



Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 7

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Fanfare (Jeffrey J. Lipscomb - 2008.09.01)

Recorded in 1966, Solti's studio Seventh from Vienna originally appeared on a pair of London LPs, where it was coupled with a Siegfried Idyll in the original chamber music version. I kept that set on my shelves for many years, solely on account of the Wagner until replacing the latter with Klemperer's more sensitive reading (now on EMI as a filler to the Klemperer/Philharmonia Bruckner Fourth). My chief objection to Solti's Seventh is its unrelenting sameness of expression. Despite the mighty presence of the VPO and great recorded sound, Solti's reading largely misses the senses of ardor and ecstasy that are such essential components of Bruckner's score. This is most especially noticeable in the Adagio, where Solti's stolidly even tempos and generally monotone phrasing make the music sound boring rather than sublime. All in all, this release will appeal primarily to fully committed Solti admirers.

Strictly in terms of execution, Böhm's live Bruckner Seventh is a fine display of well-intoned strings, perky woodwinds, and generally solid brass-playing. So it's with more than a little regret that I cannot recommend this one either. That's simply because the Bavarians are up against two superior accounts from Böhm himself: his excellent 1976 studio version with the Vienna Philharmonic (65:48 on DG) and a slightly quicker and even more persuasive live 1976 Vienna concert reading (63:04 on Andante). While all three of those are similar in interpretive profile, Andante's recording emerges as the most genial and spontaneous. Both Vienna Sevenths were recorded in the warm and spacious acoustics of Vienna's Musikverein and sound more pleasing to the ear than Audite's disappointingly colorless taping from the Herkulesaal in Munich.

Böhm's Bruckner is most distinctive for its solid craftsmanship and first-class ensemble. In the studio Böhm often could sound too sober and unvaried (e.g., a drawback to his otherwise superbly played Fourth on Decca). But in his live Sevenths, the conductor is much more flexible in pace and phrasing. The only instance where this becomes a tad eccentric (in both live accounts) occurs in the first movement/second subject, where Böhm's swift tempo suddenly slows right at the moment the big brass chorale is reached. Another minor criticism: the live Sevenths have a tiny hesitation just before the Adagio's cymbal clash, which slightly diminishes the climax's dramatic impact.

Both live readings feature some wonderfully stretched rubato in the brass passage leading to the Adagio's livelier second subject. Böhm adroitly realizes this movement's unusual bipartite tempo structure, where a slow first subject in 4/4 time is followed by a Moderato with three beats to the measure. Therefore, he correctly increases speed for the second subject, whereas some interpreters (e.g., the Solti reviewed above) just plod on as before. In the playing of this second subject, the Bavarian strings sound somewhat utilitarian in comparison to Vienna's. The live

Austrians play with an ineffable sweetness and lyricism that evokes Johann Strauss, Jr. (after all, Bruckner once remarked that he would rather hear a Strauss waltz than a Brahms symphony). The Scherzo in both live readings is bracingly alert and features an amiable Trio, but again the Viennese players sound much more Austrian. The tricky Finale has fine playing from both orchestras, but there is really nothing quite like the virtuosic solidarity of the Vienna brass.

The verdict: Böhm live in Vienna surely outclasses Böhm live in Munich. I went on to compare Andante's release to five other stereo recordings from the Vienna Philharmonic and found Böhm to be more eloquent and idiomatic than the faceless Abbado (DG), the brusque Harnoncourt (Teldec), the aforementioned Solti, the strangely lackluster Giulini (DG), and the smooth but exceedingly detached Karajan (DG). Except for Harnoncourt, all of these conductors employ the disputed cymbal clash in the Adagio's climax.

Of course, there are other interpretive approaches that certainly deserve a place in one's "Seventh Heaven" collection. My choices here are all post 1956 and, with one exception, in stereo. A more dramatic first-movement coda than Böhm's can be heard in the live 1992 Asahina/Osaka Philharmonic (63:01 on deleted Canyon; no cymbals) and in the 1967 Matačić/Czech Philharmonic (68:54 on Supraphon, with cymbals). Asahina's rich, lower string-based sonorities are captured in terrific sound, and his agile, headlong gallop through the Scherzo is altogether thrilling. The Matačić is my favorite among the slower Sevenths (those lasting over 66 minutes). Its warmly lyrical phrasing benefits enormously from the Czechs' distinctive instrumental timbres (see Paul Ingram's favorable review in *Fanfare* 28:5). The 1964 Schuricht/Hague Philharmonic (60:24 on deleted Scribendum; with cymbal clash) has moments of less-than-distinguished ensemble, but the reading is intensely passionate and its divided violins reveal many intriguing contrapuntal effects. Rosbaud's 1957 Southwest German Radio studio account (63:09, without cymbals) is now on a Meisterwerke CD (misdated as 1959). The Austrian conductor (a native of Graz, as was Böhm) provides a veritable master class on how to use varied rates of string vibrato for expressive effect, and his brisk Finale is a marvel of pointed clarity. A special favorite of mine is the live 1960 radio broadcast (59:31, no cymbals), with Paul Hindemith leading the New York Philharmonic (Baton LP). The barely decent mono sound may suffer from hiss and a few sonic dropouts, but Hindemith's profoundly insightful interpretation is riveting. Highly nuanced string phrasing, unusual tempo choices, and generous use of rubato create a most illuminating view of Bruckner from one of the last century's greatest composers. The NYP needs to give us an official release in good sound (but see below).

Finally, here are a few purchasing suggestions. Böhm's live Seventh on Andante is part of a four-disc Bruckner set (all Vienna Philharmonic) that includes Furtwängler's 1954 Eighth and a Karajan Ninth from 1978 (see Robert McColley's positive review of this set in *Fanfare* 27:1). The Furtwängler Eighth (excellent mono sound) is extraordinary. The stereo Karajan Ninth is committed but somewhat rough-edged. Andante's set normally retails for about \$56, but it recently was available via the Internet from Berkshire Record Outlet for \$28 plus postage. The deleted Asahina and Schuricht items are hard to find and fetch high prices. Matačić's is mid-priced (\$12) and the Rosbaud is even cheaper (under \$10); both can be bought at amazon.com. The Hindemith has appeared on a sub rosa CD from Disco Archivia (available from musicinthemail.com for \$5 plus postage). I recently bought a copy and it seems to be a straight dub of the old Baton LP. Also included is a pair of Hindemith/New York bonuses: Cherubini's *Medea Overture* (from the same concert as the Bruckner) and the *Overture to Weber's Euryanthe* (1963). Please be aware: what you get is a bare-bones CD-R in a plain plastic envelope (no notes). To my mind, each of those alternatives is a better value than Audite's offering (retail price: roughly \$18).