



Christian Ferras plays Beethoven and Berg Violin Concertos

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GRAMOPHONE REPLAY – Rob Cowan's monthly survey of reissues and archive recordings

Important first releases – Brahms from Barbirolli in the new Coventry Cathedral and in Boston • A feast from Christian Ferras

Recordings of performances with a dark historical backdrop are fairly plentiful – think of Václav Talich conducting *Má vlast* in Nazi-occupied Prague, Rostropovich braving Dvořák on the day the Soviets entered Prague, the maverick pianist Maria Yudina playing Mozart for Stalin, harpsichordist Wanda Landowska performing Scarlatti in Paris with anti-aircraft fire exploding in the distance, Gieseking playing the Emperor to the unsettling accompaniment of falling bombs, and so on. Now, to add to this disquieting but uplifting catalogue, Sir John Barbirolli conducts the Berlin Philharmonic in Brahms's Second Symphony, the location the rebuilt Coventry Cathedral, the date June 1962, the whole affair facilitated by the City of Berlin and the Federal Republic as a gift of reparation in memory of the original cathedral, which the Luftwaffe had razed to the ground in the early 1940s. Testament has released a transfer of the Brahms and although the recording is in mono and the cathedral acoustic more ample than is useful for specific instrumental detail, careful microphone placement means that the overall balance is actually rather good. As to the performance, the immediate impression is of a vast dynamic range and a superb instrument playing to the ample spaces available to it, the horns in particular quite overwhelming in their impact. Barbirolli's interpretation is broad and loving, with predominantly dark textures (so much for this being the 'happiest' of Brahms's symphonies!) and, for the finale's blazing last page, a massive slam on the brakes. You can hear an audience presence but, rather than end with applause, the performance closes to respectful silence.

Coincidentally the Barbirolli Society has released another live Brahms Second, recorded at Boston's Symphony Hall with the city's Symphony Orchestra, part of a concert given three years before the one from Coventry. It's likely that the faster overall pace in Boston is due at least in part to the drier acoustic and the reduced need to avoid converging lines. Still, the effect is quite different, more silken and energised, though the underlying warmth remains. The rest of the programme is fascinating; in fact, we're offered two versions of it: one from January 30, 1959, the other from January 31 (with radio announcements and in marginally inferior sound). Barbirolli's own Elizabethan Suite features superb strings and horns in 'The King's Hunt', there's Delius's *The Walk to the Paradise Garden* (rather more restrained than expected), and a colourful reading of *Wait on's Partita*. All the recordings are in

stereo.

Another comparison arrives, again involving Testament, which has released a Berlin Philharmonic Concert given at the Salzburg Festival in August 1960 under the direction of Joseph Keilberth. The main item is Bruckner's Ninth Symphony and anyone who recalls Keilberth's 1956 Telefunken recording with the Hamburg State Philharmonic will already know that he had the full measure of the work (that same recording was reissued on CD bizarrely coupled with part of Bruckner's Te Deum!). Prior knowledge of that recording will not, however, prepare you for the impact of this live performance which, in a word, is stunning, the Berlin brass presenting a welter of tone, powerfully projected, the Adagio's crowning peroration as devastating as any on disc – and I do mean any! If perchance you need convincing that Keilberth could come up with the goods in symphonic music, then look no further. The couplings are a buoyant account of Schubert's Rosamunde Overture and Alban Berg's Violin Concerto with Christian Ferras as the soloist, an occasionally rough-edged performance full of intense expression but which doesn't quite gel as an entity. Turn then to a broadcast performance put out by Audite from four years later, when a more mature Ferras was partnered by the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra under Massimo Freccia (a Franz Schalk pupil), and the overall impression is of a performance that's more confident, more skilfully shaped from the rostrum (the work's rhythmic aspects come across with greater clarity), and interpretatively better integrated. As to Audite's coupling, Ferras's 1951 Berlin Philharmonic recording of the Beethoven Concerto under Karl Böhm is the work of a precociously gifted teenager; yet, rather than opt for outward virtuosity, Ferras really plumbs the depths, his playing invariably quiet and softgrained, with some daringly broad tempi yet with real bite in the finale. Böhm's conducting is a model of discreet accompanying, with a firm pulse, neatly pointed phrases in the outer movements and a warmly sustained Larghetto. But there's a significant problem in that the surviving tape, although perfectly adequate sound-wise, lacks the opening measure of the Larghetto. The solution would have been easy: just record the surviving second measure and repeat it (they're musically identical) but, no, Audite decided that this would have invalidated the recording's authenticity. Personally, I would have copied the motif, but there you are ... you can't complain that the people at Audite lack musical integrity.