



Edition von Karajan (III) – L. v. Beethoven: Symphony No. 3 ('Eroica') & No. 9

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Audiophile Audition (Gary Lemco - 2009.01.16)

In his first post-war appearance before the Berlin Philharmonic (8 September 1953), Herbert von Karajan programmed Bartok's Concerto for Orchestra and the Beethoven Eroica Symphony. Karajan (1908-1989) had challenged the hegemony of conductor Wilhelm Furtwaengler with this precision ensemble; even in the period of Furtwaengler's de-Nazification, Rumanian Sergiu Celibidache had to mold a recalcitrant band of Furtwaengler devotees to his will. But he alienated the BPO with his autocratic stance that he could replace older players at his will. Meanwhile, Furtwaengler had systematically blocked Karajan's path to the BPO until forced to relent from pressures – musical and personal – increased signs of Furtwaengler's oncoming deafness reduced his time before the players, and they demanded alternative leaders to fill their calendar.

The first movement of the Eroica under Karajan reveals something of the tug-of-war in the musical forces at hand. Karajan opts for speed of execution, forcing the strings' eighth notes to move against a degree of inertia; and once more at the end of the exposition, the cadences want to relax the tension. But Karajan urges the music on, insisting that the BPO achieve the kind of virtuosity that would rival what Toscanini had achieved with his hand-picked NBC Orchestra. The edgy, clipped phrases; the linear progression; the seamless surface of the music: all point to the refined Karajan style that would become universally recognizable. Karajan bestows a mythic breadth upon the Marcia funebre, casting the minor mode of the music into an abyss of sorrow and internal convulsions. The developmental stretti and contrapuntal figures take on a rigid formality, an ineluctable exertion of will that still manages to sound like chamber music, though horns and tympani project devastating power. Yet, at the latter stages of the movement, a palpable transparent intimacy emerges, even as the mass of music dissolves in pathos.

The Scherzo demands unbridled virtuosity of the Berliners, and in the Trio section, the French horns strain to maintain Karajan's breathless tempo. The tiger leaps forth for the Finale, brisk, suave figurations of the "Promethean" theme as rises from various points of the orchestra's compass. Decisive jerks in the rhythm, a savvy ritard or two, then the full, muscular statement of the singing theme in frothy vigor. The Poco Andante section warrants our attention, as Karajan lets the music ease from a woodwind dirge to a sinfonia concertante with strings; then, a mighty, graduated, tautly controlled crescendo elevates what are really sentiments from the second movement into a blazing apotheosis of spirit. Applause, slow at first, then a mounting river, salutes Karajan's first appearance before the BPO in eleven years.

The concert performance Beethoven Ninth (25 April 1957) marks a different occasion: the 75th anniversary of the Berlin Philharmonic, and Karajan is the undisputed Music Director of the orchestra. His first Beethoven cycle for records is

only four years away. The responsiveness of the BPO has increased to Karajan's feverish idiosyncracies, the strict tempo of the first movement never relaxes: even in the midst of textural densities and harmonic shifts of cosmic magnitude, the throaty propulsion of basses and tympani cannot be denied. Aurele Nicolet's flute acquires a special clarity as it arises from the superhuman upheavals from below. The woodwind choir sings above the flames, as in the D Major cadenza with French horn in the recapitulation. Nicolet's suave flute curlicues take us to the final pages, where Karajan introduces a strong caesura just prior to the coda. The creeping bass theme, an anaconda from Wagnerian depths, sweeps us into a maelstrom of terrifying power for the last trump.

The Scherzo is truly played *Molto vivace*, hectic fury. The BPO strings literally strut their virtuosity before us, now light, now grindingly intense. The first appearance of the trio – beautifully balanced among oboe, French horn, bassoon, and strings – whirls with crisp energy and vibrant song, abetted by a dazzling Nicolet. The *da capo* rushes at us; not merely electrifying, it becomes savage in its driven singleness of purpose. Even for Karajan veterans, the fur should fly to unexpected heights. That Beethoven adagios signal Mahler becomes exquisitely obvious in Karajan's realization of this double-fugue-and-variations, a poised, swooping moment of orchestral discipline, likely to suggest to the Berlin audience that if the spirit of Furtwaengler endured, it inhabited – ironically enough – Karajan's objectivist soul. The deep bass drones make us realize how much Berlioz owes to Beethoven. And despite the cool charisma of Karajan's sensibility, a resonant humanity urges itself through the figures, a seeking for Grace.

For the choral finale, Karajan has perhaps his finest vocal quartet: after a headlong rush from a resonant string recitative into the brisk main theme's crescendos, Gottlob Frick injects a Wagnerian menace into his declamation that merely "absolute" tones shall not reign over this music. The arrival of the vocal quartet illuminates the stratosphere, with Elisabeth Gruemmer's liquid soprano often eliciting a sweetness and floated transparency that rivals or surpasses Schwarzkopf's efforts. The St. Hedwig's Choir – a favorite of Fricsay as well – stuns us with its clear, Herculean volume of sound. Bassoon and janissary pomp leads Ernst Haefliger into spirited, confident scherzi, reminding how preciously ephemeral is joy. Karajan's orchestra (and chorus) responds with a typhoon of sound, Shelley's spirit rushing into the Atlantic aside the West Wind. Enter the "slow movement" at "Seid umschlungen, Millionen," a towering Niagara of sonic splendor whose transcendent dimensions extend well into the aether. The pursuant fugue simply wrings our collective hearts; but the subito proves even more remarkable, for the mysteries it reveals of human optimism. The final section, ushered in with "Joy, Daughter of Elysium," quivers with emotional energy, a "swelling of the imperial theme" of human harmony. Listen to "Alle Menschen werden Brüder" with Gruemmer's high notes, and not weep! The last pages – janissary madness and superhuman ambition – tell us the Pope of Music had arrived and lived securely in Berlin.