

Beethoven

Historic Symphony Recordings

I was tempted to title this release "Historic Gramophone Premieres" - after all, it's regularly stated that Arthur Nikisch's 1913 recording of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony was the first complete recording of any symphony to be made. I've heard it introduced as such on BBC Radio Three, and I've read it in crutche biographies. Yet it's not true - it wasn't even the first recording of this symphony. For that we have to turn the clock back a further three years, and dig out a recording made by Friedrich Kark and the Odéon Symphony Orchestra in 1910, issued on the Odéon label. Perhaps it is better suggested that Nikisch's was the first by a "proper", named and highly regarded professional orchestra, under a conductor still rated today as one of the greatest of all time.

Meanwhile Oskar Fried's *Emilia* was indeed the work's first full recording (though, as often, not all the repeats are there), though in the UK Henry Wood had already recorded an abridged version on six sides some two years earlier, as was his wont at the time - you can find his 1923 Schubert *Unfinished* Symphony also in a condensed version on Pasture Audio (PASC 041). In that case Wood used four shortish sides, the entire recording running to a mere 12'43". Given a little more space, one might thus usefully explore what exactly constitutes a premiere recording..

Niggling questions aside, both of these recordings are indeed major historical events in the history of recorded music. Despite the primitive nature of the recording technology used, both offer serious, excellent interpretations by two of the finest exponents of Beethoven of their era. Whilst neither conductor dates back to the era of Beethoven himself, both were firmly grounded in the Romantic musical tradition which began with the composer. Nikisch was regarded by Brahms as having given the finest interpretation possible of his Fourth Symphony, whilst Fried's closeness to Mahler resulted in him giving the second performance of the Ninth Symphony in 1913, together with the first recording of a Mahler Symphony, his Second, also made in 1924 with the Berlin State Opera Orchestra.

To modern ears these acoustic recordings can seem particularly dim and distant, with their orchestras necessarily cut down and their instruments adapted to recordings made tightly gathered around a single horn. Trying to unlock the sound of these performances from their faint, hissy, crackly and, at times, distorted origins, is going to be a tricky business for any remastering engineer. Dynamic range is very limited, even more severely their frequency range.

And yet there is perhaps far more to be heard and appreciated than first meets the ear when hearing the records "raw", and these XR restorations have unearthed a remarkable level of depth and detail. The dynamic range of these recordings has been pushed to the limit, and a far fuller re-equalised sound, bringing out the (albeit limited) bass, allied to a far more rounded lower midrange, helps convey the true sound of the instruments to a degree few will have appreciated or even noticed before, and hopefully opened the drama of these performances up to some who might otherwise have dismissed them as too archaic to be worthwhile. If this is the case then I would judge this venture to be a success - when given a minute or so to attune my ears it certainly works for me. **AR**

FULL PROGRAMME NOTES CAN BE FOUND ONLINE AT WWW.PRISTINECLASSICAL.COM
SARL Pristine Audio, Le Bourg, 24610 St. Méard de Gurçon, France - Tel. (00) 33 553 821857
www.pristineclassical.com

Beethoven

Historic Symphony Recordings



Symphony No. 5

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra
conductor Arthur Nikisch
Complete recording, 1913



Symphony No. 3

Berlin State Opera Orchestra
conductor Oskar Fried
First complete recording, 1924

XR remastering by **Andrew Rose**

Cover artwork based on photographs of
Arthur Nikisch and **Oskar Fried**

Beethoven Historic Symphony Recordings

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

- 1 1st mvmt. - **Allegro con brio** (6:48)
- 2 2nd mvmt. - **Andante con moto** (9:44)
- 3 3rd mvmt. - **Scherzo: Allegro** (5:33)
- 4 4th mvmt. - **Allegro** (9:10)