



Carl Schuricht conducts Mozart & Brahms

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Emanating from performances at two Lucerne Festivals on 8/19/1961 (the Mozart Concerto with Casadesus) and 9/8/1962 (the Brahms Symphony with the Vienna Philharmonic), these recordings have been released in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the death of Carl Schuricht, who died in 1967. If Audite's documentation and Bernard Jacobson's headnote to a 24:5 review of another Casadesus/Schuricht performance of the same Mozart concerto are both right, then it appears that pianist and conductor bar-hopped from Lucerne to Salzburg, where just four days later, on 8/23/1961, they performed the same concerto at the Salzburg Festival with the Vienna Philharmonic. One wonders if they showed up at the Strasbourg Festival next, like fraternity bros going from one keg party to another.

Fifteen months after Casadesus made this appearance in Lucerne—and presumably the one in Salzburg, both with Schuricht—the pianist sat down in Cleveland's Severance Hall in November 1962 to record Mozart's final concerto with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra under the baton of George Szell; and as the reader is sure to know, that collaboration was not a one-off. Indeed, between 1959 and 1962, Casadesus teamed up with Szell to record all but a handful of Mozart's piano concertos beginning with No. 12. Conspicuously missing from the later concertos are the Nos. 19 and 25. Some of concertos were recorded with members of the Cleveland Orchestra and others with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra; and back in the heyday of LP, I collected all of them. Casadesus and Szell, in fact, were my introduction to Mozart's piano concertos, and I still have a fondness for those recordings.

The timings between this Casadesus/Schuricht and the Casadesus/Szell performances are remarkably close: 13:14, 8:07, 8:07 vs. 13:22, 8:49, 8:05. Only in the second movement do Casadesus and Szell adopt a more leisurely tempo. But aside from the timing similarities, I find that I actually prefer this Casadesus/Schuricht reading. Where Szell feels earthbound with a strict adherence to the beat, Schuricht seems to take wing with more flexible phrasing that lends a freer, more lyrical character to the music. The violins, in particular, sound like they're floating, and this, in turn, prompts playing of pearl-like beauty from Casadesus. There's a gentle joy in the third movement that I don't hear in the not faster but harder-driven Szell version. Given the vintage and venue of the recording, the sound is excellent.

I'm not as happy with the Brahms Symphony. The main problem lies with the recording, which, though it comes from the same venue a year later, sounds bottom-heavy and murky. I'm guessing that the larger contingent of players in the

Vienna Philharmonic, compared to the chamber-sized Swiss ensemble for the Mozart, posed challenges that the microphones and recording equipment weren't entirely able to resolve.

Setting that aside, Schuricht's performance of Brahms's Second Symphony is quite interesting, which is not necessarily to say that I find it to my liking. For one thing, it stands in rather stark contrast to some recent versions in the matter of tempo. As I and others have noted, tempos in Brahms's works, with exceptions, of course, have tended towards a gradual slowing over the past 40 or 50 years. Schuricht confirms that perception with a reading of the score that's nothing if not bracing. But it's not the conductor's pacing per se that gives me pause. Rather, it's his somewhat aggressive approach, which treats more rhythmically vigorous and dramatically heightened passages with explosive accents and notes cut short of their full metric values. In the past, I may have complained that some conductors are too keen on smoothing out the edges, especially in this score, which has often been called Brahms's "Pastoral" Symphony. But Schuricht seems to err in the opposite direction and in so doing alters the complexion of the piece and its lyrical impulses.

A Carl Schuricht discography at carlschuricht.com/SchurichtCD.htm, so up to date that it includes the current release, lists a number of recordings of Brahms's Second Symphony by the conductor with the Vienna Philharmonic on Decca (1953), the ORTF on Altus (1963), the Stuttgart RSO on Hänssler (1966), and a number of others. I reviewed the Stuttgart/Hänssler CD in 29:1, and said of it then that the performance, only a year before the conductor's death, "does not dawdle." "If anything," I continued, "I would have preferred a slightly slower pace for the Adagio, which could have benefited from a bit more expansive phrasing and shaping."

If that performance was a bit too fast for my taste, consider this earlier one with the Vienna Philharmonic vs. the later one with the Stuttgart Radio:

VPO (1962): 15:15, 9:06, 5:07, 9:26 = 38:54
 RSO (1966): 16:20, 9:22, 5:35, 10:12 = 41:29

Schuricht actually did slow down considerably in his last days, but even then I noted that the RSO reading felt a bit pressed and impatient to me. If you prefer your Brahms Second not to trot along too slowly, but you don't want it to gallop either, I'd recommend Schuricht's final RSO recording on Hänssler over this 1962 VPO version. Besides, it's in stereo and the sound is much better. The Mozart with Schuricht and Casadesu, however, is a winner.