

"There exist three live Furtwängler recordings of this symphony (plus another, 1954, version of doubtful origin). A 1944 recording in remarkably good sound with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra [Pristine PASC 260] was issued by Unicorn-Kanchana and DG (both nla) and preserves a spacious, noble performance. Then there is a recording originally issued in Germany by Electrola (nla) which comes from a performance which took place in Berlin on March 14th, 1949; and finally there is the performance we have here, which was played on the day after the Electrola version.

This remarkable reading reaches us under some handicap. The basic sound is somewhat hard and edgy, and in climaxes it breaks up and distorts badly. There must also have been a late winter virus epidemic in the city, and the affected members of the audience seem deliberately to have chosen the most rapt, quiet passages for their explosive coughs. Also, at various points piston-engined aeroplanes drone over the Titania Palast. [The Berlin airlift was still in progress, ending in May 1949-Ed.] Yet through all the distractions Furtwängler shines at his most remarkable, inspirational best, more so I feel than in the earlier Vienna version.

At the beginning of the work there is a strong and immediate feeling of mystery and tension, and the movement unfolds in dramatic, majestic fashion, superbly paced but excitingly subjective too, with marked fluctuations of pulse and tempo. No other conductor, surely, could respond so eagerly to detail and yet preserve the music's argument and sense of architecture so effectively. The Scherzo has a fast, urgent basic tempo, with middle sections by contrast painted in gentle, intimate pastel shades. The long Adagio has fewer idiosyncratic touches, and moves gently but firmly onwards, with climaxes majestically and triumphantly realized. There is a tremendous sense of power in the finale and contrasting episodes are now sharply, dramatically delineated. As to the complexities of the coda, well, they disappear into a foggy din. What a pity.

Nevertheless, here is another superlative Bruckner Eighth. Sympathetic listeners will need their own internal filter system, and fill in detail from their own imagination, but such effort will be amply rewarded."

Alan Sanders, *Gramophone*, September 1990

This 34-year-old review pinpoints precisely what was right – and wrong – with this 75-year-old recording. On one hand the performance is rightly lauded as one of the finest interpretations of Bruckner's 8th Symphony to be captured for posterity, with Furtwängler "at his most remarkable, inspirational best".

The review also skewers the recording's multitude of flaws: a particularly bronchial audience, brittle sound which veers into overload distortion during the loudest passages, all exacerbated at one point by the Berlin Air Lift going on outside the concert hall.

Happily, what was impossible 34 years ago is no longer necessarily untreatable today. The sound, no longer "hard and edgy" is full and warm, clear and vibrant. The distortions, whilst not totally cured, have at least been tamed considerably. Approximately 95 per cent of the coughing has been either eradicated or pushed back to the distant entrance lobby, and those pesky aeroplanes have largely flown off. And if the coda might remain a little misty at the edges, it is no longer a "foggy din". With so many distractions no longer present, this "superlative Bruckner Eighth" is free to shine again.

Andrew Rose



PRISTINE
AUDIO

PASC 729

BRUCKNER SYMPHONY No. 8
FURTWÄNGLER, BERLIN PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

furtwängler

conducts bruckner

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PRISTINE
AUDIO

BRUCKNER Symphony No. 8 in C minor (Haas edition)

1. 1st mvt. - Allegro moderato (15:27)
2. 2nd mvt. - Scherzo. Allegro moderato - Trio. Langsam (13:40)
3. 3rd mvt. - Adagio. Feierlich langsam, doch nicht schleppend (24:54)
4. 4th mvt. - Finale. Feierlich, nicht schnell (21:51)

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra
conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler

XR remastering by: Andrew Rose
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Live recording by RIAS
Recorded at Titania Palast, Berlin, 15 March, 1949

Total duration: 75:52

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