



## George Szell: The Warner Recordings, 1934-1970

**Bronislaw Huberman (violin), Artur Schnabel (piano), Benno Moiseiwitsch (piano), Pablo Casals (cello), Elizabeth Schwarzkopf (soprano), Alfred Brendel (piano), Dietrich Fischer Dieskau (baritone), Emil Gilels (piano), David Oistrakh (violin), Mstislav Rostropovich (cello), Wiener Philharmoniker, London Philharmonic Orchestra, Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, Radio-Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, London Symphony Orchestra, The Cleveland Orchestra. Warner Classics 019029526786 (ADD) TT: 818:11 (14 CDs)**

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This is a mostly superb set. The mono recordings, made in Europe between the wars, intrigued me the most, mostly because I hadn't heard them before.

I should come clean. I grew up in Cleveland, and the orchestra's concerts were a big part of my life. Szell represented to me the vessel of the highest musical ideals, even though I was mad about Modern music and he didn't play much of it. Many of the greatest performances I heard of any particular piece came from Severance Hall, or Vatican City as Cleveland aficionados called it, many of which never made it to recording. I remember the closest-to-ideal Verdi Requiem I've ever heard -- not normally a work or a composer you'd associate with Szell. After all, he had a reputation of "precision" (as a pejorative) inflexibility, and "coldness," rather than sentiment or warmth -- a bad rap. Szell was unlike, say, Stokowski (a conductor I also admire) a master of nuance and rhythm with a patrician sense of line and singing. The emotions that one experiences tend to be complex and non-primary-colored. Giving the lie to his inflexibility, his interpretations changed, sometimes from one performance to the next, exposing some new facet in the score, but you had to have critical ears.

The EMI (now Warner) recordings divide into prewar mono and 1960s stereo. The huge Columbia Szell box set duplicates much of the repertoire, but EMI's engineering is much better and comes closer to the sound of the orchestra in Severance. Some of the interpretations are better, some worse. By "better," I mean how close they get to my views of the score. I will list the contents for each CD.

### CD1:

Beethoven: Violin Concerto

Lalo: Symphonie espagnole

Bronislaw Huberman, violin

Vienna Philharmonic/Szell

It's probably not fair, but I had just heard Genette Neveu's recording with Koussevitzky of the Beethoven, which raptured me out. This performance doesn't come close, due in large part to Huberman. He's not bad, but he's also nothing special. Sometimes he comes almost too close to just practicing scales, and there are a lot of them in this concerto. The VPO does well, and Szell's intro to the first movement shows, even at this early stage (1934), his mastery of orchestral balance and phrasing his and emphasis on Beethoven as classicist. Huberman does better in the second movement,

with a fine tone and singing line. The most noteworthy in the third movement is Szell's attention to the rhythm of the low strings.

Unfortunately, I do not care enough about the *Symphonie espagnole* (by anybody) to worry about a particular performance. Nevertheless, the second movement "Scherzando" and the finale "Rondo" dance with a rare delicacy. Also, the performance includes only four of the five movements, just fine by me.

In sum, it's not a Beethoven concerto for the ages (the standard I expect of Szell), but for Szell headbangers like me with an interest in all phases of the conductor's career.

There is, however, on YouTube, a gorgeous performance by Szell and the RSO Köln and one of his favorite violinists, Edith Peinemann, who recorded about as often as sightings of the Bahama nuthatch. Peinemann's intonation is so fine that it becomes an emotional factor in the piece, and her phrasing and shaping of the line matches Szell's. No wonder he liked her.

#### CD2:

J. Strauss II\*: *An die schönen blauen Donau*

*Frühlingsstimmen*

*Pizzicato Polka*

*Tritsch-Tratsch Polka*

Brahms: *Piano Concerto No. 1 in d*

\*Vienna Philharmonic

Artur Schnabel, piano

London Philharmonic Orchestra/Szell

This may come as a surprise to some, but Szell loved the music of the Strauss family. These are fine performances, but he surpassed them on his Sony disc with Cleveland. And, of course, the sound is better than here.

He also surpassed this Brahms in Cleveland with Serkin. The LPO plays a bit raggedly. Schnabel also disappoints. He can't handle the deliberate tempo Szell sets in the first movement, and he often sounds as if he's sewing scraps together, rather than presenting a complex musical argument.

Again, a disc of historic interest, but little aesthetic interest.

#### CD3:

Wagner: *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* - Act I: Prelude

Weber: *Oberon* - Overture

Beethoven: *Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat, "Emperor"*

Benno Moiseiwitsch, piano

London Philharmonic Orchestra/Szell

The disc opens with a fine *Meistersinger* prelude, full of swagger and wit, but you can find a better with the Cleveland on Sony, in stereo, besides.

The *Oberon* overture I've heard but didn't know all that well. I've since gone to my streaming service to bone up on major performances there and found on YouTube a 1970 live performance in Tokyo with Szell and the Cleveland. Of course, there's also Szell's recording with the Cleveland in the Sony box. Szell's razor-sharp rhythm and dynamic builds and fades distinguish him from the pack. The recording here doesn't match the remake with the Cleveland, with some raggedy playing from the LPO horns in the slow intro. The allegro, however, sounds like it's fleeing from a pack of demonic wolves - - exciting, but also a bit frantic, almost a minute quicker than his later readings. Still, the LPO keeps itself together, and its rhythms crackle -- a fine account.

Szell recorded the "Emperor" at least three times -- with Fleischer, Gilels, and Moiseiwitsch.

Moiseiwitsch brings out the lyrical qualities of this concerto -- rare, when too many emphasize the big bow-wow in the score. Even the obviously virtuosic passages come off easily and "naturally."

However, for some reason, soloist and conductor often find themselves spiritually apart in the first movement. The reading doesn't "gel." Nevertheless, the slow movement, particularly the introduction to the second movement "Adagio," establishes a rapturous hush, which Moiseiwitsch beautifully picks up. Again, this falls into the category of "good" or even "interesting," but not "essential."

#### CD4:

Dvor'ák: *Symphony No. 9 in e, "From the New World"*

*Cello Concerto in b*

Pablo Casals, cello

## Czech Philharmonic Orchestra/Szell

The sight of the "New World" with the Czech Philharmonic excited me, since I hadn't heard it. Szell, justly famous for his Dvorák, turned in one of the very best accounts in his Cleveland recording. The recording isn't as bad as I make it sound, but it's not a patch on the stereo remake. The dance rhythms are blurry near the point of non-existence. The opening attack on the second movement is a smudge. The Czech Phil's intonation doesn't meet Szell's usual high standard. Still, I like the overall lack of swoon Szell brings. The emotional clarity strikes more deeply than the glam treatment. Lack of definition in the dance rhythm of the main theme from the strings mar the scherzo. The trio lacks the buoyancy of the remake. It may be a matter of the recording itself. The rhythmic and intonation smears carry into the finale.

I'll also commit heresy and say that I never cared for Casals as a cellist. Among his near contemporaries, I prefer Feuermann and Fournier. The Szell-Casals Dvorak concerto by consensus ranks as one of the master recordings of the work, so that makes me a crank. To me, Szell's recording with Fournier and the Berlin Philharmonic surpasses it by at least a stride of the seven-league boots. The orchestral introduction is superb, with all those Czech Phil intonation and rhythmic problems gone, and they sound a hell of a lot better than in the symphony, besides. For me, Casals is far too bluff and hearty, at times even stodgy. He lacks the delicacy for this emotionally subtle work. I kept waiting for the tutti passages to get back to the work as I want to hear it. Szell and his players invest the work with the poetry of the performance. I will admit, however, that the soloist does best in the finale and achieves a rapport with his accompanists.

## CD5:

R. Strauss: 4 letzte Lieder

Muttertändelei

Zueignung

Freundliche Vision

Die heiligen drei Königen

Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, soprano

Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra/Szell

A classic album. Both Schwarzkopf and Szell stand among the foremost Straussians of their day -- Schwarzkopf the archetypal Marschalin and Szell \*the\* great Strauss conductor. Of course, as a young man, he had worked as Strauss's assistant, even filling in for him at at least one recording session because Strauss ran late. Strauss arrived in time to conduct the last movement. In Szell's composing days, he modeled his music on Strauss's. You can't really go wrong here.

I love Strauss's operas but am often put off by his songs, many of which strike me as rather fussy, full of curlicues and adornments at the expense of melody. They pose a considerable technical challenge to singers, and the effect of hearing one can often -- to riff on an analogy by Dr. Johnson -- seem like watching a dog do backflips.

On the other hand, Strauss also wrote some of the greatest songs in the repertoire. The Vier letzte Lieder (four last songs) certainly qualify. They greatly resemble one another in mood -- four bus tickets to the ecstatic -- but Strauss has the skill to avoid cloying. It doesn't hurt that each song is supremely beautiful. These and the selection of miscellaneous orchestral songs presented here present Strauss at his best. They depend at least as much on the orchestra as on the singer. Strauss tends to set a scene with his gift of painting literal details with his orchestra. One "sees" a pair of larks flying across the sky, hears cattle lowing and wind rushing through branches, and so on. There are long passages for solo instruments -- particularly a meltingly gorgeous violin solo in the Four Last Songs, superbly played in this performance, and a two-minute coda in "Die heiligen drei Königen" for orchestra alone.

Schwarzkopf skillfully makes Strauss's vocal lines seem natural -- as if she "just sang," a quality not often associated with her art. Szell turns the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra into an other-worldly ensemble. Such intonation and clarity! Such warmth and beauty of tone! One might complain that if you can do the Four Last Songs at all, you have to do them well, but Szell ranks altogether higher than that. The emotional content, the fervor give the lie to the characterization of Szell as a cold, heartless technician only. A technician he certainly was -- even a wizard -- but certainly not cold.

## CD6:

Mozart: Ch'io mi scordi di te? ... Non tamer amato ben\*

Vado ma dove? ... O Dei

Alma grande e nobile care  
 Nehmt meinem Dank  
 R. Strauss: Ruhe, meine Seele  
 Meinen Kinde  
 Wiegenlied  
 Morgen\*\*  
 Das Bächlein  
 Das Rosenband  
 Winterweihe  
 Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, soprano  
 \* Alfred Brendel, piano  
 \*\* Edith Peinemann, violin

London Symphony Orchestra/Szell

A program of Mozart concert arias and a miscellany of Strauss orchestral songs.

Szell, one of the great Mozarteans, reserved this composer for the artists he most respected, both the famous and the lesser-known: Schwarzkopf, Serkin, Peinemann, Raskin, and Casadesu, certainly, but also Druian, Skernick, and Marcellus, principals of the Cleveland Orchestra.

I must say that Schwarzkopf disappoints me in the Mozart arias. She recorded these late in her career and the voice shows signs of age. Furthermore, her diction often turns to mush, so that you have no idea of the text. I think of her as having crisp enunciation, so this shocked me. At any rate, you wind up listening to an abstract vocal line. Szell, however, delivers his best. I describe his Mozart with difficulty. It combines a classical poise so intense that it becomes, paradoxically, moving. The big aria, "Ch'io mi scordi di te," receives a glorious performance. Unusually, it features a prominent solo piano part (here played by Alfred Brendel in perfect emotional synch with Szell), which I assume Mozart played in his performances as he conducted from the keyboard. This track stands as one of the highlights of a fabulous set of discs.

Much of what I said about Strauss under the previous CD applies here. Most of these songs strive for the ecstatic moment, although again Strauss finds sufficiently different music almost every time. He again uses the gambit of the extended coda, and in "Morgen!" an extended introduction featuring solo violin. Edith Peinemann plays as if the violin had an actual soul. Schwarzkopf does better in the Strauss than in the Mozart, even though her diction does go south occasionally and she mouths strange vowels. Again, Szell performs miracles of clarity and balance with the orchestra. Strauss's orchestra can sound cluttered and clumpy in less-than-capable hands. Not here. Szell also pulls off the illusion that this music flows "naturally."

A locus classicus of Strauss song performance.

CD7:

Mahler: Des Knaben Wunderhorn  
 Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, soprano  
 Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, baritone  
 London Symphony Orchestra/Szell

One of my two favorite Des Knaben Wunderhorns. The other is a very different account with Janet Baker, Geraint Evans, and the London Philharmonic Orchestra, led by Wyn Morris. Szell's recording was controversial when it came out and the embers of those flames haven't yet gone out. Some thought it too fussy -- from the soloists to the conductor. Writers complained about the assignment of some of songs between male and female, different from the usual arrangement, but surely it doesn't matter who, but how well.

There were more important disagreements. The Wunderhorn songs, after all, were Mahler's connection to German folk music and poetry. On the other hand, although Mahler could conjure up innocence, he did so with very sophisticated means, and the music doesn't shed its sophistication -- no matter who performs it -- any more than Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* does. I make room for both views, although I allow that they stress different aspects of the score. Besides, the original poems weren't exactly folk poetry, but von Arnim and Brentano's recreations in the folk idiom, either through silent alteration of the folk source or the inclusion of original poems.

For me, Mahler and Schubert represent the summit of German song, as marvelous as Schumann, Brahms, and Richard Strauss may be (I'm not Hugo Wolf's biggest fan). His melos and use of the orchestra differ from that of his contemporary Strauss. Strauss practices Wagner's "endless melody." With the major exceptions of Symphony No. 8 and *Das Lied von der Erde*, Mahler writes "tunes,"

melodies with song-like shapes less subject to routine chromaticism -- never more so than in the Wunderhorn songs. Strauss's orchestrations of his songs are gorgeous, but one usually hears a "wash" of sound and when the details assert themselves, they do so with pictorial intent. Mahler's lines are leaner, more distinct, and more salient. The essence of his music is counterpoint -- different melodies weaving together or different distinct planes of musical activity -- and the details assert themselves with dramatic, psychological effect.

I like the Morris recording mainly for Janet Baker. I prefer her voice to Schwarzkopf's. However, Schwarzkopf's diction (remarkably improved from the previous CD) is back to her usual excellent, and enunciation never was Baker's strong point. I also prefer Evans's tone to Fischer-Dieskau's, but F-D yields nothing in drama to Evans.

As far as the orchestra goes, you will never hear these songs better played than by Szell and the LSO. Not only is the texture preternaturally clear (you can pretty much follow the orchestration without a score), but the phrasing melts you, especially in something like "Der Tamboursg'sell." This Wunderhorn receives a reading full of wit, rapture, and tragedy. Another landmark of the stereo era.

#### CD8-CD10:

Beethoven: Piano Concertos (complete)

Emil Gilels, piano

The Cleveland Orchestra/Szell

This set is a beautifully recorded and played little shop of horrors. The main problem is Gilels, who had his own ideas and would not be moved. I didn't like Gilels even before this set came out, thinking him merely uninteresting. After this set, I began to seriously question his musicianship. Why Szell agreed to these recordings remains a mystery, especially when his accounts of the five concerti with Leon Fleisher are considered touchstones of these scores.

From the crude tromping of the first movement of Concerto No. 1 to the blatant ignoring of many marks in the score of the "Emperor," Gilels mostly moves from disaster to disaster. He does best in the Concerto No. 3, but not significantly better than many others. Mostly, he's way too smooth, a practitioner of the super-glam treatment, which really isn't my (or most's) musical image of Beethoven. He drops his biggest brick in my favorite of the set, the Concerto No. 4. I loved this work so much, I spent three months studying the score. Beethoven wrote not one, but two cadenzas for the first movement, and Gilels chose the less interesting. Ah, well.

Sounds pretty, anyway.

#### CD11

Brahms: Violin Concerto in D

Double Concerto in a

David Oistrakh, violin

Mstislav Rostropovich, cello

The Cleveland Orchestra/Szell

You have your pick of Brahms violin concertos, but this should be one of them, along with Heifetz/Reiner, Szeryng/Monteux, and your favorite violinist.

Critics call the concerto "symphonic," due largely to the huge first movement -- longer than many entire violin concertos -- which presents a complex argument based on four main ideas. Indeed, composition students analyze this movement for tips on how to construct a large movement. The star here is Brahms, with Oistrakh, Szell, and the Cleveland, as strong principals. I know of no other performance which unlocks so much of this score. They not only limn the structure but press the movement's strong emotional contrasts -- serenity against drama -- the motor of the argument. If you want more emphasis on the soloist, try Oistrakh with Kondrashin or just about any other combo.

Brahms originally planned a four-movement concerto, which of course would have emphasized its resemblance to a symphony, but replaced two inner movements (an allegretto and a scherzo) with this Adagio, which he called "feeble." No idea what he was talking about, because this movement sings its way deep into the bone. The main melody resembles the composer's song "Sapphischer Ode." So many emote over this movement, turning it into a sentimental chromo and ignore the darker moments. Oistrakh and Szell go for something more tough-minded -- Szell's normal inclination and Oistrakh's strong, rich tone. The interplay between soloist and accompaniment stand out, especially the way the winds and strings weave subsidiary melodies that support the violin. Other composers in such music would have leaned more on chords, block or arpeggiated, but Brahms loved counterpoint.

The finale pays tribute to "gypsy" café music -- its abandon and love of virtuosity. You will hear more

suave versions than Szell and Oistrakh, but I like the rougher edge here. Still, roughness doesn't mean sloppy. The considerable electricity Oistrakh and Szell throw off derives from rhythmic precision. The Double Concerto originated at the request of a cellist. However, Brahms may have felt that the balance problems between a cellist and an orchestra in a concerto may have been too great. After hearing Dvor'ák's cello concerto, for example, he exclaimed, "Had I known that one could write a cello concerto like this, I would have written one long ago!" Adding the violin gave him a sonority that could pierce through or at least rise above most of the orchestra. Brahms, one of the most historically literate musicians of his day, of course knew earlier examples of double concerti. However, he brought something new to the genre -- Sturm und Drang, as opposed to the Baroque and Classical eras' balanced conversation, a lightning-blasted tree rather than topiary. At the same time, however, this concerto, like the one for violin, spins a complex argument. You just can't tromp through it. I consider this performance one of the very best, but for a long time, EMI didn't release it on CD, preferring these soloists with the bland Herbert von Karajan. Szell's uncanny delineation of structure and the power generated by not only these soloists but also Szell and the Cleveland's biting attacks and sharp rhythm make this a Double Concerto to treasure. Just one example, listen to the opening measures -- the call to arms from the orchestra followed by Rostropovich's stabbing entry of one note, which should raise the hairs on the back of your head. At the same time, the Cleveland winds can melt you in the lyrical bits. The soloists accomplish a Vulcan mind-meld in their chamber-like unanimity of ensemble with one another and yet remain full-throated. They don't strike one as either careful or lackadaisical. The transitions from fiery to serene sound so perfectly right that you don't really experience them as transitions, but as a smooth change of light. The lyrical second movement is both heartfelt and restrained, in the way of Szell's usual treatment of pure singing. He trusts the music and doesn't see the need to paint a tear on its cheek. The finale dances vigorously, with subtle contributions from those fabulous Cleveland winds. It is a tribute to the soloists that they take their proper places in the spotlight and a tribute to Szell that he accompanies with such mastery.

#### CD12:

Schubert: Symphony No. 9 in C, "Great"  
The Cleveland Orchestra/Szell

I get the impression that this symphony never received many recordings until after the World War II. Off the top of my head, I can think of recordings only by Furtwängler, Klemperer, Toscanini, and Beecham of the older accounts. Now, it's become a necessary score for any conductor who aspires to first rank. The nickname "Great" was originally applied to distinguish it from the composer's Sixth, in the same key, although its fans (I'm one) wouldn't mind it as an indication of its quality. However, I hesitate to call it Schubert's greatest symphony, since it competes against the Eighth ("Unfinished"), mainly because at that level it's like asking whether Sophocles can beat up Shakespeare. Szell introduced me to this symphony on his Columbia/Sony LP. I've heard other performances that equal it in their individual ways, for this score asks for different interpretations. What distinguishes Szell's performance is the sense that he makes you see the entire movement as a whole, rather than as a succession of passages. The EMI remake surpasses it in two ways: better engineering from EMI and a warmer, deeper interpretation from Szell. It's my favorite recording of this symphony.

#### CD13:

Dvor'ák: Symphony No. 8 in G  
Slavonic Dance in e, op. 72/2  
Slavonic Dance in A-flat, op. 46/3  
The Cleveland Orchestra/Szell

Szell conducted the big and not-so-big Czech composers -- especially Smetana and Dvor'ák -- so many times that Severance Hall became known as the Temple of Czech Culture (behind his back). He orchestrated Smetana's second string quartet in an effort to introduce it to American audiences (quartets didn't play it). He championed Dvor'ák's violin and piano concerti, even today a bit off the beaten path. Of that composer's symphonies, he confined himself to the last three. I recall the earlier ones beginning to make their way in the Sixties. I'm not going to call the Eighth Dvor'ák's greatest symphony, but merely my favorite, and this performance to me surpasses his earlier outing on Columbia/Sony. Again, the difference comes down to superior engineering and a warmer, more expansive reading from Szell, but not at the expense of intonation or rhythmic snap. If anything, the phrasing is even more elegant than in the earlier recording, with masterly dynamic control.

Szell's account of the Slavonic Dances with the Cleveland ranks as the ne plus ultra recording of this work -- another landmark in the history of recording. When orchestral musicians listen at home, a lot of them choose this. Szell liked to use the excerpts here for his encores on tour. They don't disappoint.

CD14:

George Szell -- A Memoir

A narrative interlaced with interview material from members of the Cleveland and London Symphonies as well as such lights as Stanley Drucker and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. You also get a brief snippet of Szell in rehearsal with Emil Gilels. As these things go, it's not too bad, even here and there insightful.

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