



Edition Hans Knappertsbusch & Berliner Philharmoniker – The complete RIAS recordings

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[Fanfare](#) (Ronald E. Grames - 2011.05.01)

Unlike the 12 fairly full CDs in the Audite set of Furtwängler recordings made by the RIAS between 1947 and 1954—released in 2009 and included in my Want List for that year—this box of recordings by Hans Knappertsbusch with the Berlin Philharmonic is comparatively thin. There are two live recordings made at the Titania Palace—two days apart in 1950 with very different programs—and three studio sessions. And one of those studio sessions documented the same program as the January 30, 1950, live performance, just two days before the concert. (The run-through and recording before the live event no doubt appealed to the rehearsal-resistant Knappertsbusch, and fit with the economics of the time. It does give an opportunity to hear how much two contemporaneous performances of the same works could vary under the legendarily spontaneous conductor's leadership.) The other sessions came in January of 1951—the Bruckner Eighth—and January of 1952 for the Beethoven and an operetta excerpt. That, regrettably, was all that made it onto the high-quality 30-inch-per-second tape masters held in the German Radio archive. Changing tastes, other projects, and the ascendancy of Karajan soon after brought this collaboration to an end.

These original masters, of course, are the reason for this release. All of these performances have been available before, some in expert transfers by the likes of Tahra and Music & Arts, but none had access to the original tapes, and the additional clarity and dynamic range, and the lower distortion of these Audite transfers, are immediately attractive. While one could take exception to some of the equalization decisions—resulting notably in some wiriness of the high strings in the Bruckner and Schubert recordings—there is no gainsaying the extra detail that is revealed, the greater power of the climaxes, and the sense of ambient space now heard in these recordings.

Collectors of this artist's work will know what to expect of the performances. The program notes make a theme of the expectation of slowness, and it is my own experience that Knappertsbusch has routinely been lumped with Furtwängler, Klemperer, and Celibidache as if these four represented some distinctly dilatory school of conducting. In truth, each of these conductors has given the casual listener reason for the slow tag—note Knappertsbusch's somnambulant Munich Bruckner Eighth on Westminster—but as the more experienced collector will know, tempo is relative, and the impetuous drama of Knappertsbusch is nothing like the deep mysticism of Furtwängler, or the monumentalism of later Klemperer or Celibidache. Still, I am not sure that these recordings belie the stereotype for slowness in general. Knappertsbusch is often deliberate, especially to ears attuned to the quicker tread of present-day performances of these works. Listeners will find the Beethoven Eighth ponderous or profound according to their persuasion. The Haydn "Surprise" Symphony has a weightiness that rather mitigates its high spirits, regardless the

enthusiasm of the playing.

The overall timings of the Schubert “Unfinished” seem unexceptional until one realizes that Knappertsbusch did not observe exposition repeats. The studio recording is the more conventional, if any performance by Knappertsbusch can be called that, a very pleasant but not highly distinctive performance. It is in the live performance of two days later that the musicians discover the full potential of Knappertsbusch’s approach, controversial as that may be. It is full of portent, dark and forbidding in the very moderate *Allegro moderato*: slow, especially at the start, but strikingly powerful. The *Andante con moto* is also rather unhurried, but with phrasing flexible and alive to the impulse of the moment.

His Bruckner, however, is anything but measured. Under the conductor’s impulsive and fluid direction, these performances breathe like a living thing. The performance times are mainstream—the annotator makes a point of their being generally faster than the “normative” Wand—but as with the Schubert, the overall tempos tell little. Within that basic timing, the conductor shapes the works compellingly, with extremes of tempo and many shadings of dynamics and texture. The effect is often exhilarating and, as at the end of the *Adagio* of the Ninth, quite moving. The studio version is shaped with comparative restraint, the tempos in general somewhat faster and less extreme. Two days later he takes his audience and the apparently telepathic—though not infallible—orchestra through an emotional roller-coaster of a performance that leaves the listener drained at the end. Risk-taking in live performances was this conductor’s *modus operandi*, and sometimes it failed to come together into a coherent vision. In this live performance of the Ninth, and in the similarly dramatic Eighth of 11 months later, the spontaneity pays off handsomely.

Lighter music is the other part of the offering here. Those who only know Knappertsbusch through his Bruckner and Wagner may be surprised to find that he shows an equal affinity for the waltz and polka. The concert on February 1, 1950, was what we would now call a pops concert. The one work of symphonic scope is the leisurely Haydn symphony. The rest consists of operetta overtures, a Viennese waltz, and ballet music by Tchaikovsky. As with the larger-scale works, there are liberties taken. At one point Knappertsbusch slows the *Pizzacato Polka* to a droll attention-getting crawl, and he starts the *Komzák Bad’ner Madl’n waltz* at a crawl and then pulls it about in a most willful way. Yet the audience loves it, judging from the included applause. At the very worst, listeners will feel that these and the other Viennese confections are loved to death, but I think most will find them charming. The same is true of the Tchaikovsky suite, which is slower than is the norm, but which remains very light on its feet.

Another service that this release provides for the collector, besides making these recordings available in superior transfers, is to clarify their provenance. Previous issuers have had to guess a bit at dates—another concert of the Bruckner and Schubert on January 29, 1950, as it turns out, was not recorded—and there has been some confusion between the live and studio recordings. This is not a major issue for most listeners, who will be interested primarily in the sound and artistry. This set, in the former quality, supersedes all other releases of these performances. Anyone remotely interested in Knappertsbusch’s art or in the symphonies of Bruckner should add it to his or her collection post haste.