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Edition Wilhelm Furtwängler – The complete RIAS recordings

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Fanfare (Ronald E. Grames - 1970.01.01)

Want List for Ronald E. Grames

The budget-priced 12-disc Audite release of the complete surviving Furtwängler/Berlin Philharmonic RIAS recordings has to top my list of five personal picks for the last year. Made by the iconic conductor between his 1947 de-Nazification and his death in 1954, most of these recordings have been available before, and the qualities of the performances much discussed by devotees and critics. The difference: these were sourced from the original 30-ips studio master tapes. Given the age of the material and the challenges of recording in immediate post-war Germany, the quality is remarkable. The skillful and restrained restorations have resulted in brighter, more transparent, properly pitched (often faster) transfers with a much wider dynamic range than earlier incarnations; in many cases, a distinctly new experience. For an English podcast demo of what was accomplished, a complete track listing, and supporting material, most alas in German, visit http://www.audite.de/sc.php?cd=21403.

Few will argue that this Madama Butterfly supersedes earlier classic accounts. It is, however, their equal and a superb new studio recording—with the studio virtues of optimized casting, sound, and attention to detail—in a time when new opera recordings are almost invariably live and usually video. Pappano keeps the proceedings spontaneous. Gheorghiu, with subtle shading and telling detail, creates a touching dramatic arc from child to betrayed woman with dignity and the expected vocal allure. Kaufmann, darker and less Italianate than most Pinkertons, leans toward cad, but provides plenty of vocal charm to explain the attraction. The supporting cast is equally fine and the Roman orchestra and chorus perform with precision and utter conviction. Tired of the compromises of many live recordings, and distinctly weary of goofy post-modern stagings, I hope more audio-only studio efforts like this are forthcoming.

For those wishing to buy a second choral recording this year (Łukazewski's Via crucis on Hyperion is my primary recommendation), the Accentus Fauré Requiem should be it. I have yet to hear a sub-par recording by this marvelous chorus, but here is something special: an ideal meeting of performers and repertoire. The choral sound is refined and beautifully blended, with a softened French pronunciation of the Latin text. Laurence Equilbey's interpretation is anything but soft. Out of the warm texture of the chamber orchestra she draws all of the remarkable drama of the work—the brilliant brass and percussion writing especially being given its due—with no romantic bloat or eviscerating sweetness. The soloists are tender, pure, and cantorial as required. The charming Cantique de Jean Racine is equally fine. Short

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time at 41 minutes, but one doesn't buy perfection by the pound.

There were two recordings of star performers in unexpected repertoire on my short list. Villazón's (may his recovery be swift and complete) Vivaldi on DG is great fun, but too stylistically challenged for a Want List recommendation. This recording of famous Bach solo cantatas offers no such impediments. Dessay, mistress of stratospheric coloratura and bel canto, may be less distinct in articulation than some German and English singers who have assayed this repertoire—she is reminiscent of Pierrette Alarie in that—but these performances are special for her heartfelt, caressing interpretations and for Haïm's alert, stylish accompaniments.

Finally, I passed over two superb Mahler symphony recordings (Fischer's Fourth on Channel and Gergiev's Eighth on LSO Live) to welcome Petrenko's dazzling first installment in a promised budget Shostakovich symphony cycle. In this recording of the cinematic 11th, a challenging work to pull off, Petrenko reveals a structural integrity frequently concealed in lesser interpretations while maintaining most of the excitement of the hell-bent-for-leather approach. This may have been recorded by more virtuosic orchestras—but not by much, and there may be more transparent recordings—this is merely excellent, but there are none I know that give this much pleasure overall. I look forward to the remaining releases with great anticipation.

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