



Brahms

Alto Rhapsody, Op.53

Schicksalslied, Op.54

Mahler

Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen

Mildred Miller (mez-sop)

The Occidental College Concert Choir

Columbia Symphony Orchestra

Speakers Corner 180gm LP: MS 6488

Performance: 4

These performances - which date from June, July and December 1960 and January 1961 - form part of Bruno Walter's Indian summer with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra and feature two composers he was particularly associated with. The programme opens with the glorious Brahms Alto Rhapsody, whose second section is graced by one of the composer's greatest melodies and from the opening bars where the lower strings dig-in and the instrumental lines are beautifully balanced it is obvious that this is going to be a fine performance. When Mildred Miller - who was only 35 in June 1960 - enters you hear a rich, fruity voice, whose tone has more than a hint of the contralto about it, which she uses to solemnly intone the text and her intonation is good, but nowhere does she equal Janet Baker with Adrian Boult (HMV), but then again, nor does anyone else.

Schicksalslied (Song of Destiny) is an interesting work, which receives an eloquent, beautifully balanced, flowing performance and as in the Rhapsody, the singing of The Occidental College Concert Choir (where do Americans get these names from?) is well-focused and projected.

As you might expect from one of the great Mahler conductors, Walter is alive to every change of mood in the multi-faceted *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (it comes as a surprise to learn from Erik Ryding and Rebecca Pechefsky's discography that this is his only recording of the work) where his use of orchestral rubato and effortless changes of tempo are completely natural. Miller is also vividly characterises the words using a wide range of dynamic and tonal shading, but again Janet Baker with John Barbirolli (HMV) is even better.

Sound

Balance: 3

Inner balance: 2/3

Detail and clarity: 2/3

Dynamic range: 3

In the Brahms pieces the overall balance is slightly recessed, Mildred Miller is stage-front and too dominant (although by the standards of the era she isn't in your face) the chorus - as they should do - sound as though they are behind the orchestra, but move forward in forte passages. The orchestral sound is rich, but lacks definition and transparency, so the brass are often inaudible, but when they can be heard the horns have a mono-like tubular quality, woodwind solos aren't unduly highlighted, the string tone is full if a little amorphous and the dynamic range is no more than adequate.

A few months earlier the engineers - at the same venue, the American Legion Hall, Searcy - created a different sound in the Mahler, where there is more reverberation, the image more recessed, which means Miller's voice sounds smaller, if more naturally balanced, crucially, given the kaleidoscopic nature of Mahler's orchestration, the image has greater clarity, although woodwind solos in forte passages do have a tendency to jump out at you, which is unnatural. Nevertheless, while this doesn't challenge British Columbia, Decca, Mercury, or for that matter, RCA Living Stereo sound of that era, it is acceptable and doesn't seriously detract from the performances.