

Carl Schuricht's late-fifties Paris Conservatoire Beethoven symphony cycle is perhaps one of the more unusual recordings both of its era and, more generally, of Beethoven cycles. To begin with there is the question of the recordings themselves.

Made in the Salle Wagram in Paris between 1957 and 1959 at a time when just about everyone was embracing the idea of stereo in classical music recordings, the Schuricht series was made and released in defiant mono. Or was it? For many years this appeared to be the case – certainly the vinyl releases at the time were all mono, and often very competitively priced – in the UK at least.

When EMI reissued the complete cycle in the late 1980s, once again the nine symphonies were released in mono. It was not until the 21st century that a stereo recording from this set emerged, in the shape of the Ninth 'Choral' Symphony – why this had been overlooked for so many years is hard to understand. Nevertheless the rest of the series remains mono or – in the case of these Pristine XR remasters – with a very pleasing Ambient Stereo ambience.

What was also unusual was the French orchestra, which to some contemporary ears outside of the country sounded all wrong: for some it was the playing style, for others the sound of some rather unique instruments in the brass and woodwind were off-putting. But in the fullness of time opinions have been revised and some have come around to the view that this is a very special Beethoven cycle indeed:

"My immediate impression was that I had never heard Beethoven conducted in quite this way. That is not the same as saying I had never heard Beethoven played this way. By certain string quartets, for example. I was reminded of Serkin playing the piano sonatas, even more, perhaps, of late Backhaus. The first symphony immediately created an impression of gut conviction and great vitality. As with late Backhaus, technical perfection is not an essential, phrasing can be a bit rough and breathless, but you get a sense of contact with the music that you more often get from hands-on performers than from conductors whose vision has to be realised by others: namely the orchestra. This generally translates into brisk, spinning tempi that are not driven, or goaded onward, by a conductor with a whip, but have a vitality that seems to arise from the music. In the second movement of this same symphony there is a warm songfulness rather than an attempt to wrest a prayer for humanity from every phrase. It is here, too, that the French woodwind are at their most piquant.

I must record a curious sensation over this. While it is true that the Historically Informed brigade would run a mile from such vibrato, modern performances on period-style instruments have rediscovered a factor which was still available in Paris in the 1950s. Each instrument has its own personality, makes its own contribution to the argument, instead of being blended so that the wind band might as well be a harmonium. With the wind forwardly balanced into the bargain, these performances contain elements that were scarcely heard again until the HIP movement got going two decades later.

This sense of vital contact with the music crescendos through the first three symphonies. The "Eroica" slow movement is an interesting case. Schuricht starts out at a fairly flowing, but expressive tempo. Most conductors start slower, but have to move forward later. Schuricht holds his tempo, but not in the sense of dogmatically ploughing on regardless. He simply doesn't seem to find it necessary to make any adjustment, for his tempo fits every part of the movement beautifully. The proof of this is heard as the initial march theme returns after the climax and sails in without the conductor having to put on the brakes. The final disintegration has rarely been so moving – it emerges so inevitably from what came before. In spite of a not very slow initial tempo this is one of the longer versions on record: at 15:40 it is exceeded by Toscanini's 16:06 in 1939 but is expansive compared with Klemperer's 14:43 in 1956 – and no, I haven't got these the wrong way round...

...The time has now come to take it seriously. Heaven forbid that any critic should recommend a "best version" of such multifarious works, or even a "best version" of each single symphony. We can try to distinguish between the ones that count and those that don't. This cycle counts. It explores avenues of Beethoven interpretation, areas of Beethovenian truth, not touched upon elsewhere." - Christopher Howell, *MusicWeb International*, 2013

Andrew Rose

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schuricht
beethoven symphonies, volume three

beethoven
symphony no. 4
symphony no. 5
orchestre de la société
des concerts du conservatoire
studio recordings, 1957 & 1958

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BEETHOVEN SYMPHONIES VOLUME THREE: NOS. 4 & 5
SCHURICHT, ORCHESTRE DE LA SOCIÉTÉ DES CONCERTS DU CONSERVATOIRE

schuricht

beethoven symphonies, volume 3

BEETHOVEN Symphony No. 4 in B flat major, Op. 60

1. 1st mvt. - Adagio - Allegro vivace (11:44)
2. 2nd mvt. - Adagio (9:21)
3. 3rd mvt. - Allegro vivace (5:28)
4. 4th mvt. - Allegro ma non troppo (7:11)

Recorded 23, 25 & 26 September, 1958

BEETHOVEN Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67

5. 1st mvt. - Allegro con brio (7:35)
6. 2nd mvt. - Allegro con moto (9:45)
7. 3rd mvt. - Scherzo. Allegro (5:12)
8. 4th mvt. - Allegro (8:34)

Recorded 25-27 & 29 April, 1957

Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire
conducted by **Carl Schuricht**

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Andrew Rose

Cover artwork based on a
photograph of Carl Schuricht

Recorded at
Salle Wagram, Paris

Producer: Victor Olof
Engineer: Paul Vavasseur

Total duration: **64:50**

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