



BEETHOVEN *Missa solennis* •

Carl Schuricht, cond; Maria Stader (sop); Marga Höffgen (alt); Anton Dermota (ten); Walter Berry (bs); Vienna Singakademie; Vienna P • ST LAURENT STUDIO 511 (77:13) Live: Vienna, Stephansdom 6/21/1961

Despite one regrettable flaw, this is a treasurable performance of Beethoven's mighty choral masterpiece, which ranks in my affections alongside Bach's St. Matthew Passion as one of the two greatest sacred works for soloists, chorus, and orchestra ever penned. That flaw is that the performance has not survived quite intact. At 6:41 in the Credo there is a sudden, jarring skip of about two measures just after the tenor's ringing declaration of "et homo factus est" (one of my favorite moments in the score); at 4:19 in the Agnus Dei, the sounds momentarily fades out and returns, with about four measures of music lost from where the concerted solo quartet is intoning the words "peccata mundi" to its re-entry with the phrase "miserere nobis." One wishes that Yves St-Laurent had imitated Andrew Rose at Pristine Audio and discreetly spliced in the missing measures from a comparable performance. (Karajan's live 1966 version comes immediately to mind as an excellent choice; it shares the same bass soloist, chorus, and orchestra, with comparable voices in the other solo parts, not dissimilar sound quality, and a reasonable match in tempo). St-Laurent has advised me that if a copy of the intact performance is ever provided to him (does any collector out there reading these lines have a private copy?), he will correct and reissue this release.

If you can live with those two momentary blips, there is much here to savor. Schuricht did not have the opportunity to record the *Missa solennis* in the studio, but thankfully another live performance by him also survives, a 15 September 1957 Montreux Festival outing in quite decent monaural sound with the NDR Symphony of Hamburg, St. Hedwig's Cathedral Choir of Berlin, and solo quartet of Maria Stader, Elsa Cavelti, Ernst Häfliger, and Heinz Rehfuss. It has long been out of print on CD issues (Archiphon and Living Stage). That is a crying shame, for despite an over-the-hill alto soloist that has long ranked in my estimation as among the half-dozen or so greatest performances of this work I've ever heard. Schuricht's take on the work is utterly unlike that of any other conductor I've ever heard. In his hands this intricate score, with its many dense contrapuntal passages, consistently emerges with the magical transparency, lightness, and intimacy of chamber music—and, unlike most period-instrument renditions, he accomplishes this without the results sounding at all underpowered and malnourished. Those same virtues are also present here in Vienna, though the reverberant acoustic of the mammoth St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna makes them a degree less apparent. Even so, I was still surprised to hear immediately in the opening bars of the Kyrie instrumental details that I have not encountered in other recordings, and this feature remains apparent throughout the entire performance. Also, this is a brisk but by no means rushed performance (about four minutes faster than Schuricht's 1957 outing), with the pacing of

each movement well shaped throughout all sub-sections; rarity of rarities, the always tricky final bars of the Agnus Dei for once sound like a definite and convincing conclusion to the whole, instead of the proceedings suddenly stopping in mid-course. The solo quartet is strong if not perfect. The two male singers are superb; Marga Höffgen is a steady assured presence who only lacks distinctiveness and memorability; Stader starts well but clearly tires and her intonation becomes somewhat suspect by the Agnus Dei. The Vienna Singakademie sings with the customary expertise, and the Vienna Philharmonic (not the Vienna Symphony, as erroneously stated on the printed materials I received for this release; see wienersingakademie.at/archiv/program.php?year=1961 for the correct attribution) is likewise in fine fettle. The recorded sound is a bit cloudy, with background hiss, but certainly of acceptable quality for those accustomed to listening to historic performances.

As usual, YSL provides no libretto or booklet notes, but a cover photo of Schuricht and vivid color pictures of the spectacular interior and exterior of the cathedral are most welcome. If, like me, this work is especially dear to your heart, you may well wish to make room on your shelf for this as an addition to your collection. It may be purchased through Norbeck, Peters, and Ford (norpete.com). And, definitely do acquire Schuricht's gorgeous 1957 version as well!

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