

## SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1043

### WILHELM FURTWÄNGLER

It is sometimes suggested that because a gramophone recording must stand up to constant rehearing then recorded performances should be pre-eminently straightforward and faithful representations of the score. It is even suggested that recording might preferably be left to 'safe' artists, for example - in the case of orchestral works - to 'house' conductors, still extant in the age of digital CD's. Controversial celebrities, such as the late Wilhelm Furtwängler, whose readings of the central repertory followed no standard pattern, their very qualities hinging on their spontaneity and creativity, seem to have been an embarrassment to the record moguls and to some distinguished record reviewers, too. Indeed, the authors of the famous *Record Guide*, published in the early 1950's, were perhaps for this reason a trifle uncharitable in their evaluation of Furtwängler's post-war EMI recordings, with the significant exception of his complete *Tristan und Isolde*. Indeed, each of his many performances - live or canned - of works like Beethoven's 9th Symphony or Brahms' 1st differed, sometimes radically, challenging the listener's existing perceptions of the music, including his memories of Furtwängler's own earlier accounts. This artist was one of a minority who, while sometimes ignoring or overriding composers' markings, brought original, even hazardous insights to bear on music which we all imagine that we know inside out.

The resort by the record companies to employing safe musicians may account for the extraordinarily high current percentage of orchestral recordings distinguished only by their mechanical precision and stultifying blandness. With Furtwängler, as with others of his generation, such as Stokowski and Mengelberg, there is no such danger of what might be dubbed 'deja entendu', even if the record collector then has to live with eccentric performances which could distort his perception of the music. Recourse to live concert-going should prevent the music lover from becoming conditioned to eccentricity or indeed to any one style or approach to a masterpiece. Returning to Furtwängler, it can be claimed that while virtuosi such as the conductors mentioned earlier could be calculating or perverse, his own art was remarkably spontaneous; his tempi in particular and their underlying relationships were invariably more than justified. It is a case of 'the proof of the pudding'; the final result was so often greater than the sum of its parts. All Furtwängler's readings need to be heard as a whole; extracts can be very misleading. Every performance that he gave, it is claimed - even those which may have fallen below his finest standards - represented an attempt to recreate what he believed to lie embedded behind the printed notes. There was rarely anything workaday or routine in his readings and there are few conductors today of whom one can make that claim.

Furtwängler's recording career fell into several phases. In the early years of electrical recording, he was a Polydor artist - as was Klemperer. Both men were employed sparingly - sales of classical music, even in Germany, would have been

miniscule compared with those of today and Furtwängler was given even less opportunity than Klemperer of putting his chef d'oeuvres on to disc. Apart from an inadequately engineered version of Beethoven's 5th Symphony, he was confined in this first period to a pot-pourri of overtures and short works. Only from the mid-1930s, as an Electrola (HMV) artist, was he able to extend his repertory into major works such as Tchaikovsky's 'Pathétique' Symphony and a new version of the Beethoven 5. During the Second World War, there were tapes of magnificent concerts and an almost complete *Meistersinger*, too. These treasures were largely issued posthumously. After de-Nazification, Furtwängler resumed making studio recordings for EMI, mainly with the Vienna Philharmonic. Some of these were a little disappointing; there was also the live Beethoven 'Choral' Symphony from Bayreuth and complete operas, *Fidelio* and *Tristan und Isolde* among them. In the final years of his life, he renewed his work for Polydor (DGG), with memorable versions of such masterpieces as Schubert's 9th Symphony and Schumann's 4th. Many LP's and CD's followed posthumously, not the least his two complete versions of the *Ring Cycle*.

The material selected for transfer on to this disc is of some of the most intriguing issues of the early Polydor period, made between 1926 and the early 1930s, when Furtwängler was still only in his forties and in the first flush of his long association with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. It was in the late 1920s that they dazzled London audiences and dismayed British musicians, too, with their marvellous playing and the exhibition that they gave of a near symbiotic bond between conductor and players. (The formation in quick succession of the BBC Symphony and the London Philharmonic Orchestras owed not a little to this revelation of the poverty of London's orchestral standards).

The recording quality achieved nearly sixty years ago by the Polydor engineers varied and some allowances have to be made for the first item, Weber's *Der Freischütz* overture, recorded in 1926 at the dawn of the electrical era. However, most of these productions have a warm ambience, a satisfactory balance and a textual clarity which conveys as much of the sound of the Berlin Philharmonic as was technically possible, especially the magnificent lower strings and the very modern execution with scarcely any 'portamento' string playing. The 3rd Brandenburg Concerto, with a full string band, may come as something of a shock to younger listeners reared on more authentic performances: tempi, texture and style all accord to a tradition which was only breached in the 1930s by musicians such as Adolph Busch and Boyd Neel - and even their conceptions would sound a little old-fashioned today. Accept Furtwängler's Bach on its own terms and you can luxuriate in a wonderful aural tapestry, huge and bold, but translucent, athletically dextrous, all of a piece and excellently recorded for its day. However, be warned that there is no bridge passage between the movements and not the glimmer of a harpsichord continuo.

Like most of his generation, Furtwängler's apprenticeship had been served in the opera pit and he seems to have been commendably uncondescending about the lighter side of the repertory. His account of Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* overture, less swaggering than Toscanini's contemporary New York version, is

nonetheless spontaneous, bouncy and completely theatrical in spirit, giving as much pleasure as any performance in the current catalogue. (Incidentally, there are small textual differences from other performances, notably in the repeated phrases just before the main allegro, modulating here from the usual major into the minor). Pre-dating Rossini's operatic setting of Beaumarchais is that of Mozart: here is as precise and yet as pliant and assured an account of the *Figaro* overture as has ever been put on disc. Again, Schubert's *Rosamunde* overture has great style and momentum; the extracts from the ballet music, too, display admirably the rhythmic and lyrical consistency of Furtwängler's approach to pieces that can so often be mere pot-boilers and which, like so much of the lighter side of the repertory, rarely gets a live performance by a great conductor. Indeed, this writer recalls hearing Furtwängler for the first time in the late 1940s with the London Philharmonic when he opened a programme with Nicolai's *Merry Wives of Windsor* overture, from which the great Wagner was later to quote - albeit inadvertently - in Act III of *Die Meistersinger* . . . can one imagine Haitink or von Karajan performing such music in a public concert today?

The heroic is represented here, too, with brief samples of Furtwängler's art in the service of the two composers of whom many regard him as the most profound interpreter of this century: Beethoven and Wagner. One welcomes the restoration to the catalogue of a Furtwängler version of Beethoven's *Egmont* overture, fleeter and more plastic than, say, Klemperer's, less peremptory than Toscanini's, rhythmically buoyant and only a trifle diminished in its impact by some backward woodwinds and horns. The funeral music from *Die Götterdämmerung* has extraordinary presence: "bleeding chunk" though it is, it survives its excision from that great music drama in a fine reading which should spur the listener to acquire the whole work in one of the conductor's two recorded versions. Finally, as encores, there are two of Brahms' Hungarian Dances, idiomatic and insinuating.

Many of Furtwängler's characteristic nuances can be heard on this disc: free rubato and heady accelerandi in the *Freischütz* overture; the sonorous, but never vulgar, weightiness of the brass in the Wagner extract; always that seamlessness that ameliorates any unease that the listener may have about liberties taken with tempi. Wilhelm Furtwängler invariably achieved this underlying Gestalt, not through cold-blooded planning, or even rigorous rehearsal - vital though that was - but through that osmosis by which all great conductors communicate the spirit of the music at the point of performance, invariably from the tip of the baton or through eye contact, but also with something which goes beyond mere physical signals. It confirms that great conducting can defy rational explanation. This disc is ample evidence of that art.

Michael van Blankenstein, © 1988

## WILHELM FURTWÄNGLER – A BIOGRAPHY

[Gustav Heinrich Ernst Martin] Wilhelm Furtwängler was born in Berlin in 1886. He was the oldest child of Adolf Furtwängler, classical archaeologist, and Adelheid née Wendt, painter. He spent his first years in Berlin, but the family moved to the neighbourhood of Munich in 1894 on his father being appointed a professor there. As his unusual gifts became apparent he was removed from school and educated privately. Amongst his tutors were a musicologist, an art historian and a sculptor, and he spent some time with his father on an archaeological site at Aegina. Thus he imbibed of a liberal cultivated German humanism. He played the piano from a very early age and was composing by the time he was seven. He studied composition with Anton Beer-Waldbrunn, Joseph Rheinberger and Max von Schillings, and piano with Conrad Ansoerge, a pupil of Liszt. By the age of seventeen he had composed a considerable number of works including a symphony and various chamber works. He moved towards conducting on three counts: the wish to conduct his own works, an ever deepening interest in interpretation and the need to earn a living. The latter, as the death of his father in 1907 necessitated him providing support for his mother and younger siblings.

The programme of his concert début in 1906 included Beethoven's overture *Die Weihe des Hauses*, Bruckner's ninth symphony and a movement from one of his own works for orchestra. An artist in the German-speaking world of that era commenced with a minor post, then rose gradually through successively more prestigious appointments, in each gaining experience, the more talented eventually occupying the more coveted positions. Thus, for Furtwängler the path lay through the Stadttheatre, Breslau, répétiteur, 1905-1906; Zürich, 1906-1907; Munich, assistant to Felix Mottl, 1907-1909; Strasbourg, 3rd conductor at the Opera under Hans Pfitzner, 1910-1911. In 1911 he was considered to be sufficiently experienced to be appointed, at the age of 25, director of Lübeck's subscription concerts and opera house. In 1915 he succeeded Bodanzky at Mannheim. He was now recognized as Germany's most promising young conductor.

In 1920 he succeeded Willem Mengelberg as director of the Frankfurt Museum Concerts and Richard Strauss as director of the Berlin Staatsoper Concerts. On the death of Arthur Nikisch 1922 Furtwängler was the obvious choice to succeed to both the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. The latter became the chief centre of his work for the remainder of his life.

His first engagement in Vienna was in 1919 for the autumn concerts of the Tonkünstlerorchester and in 1922 he commenced a long relationship with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, which included a leading part in the Schubert celebrations of 1928. In Vienna in 1920 he began to study scores he intended to conduct with Heinrich Schenker; a practice which ceased only with the latter's death in 1935.

During the 1920s Furtwängler's career expanded to include engagements with foreign orchestras and tours of neighbouring countries with his Berlin orchestra. In 1924 he conducted in London, firstly the orchestra of the Royal

Philharmonic Society and then the London Symphony Orchestra. His first visit here with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra was an eye-opener on orchestral standards to the British music world. He shared the Coronation Season of 1937 and the 1938 season with Sir Thomas Beecham, thus twice conducting Wagner's Ring cycle in London.

Only in the United States was he less successful. There seem to have been two reasons: He failed to pay his respects to powerful members of orchestras' governing bodies (a requirement unknown at home) and his highly individual interpretations of the classics upset critics for whom the objectivity of Toscanini had become the only possible ideal. However, both musicians and public thought very, very highly of him.

Like many who enjoyed the liberal tradition in the Weimar Republic, Furtwängler failed to see the writing on the National Socialist wall. As the year 1933 advanced he found himself ever deeper in the mire of the New Order. He distanced himself as much as he possibly could both from its ideology, for which he had no sympathy, and its leaders, for whom he had no liking. He was never a member of the party, he never gave the Hitler salute, he sought to retain Jewish musicians in their posts and he refused to conduct in occupied countries. Certainly, as many non-Jewish musicians did, he could have emigrated, but he chose to stay. He believed, fervently, but wrongly, that art and politics could be kept apart. In 1934, when Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler* was banned, he resigned from every post he held and persistently refused every manner of invitation to resume them.

His detractors see him as weak and point to the propaganda value of his name to the party, of which he must have been aware. However, he remained, as he saw it, albeit one may say naïvely, in order to preserve the profound values of German art and the decency enshrined in it. Perhaps that required more courage than some would give him credit for. It is well attested, also, that, having stayed, he used his influence to help individuals, not all of them musicians, some of them people he had never even met. Perhaps that, too, required more courage than some would give him credit for.

At the end of 1944 (ca.10-12 December) he was warned by Albert von Speer in person that he was on Himmler's list to be murdered. One of Himmler's doctors overheard discussions and likewise warned him. He had a permit to enter Switzerland to conduct, but he decided to cross the border quietly on foot at a remote frontier post.

As a consequence of remaining, he had to undergo a long and humiliating process of denazification, lasting until 1947, whilst others who were involved were cleared quickly and advanced their careers rapidly. (Two who subsequently became very successful in the world of music persisted in denying their former party membership years after documentation was public.)

For some he remained permanently tainted; he was never, for example, able to conduct again in the United States, but in Europe he was widely welcomed. He resumed his post in Berlin and he conducted in Edinburgh, London (starting with 4 visits in 1948), Lucerne, Paris, Rome (including two Ring cycles), Salzburg and Vienna. Most notably he conducted the "Choral" Symphony at the re-opening of

Bayreuth in 1951; one of the very rare occasions when music not by Wagner has been performed there.

He enjoyed ever-growing popularity until hindered by increasing deafness and poor health. He died of pneumonia in 1954. Drugs were by then available, but, according to his wife, he just gave up.

A vast assembly of post-war recordings, on tape and disc, commercial and from radio, official and unofficial, survives from his last years, much of it published. Here we sample his relatively few pre-war recordings.

For many, his performances were a culmination of the conducting tradition from Berlioz through Wagner and von Bülow to Nikisch. Thus there was a sense of improvisation and romanticism, even mysticism. No two performances were alike; there was always a step further, if the gods looked down with favour, towards the truth. His beat was rarely precise as he strove for sonority and his tempo changed freely as the moment inspired him; features accepted by many as tools at the service of drama and profundity. His repertoire was wide, from Bach to Stravinsky, though heavily orientated to the great German and Austrian masters of the 19th century. His compositions are in the tradition of Bruckner and are now gaining a limited acceptance.

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