

# REPLAY

Rob Cowan's monthly survey of reissues and archive recordings

## Taking a view on Beethoven...

# A clutch of Ninths

Three mid-century maestri offer a Choral compare-and-contrast

**G**uild Historical has come up with the novel idea of simultaneously releasing three broadcast recordings of Beethoven's *Choral* Symphony so that "the serious music lover has the opportunity to hear how three eminently great, but very different, conductors approached this Mount Everest of the orchestral repertoire". Those conductors are **Arturo Toscanini**, **Wilhelm Furtwängler** and **Fritz Busch**, with each CD including, as a bonus, the overture *Leonore* No 3 – or at least I presume that was the intention. In the case of Busch's bracing, classically conceived reading of the Ninth from 1950 (with the Danish Radio Chorus and Orchestra and soloists Lindberg-Torlind, Jena, Sjöberg and Byrding) what we actually get is *Leonore* No 2 (a 1949 relay previously on a Heliodor LP) although the box, booklet and note insist it's No 3. I'm assuming that the reference in Robert Matthew-Walker's analysis of Busch's performance was changed from "2" to "3" on the misunderstanding that he had typed a misprint. The Busch brothers' biographer Tully Potter assures me that there is no extant Fritz Busch-directed No 3. No matter, both performances are forcefully argued without sounding over-driven and, as Matthew-Walker rightly points out, both offer "commitment and rhythmic elan."

The Furtwängler performance is the oft-reissued BPO broadcast from March 1942 (Briem, Høngen, Anders, Watzke, Bruno Kittel Choir), similar in design to other Furtwängler Ninths that have come down to us, always malleable and filled with a sense of mystery. Though marginally sleeker than others, this particular performance is very intense (especially at the apex of the first movement) and well sung. Guild present it to us as part of a two-disc set that also includes a shattering wartime *Coriolan* Overture, a well known – and very revealing – Stockholm Philharmonic rehearsal of *Leonore* No 3 (1948), with a Concertgebouw performance of the full work from two years later, as well as a commercially recorded Berlin Phil *Egmont* from 1933 and two poorly recorded "live" fill-ups with the Buenos Aires Teatro Colon Orchestra (1950), Handel's Concerto grosso Op 6 No 10 in D (not No 11 in A as stated) with two movements omitted and, interestingly, its last two movements played in reverse order – which wasn't the case on Furtwängler's wartime broadcast recording. Guild also lists two excerpts from Schubert's *Rosamunde*: the first of the tracks (9) is, the second (10) definitely isn't!

The last of Guild's three Ninths also features Teatro Colon Orchestra, this time in 1941 under Toscanini's white-hot direction with the Colon Orchestra Choir and soloists Hellwig, Kindermann, Maison and, most memorably, Alexander Kipnis, a little beyond his prime perhaps, but still with a god-like vocal presence. Toscanini screws up the tension to near-fever pitch; it's an extraordinary traversal and nicely balanced by a cooler if hardly less exciting 1936 *Leonore* No 3 with the New York Philharmonic Symphony. Guild's careful remasterings tend to tame the impact of the originals (everything here has been out before in one form or another) though it's a palatable sound-frame. But turn to Pristine Audio's transfer of a 1936 New York Toscanini Choral and you soon realise just how much



information can be drawn from these sonically compromised airchecks. Tempo-wise there is very little difference between this Ninth and the famous 1952 RCA NBC Symphony recording that Pristine has also reissued (using truly "pristine" HMV: "ALP" LP pressings) but the two orchestras are very unlike, the Philharmonic Symphony scoring especially high in the upper strings department, especially

in the *Adagio*'s more decorative passages. Here as ever one senses a rostrum titan in absolute control, whereas the later performance, although excellent in its way, hasn't quite the flexibility or "singing" quality of its more distantly recorded predecessor. The perfectly adequate post-war line-up of Farrell, Merriman, Peerce and Scott (with the Robert Shaw Chorale) rings less significantly resplendent than Tentoni, Bampton, Kullman and (especially) Ezio Pinza. Do try this Ninth: like so many other NYPSO Toscanini broadcasts from the same period it counters the widely prevalent impression of the Maestro as someone who could never relax, musically, though if you fancy the post-war version, Pristine's warm, nicely aired transfer makes for a pretty painless listen. How fascinating though to hear Toscanini conduct one of his repertory staples with three different orchestras.

Talking of Ninths, I was happy to encounter Beulah's expert transfer/remastering of **Sir Adrian Boult**'s first recording of Schubert's Ninth, a brilliantly executed performance (BBC SO), swift and breezy and, as almost always with Boult, acutely structure-conscious. I was grateful to discover **Anatole Fistoulari**'s 1944 *Unfinished* with the National Philharmonic, a fresh and dramatic reading though not quite as well recorded as the Boult. Beulah add Felix Weingartner's 1928 Basle Symphony version of *Rosamunde*'s Act 2 Entr'acte. However for me Beulah's star release has **Anthony Collins** conduct a programme of "British" music. Rarely have I encountered a more sensitively nuanced reading of Vaughan Williams's *Tallis* Fantasia, with some beautifully judged perspectives, or more luminously played Delius (the "Walk" from *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Song of Summer*). All are with the LSO whereas Sullivan's *Overture di ballo* (a superb performance), Gardiner's *Shepherd's Fennell's Dance* and Grainger's *Shepherd's Hey* are with the New Symphony Orchestra. Beulah adds Vaughan Williams's *Greensleeves* Fantasia, another memorable LSO recording. The transfers are first-rate.

## The Recordings

- **Beethoven** Sym No 9, etc **Busch**  
Guild Ⓟ GHCD2343
- **Beethoven** Sym No 9, etc **Furtwängler**  
Guild Ⓟ GHCD2345/6
- **Beethoven** Sym No 9, etc **Toscanini**  
Guild Ⓟ GHCD2344
- **Beethoven** Sym No 9 **Toscanini**  
Pristine Audio Ⓞ PASC120
- **Beethoven** Sym No 9 **Toscanini**  
Pristine Audio Ⓞ PASC117
- **Schubert** Syms **Boult, Fistoulari, etc**  
Beulah Ⓞ 1PD32
- **Various Cpsrs** Orch Wks **Collins**  
Beulah Ⓞ 1PD26