



Herbert von Karajan - The Early Lucerne Years

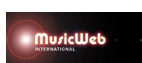
aud 21.464

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In the wake of von Karajan's denazification in October 1947, it was important for him to resume international engagements. One such presentable opportunity was the Lucerne Festival, which had offered performances to Furtwängler, and so Karajan first appeared with the Swiss Festival Orchestra in August 1948, inaugurating a 40-year association that ended only with his death. The three CDs in his handy box cover a slightly later period, 1952-57. audite claims, and I don't have a reason to doubt them, that the only previously released material is the Bach Concerto for two pianos, with Clara Haskil and Géza Anda.

The first disc has two concertos and a symphony. I can't say I'm much of a fan of Karajan's Beethoven No 8 (16 August 1952) which I find disagreeably beefy, Karajan presumably attempting to vest the music with rugged dynamism. Despite a well characterised Menuetto I find those lower strings a bit of a congealing mess. Robert Casadesus in Mozart's Concerto No 24 in C minor, K491 plays his favourite of the composer's concertos with the elegance familiar from his 78 set with Eugène Bigot in 1937. His scrupulous musicality may seem a mite small-scaled to some but I find it tremendously winning, Casadesus reserving weight for the optimum moments. The Bach was recorded on 10 August 1955 and was reissued on audite 95650 only last year. One can hardly go wrong with Haskil and Anda unless aural congestion is the enemy – which it isn't here – and the two make significant hay with the exchanges in the finale. The two pianists recorded the concerto commercially around this time in London with Alceo Galliera.

The second disc was recorded on 6 September 1956. Karajan brought the Philharmonia Orchestra from London and the recording quality, as well as the performances, improve too, not that the Swiss Festival Orchestra was poor. There is, however, a tangible increase in finesse and intensity for Beethoven's Pastoral and Brahms' Fourth Symphony. The Philharmonia's winds are on notable form and reflect something, perhaps, of Klemperer's influence as modified by Karajan in favour of a more emollient tonal balance. Nevertheless, there is considerable clarity, and the Scene by the Brook moves evocatively at a fine tempo (not too slow). The storm is trenchant and dramatic. Karajan's Brahms performance is slightly more elastic than his 1957 LP, but is otherwise as lucid, powerful and well-balanced. His tempo modifications are organically convincing and the vistas he summons up are full of grandeur. The richness of the finale, with its funereal-tragic element nakedly audible, is utterly splendid.

The third CD is balanced between Brahms' Violin Concerto with Nathan Milstein (17



August 1957) and Honegger's Symphony No 3, the Liturgique which was performed on the same evening as the Bach Concerto for two pianos. Milstein is his sovereign self and though he was an inconsistent, sometimes unconvincing exponent of the sonatas, he was invariably convincing in the concerto no matter who the collaborator was. There seems to have been mutual respect between the two men but it's also clear that Karajan was in no position to impose any conceptual interpretation on the violinist who takes his habitual tempi throughout, tempi he took with Fistoulari, Steinberg and Jochum or in any of the live performances that have emerged such as those directed by Kletzki or Dorati. Only a great musician like Milstein can play at relatively fast tempi but sound unhurried.

Karajan made a famous LP of Honegger's Symphony in the early 70s, coupling it with No 2. However, it was only a decade old in 1955 when he performed it in Lucerne at tempi somewhat tighter than he was later to take in Berlin. The tensions of a live concert however bring their own reward and the sense of visceral intensity in the first movement, and the controlled *Dona nobis pacem* finale, are more than merely admirable. The central *De profundis clamavi* may lack Berlin's silken strings, and the sense of clarity they brought, but the Swiss Festival Orchestra's directness is vivid and moving. If you find Serge Baudo's Czech Philharmonic performance too intense, then Karajan has always offered a rather different perspective on Honegger.

This box is excellently documented, and the recordings come directly from the original 15-inch broadcasting tapes. The repertoire is hardly earth-shattering, and I don't much like the Beethoven Eighth, but with two orchestras at his disposal, elite soloists and a span of six years this is a valuable addition to the recorded legacy of even so supposedly over-documented a conductor as Karajan.

Herbert von Karajan (conductor)***The Early Lucerne Years, 1952-57***

rec. 16 August 1952, 10 August 1955, 6 September 1956, 17 August 1957, Lucerne, Kunsthaus

Bonus tracks available as downloads on audite.de

Audite 21.464 [3 CDs: 224]

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Jonathan Woolf

A reader has written to me to point out that, despite Audite's claim that only the Bach has been previously released, the Milstein-Brahms concerto performance HAS been issued before, on Tahra TAH 692.

