Beethoven - 9th Symphony (' Choral ') (1981)

I - Allegro Ma Non Troppo, Un Poco maestoso II-Motto Vivace ; Presto III-Adagio Molto E Cantabile IV-Presto;Allegro Assai; Rezitativo Allegro assai Lucine Amara (soprano), Lili Chookasian (contralto), John Alexander (tenor), John Macurdy (bass) Mormon Tabernacle Choir Philadelphia Orchestra Eugene Ormandy – conductor (CBS Masterworks - Great Performances 34)

This Ninth proves what a superb musician Ormandy, at best, can be. The opening movement is played with breadth and impetus, an exciting multi-tonal drama beside which some celebrated German performances sound tentative, pedestrian even. The acoustic is a reverberant one, adding a certain richness but never clouding or obscuring the flow of the drama. After this there is a superb scherzo, an adagio which, though hardly ever dolce, is winningly articulate, and a finale which, in spite of some gruffness in the instrumental recitative (and some 'traditional' touches: the crescendo in bar 65, for instance) emerges winningly, thrillingly in fact: orchestra and choir hymning the brotherhood of man with a certainty that we Europeans can't always quite muster. If one were to quibble one could point to some rather clipped and drilled choral singing at the very start of the choral contribution; and to an Alla marcia which is proud, loud and rather slow. But how splendidly the choir sings later on— fervent but never gauche—and how refreshing to hear the Alla marcia given such a portentous tread, with flashing trumpets and a gloriously sounded fugato to follow. The admirable single-disc Ansermet tends to sound dull by comparison, interpretatively and sonically, though the turnover midway through the slow movement is better managed by Decca. CBS's trick of ending on bar 82 and then re running it at the start of Side 2 doesn't work. All we require as we turn the disc rapidly ovens an answer to the query posed in bar 82, mat a reiteration of the question. But that is a miniscule point. For this Philadelphia Ninth-has abundant merits (apart from its priee).: above all, a vibrance, a conviction—a sail-filling quality— that one joys to hear. R.O. --- .gramophone.net

In my book this was the definitive performance of Beethoven's 9th even if Ormandy skipped the repeats in the second movement, as he is wont to do. The performance lives up to everything said by previous reviewers and more. If you believe that there are two classes of conductor, Eugene Ormandy then all the others, this is a must-have CD despite it's major flaws. I bought this recording on vinyl in the 1970s and finally got the CD. What a disappointment. The original analog recording sounds great in the softer areas but the tape is saturated in some of the loud parts. There are many places where you can clearly hear the harmonic distortion, especially when the timpani are playing loudly. There are also occasional dropouts, with a major one in the left channel about 1:25 into the first movement (it sounds like a wrinkle in the tape but seeing that it is in only one channel it's probably a flaw in the oxide). In the third movement there is so much crackling and popping that I could swear they digitized a vinyl recording for the CD. Seriously, I think the master tape must have been lost or damaged and this CD was made from a bad copy. Also, I know there is an Ormandy recording where he takes the repeats in the second movement. I borrowed it from the public library as part of the complete symphonies many years ago. Columbia apparently edited the repeats out to fit the symphony on a single vinyl disk for the single-disk release. Why didn't they use the unedited version here? There's room on the CD. This recording is a must-hear because it is an unbeatable performance of the 9th, and I'm glad to have it. However, don't clamp on your best headphones and expect to hear an excellently-engineered recording. The quality of the recording is, unfortunately, second-rate.

Update: There is an excellent recording of the Ormandy performance of Beethoven's 9th available. It's out of print but available used here at Amazon if you search "Beethoven symphony 9 Ormandy". It is the two-disk set that includes the Choral Fantasy. It's a bit pricey on the used market but it sounds excellent and includes the repeats in the second movement. --- Bob DuHamel (El Cajon, CA USA)

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