



George Szell conducts Dvorák & Brahms

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Fanfare (Henry Fogel - 2015.03.24)

Szell recorded both of these works more than once, and those recordings are highly regarded. Indeed, collectors particularly value a Concertgebouw Dvořák Eighth Symphony of his. So why single out this disc for Classical Hall of Fame status? The evidence is in the listening: Szell in live concert was meaningfully more free and flexible than in the studio, particularly in Europe, and both of these works benefit from that.

The Dvořák is perhaps the stronger of the two performances, though both are gripping and memorable in their own ways. The familiarity of the Czech Philharmonic with this score, which it must know by heart, when added to Szell's rigor, results in a performance that is one of the truly great renditions on disc. Even the brief ensemble mess in the coda of the third movement doesn't detract from the impact of this performance. To the qualities we know of Szell's Dvořák, which include clean and clear textures, carefully judged balances, taut rhythms, and a logical juxtaposition and flow of tempo relationships, this performance adds a feeling of spontaneity and improvisation not always present with Szell. The sweet string tone, the impeccable ensemble between and among players in different sections as well as the same section, the tasteful but definite application of portamento, the sense of ebullience from beginning to end—all of these add up to a special sense of occasion. The most obvious point at which to compare this to Szell's studio recording is the final coda. In all his recorded performances he applies an accelerando and a touch of extra energy. But here those qualities are in extra supply, with a unique sense of abandon that brings the symphony to a particularly thrilling close. The monaural recording is well balanced, clear, and surprisingly transparent.

The Brahms is almost at that same level. One doesn't have the sense of utter comfort with the music that the Czech players bring to the Dvořák, and one recognizes that this is an ad hoc orchestra that came together for the Lucerne Festival, and while its members play well enough they do not convey the utter unity of sound picture and phrasing as one hears in the Czech players (or, for that matter, in Szell's Cleveland Orchestra). However, compensating for that is again an improvisatory spirit that is not present to the same degree in those studio recordings, a sense of conductor and orchestra seeming to discover the music as they play it. Szell is more flexible, with a greater range between his dynamic and tempo extremes, and there is a sense of digging in from the string players that brings an extra intensity to the music. This stands as one of the great Brahms Firsts on disc, with Szell's usual care for structure, shape, and balance married again to a sense of urgency and theater that we do not always hear in his music-making. Again, the monaural sound is fine, though a bit drier than the Dvořák.

This new series from the Lucerne Festival Archives on Audite promises much to

discerning collectors. This is a great start. Interesting and intelligent program notes accompany the disc.

