

Szell conducts Brahms and Dvořák

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"Of late I've been listening to the EMI/HMV (now Warner) recordings by Szell, to include his partnerships in concertos with Huberman and Casals. From there I moved on to the early 1950's Concertgebouw recordings he'd made with London/DECCA of the Brahms 3rd and Dvorak 8th symphonies, as produced and engineered by the DECCA "A team" of Culshaw/Wilkinson. Szell's interpretations of these symphonies - but especially the Brahms third - are personal favorites and have long been recognized as among the most satisfying committed to disc.

But here's the point. Whereas your remastered sonics of the earlier (1928-mid 30's) concerto performances remain the most satisfying to me the sonics of the CDs of these performances - at least in the DECCA Original Masters and recent Tower Records Japan "Vintage Series" CD sets - seem congested, distorted and distant. Interestingly, in his review of the DECCA Original Masters set James North noted a "possible deterioration of the master tapes" to explain his reservations about the CD's sonics as compared to those of the original LPs.

I know of several Concertgebouw performance-recordings from the early 50s that sound quite good. Among them is your remastering of the famous 1950 broadcast of Klemperer conducting the Mahler 2nd symphony. Do you think it possible - or more importantly worthwhile - to take a crack at these two Szell performances?" S.B., *by email*

"In the Brahms symphony Szell's strong approach pays dividends in the first movement, but elsewhere his conducting is a shade brusque and heartless. Dvorak's Eighth is given a strong, spirited reading, but again poetry and wit are rather lacking. Szell often shed his chilly transatlantic manner when he returned to Europe, but not here, alas. The recordings are poor for their date and unpleasantly thin and shrill." A.S., *Gramophone*, September 1992

The juxtaposition of these two observations will prove, I hope, somewhat confusing! What do we have here? Is it "one of the most satisfying [*Brahms' Third*] ever committed to disc", or is it a reading that is "brusque and heartless"?

The key to unlocking this question lies in comments common to both assessments: the poor sound quality of the original recordings. Despite the efforts of what would become a legendary partnership in the production and recording of classical music in the 1950s and 1960s - producer John Culshaw and engineer Kenneth Wilkinson - for some reason things didn't work out so well in this instance.

The recordings took place over two consecutive days in September 1951, during Decca's second year of LP production but at a time when recordings were still being made with the 4-minute durations of 78rpm discs in mind. Tape recording was in its infancy, and the recording quality heard from productions of this era is remarkably mixed.

Tonally there was quite a strong imbalance, which pushed harsh upper frequencies to the fore. Is this enough to make a good performance seem unusually "brusque and heartless"? Quite possibly. Over the course of hundreds of restorations I have witnessed numerous critics entirely change their feelings towards recordings they may have known - and dismissed - for decades, once heard in the new light of an XR-remastered reissue. I choose as always to reserve that judgment to the experts - but it would come as no great surprise if a few reviews were rewritten in the light of this issue.

Andrew Rose



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BRAHMS SYMPHONY No. 3 - DVOŘÁK SYMPHONY No. 8
SZELL, CONCERTGEBOUW ORCHESTRA

szell

conducts brahms & dvořák

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BRAHMS SYMPHONY No. 3 - DVOŘÁK SYMPHONY No. 8
SZELL, CONCERTGEBOUW ORCHESTRA

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BRAHMS Symphony No. 3 in F major, Op. 90

1. 1st mvt. - Allegro con brio (9:44)
2. 2nd mvt. - Andante (7:40)
3. 3rd mvt. - Poco allegretto (5:45)
4. 4th mvt. - Allegro (8:46)

DVOŘÁK Symphony No. 8 in G major, Op. 88

5. 1st mvt. - Allegro con brio (10:04)
6. 2nd mvt. - Adagio (9:51)
7. 3rd mvt. - Allegretto grazioso - Molto Vivace (6:16)
8. 4th mvt. - Allegro ma non troppo (8:54)

Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam
conducted by George Szell

XR Remastered by **Andrew Rose**

Cover artwork based on a photograph of George Szell

Recorded 3 September (Brahms) & 4 September (Dvořák) 1951, Concertgebouw, Amsterdam

Produced by John Culshaw, engineered by Kenneth Wilkinson, first issued by Decca in 1952.

Total duration: 67:00

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