



Wilhelm Furtwängler conducts Beethoven's Symphony No. 9

aud 95.641

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Fanfare (Henry Fogel - 2015.05.01)

This famed performance was Furtwängler's last of the Ninth; he died a few months later. I have reviewed it many times in *Fanfare: Music & Arts* releases in 17:4, 19:3, and 31:6, and a *Tahra* reissue in 32:4. I find no *Fanfare* review, from me or any other critic, of *Pristine's* version. Now we have this "official" Lucerne Festival release, part of an important series of reissues of great Lucerne Festival performances on Audite taken directly from the Swiss Radio masters. (*Tahra* claimed that as the source too, and it wouldn't surprise me given the fine quality of that release; *Pristine* did not indicate a source, but its version also has very good sound). This recording, in fact, boasts top quality monaural broadcast sound from that era—some of the finest sound quality given any Furtwängler performance.

Interested readers can look up those earlier reviews in the *Fanfare* Archive, and I will not go into great detail here about the performance, other than to say that over the years it has become my own favorite of the 12 that have survived (all are live; Furtwängler never made a studio recording of this work). Overall it can be said to combine the intensity and drama of his earlier versions with a certain nobility and restraint not always present in those. It is, of course, helped by the fine recorded sound. The slow movement in particular here is magical; one never feels a bar line, rather it is one long arch. Anyone interested in this music, no matter what your performance style preference might be, should hear this statement of immense musical grandeur and power.

For collectors, the important question will be how this compare to the *Tahra* and *Pristine* issues, both of which are of excellent quality. I would say that for most listeners, the differences will not be significant, and if you own either the *Tahra* or *Pristine* version this is not an essential purchase. (*Tahra* has folded, which eliminates one option for those who don't own it.) I have spent the better part of a weekend comparing the three versions, and would say that I have a slight preference for this Audite version, so a collector who deeply cares about this performance and absolutely wants the most satisfying transfer might wish to explore it. I find the orchestral sound just a bit more natural and less congested, more fully open.

One issue is the equalization applied by the transfer engineers. Andrew Rose of *Pristine* felt that there was a bit too much mid-bass on the *Tahra* (I am paraphrasing), which made the timpani overly prominent. He suggested a point of comparison at about 10:00 into the first movement, and so I directly compared that spot (from about 9:55 to about 11:10) in all three versions, in addition to listening to the entire performance in all three transfers. Rose was right: The *Tahra* does seem a bit boomy, and his compensation was an improvement. But one could make the case that he went too far, and that this Audite release finds the proper middle ground. Both in that one-minute passage, and in hearing the entire performance, I found the Audite

to be slightly more satisfying as a listening experience. But I will stress again that the differences are not major.

Also not major, but present, are the pitch/speed differences. Audite and Pristine are extremely close (for all practical purposes, identical); Tahra is transferred at a very slightly faster speed. The pitch difference is not consciously audible, but could be affecting one's reaction to the overall sonority of the orchestra. Here are the timings of each movement, not as given in the booklet, but as measured from first note to end of last note of each movement:

Audite's notes are excellent, though not always perfectly translated into idiomatic English. What is most gratifying is that this is another assurance that this historic performance will remain available to the public in the best possible form.

