor Mass*, *Christmas Oratorio*, *Magnificat* (in D) and *Cantata No 187*.

Like Klemperer, the American conductor **Levin Maazel** looked no compromise when it came to his career. In 1980, expecting to become successor to Herbert von Karajan as chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, he suddenly and publicly severed all connections with the orchestra when it was announced that Claudio Abbado was to take over. Luckily for us, Maazel had already made a number of remarkable recordings with the BPO for DG, including Rachmaninov's three symphonies, *Symphonic Dances* and other orchestral works (1981-84), readings distinguished by seamless lines and some glorious playing. All are gathered together as part of a handsome 39-disc set of Maazel's complete recordings for DG.

Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* and *Pavane* (1979) are similarly sumptuous and charged with atmosphere, as is Zemlin's *Lyrical Symphony* (with Jula Varsady and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau), but for me the high points in Maazel's BPO legacy are the early recordings, starting with the 1957 mono tapes of *Romeo and Juliet* music by Berlioz, Tchaikovsky and Prokofiev, the *Belshazzar* (taken from his *symphonic dramatizations*) electrifying in the extreme. And what playing! My only quibble is, why omit so strongly with *Romeo* at the *Temple of the Capulets*? Surely Maazel of all people (who went on to prepare a *King without Honor* sequence with the BPO for Telarc) could have adapted the majestic closing 'Oath of Reconciliation' for orchestra without issues. Still, what we do have is dazzling. Schubert symphonies, too (stretching from No 2



Otto Klemperer projects a singular vision in his recordings of operatic and sacred works

to the *Unfinished*, the Fourth a particular highlight, its opening *Adagio molto* like a Gainsborough scene masterfully reflected in sound. There are live New Years' Day Concerts with the Vienna Philharmonic, all of them stylishly turned. Maazel was a master of the Viennese 'lit' and, also with the VPO, Dvorák's *Symphonies Nos 7-9* (good rather than exceptional). Maazel's French legacy includes Mozart's first and last symphonies and unforgettably poignant (and at times humorous) accounts of Ravel's mini-operas *L'enfant et les sortilèges* and *L'heure espagnole* with the French National Radio Orchestra (recorded in 1960 and 1965 respectively). A large-scale operatic masterpiece is Verdi's *Luis Miller* (Covent Garden with Plácido Domingo), an excellent performance from 1979, and there are also works by Beethoven, Brahms, Falla, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Mussorgsky, Respighi, Rimsky-Korsakov, Richard Strauss and Stravinsky.

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Ward Marston's catalogue of freshly discovered or rediscovered musicians from the past is impressive by any standards, but with a three-disc set devoted to (mostly) live recitals featuring the Austrian-American pianist **Robert Goldsand** (1911-91), a Moritz Rosenthal pupil who launched his performing career at the age of 10, he scores even higher than usual. The recording dates are in the main between 1956 and 1978, with one or two recording commercially taped items thrown in for good measure (in Godowsky's *Symphonic Metamorphosis* in 'Die Fledermaus', taken from a 1964 Decca LP, and an abridged version of Rachmaninov's *Variations on a Theme of Chopin* as recorded by the Concert Hall Society in 1952). But it's the live items that make the biggest impression, Liszt's *Grande étude de Paganini* a highlight, recorded in New York in 1956, 'Capriccio' all dynamism and filigree, 'La chaise' with its pristine turns of phrase and immediate trills, and a dazzlingly variegated 'Theme and Variations' warranting particular praise. Goldsand was a formidable virtuoso, yet his playing is often made up of the subtlest components, even in Rosenthal's spectacular reworking of Chopin's 'Minute' Waltz or Godowsky's ingenious 'Bedlam' (the Studies Op 10 No 3 and Op 25 No 9 combined), both of which emerge more as music than as show-off stunts. By contrast, Clement's Sonata in F sharp minor, Op 25 No 5, is a model of finely sculpted classicism whereas Camargo Guarnieri's Sonata No 3 in the G Clef (published in 1948) kicks its heels in the manner of Villa-Lobos. As to the rest, we're offered Albinetti, Handel, more Chopin (principally in the originals), Prokofiev, Rachmaninov, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann and, to close, a warmly uplifting account of 'Jesus, son of man's' deicing' in Myra Hess's arrangement. It's an enticing introduction to a musician's music, and the transfers (by Seth Winson) are, for the most part, first-rate. So are Donald Marill's notes. ●

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