



## Edition Wilhelm Furtwängler – The complete RIAS recordings

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### Audiophile Audition (Peter Joelson - 2009.06.18)

On 25 January 1945, Wilhelm Furtwängler travelled to Vienna with Friedrich Schnapp, his favoured recording engineer, for what were to prove almost his last performances until 1947. This was his 59th birthday, celebrated in an unheated train with broken windows, and later an unheated Imperial Hotel in Vienna, though he did have a rarity at that time, a roll of lavatory paper. After the concerts on 27-29 January, Brahms' Symphony No. 2 and the Franck, and under great pressure - having been tipped off he was in danger of being arrested by the Gestapo and was being pursued by them - he made plans to escape to Switzerland. After hiding for nearly a week in Dornbirn, Austria, he crossed the border on foot into Switzerland, meeting his wife and baby son who were waiting there for him.



In February 1945 he conducted the Suisse Romande Orchestra in Geneva, and the Stadtorchester in Winterthur; further concerts with the Zurich Tonhalle in Zurich were cancelled after demonstrators had tried to prevent the audience attending the Winterthur concerts. A little later he went to stay with Professor Niehans, famous for his pioneering work in rejuvenation, in Clarens. After two post-war trials, the first in Vienna in January 1946, the second in Berlin in December 1946, Furtwängler was cleared to work as a conductor again.

He had spent much of time composing, and was not in a hurry to conduct, but for the necessity of clearing debts incurred during his Swiss stay. His conducting career began again in early April, 1947, with four concerts with the Orchestra stabile dell'Accademia nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome and the Orchestra del Maggio musicale in Florence, and then, on 25 May 1947, he made his first post-war appearance with the Berlin Philharmonic, in a programme consisting of Beethoven's 5th and 6th symphonies.

CD1: This concert provides the contents for the first disc in this collection of the complete recordings kept by RIAS; almost all of WF's RIAS concerts were archived, the only casualties being the Beethoven's 7th, the Egmont Overture, both tapes overwritten, and Beethoven's 9th from 1951, where the recording was halted due to a technical fault. This is the first time these concerts have been issued using the high quality master tapes as the source, and recorded at 76cm/s the quality for the time is excellent. Beginning with the Pastoral Symphony, WF's performance begins with a sense of wonder at the countryside seen for the first time, a slow tempo emphasizing this, but WF's grasp of the architecture of the whole piece ensures a fine performance. The 5th Symphony's start has been criticized for its uncertainty - perhaps under the circumstances, forgivable.

CD2: Mendelssohn's Midsummer Night's Dream Overture has a false entry of little consequence and the orchestra soon recovers. Yehudi Menuhin, a stout supporter of

WF, both in Germany and later in the US when his invitation to Chicago was rescinded, joins for a satisfying account of the Beethoven Violin Concerto, not quite in the league of a later one in Lucerne, but with a particularly good first movement. A couple of passages of very mild flutter did not spoil the proceedings, and the sound really is infinitely superior to that of the next day's performance available on Myto possibly derived from home recording on acetates. WF's Bach certainly is old-school, but the performance of the Third Suite is I think far more successful than Karajan's Bach as played in Moscow in 1965. It is a big sound, built from the bottom up, as expected.

CD3: The Bach opened the concert completed on this disc, a fine Schubert 8th, and a really fine Brahms 4th.

CD4: WF recorded two performances of Bruckner's 8th in early 1949, one without an audience in the Gemeindehaus, Berlin-Dahlem on 14 March, available on Testament SBT1143, and this live one on 15 March. While the earlier has no audience noises, the later is a more dramatic performance, and Audite's remastering engineers have sought to diminish the effect of the more bronchial members of the audience. Before and after examples are available on Audite's website in a podcast about their remastering, and while there is still a fair bit, it is now rather less than on a previous release by EMI of historic Bruckner recordings.

CD5: This contains the concert of 18 December 1949, opening with a fiery account of Schumann's Manfred, followed by a very dramatic performance of Brahms' 3rd; this last may not be to all tastes. The programme ends with Gerhard Taschner's steely performance of Wolfgang Fortner's Concerto for violin and large chamber orchestra, a somewhat grey work interesting largely due to the performers. This has been available on MDG in good sound, but Audite's has a far greater frequency range. After the war, Fortner became well-known as a teacher as well as composer, counting Henze and Zender among his pupils, as well as Jewish musicians who had fled Germany.

CD6: WF's Wagner is riveting here as always, the Funeral March from the Twilight of the Gods and Prelude to Act 1 of The Mastersingers from 19 December 1949 entirely successful. These are followed by items from a concert in June 1950, the first of two Handel Concerti Grossi in this set. This is Op. 6, No. 10, and like WF's Bach, not taking much notice of historic practice of the time, pioneered by those like Boyd Neel, for example. However, even as a great fan of the set recently issued by BIS on SACD, I found these Handel performances telling. WF recorded Brahms' Variations several times, and this performance is as fine as most. The disc ends with Hindemith's Concerto for Orchestra, not the most urbane of readings.

CD7: Gluck's Overture to Alceste is the surviving recording from the lost Beethoven 9th, again an old-fashioned reading by today's standards and tastes. Also included is a very fine Beethoven 3rd from 1950, and the other Handel Concerto Grosso, Op. 6 No. 5 from 1954.

CD8: A fine and substantial concert from the end of 1952 opens with a WF favorite, the Overture to Der Freischütz, followed by Hindemith's Die Harmonie der Welt symphony, the concert's conclusion.

CD9: Here we have another performance of Beethoven's 3rd, the 8 December performance, quite superb, and in most excellent sound. The discs continues with Schubert's Rosamunde Overture, and from April 1954, Boris Blacher's Concertante Musik für Orchester.

CD10: Another Schubert 8th in a good performance is followed by Schubert 9th in a muscular reading not quite as successful I feel as WF's studio performance for DGG.

CD11: Another performance of Brahms' 3rd again highlighting the drama, and more successfully than the earlier one, is coupled with Wagner Prelude und Liebestod from Tristan, highlighting the symphonic structure. In between, R. Strauss' Don Juan's opening is played superbly by the BPO, a satisfyingly virtuoso performance.

CD12: The last performances recorded by RIAS coincidentally replicate the opening ones, that pair of Beethoven symphonies, now more fluent though just as muscularly strong; all movements are a bit slower and one wonders how much struggling WF was enduring with his failing hearing at this time.

CD13: This bonus CD has Werner Egk and his students interviewing Wilhelm Furtwängler in German in 1951 about interpretation; alas, my German is insufficient to have understood the details and no translation is provided.

The Audite website has some very interesting downloadable material, a podcast (in English) about remastering of historic recordings, an Acrobat file of additional photographs and concert reviews, and further sound files of the interview in German with WF.

I have compared as many of these performances with the same on other issues in my collection and can confirm that the results of access to the master tapes has paid dividends in these cases. Earlier issues were derived from off-air recordings and do not have the either the dynamic range or the frequency response of Audite's issue. Just one criticism, though, concerns the gaps between pieces – they are surely just too short. I have refrained from awarding stars in this instance, but they would range from three (Bach) to five (the second Beethoven 3rd) for performance; the remastering deserves five!

The substantial booklet contains, as is the norm with Audite's historic releases, an excellent essay full of interesting details, by Rüdiger Albrecht, and the whole package of very well-filled CDs is available at a bargain price. An excellent production all around.



**FURTWÄNGLER - The Complete RIAS Recordings - Live recordings from 1947-1954 - Yehudi Menuhin/ Gerhard Taschner/ Berlin Philharmonic/ Wilhelm Furtwängler - Audite (12 CDs + bonus CD)**  
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**FURTWÄNGLER - The Complete RIAS Recordings - Live recordings from 1947-1954 - Yehudi Menuhin/ Gerhard Taschner/ Berlin Philharmonic/ Wilhelm Furtwängler - Audite 21403, (12 CD boxed set + bonus CD):**

On 25 January 1945, Wilhelm Furtwängler travelled to Vienna with Friedrich Schnapp, his favoured recording engineer, for what were to prove almost his last performances until 1947. This was his 59th birthday, celebrated in an unheated train with broken windows, and later an unheated Imperial Hotel in Vienna, though he did have a party at that time, a roll of laxative paper. After the concerts on 27-29 January, Brahms' Symphony No. 2 and the Franck, and under great pressure - having been tipped off he was in danger of being arrested by the Gestapo and was being pursued by them - he made plans to escape to Switzerland. After hiding for nearly a week in Dornbach, Austria, he crossed the border on foot into Switzerland, meeting his wife and baby son who were waiting there for him.

In February 1945 he conducted the Suisse Romande Orchestra in Geneva, and the Stadtorchestra in Winterthur, further concerts with the Zurich Tonhalle in Zurich were cancelled after demonstrators had tried to prevent the audience attending the Winterthur concert. A little later he went to stay with Professor Hallensleben famous for his pioneering work in rheumatism, in Garmisch. After two post-war trials, the first in Vienna in January 1946, the second in Berlin in December 1946, Furtwängler was cleared to work as a conductor again.



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CD2: Mendelssohn's Midsummer Night's Dream Overture has a false entry of 18th consequence and the orchestra soon recovers. Yehudi Menuhin, a stout supporter of WF, both in Germany and later in the US when his invitation to Chicago was rescinded, joins for a satisfying account of the Beethoven Violin Concerto, not quite in the league of a later one in Lucerne, but with a particularly good first movement. A couple of passages of very mild flutter did not spoil the proceeding, and the sound really is infinitely superior to that of the next day's performance available on Myto possibly derived from home recording on acetates. WF's Bach certainly is old-school, but the performance of the Third Suite is I think far more successful than Karajan's. Each as played in Moscow in 1965. It is a big sound, built from the bottom up, as expected.

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--- Peter Jozelson

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