

Classical Reissue Reviews

BRAHMS: Symphony No. 1 in c Minor; HANDEL: Concerto Grosso in D Major; Concerto Grosso in g Minor, No. 6 – London Sym. Orch./ Felix Weingartner – Yves St-Laurent Studio

"Classical" maestro Felix Weingartner has his work in Brahms and Handel restored, and the musical moments well articulate the refined qualities of his conducting art.

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BRAHMS: Symphony No. 1 in c Minor, Op. 68; HANDEL: Concerto Grosso in D Major, Op. 6, No. 5; Concerto Grosso in g Minor, Op. 6, No. 6 – London Sym. Orch./ Felix Weingartner – Yves St.-Laurent Studio YSL 78-038, 72:00 [www.78experience.com] *****

Among the more self-effacing interpreters, Felix Weingartner (1863-1942) insisted upon the primacy of the composer's intentions as indicated in the score, as opposed to the "romantic" tendencies of contemporaries like Hans von Bulow, whom Weingartner accused of self-aggrandizement. The Brahms and Handel recordings issued here by Yves St.-Laurent, inscribed 16-22 February 1939, would appear to celebrate a seventy-fifth anniversary at the time of my audition. Weingartner embodies the art of dignified continuity of the musical line, his tempos brisk but not excessive, and he has a distinct sense of the musical styles idiomatic to each composer. In this sense, Weingartner's aesthetic comes close to that of Arturo Toscanini, although from Weingartner's Austro-German tradition.

The two Handel consorts enjoy – in spite of the producer's insistence on retaining the distinctive shellacs' surface noise – an innate nobility of line, plastic, melodic, and eminently vocal in character. The stately grace of the *G Minor's Musette: Larghetto* will bear many repeated auditions without monotony. The refined intimacy of the readings of both the *D Major* and *G Minor* concertos accomplishes much that contemporary Adolf Busch wished to define for his own chamber music ensemble. The warm *Largo* of the *D Major* provides a splendid case in point, with no sag in the musical line and a clear textural harmony between the string ensemble and harpsichord. Those who include Weingartner in their lists of revered performances in record often bemoan the relatively poor sound of his legacy, but no such claim can be pressed here, whose figures lilt with studied nuance, rhythmic and dynamic. The ease of musical transition appears as naturally as any we hear in contemporary, politically-correct readings by the so-called "Baroque specialists."

The Brahms *C Minor Symphony* (16 & 18 February 1939), from its opening *Un poco sostenuto*, declares both magnitude and seriousness of purpose. Since we have no documents from the primary contemporary of the composer's day, Fritz Steinbach – from whom Toscanini claimed to have imbibed the Brahms style – we might well assume Weingartner's reading to be a fair estimate of the requisite music-practice. The *Allegro* moves briskly, but Weingartner certainly invests a spaciousness to the lyrical secondary motifs and their wind and horn interplay. The Weingartner "youthful fire" reported by a Beecham colleague who heard him in 1939 Vienna infuses every bar of this movement, which proceeds with often dancing or singing deliberation. If the gestures emerge more musically than heroically, we must accept the fact that Weingartner did not brandish his ego in the same aether as those titans, Mengelberg and Furtwaengler.

The second movement *Andante sostenuto* reminds us that Weingartner and the composer met on the occasion of Weingartner's performance of the *D Major Symphony*, whereupon Brahms expressed his appreciation of having "heard myself so well reflected in your musicianship." The famed oboe part has his moments in the sun, as does the clarinet, all eventually yielding to the glories of the violin concertmaster with the French horn. The ominous sense of drama still emerges from the LSO bass line, almost in spite of the idyll projected in the treble line. The third movement, *Un poco Allegretto e grazioso*, with its five-bar phrasing, allows us a quick glimpse into Weingartner's poised architecture, fluent and genially forceful, at once. The direct energy of the middle section resounds with nervous brio. Never one to court "mysticism" intentionally, the opening bars of the Weingartner's final *Adagio* do convey a majestic grandeur we usually attribute to the romantic school. The French horn solo from the *Schwarzwald* invokes a moment from Friedrich's famous portrait of *The Wanderer Above the Sea of Mist*. This rendition strikes me as a model for the Krips inscription from Vienna (on Decca) some thirty years later. The procession from the *Piu Andante* into the more aggressive *Allegro ma non troppo* remains rather literalist, and for some, too understated. But the linear clarity of design trumps any "romantic" quibbles about the monumentality of the occasion, and I can recommend this rendition with few reservations, having noticed only in retrospect how singularly quietly the 78 rpm surfaces have preserved their Brahms glories in this restoration.