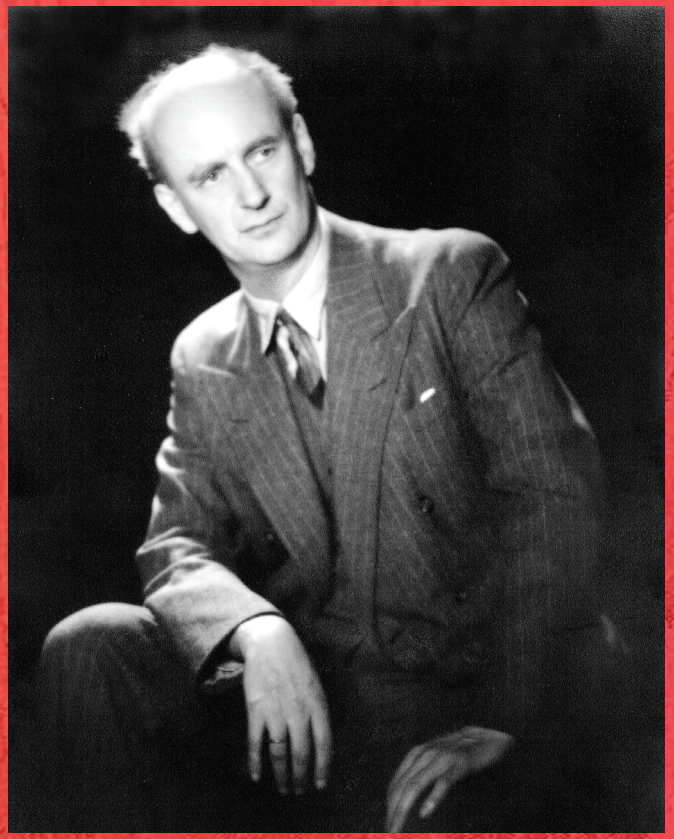
SOCIÉTÉ WILHELM FURTWÄNGLER

"Studies"

FURTWÄNGLER'S TELEFUNKEN RECORDINGS



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Wilhelm Furtwängler made only three recordings for Telefunken. Each of them has interest in documenting the conductor's musicianship at this stage of his career. In one case, the recording of Beethoven's Cavatina, the Telefunken disc represents the only recorded example of Furtwängler's interpretation.

Telefunken Systemtechnik GmbH began in 1903 as a subsidiary of Siemens & Halske AG. The company soon became a major player in radio and electronics manufacturing. Following World War II Telefunken vacuum tubes and microphones became well known and widely used in the recording industry.

In 1932 Telefunken began producing gramophone records, with studio facilities located in Berlin and Hamburg. The company developed a classical music catalog, first by reissuing Czech Ultraphon productions under license, then issuing their own recordings.

Telefunken inevitably sought out conductors in Germany to build their catalog. Early on they utilized the rising star Eugen Jochum (1902-1987), Generalmusikdirektor in Hamburg and chief conductor of the Philharmonisches Staatsorchester Hamburg, which also served as the orchestra of the Hamburg Opera. Jochum recorded works by Beethoven, Brahms, Mozart, and Wagner with his Hamburg ensemble and the Berlin Philharmonic during this period.

Wilhelm Furtwängler's recording career in Germany had faltered in the aftermath of his spirited defense of Paul Hindemith in 1934. The Berlin public remained steadfast to him, and upon his restoration to the podium of the Berlin Philharmonic in 1935 he continued to be a popular figure with concertgoers. Furtwängler's relationship with Deutsche Grammophon terminated following recording sessions in 1936. He did not record again until 1937-38, when for HMV he made impressive discs of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, the Tchaikovsky "Pathetique", and excerpts from Wagner's *Parsifal* and *Tristan und Isolde*.

On 17-20 March 1940, Furtwängler and the Berlin Philharmonic performed an all-Beethoven concert. The first three dates were in the Berlin Philharmonie, the last concert was in Hanover. The repertoire included Beethoven's *Eighth Symphony*, and two movements from the original form of his *String Quartet, Op. 130*: the *Cavatina* and the mighty *Grosse Fuge* (Beethoven later replaced that movement with a new finale). Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* concluded the program. One of the Berlin programs was recorded for later broadcast (aired on 1 April 1940). Six months later, Furtwängler was invited to record the *Cavatina*, which encompassed a single 78RPM disc, for Telefunken (15 October 1940).

Critic Michael Steinberg (in *The Beethoven Quartet Companion*) termed the *Cavatina* "one of Beethoven's most inward and wonderful slow movements." This is high praise indeed when one considers such impressive examples as the Marcia funebre from the *"Eroica" Symphony*, the introspective, the affecting *Adagio* from the *"Emperor" Concerto*, or the *Adagio* from the *Ninth Symphony*.

The Op. 130 *Adagio* movement known as *Cavatina*, to which the composer added the indication *molto espressivo* is only 66 bars long. Its emotional impact though far outweighs its comparative brevity. Played by the full body of the Berlin Philharmonic string section, this touching movement takes on

even more depth of expression. The listener admires the fine dynamic control achieved by Furtwängler and his players as they navigate the elegant flow of this music.

Furtwängler revived the *Cavatina* transcription only for several concerts in the Berlin Philharmonic's tour of April and May 1952. The piece was played in Hanover, Baden-Baden, Stuttgart, and Bielefeld. Unfortunately none of these tour performances survived as a recording. This Telefunken recording therefore is unique in the Furtwängler canon.

Furtwängler showed strong allegiance to both of Christoph Willibald Gluck's best known operatic overtures, *Alceste* (1767) and *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1774), throughout his career. He consistently played these works in serious, Germanic style, with strong bass lines and dramatic impulse. On 8 March 1954 he recorded both works in the Musikvereinssaal with the Vienna Philharmonic, and these recordings can be considered definitive representations of his interpretations.

The Telefunken disc of the *Alceste Overture* nonetheless has its own merits. This recording was made on 28 October 1942, the same day as a concert in which Furtwängler led the overture along with Schumann's *Cello Concerto* and Bruckner's *Symphony No. 5*. It is very well recorded for its time, and exhibits more urgency than the conductor's later interpretations of this score. The intensity of the faster sections is gripping, and Furtwängler's fine control in relaxing into the quieter material consistently impresses. The coda is riveting, each quiet chord held as if the conductor was reluctant to reach the conclusion.

In the introduction to his score, Gluck wrote that an operatic overture "should inform the spectators of the subject that is to be enacted, and constitute, as it were, the argument" (translation by Patricia Howard). Even conceding that the potential for music to outline a detailed narrative is limited, it is clear that Gluck intended his overture to set the stage and mood for the drama that followed. In this sense, Furtwängler's' interpretation of the work as a concert piece is entirely justified in emphasizing its drama.

Furtwängler performed the Felix Weingartner arrangement of the Overture to *Alceste*, which incorporated a concert ending. He apparently found the *coda* in this arrangement too distended. He therefore made an 18-bar cut following the opening violin figure of the *Andante* (12 bars after rehearsal number 11). Furtwängler's abridgement then segues neatly into the corresponding violin phrase nine bars before the close.

Conductor Paul Vermel (1924-2024) was an avid admirer of Furtwängler, and once showed me his conducting score of the *Alceste Overture*. He had meticulously annotated Furtwängler's performance inflections as well as his abridgement of the coda, an amendment that Vermel agreed with and followed in his own performances.

Telefunken's recording of the *Adagio* movement from Bruckner's *Seventh Symphony* was made on 1 April, 1942. This was an agonizing period for Furtwängler, vividly described in Fred Prieberg's *Trial of Strength*. The conductor busied himself with rehearsals and concerts in Vienna, including the 100th birthday celebration of the Vienna Philharmonic, while Goebbels wanted him to come to Berlin and conduct for the Führer's birthday (19 April). Furtwängler tried to resist his wishes and attempted to create a scheduling conflict with an upcoming Vienna concert. Unfortunately the Vienna performance of Beethoven's *Ninth* was postponed under pressure and Furtwängler was obligated to return to Berlin.

It is unknown why Telefunken recorded only the *Adagio* movement. They previously recorded the entire symphony with Eugen Jochum conducting the Vienna Philharmonic in May of 1939, but Furtwängler was a famed proponent of the score. The early Fried and Horenstein recordings from the 1920s were by then obsolete due to technical advances. Surely there was room in the catalog for another complete recording. Alas it was not to be one by Furtwängler. Electrola seized the opportunity to record the entire work under Kabasta in September 1942, underlining the missed opportunity.

Again one hears the superior technical quality of the Telefunken engineers. This recording easily captures a full dynamic range, as well as the finely balanced ensemble from double basses to the brilliant trumpets. Furtwängler unfolds the score with patience, and the Berlin Philharmonic sounds spectacular. The quartet of Wagner tubas plays their part in the sublime coda with true artistry.

The Telefunken discs register the percussion at the climax of the movement (Letter W) with clarity. This is a stark contrast to the Furtwängler/Berlin performance of Bruckner's *Seventh* captured on a home disc recorder in February 1941; in that recording one can scarcely tell that there is a cymbal crash. This Telefunken account does not however include the spectacular tympani *crescendo* inserted before the climax, as heard in Furtwängler's broadcast recording with the BPO taped in October 1949. Furtwängler discarded that amendment in his 1951 performances of the Bruckner *Seventh*.

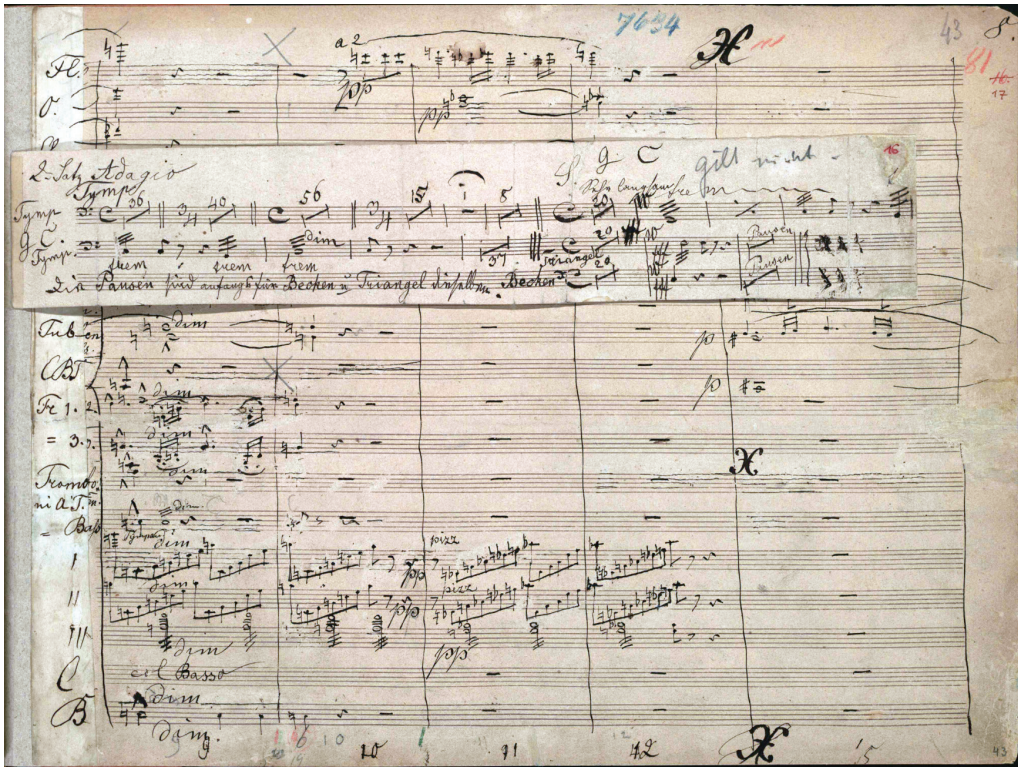
Furtwängler continued to perform the *Seventh Symphony* with the percussion in the *Adagio*, even after the Robert Haas edition published in 1944 omitted the percussion. Christa Brüstle showed that Haas's editorial decisions became influenced by unfavorable copyright decisions in 1936-38. In order for a Haas

edition to be considered for copyright after that point, it had to be distinct from both Bruckner's manuscript and from the previous published edition. Thus in 1938 Haas mixed elements from Bruckner's earlier version of his *Second Symphony* (not published at the time) into the 1877 version that was finally published in 1892. As William Carragan pointed out, this led to a handwritten note by Leopold Nowak concerning one point where the two versions were joined: "Woher die Streicher?" Carragan explained Nowak's puzzlement as to where the string parts came from—they were composed by Haas to facilitate the transition.

In the case of the *Seventh*, Haas had a problem in that the manuscript was used as the printer's score for the first published edition. Undeterred, he "recovered" earlier readings of a few passages that were revised in the manuscript, for example, restoring brass passages that Bruckner erased after letter E in the opening movement (Bruckner's manuscript can be viewed at the IMSLP website). What justification was there for Haas to eliminate the clearly indicated divisi passages in the first violins after letter G in the same movement? Only he knew.

The composer carefully wrote out the percussion additions in the *Adagio* on a folded strip of paper inserted into the score. Haas was not bold enough to cross out these passages (Bruckner would have either done that, or simply discarded the strip, if he truly had second thoughts concerning them). Instead, Haas pointed to "gilt nicht," written on the strip in bold pencil, rather than inked in Bruckner's characteristic hand.

Haas claimed the notation was "in the writing of Bruckner's old age." Viewed with modern eyes, it's not even a passable forgery. The penciled note completely fails to capture the composer's typical lightly penned loop forming the bottom of the "g" and the "n" and "t" in «nicht» are entirely uncharacteristic. In this case it is safe to say that Furtwangler's instincts were correct in trusting the composer at his word.



Seventh Symphony: Adagio.
Original manuscript,
with the strip paper.
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