



Wilhelm Furtwängler conducts Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 on LP

aud 80.461

EAN: 4022143804617



www.musicweb-international.com (Stephen Greenbank - 2015.10.01)

Last year for our weekly feature 'MusicWeb International Recommends', reviewers were asked to nominate a version of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. My recommendation was this live 1954 performance, set down on 22 August 1954, at the Lucerne Festival, by the Philharmonia under Wilhelm Furtwängler. It has had several incarnations on silver disc from labels such as Tahra, Music and Arts and also from Audite, who released their CD version last year. For vinyl enthusiasts, like myself, this 2LP set is enthusiastically welcomed.

According to Herbert Haffner, in his book about the conductor, Furtwängler performed the symphony 103 times, and there are about twelve extant taped performances. The conductor was averse to the sterile conditions afforded by the recording studio and, whilst he did make studio recordings of most of Beethoven's symphonies, the ninth, together with the second are exceptions. With the former, he felt that it was a work that benefited from the spontaneity of the live event, and his recorded legacy of this particular symphony comprises live airings only. Berta Geissmar, his secretary and business manager, maintained that Furtwängler regarded a performance of the Ninth Symphony as 'a sacred occasion'. Another reason for his dislike of the studio stemmed from his animosity towards HMV's producer Walter Legge who, in the conductor's eyes, promoted his chief rival and *bête noire*, Karajan.

The significance of this 1954 performance is that it was Furtwängler's last — he would be dead three months later. One can regard it as his valedictory pronouncement. I have been familiar with it for many years from the Tahra issue (FURT 1003), and it is the conductor's finest realization of the Symphony. Aside from this, there are two other live airings which I'm particularly fond of: the 1942 Berlin Philharmonic, and the 1951 Bayreuth Festival. What gives this 1954 Lucerne Festival the edge is the improved sound, and the greater spiritual and transcendental qualities with which Furtwängler invests the score.

Despite the conductor's failing health, the reading has vim and vigour, with no sense of fatigue. His stamina is evident in the muscularity, drive and pacing. Less visceral than in the 1942 Berlin performance, there is no terror or angst, and on the whole the effect is less frenetic. By 1954 there was an otherworldly and more profound spiritual dimension of nobility and humanity. Here, Furtwängler penetrates to the heart of the score, inspiring his players to a transcendental level. The Adagio is slower than we are used to today, but at no time does one detect a lack of pulse. The music just flows, unimpeded by bar lines until the trumpets enter at bar 120. Throughout the variations, transitions are negotiated superbly, with over-arching phrases. Any rubato that is applied is added tastefully and doesn't stymie the fluidity of the line. The grandeur and drama of the finale is enhanced by a formidable vocal quartet and

excellent choir. The Philharmonia are on top form, and Dennis Brain's solo horn contribution in the Adagio is exemplary.

I've never heard the Audite CD version, but I did a head-to-head with my Tahra copy. The improvement in sound quality is remarkable on the LPs, which have a smoother, warmer and richer tone. The Tahra aural picture was coarse and rough-edged in comparison. The LPs also render enhanced spatial depth in the string tone, and the vocal contributions are more vivid and bright.

The 2 LPs are housed in a sturdy gatefold, and one movement of the Symphony is assigned to each side. Erich Singer's informative annotations are in German, but translated into English. The sound quality is vivid, clear and spacious, with an expansive dynamic range, and I detected no congestion or overload in loud passages. Neither is there any hint of pre-echo. The LPs showcase the diaphanous woodwinds, burnished brass and rich velvet string tone, and all this adds to the potency and success of the mix. Audience noise is minimal. It is excellent in every way.