



Edition Wilhelm Furtwängler – The complete RIAS recordings

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[Fanfare](#) (Richard A. Kaplan - 1970.01.01)

Rather than attempt to come up with a “best of” list, I prefer to think of my annual Want List as a medium for calling attention to recording projects of extraordinary documentary or historical value. This year’s choices include three big boxes, suitable for and worthy of holiday giving or receiving. Finally, I also include a single new recording that really blew this jaded critic away this past year.

Not included for 2009, but certainly deserving an honorable mention, is the continuation of the Sibelius Edition on BIS, now at eight volumes and counting. Perhaps no single volume issued this year has reached the heights of last year’s “Voice and Orchestra” box, which featured gorgeous performances of the many little-known but stunning choral-orchestral works; but still, this project will surely stand as one of the enduring landmarks in the history of recorded music.

As it happens, four of my five official items this year are reissues, although they differ widely in character. This is the third incarnation of DG’s Brahms Edition, originally issued on LP in 1983 to mark the composer’s sesquicentennial. DG here atones for allowing the 1990s CD edition to go out of print; the current incarnation is identical to it in content, but trades the multiple volumes and elaborately illustrated booklets for a single compact box (essentially a five-inch cube) that can be had for under \$100. For most collectors, of course, multiple duplications will be unavoidable, but this set is worth the price just for the four gorgeous discs of choral music under Günter Jena—whose name, shamefully, can be found nowhere in the booklet or CD sleeves—not to mention the four discs of rare vocal duets and quartets with DG stalwarts Mathis, Fassbaender, Schreier, and Fischer-Dieskau, or the superb piano trios and quartets with Tamás Vásáry. I could go on, but if you love Brahms and missed this the first two times around, grab it.

Bernstein’s 1960s Mahler cycle was literally a once-in-a-lifetime case of musical syzygy: the music, the conductor, the still-recent development of the stereo LP, and the times all aligned to make these recordings central to the “Mahler boom” that continues to reverberate more than four decades later. Several of the performances remain unmatched, and all have been remastered in stunning sound that makes all previous issues obsolete.

The Audite set includes all the live 1947–54 Furtwängler material still extant in the form of original RIAS tapes. All this material has been issued elsewhere, but the sound quality of these first transfers from the original 30-ips tapes is superior—sometimes dramatically so—to that of all previous issues. The performances need no recommendation from me; see Henry Fogel’s article in the September/October 2009 issue for more details.

Ansermet's Borodin recordings, particularly the two symphonies and the overture in astonishing 1954 stereo, are representative of his best work. Ansermet also reminds us what a little gem of a tone poem *In the Steppes* really is. This collection stands on its own merits, but also has to serve as a proxy for the 50-plus CDs already issued in Eloquence's "Ansermet Legacy" series, which offer the opportunity to rediscover many other wonderfully atmospheric performances by one of the last century's great conductors, most of them in legendary audiophile sound.

Finally, the single new Brahms performance that gave me fresh perspectives on the formidable C-Minor Quartet: the Arcanto Quartet, a group of young German musicians, plays this music not only with complete technical mastery and tonal beauty, but also with astonishing insight into its endlessly fascinating complexities. If and when the other two quartets follow, this could be a cycle to rival or even surpass the benchmark Melos and Emerson versions. If the Piano Quintet doesn't quite rise to the same heights, it is still a worthy discmate. The Arcanto is the finest new quartet to come along in years, showing astonishing musical maturity in the most challenging repertoire.