



St Laurent Studio

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“Karajan, like Bernstein, Solti, and Ormandy, was fortunate to thrive during the postwar boom in

recordings, and he made abundant use of the recording studio from the late Thirties through the Eighties. Over that long span there would seem to be nothing lacking, certainly not with Brahms. This new Brahms symphony cycle, recorded in excellent, natural-sounding stereo, was captured in concert when the Berliners came to Paris in June, 1975. There is a studio cycle from this time, and when added to Karajan’s two other DG cycles, along with any number of individual discs, the impression of much of a muchness seems inescapable.

I’d like to argue, however, that there is something exceptional here, beginning with the lack of live performances under Karajan. Unlike Furtwängler and Tennstedt, whose inspiration can only be appreciated fully in concert, Karajan the perfectionist had disciplined himself, and his musicians, to such a degree that you don’t expect dramatic differences between the studio and the concert hall. Yet this impression is misleading, and when Testament released live Karajan performances from London, even the most familiar repertoire, like ALSO SPRACH ZARATHUSTRA, gained in vibrancy and presence.

The rewards here are similar. Perfectionism cuts both ways. In return for impeccable execution, ensemble, and finesse, music loses spontaneity when it is too finely honed. Grumbling of this sort followed Michelangeli throughout his career and dogged Karajan in the last third of his. I’d counter by saying that audiences were absolutely astonished at the Berlin sound under Karajan. This factor is diminished in a recording but not erased. From the first movement of Symphony #1 your ear hears flawless music-making that goes beyond what furious taskmasters like Toscanini, Cantelli, and Szell managed to achieve.

The necessary thing, which some listeners resist, is that you must allow yourself to submit to the total control imposed by all four conductors. They set out to control not just the orchestra but the listener too. It was often said that Karajan cast a spell that was almost hypnotic (since he conducted with eyes closed, he seemed to be under the same spell). But if you can look past the cult of personality, which for some is very hard to do in Karajan’s case, the spell is being cast by the music. Remove the man and Brahms remains, wrapped in the closest thing to unblemished beauty that anyone has ever achieved on disc.

By 1975 Karajan had just entered the phase where he wanted music-making to be overly modulated, a style various critics have rejected and even derided. Certainly if you want Karajan's Brahms symphonies at their most unvarnished, the DG recordings from the Sixties should be sought out. But here in Paris one senses his deep understanding of Brahms' drama. For example, the slow introduction to the finale of the First Symphony is thrilling in its suspense and premonition, something clearly intended but often missed. Here it is expressed at the highest intensity. None of the studio Firsts go this far. And the orchestral power needed to carry out Karajan's intentions remains unexcelled.

Having wound up the tension to the breaking point, Karajan makes the big tune feel like a release into the brightness of day, and when he applies an *accelerando*, leading to a rising feeling of exhilaration, you grasp that he was a master of long-range planning. This perfectly suits Brahms, who had the same gift (as did Furtwängler - he wouldn't have felt so much rivalry if he hadn't recognized that Karajan was breathing down his neck). Of the four symphonies, the First was a specialty for both conductors, and this Paris performance shows why. Exaltation can be reached by two very different paths.

The Paris audience, not famous for loving Brahms, goes wild. I won't describe the rest of the cycle, saying only that everything exceptional in the First Symphony is present in the later three. I realize that experienced listeners are likely to have a fixed opinion about Karajan one way or the other. He started out as a Wunder and wound up being a case. If you are open to experiencing why he was ever a Wunder, this wonderful live Brahms cycle is an ideal place to begin."

- Huntley Dent, FANFARE