

BRAHMS: A GERMAN REQUIEM * KLEMPERER

stereo

BRAHMS A GERMAN REQUIEM

Elisabeth
Schwarzkopf
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OTTO
KLEMPERER
CONDUCTING
THE PHILHARMONIA
ORCHESTRA
AND CHORUS



KOOR VAN DE HEEREN: SAINT MICHAEL, MICHAËLS VERGELIJKING SOUS
DETAIL OF 'THE LAST JUDGEMENT' HOSPICE DE BEAUNE FRANCE

EMI
CLASSICS

Klemperer conducts Brahms

Those of us old enough to recall life in London during the late 1950s and the whole of the 1960s know that the concerts conducted by Otto Klemperer (1885-1973) with Philharmonia forces were red-letter occasions for which tickets were like gold dust. Klemperer, who survived innumerable setbacks of a physical nature, had established himself as an indomitable, patriarchal figure at the head of an orchestra and chorus formed by Walter Legge expressly to perform works in public and then to record them. After Karajan had left the orchestra and departed for other shores, Legge appointed Klemperer as the uncrowned head of this musical empire.

As I remember, early concerts under Klemperer were not always full, but very soon, lauded by critics and public alike, he became a favourite at the Royal Festival Hall and remained one virtually for the rest of his active life, admired in the Austro-German classics from Bach to Mahler, but it was, above all, the Beethoven, Bruckner and Brahms evenings that provided the most memorable readings.

In 1961, when this recording was made, Klemperer and the Philharmonia were at the

peak of their powers and their mutual relationship. Wilhelm Pitz, choral trainer extraordinary, had honed the chorus into a dedicated, marvellously co-ordinated, full-toned body of singers, and Klemperer had moulded the orchestra into a band of players responsive to every nuance of his often wayward beat. Klemperer was always insistent on a fair balance between the wind and brass sections and the strings, something he achieved with regularity in the concert hall. Legge managed to transfer all these assets into studio performances that captured most if not all the frisson of the live occasions. It was a partnership not without its awkward moments – Klemperer's frankness and his dry humour were sometimes hard to live with – but the results reveal that Legge, himself strong-willed and opinionated, was willing to accommodate and humour the veteran conductor.

This account of the Brahms *Requiem* was typical of the whole process. The performance at the Festival Hall took place on 3 March, rehearsals for the recording began on 19 March and the major sessions started on 21 March (although one had happened earlier in the year). Incidentally, Peter Heyworth in the second volume of his biography of the conductor (Cambridge University Press, 1996) relates

that, in the course of the 19 March session, Klemperer conducted the Funeral March from the *Eroica* in memory of Beecham who had died on 8 March (Beecham had been in charge of the Philharmonia's inaugural concert in 1945).

Beethoven apart, Brahms was probably the composer closest to Klemperer's heart and he was able satisfyingly to combine the rugged, spiritual and lyrical aspects of this score. He probably empathised with Brahms's attitude to religion; neither was conventionally religious but both undoubtedly felt the weight of the Judaeo-Christian ethic. Also the composer wanted, if not specifically so, to commemorate the deaths of Schumann and of his own mother, both important influences on his life and work, though later he was to say that in writing it he had 'the whole of humanity in mind'. And it is the whole of humanity whom Klemperer seems to be addressing and encompassing in this grand-scale yet paradoxically very human reading.

When the set first appeared, Lionel Salter in *Gramophone* thought the reading to be 'virile and stoic'. He declared the recording itself to be 'sensational' (after all these years it remains a benchmark in sound terms). He commented, quite rightly, on the thought given to balance. 'The size of vocal and instrumental

forces has been adjusted according to the character of each movement, and different perspectives have, quite convincingly, been adopted for the two soloists – the prophetic utterances of the baritone in the foreground, the angelic balm of the soprano's message floating down from farther away.'

Those two soloists were pre-eminent in the work at the time. Fischer-Dieskau's declamatory style and wonderful management of the text are ideal for his part, his 'prophetic utterances' in the third movement superbly delivered. He is no less magnificent in the sixth movement. The soprano has just one chance to make her mark, the ethereal solo that comprises the fifth movement. Schwarzkopf phrases it with all the benefit of her detailed artistry, her purity of tone and breath control exemplary, with a refined *rubato* as she rises to her high B flat.

Above all, success in the execution of this work rests on the performance of the chorus. As has already been suggested the Philharmonia Chorus was at this time unrivalled in terms of both lovely tone and precise execution. The sopranos' tone was gleaming, the tenors better than in any other British choir, the basses firm and strong. These attributes are self-evident throughout the recording, nowhere more so

than in the climaxes of the second movement and the exultant C major fugue of the sixth, while the smaller group of singers used for the fourth movement achieves the flowing, relaxed effect Brahms surely wanted.

So, with dedication obvious on all sides, and one of the towering conductors of his or any day in control, this is truly one of the great recordings of the century. In today's search for authenticity of performance, smaller forces, lighter timbres and faster speeds have been brought into play, but these seem to ignore a performing tradition passed down from the composer's time and made manifest here in Klemperer's grand overview of the work.

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Otto Klemperer in 1960

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