



George Szell conducts Dvorák & Brahms

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George Szell's many recordings with the Cleveland Orchestra are almost always characterized by their clear textures, firm rhythmic grasp and fundamental musicality. His reputation as an orchestral dictator – bully, even – may put some listeners off, but listening today one can forget that and enjoy performances that grip from start to finish. The only concern can be that there is too much control and too little spontaneity, reducing the emotional temperature of the music.

That is not the case here with these two live performances at the Lucerne Festival. In the Dvořák in particular the inflexibility which is sometimes found in Szell's studio recordings is wholly absent. Not that even here Szell could be accused of being wilful, but phrases are allowed to finish more naturally and minor tempo changes occur with apparent spontaneity. The Czech Philharmonic in the late 1960s were at the peak of their form and playing with an individuality in both wind and strings which, as with so many orchestras, has to some degree been lost in more recent years. Occasionally there are minor inaccuracies typical of any concert performance, but these are rare and unimportant. The sound as presented here from broadcast tapes is much more than tolerable for its date, helped no doubt by Szell's legendary ability to clarify orchestral textures. I usually prefer applause to be omitted, but on this occasion it is so obviously merited that I not merely tolerated it but even welcomed it as being a natural reaction to such a superb performance.

The earlier performance of Brahms' Symphony No. 1 has similar virtues although the orchestra is perhaps less individual. I am unclear as to whether the Swiss Festival Orchestra was a single permanent orchestra or was recruited specifically for the Festival. Again, however, it is similar in general approach to Szell's studio recordings of the work but with more freedom and more energy.

The booklet is a model of how to add to the listener's enjoyment of historic live performances, with photographs of Szell, presumably in Lucerne but lacking details of dates or places, and a lengthy and very interesting article on the conductor and the Festival by Malte Lohmann. The cover indicates that these recordings were previously unreleased. It is good that such excellent performances are now available and so well presented on this generously filled disc.