Sergiu Celibidache: The Berlin recordings

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GRAMOPHONE

Youthful maverick on a roll

Celibidache's single-minded vision in Berlin performances from the 1940s and '50s

Anyone who attended the concerts of Sergiu Celibidache from the 1970s through to the late 1990s, with their uncommonly spacious tempi, long-breathed phrases and transparent textures, may well be surprised by the fiery, even elemental mood of certain of his Berlin recordings from the mid-1940s and 1950s. Audite has already released 'The Complete RIAS Recordings' (9/11) and now offer a generous and often revealing 13-disc follow-up, 'The Berlin Recordings 1945-1957'. Some of this material has already surfaced from other sources, though for the most part in less good sound (Audite had access to the original radio tapes).

The orchestras featured are the BPO, the Berlin Radio SO and the DSO Berlin, and the range of repertoire takes us from beefy, 'Philharmonic' style Baroque (Purcell and Vivaldi) to such interesting 20th-century rarities as Günter Raphael's Fourth Symphony, Chavez's First, Rudi Stephan's Music for Orchestra and the imposing Vorspiel zu einem Revolutionsdrama by Celibidache's composition teacher Heinz Tiessen. Copland's Appalachian Spring enjoys marginally more repose than its RIAS predecessor (the two performances are merely two days apart), both of them bright and bushy-tailed, if a little stubbly at times. Works by Milhaud (Suite francaise and excerpts from his Suite symphonique No 2) are convincingly played, as are Barber's Capricorn Concerto, Walter Piston's Second Symphony and Shostakovich's Ninth (though the opening notes are snipped). Celibidache brings a relaxed sense of wit to Stravinsky's Jeux de cartes whereas in Strauss's Till Eulenspiegel, wit and drama combine to generate dazzling levels of energy and excitement.

Of the various works with soloists or singers, Margarete Klose is in truly wonderful voice for five orchestrated Wolf songs and a German-language version of Saint-Saens's 'Softly awakes my heart'. The perennially girlish Erna Berger remains securely skybound in Gliere's Concerto for coloratura soprano. Although undoubtedly historically important, pianist Raoul Koczalski neutralises the colour potential in Chopin's Second Concerto. The wonderful Hungarian-born cellist Tibor de Machula had been Furtwängler's desk-leader with the BPO for the duration of the war and although his 1945 account of Dvorak's Concerto offers plenty of expressive ardour, there are roughshod moments that for some may prove difficult to tolerate on repetition.

Celibidache's August 1945 account of Mendelssohn's Fair Melusine Overture must have been among the first signs of the composer's German rehabilitation after his

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banishment by the Nazis, though the performance is conspicuously lacking in finesse. An Italian Symphony from eight years later is both more secure and more affectionately played, and there are sparkling performances of Bizet's Symphony in C and two Berlioz overtures. Tchaikovsky is represented by a hot-blooded Romeo and Juliet and an erratic Little Russian Symphony, while the 1945 performance of Rimsky's Russian Easter Festival Overture is best forgotten. Just compare it with Celibidache's blistering Brahms's Fourth, another 1945 production, where the BPO play virtually as passionately as they did for Furtwängler, and where the second movement stretches to a very leisurely 13 minutes. Then there's Celibidache's Debussy: 'Fetes' with a funereal central procession, a volatile La mer and an account of the endlessly fascinating 'poeme danse' Jeux that trades subtlety for impulsiveness.

I was surprised that Celibidache in 1946 approached Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet Second Suite with the same aching solemnity that distinguished his live 1970s LSO reading, while the Classical Symphony is graced by memorably deft outer movements. Also included are works by Roussel, Busoni, David Diamond, Britten and Haydn, and an incomplete Beethoven Seventh, where this maverick genius of the baton shouts his way through roughly two thirds of the score and where the (complete) first movement is uncommonly broad. There's hardly a dull moment, and while sticklers for literal interpretation will likely turn up their noses, those who relish individual interpretation will have a ball. Aside from one or two tape glitches, the sound is good for its age and the annotation both comprehensive and interesting.

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