

BERLIOZ REQUIEM

Léopold Simoneau
New England Conservatory Chorus
Boston Symphony Orchestra
Charles Munch
25 April 1959

Berlioz LES NUIT D'ÉTÉ

Victoria de los Ángeles - Boston Symphony
Charles Munch – 1955

Debussy LA DAMOISELLE ÉLUE

Victoria de los Ángeles - Carol Smith - Boston Symphony
Charles Munch – 1955

IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1220-2 (2 CDs: 138:27)

Review by **Ken Meltzer**
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Immortal Performances (IP) presents “world premiere releases” of concert broadcasts from 1955 and 1959 by the Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO) and music director Charles. All performances were recorded in Boston Symphony Hall. In April 23-25, Munch, the BSO, tenor Léopold Simoneau, and the New England Conservatory Chorus performed the Berlioz *Requiem*. The final concert in the series was broadcast. The Berlioz *Summer Nights* and Debussy *Blessed Damsel*, with the Radcliffe Choral Society in the Debussy, and soprano Victoria de los Angeles in both works, were presented on April 7 and 9, 1955. The broadcast included in the IP set is from April 9. Immediately after each concert series, the artists made commercial recordings of the works for RCA. The Berlioz *Summer Nights* and Debussy are monophonic recordings, while the *Grande Messe des morts* is in stereo. All of these commercial releases are superb; indeed they may serve as reference recordings for the repertoire. Which leads to the question: What is the value of the contemporaneous broadcast performances that, while preserved in fine broadcast sound, don't equal the impressive sonics of the RCA commercial releases? A response necessitates some background.

There are many reasons Charles Munch (1891-1968) is one of my favorite conductors (and not just because he was an avid golfer!). A superb violinist, Munch served as concertmaster in the Gürzenich Orchestra of Cologne, conducted by Hermann Abendroth, and the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, under the batons

of Wilhelm Fürtwängler and Bruno Walter. Munch's experience as an orchestral musician informed his approach to conducting, in which he viewed his role as a collaborator, rather than autocrat. In this sense, Munch distinguished himself from his legendary predecessor in Boston, Serge Koussevitsky. Munch's humanity also manifested itself in his private life. During World War II while living in France, Munch supported the Résistance, provided refuge in his home to Allied forces and civilians fleeing the Nazis, and aided his orchestral musicians who were the targets of religious persecution. It's telling that Munch mentions none of this (nor his being awarded the Légion d'Honneur) in his brief, treasurable book *I Am a Conductor* (translated, Leonard Burkat, Oxford University Press, New York, 1955).

Munch's book does offer a wealth of insights into his views on music making, including the special nature of concerts. He describes them as "a celebration": "The lights go down. Conversation in the hall, murmurs in the orchestra are stilled. This is the profound and beautiful silence that precedes the first note of music...What is to be expected of the conductor during the concert?...the conductor must be there to inspire the musicians and to instill in them the emotions the music arouses in him...The spark, the electric current that must emanate from the conductor, is what makes a performance that was carefully prepared in rehearsal become at concert time a masterful one or, as the critics—who do not always have good memories—say, an unforgettable one." (pp. 68-71). We are fortunate there are many audio and video recordings of Munch in live performance. They document an intensely focused musician, for whom the joy of sharing music with his musicians and audience is palpable. And it bears repeating that Munch, as concertmaster, played under the batons of Abendroth, Fürtwängler, and Walter, all of whom relished the unique heat of inspiration generated by live performance.

I don't mean to suggest that the difference between a Munch commercial recording and live performance is as dramatic as one may often find in the case of Hans Knappertsbusch (who loathed recording) and Fürtwängler (who tolerated it). Munch made a wealth of commercial discs, and they are worthy documents of his artistry. A perusal of the total performance times between the broadcast performances on the IP release and the parallel RCA recording offers the following: Berlioz *Requiem* (bdcst: 83:37, RCA: 83:46), *Les Nuits d'été* (bdcst: 29:04, RCA: 30:39), Debussy *La Damselle élue* (bdcst: 20:27, RCA: 20:24). While the versions of Berlioz's *Summer Nights* have the greatest time differential, their impact in that regard does not impress me as striking. And generally, comparisons of the internal movements of the various works do not reveal major differences. No, the contrast between the commercial recordings and the concert broadcasts, including announcer William Pierce's commentary manifests itself in the sense of occasion, and rapt intensity it inspires. The presence of the Symphony Hall audience is evident throughout, sometimes via the occasional cough. Of greater significance, the filled seats at Symphony Hall produce a different, and

somewhat less resonant sonority. One can sense the proximity of the musicians to the patrons, and the artists respond in kind. The contrasts between lyrical and dramatic episodes are more finely etched. I find, for example, the *Tuba mirum* climax and its aftermath even more arresting in the broadcast than the RCA recording, despite the latter's gorgeous stereo sound. Likewise, the choral and solo vocalist declamation in the broadcasts has just a bit more focus and dramatic import. Here, I must commend two beloved artists, soprano Victoria de los Angeles, and tenor Léopold Simoneau, both of whom handle their challenging assignments with the same radiant vocal beauty, patrician artistry, and technical distinction as on the commercial recordings, but with a bit more expression thrown into the mix. Indeed, a comparison between the RCA releases and the broadcasts uncovers no diminishment in the glorious level of execution by all concerned. But the IP release is nonetheless important for documenting the impressive level of performance by Munch and the BSO in concert, and to a degree, its differences from commercial recordings.

The IP booklet contains its characteristic wealth of helpful and fascinating material. My colleague Henry Fogel's commentary eloquently sets the stage for these broadcast treasures. Richard Caniell's commentary on the Berlioz *Requiem* and his Recording Notes is distinguished as well. A wonderful document of a glorious era in BSO and American music history. Recommended.

Five stars: Live concert broadcasts of Charles Munch and the Boston Symphony Orchestra in vocal music by Berlioz and Debussy