Luciano Berio – Sinfonia (1968)

1 .Side One 2. Side Two The Swingle Singers New York Philharmonic Luciano Berio – conductor

This is the definitive performance of this piece, Berio's masterpiece, conducted by the composer, with the original Swingle Singers doing a phenomenal job in a most challenging set of parts, as conceived and written for them.

The competition is thin. The Eotvos is okay, but nothing special. The Boulez is dreadful, one of his worst recorded performances. He simply has no gut-level feel for this music, for its flambouyant theatricality, and the recording is poorly balanced and almost inaudible in places--especially in the centerpiece, the extraordinary Mahler/Beckett-trope movement. Berio conducted his own masterpiece brilliantly. So why hasn't Columbia/Sony ever released this magnificent recording digitally?

Undoubtedly because it's only the 4-movement version; they may even be forbidden from releasing it by Berio's estate. This is actually one of the virtues of the 1968 recording, however, as the 5th is by far the weakest movement of the Sinfonia. It's the only one that sounds like boilerplate "contemporary music"; its supposed culminating role, as quoting from and tying up all the strands of the other 4, simply doesn't work very well.

Or perhaps this movement is better than I think, but the only existing recordings (Boulez and Eotvos) have made a really bad case for it. Come to think of it, Berio rehearsed and conducted the Sinfonia in Tanglewood, when? in the late 70s/early 80s? It must have been the 5-movement version, and it was another brilliant performance. Did that performance get

recorded? Are there bootlegs floating around? At any rate, this 1968 vinyl is still the best version of this amazing piece, without any question at all, and should be treasured by everyone who owns it--at least until you can find a digital transfer. Anyone who doesn't yet own it and still has a turntable, snap it up. If the only version you know of the Sinfonia is the Eotvos (or, heaven help you, the Boulez), you're in for a treat! ---C. Smith, amazon.com

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