



Edition Wilhelm Furtwängler – The complete RIAS recordings

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Regular Gramophone readers will by now have cottoned on to what I've occasionally thought of as a "Furtwängler Industry" – the relentless recycling of familiar recorded material by a plethora of labels. But a new 12-CD collection from Audite is rather more than mere recycling: this handsomely produced and intelligently annotated collection calls on the archives of RIAS ("Radio in the American Sector") and offers what amounts to the archive's complete Furtwängler legacy, transferred from the original mastertapes which means, often for the first time on CD, optimum sound quality. Furtwängler "first-timers" may be perplexed by a number of repertoire duplications – Beethoven's Symphonies Nos 3, 5 and 6 and Brahms's Third are all offered in two separate recordings, yet the differences between them, although far from radical (except perhaps in the Brahms) are significant enough to warrant study, principally for the subtle contrasts that Furtwängler achieves through tiny alterations in pulse and emphasis. One good example is the opening of Brahms's Third, which goes off like rocket in 1949 whereas the performance from April 1954 is noticeably less combustible (especially in the finale; also there was no first movement repeat in 1954). Another interesting comparison is between the two recordings of the Eroica, the first from June 1950, the second from December 1952 where the Funeral March second movement is broader than its predecessor by almost one and a half minutes. A Bruckner Eighth from March 15, 1949, enjoys a higher voltage-level than on the broadcast performance from a day earlier (not included in the set), though some listeners may find the bronchial audience irksome.

Other highlights include two works by Paul Hindemith, the Concerto for Orchestra and the Symphony Die Harmonie der Welt, which remind us of tumultuous times in pre-war Berlin. While Furtwängler's performances lack polish, a degree of warmth and energy more than compensates. You can hear Fortner's Violin Concerto (Gerhard Taschner) and Blacher's Concertante Musik while gargantuan Baroque is represented by Bach's Third Suite and Händel's Op 6 No 5 – stylistically inauthentic but audientically "felt". Among the many other significant items are memorable, typically free-spirited renditions of Beethoven's Violin Concerto (Yehudi Menuhin), Schubert's Symphonies Nos 8 and 9, Brahms's Fourth, Strauss's Don Juan and orchestral excerpts from Wagner operas. A bonus disc allows us to hear Furtwängler in (German) dialogue with what I presume is a group of music journalists, the range of topics covered mostly concerned with repertoire and interpretation. Clearer-than-ever sound, including the odd distant Dakota flying overhead, is another bonus. If ever a set warranted the hackneyed if useful accolade "Essential Furtwängler", this is it.