



Edition Wilhelm Furtwängler – The complete RIAS recordings

aud 21.403

EAN: 4022143214034



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[Fanfare](#) (Henry Fogel - 2009.09.01)

For those who collect recordings by Wilhelm Furtwängler it will be hard to overstate the importance of a new 12-disc set by the German company Audite. Audite made an arrangement with the German Radio system to obtain the rights to use the original master tapes made by RIAS (Radio in the American Sector), Berlin. Although none of the material in this set is new to CD, this is the first authorized set taken from those master tapes. This is a "complete" edition – every piece of music performed by the Berlin Philharmonic under Furtwängler and broadcast by RIAS between 1947 and 1954. In many cases, only some works from a concert were broadcast (example: the conductor's first post-war concert in May of 1947 – consisting of Beethoven's Egmont Overture, and Symphonies Nos. 5 and 6. The Egmont was broadcast, but the tape was not kept, so we don't have it here – even though it was recorded live by DG, and issued on that label. This set contains only the RIAS recordings that survived, nothing more, nothing less.

To say that it is a miracle to have these is to understate the case – at least for those of us who love this conductor's work. A good deal of this material has only been available in cramped, compressed, and/or distorted sound. Now it comes to us with an openness and fullness that we could only dream of, and it makes clear something that the poorer recorded sound did not – Furtwängler's very keen ear for color.

Since all of these performances have been in circulation, I will not review each one with any detail, but rather make what I feel are minimally necessary comments about each one. And to save valuable Fanfare space, instead of a complete headnote, I will identify each performance as I comment on it, including the date. All are with the Berlin Philharmonic. The Audite set is 21.403, and, as I indicated, it consists of 12 well-filled monaural CDs, with very informative notes (if, perhaps, a bit over-the-top in discussing Furtwängler's interpretations) in German and English. Anyone interested in Wilhelm Furtwängler's conducting simply must have this set. I am going to list the works below in the order they appear in the set (note that some works appear more than once), which is largely chronological.

Beethoven: Symphonies Nos. 5 and 6 (5/25, 1947). This coupling has long been famous among Furtwängler collectors. It is his first time conducting after a two-and-a-half year imposed silence, through the end of the war and his de-Nazification hearings. Now he was standing on the podium of his Berlin Philharmonic for the first time since January 1945, and the force and in-your-face punch of these performances is unmistakable. DG issued the Fifth, and the Egmont Overture from a repeat of the program two days later, but this is the very first night. It has been issued before, but never with such rich sound. Even the DG from May 27 sounds thin and edgy compared to this. There is an uncertainty, an insecurity, in the ensemble – one suspects everyone's nerves were at their extreme edges on this

night – and the May 27 DG performance is cleaner. But the sheer visceral force of these performances, really heard for the first time because of the sound quality, is irreplaceable.

Mendelssohn: Overture to *Midsummer Night's Dream*; Beethoven: Violin Concerto (Menuhin, soloist; 9/28/1947). There was also a Beethoven Seventh on this concert that has not survived. Tahra has issued these two works from a performance identified as September 30 (although Rene Tremine's Furtwängler concert listing states that this program was only given on September 28 and 29). Whatever the accuracy of Tahra's date, this is definitely a different performance, and to my knowledge the first release ever of these performances from September 28. That was a historic occasion because it was the first concert after the war at which Yehudi Menuhin played in public in Germany with Furtwängler, which was Menuhin's very courageous statement of support from one Jewish artist at a time when many others were shunning the conductor. (They had actually performed together in Lucerne a month earlier.) I made a direct A-B comparison between this Audite release and Tahra FURT 1020, and preferred these performances and the recorded sound. The sound here is more naturally balanced and clear, and the performances have the spontaneity one would expect from the first night in a set. Furtwängler collectors will have to have this, as it is the first "new" item in the conductor's discography in many years.

Bach: *Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D*; Schubert: *Symphony No. 8, "Unfinished"*; Brahms: *Symphony No. 4* (10/24/1948). This has the appeal of being a complete Furtwängler concert, as given in 1948, so we can feel the shape of the whole evening. The Bach has been issued by DG, in thinner, harder-edged sound. This is not Bach for today's HIP listeners, but in its old-fashioned way it has plenty of thrust and spine. The Schubert "Unfinished" will be a major discovery for many. It was previously issued on Japanese Columbia and Vox Turnabout LPs, and on CD only by the German Furtwängler Society and the hard-to-find Priceless 13272. The sound here is in a different league from earlier releases, and most collectors probably won't even have the performance at all. This performance has a touch more rhythmic bite than the 1953 performance issued by DG (which also appears in this set and will be noted later), but is basically similar to the later one in its interpretive profile. This Brahms Fourth is also a rarity – having been issued only by Tahra and by the Japanese Wilhelm Furtwängler Center. Once again, the sound quality here is superb – opening up our ears to the drama and thrust of this performance. There are some ensemble problems, but they do not detract from a performance of enormous momentum and cumulative power. The wartime Brahms Fourth may be even more dramatic, but the richer sound here makes this my own favorite of the Furtwängler recordings of this work.

Bruckner: *Symphony No. 8* (3/15/1949). Furtwängler conducted the Bruckner Eighth on March 13, 14, and 15, 1949. No recording seems to survive of the 13th. The 14th and 15th performances have been issued on a number of labels and have been confused with each other and frequently misidentified. The performance from the 14th has been issued on Testament and EMI. This one from the 15th is on Music & Arts, and is also part of an EMI Bruckner set. But once again, Audite's access to the RIAS masters pays dividends. I compared this with all the others from both dates and found this the most satisfying sounding of all. The finest Furtwängler Bruckner Eighth is still the 1944 Vienna reading, with astonishing tension and drama combined with sublime beauty, and it is best heard on a Japanese EMI release or on Music & Arts 1209. This performance from 1949 doesn't quite reach those heights, but the sound picture is much more satisfying, so it offers a more complete sense of the conductor's view of the music.

Schumann: Manfred Overture; Brahms: Symphony No. 3; Fortner: Violin Concerto (Gerhard Taschner); Wagner: Götterdämmerung Funeral Music; Die Meistersinger Prelude (12/18-19/1949). Yes, that's right – that is all one concert's program! And an oddly structured one at that (I believe intermission came after the Brahms Third). Again, though, it is great to have a complete Furtwängler concert reproduced as it was given (though the recordings stem from two different nights of the repeated program). The richness of the string-playing in the Brahms, along with the rhythmic incisiveness he brings to the outer movements, adds a power and concentration to this music that it sometimes lacks. On the other hand, sometimes one has the feeling that the conductor is adding more weight to this work than it can stand. The 1954 performance (reviewed below later in this set) holds together more firmly. Once again, though the sound here far surpasses previous releases. The Wagner excerpts and Schumann Overture were issued by DG, and the sound here is only marginally preferable. The big surprise is the Fortner. The prior releases on Fonit Cetra and AS Disc did not do justice to the performance, or even the work. Wolfgang Fortner (1907-1987) wrote in a style that will connect with anyone who responds to Shostakovich or Prokofiev, with the same spiky rhythms and wit, though slightly less orchestral imagination and melodic inspiration. But it is an enjoyable work to hear once in a while, and it shows a side of the conductor we rarely experience. Taschner (a BPO concertmaster) plays it quite well.

Handel: Concerto grosso, op. 6/10; Brahms: Variations on a Theme by Haydn; Hindemith: Concerto for Orchestra; Beethoven: Symphony No. 3, "Eroica" (6/20/1950). This is even longer than the December 1949 concert – 101 minutes of music! People had longer attention spans in those days. Once again, all of this material has been available, but not in this sound quality. Music & Arts and Tahra have issued this "Eroica," and it is a strong performance – but not as strong as either the 1944 Vienna wartime reading or the 1952 reading reviewed below. When this performance is heard with the fullness of sound available here, it does gain in stature. Even Furtwängler's richly colored conducting fails to convince me of the merits of Hindemith's dry and academic Concerto for Orchestra. The Handel is an interesting reminder of a time when major conductors and orchestras played this music without fear of attack from the purists, and the Brahms Variations sounds warmer and richer than on DG's release of the same performance.

Gluck: Alceste Overture (9/5/1051). This is all that survives of a concert that opened Berlin's Schillertheater. That is particularly distressing because the other work on that program was a Beethoven Ninth, and to have had one with this level of fidelity would have been something indeed. This lovely performance has been issued only sporadically in Germany and Japan on CD, and this will be new even to many collectors. He shapes the music warmly and gives it more weight than his 1942 studio recording of the work.

Weber: Der Freischütz Overture; Hindemith: Die Harmonie der Welt, Beethoven: Symphony No. 3, "Eroica" (12/8/1952). This, too, is a complete concert, and it is one I would like to have been at. The "Eroica" is almost as powerful as the famous 1944 Vienna recording, but in such superior sound that it becomes the more satisfying overall experience for the listener. Furtwängler's way of building orchestral sound from the bottom up is often weakened by poor recorded sound – but not here. We hear everything, and we hear it all in the right proportions. This is a deeply moving, even thrilling experience. This Hindemith has always struck me as one of his more emotionally effective and communicative works, and this performance has always sounded to me as if it would convey the work's beauty and power if one could only hear it. A later Salzburg performance has been the preferred one in the past because of superior sound – but no longer. This has just the right combination of leanness and warmth, more weight than most conductors give this music, but never too much.

Schubert: Rosamunde Overture; Symphonies Nos. 8 and 9 (9/15/53). If I had known in 1953, when I was 11, what I know now, I would probably have tried to find my way to Berlin to hear this concert. This all-Schubert program is filled with warmth, tenderness, drama, and wit – all in the right proportions. Once again, the superior sound quality comes quite close to early 1950s studio recording sound.

Handel: Concerto grosso, op. 6/5; Brahms: Symphony No. 3; Blacher: Concert Music for Orchestra. R. Strauss: Don Juan; Wagner: Tristan and Isolde "Prelude and Liebestod" (4/27/1954). Once again, a long and somewhat oddly constructed Furtwängler program. Clearly he was one of those who didn't like to end with Brahms's Third, because of its soft ending – but then again, he did end with the "Liebestod," not exactly a bring-the-house-down piece either! The interest here is twofold: the conductor's best-recorded rendition of the Brahms Third, and the Blacher available for the first time in good sound. The Blacher is written in Stravinsky's neo-Classical vein, though without Stravinsky's imagination. Still, it is nice to hear Furtwängler in this kind of repertoire, which he visited rarely. The Strauss and Wagner obviously benefit from the improved sonics, though both were released by DG in transfers that were fairly good.

Beethoven: Symphonies Nos. 6 and 5 (5/23, 1954). And so this set ends as it began, with Beethoven's Sixth and Fifth Symphonies combined on one program, almost seven years to the day after the concert marking the conductor's return to Berlin (and about six months before his death). Furtwängler obviously saw these symphonies as a set, and played them together on more than one occasion (and he played them in this order – and on this occasion with no overture). Although the conductor was ill and could be uneven in the final year of his life, this is one of his truly great concerts – and now that one hears it from the master tapes one realizes what a momentous evening it was. (Tahra's earlier release of these performances was quite good, but this is even better.) If you want to convince a non-believer in the power of Furtwängler as a conductor, this disc should do it as well as any.