



Claudio Abbado conducts Schubert, Beethoven & Wagner

aud 95.627

EAN: 4022143956279



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[Fanfare](#) (James Miller - 2014.08.18)

In 1961, George Szell, who had examined a Photostat of the manuscript, inserted what he called “a pungent dissonance” at bars 109 and 327 of the first movement of Schubert’s “Unfinished” Symphony when he recorded the piece for Epic. It appears in a passage leading to the development section and, later, to the coda. The chord still sounds sour to me and, at the time, it seemed to me that he was “overSzelling” it. A quarter of a century later, Claudio Abbado examined the manuscripts of all the symphonies and discovered that the standard editions differed in some respects from Schubert’s originals and recorded all but what is now the former Seventh, D 729, using the manuscripts as a basis. The differences aren’t radical but you’ll hear some things you may never have heard before. As for the “pungent dissonance,” it was still there on his 1987 recording of the “Unfinished,” but when he had performed it in 1978 with the Vienna Philharmonic, he was still using the standard edition and one hears the familiar chord one grew up with. The first movement repeat was omitted, pretty much standard operation procedure at the time—in fact, I think Szell also left it out. One of my very favorite “Unfinished” recordings is the one in Abbado’s 1986–87 set with the European Chamber Orchestra—in fact, I am extremely fond of the entire set and would recommend it to anyone who wants to purchase a nearly complete collection of the symphonies. This 1978 Vienna recording is, essentially, the same performance as the later one but, perhaps inevitably, slower, darker, and weightier, with a bit less inner detail but with similar flexibility of tempos and dramatic use of slight pauses.

It was too long ago to remember nuances, but I recall having a high opinion of Claudio Abbado’s set of the Beethoven symphonies that he recorded with the Vienna Philharmonic (I also liked the Art Nouveau covers.). Unfortunately, I have heard very little of his subsequent Berlin Philharmonic set so I can’t make any relevant comparisons with this 1988 performance of the Second Symphony with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, but it’s hard for me to believe that either performance of the Second could be any better. Although the symphony can also be effective when the inner movements are taken a bit slower, I find its energy and crisp detail virtually irresistible. All repeats are taken but the symphony never seems long—if anything, it’s over with too fast. Some people claim that it is with the “Eroica” that we finally hear the “real” Beethoven, but a case can be made for the Second Symphony, and I think Abbado makes it. I’ve never heard one that I admire more than this performance.

The leaves the Siegfried Idyll, a piece that is very difficult to ruin no matter what tempo you choose. I have an impression that conductors of an earlier generation took it faster. Abbado’s, at 19:11, is one of the slower ones, but it’s beautifully played and never sags. I might mention that Abbado himself approved the release of these recordings—as well he should have.