



St Laurent Studio YSL T-1073

HERBERT von KARAJAN Cond. Berlin Phil.:
Symphony #9 in D (Mahler)

1 May, 1982, Philharmonie Berlin, live

This outstanding new release brings to four the Karajan performances of the Mahler Ninth that collectors can choose from. First came DG's studio recording in 1981, which Karajan wasn't satisfied with, so a live account from the Berlin Festival in February, 1982 quickly followed. St. Laurent Studio issued a second live account from August, 1982 from Salzburg, and now we have a live performance from May, 1982. It is certainly reasonable to call this plethora a needless redundancy, since three readings date from the same year. But there are a few fine points to consider.

First comes a not so fine point. Should you acquire any Mahler Ninth under Karajan? He came to Mahler's music late, and perhaps reluctantly, and by 1982 critics were already grumbling about the conductor's obsessive pursuit of a smooth, beautiful orchestral sound. There is still considerable resistance to Karajan in general, but I wouldn't be without at least one of his Mahler Ninths - they counter every Karajan stereotype by being deeply felt and simultaneously amazingly virtuosic and beautiful sounding.



As to the finer points, the sonics from the Berlin Philharmonie (the source is undisclosed) are wide-range and comparable to DG's live engineering. I detect a little upper-frequency shrillness, but there is no microphone shatter, and the full impact of the orchestra comes through. And what an impact they make - Mahler conducted probably the best orchestra in Europe with the Vienna Philharmonic, and he wrote for bravura effects. He was also fastidious about giving detailed markings for the conductor, and what we have here is the epitome of both

virtuosity and detail. Happily, the engineering is fine-grained, so that we catch the lightest pluck on a lower string on the harp as well as the Berlin brass on full throttle.

I won't second guess a listener's opposition to Karajan on political or personal grounds. When he trusted an interviewer, as he did Richard Osborne, he showed himself to be a cultivated, sensitive musician with sharp astuteness about how an orchestra should be run. He was the undisputed chief in Berlin, but I believe Karajan when he says that he always had the welfare and musical growth of the Berlin musicians in mind.

This care is evidenced on close listening when you notice how refined and, indeed, evolved the playing is on this recording. Individual parts and whole sections are supremely accomplished. Nothing sounds regimented. Quite the opposite - the first movement is a model of spontaneous music-making that follows the ebb and flow of Mahler's score. The confident full tone with which the Berliners move from ppp to fff is remarkable, and the emotional intensity in the finale feels completely authentic.

I won't repeat the praise I gave to St. Laurent Studio's previous live Mahler Ninth in FANFARE 44:4, since this reading from a few months before exhibits everything I applauded there. The May timing is four minutes slower than the one in August, which means little. Perhaps one version sounds a trifle better than the other; the soundstage is wide and deep for both recordings. I suppose if forced to make a choice, I would choose the Salzburg account over the Berlin one simply because the acoustic is somewhat more forgiving.

The essential point is that Karajan, for me at least, is indispensable in this symphony. Like the Beethoven Ninth, the Mahler Ninth is a bottomless well of expressive possibilities. It was our Beethoven Ninth for the twentieth century, needing only the Shostakovich Eighth to reflect the horrors of modern war that Beethoven couldn't have possibly imagined. Instead of an ode to joy, we needed an ode to tragic humanity, which Mahler miraculously expressed in the Ninth Symphony without losing the joy."

- Huntley Dent, FANFARE