



St Laurent Studio YSL T-888

“Charles Munch had the good fortune to lead the Boston Symphony during the Fifties when the LP and high fidelity were an unquenchable phenomenon. In its complete Munch edition, RCA included no less than 86 CDs, but Haydn was represented only by two works, Symphonies

Nos. 103 and 104. Further supplements by live performances haven’t added significantly to that meager number, but St. Laurent Studio has made an important addition with these three ‘London’ Symphonies recorded live in Symphony Hall between 1955 and 1959.

Munch could be fairly indifferent in the Viennese classics (I’m dubious about his Beethoven, generally speaking), but he had a gleam in his eye for Haydn. These are sparkling readings filled with unmistakable joy, as lively and attentive as any Haydn from the period. Lighter than Beecham and just as infectious, Munch makes these works seem carefree. More than that, they return to feeling essential, as they were to audiences back then, who could not have foreseen the current neglect of Haydn on the concert programs of major orchestras (as opposed to the super-abundance of HIP recordings, usually with diminished, even chamber-sized forces).

Munch’s brio belies the canard that the Romantic tradition can be equated with weightiness and plodding tempos. The slow movements and Menuettos unfold naturally without sounding too measured or impatiently rushed to the finish line as is fashionable in period performances. Haydn’s symphonic arc from a slow introduction to a presto finale that ends on a smile is perfectly executed here. The BSO strings are particularly precise, and in the wittiest finale, of Symphony #102, Haydn’s genial humor shines through. The military fanfares and percussion in the second movement and finale of Symphony #100 are turned into a nice swaggering surprise, although we are far from the shocked reaction of a contemporary reviewer who spoke of a ‘hellish roar of war increas[ing] to a climax of horrid sublimity!’

Since I was a baby boomer who learned the “London” Symphonies mainly from Bruno Walter and Leonard Bernstein, the insouciant, affectionate style of Munch’s readings seems totally apt to me. The mono sound is quite listenable, the only one marred with a few crackles and truncation in the treble being the 1955 Symphony #102. The transfers by St. Laurent Studio are otherwise quite clean and clear. As usual with this label there are no program notes. It should be added that this is Vol. 38 in their Munch Edition, which unfolds at a speed too fast for reviewers to keep up with, yet all of which is worth exploring. The source for these live BSO concerts isn’t revealed, but it seems to go on and on.”

- Huntley Dent, FANFARE