

# Furtwängler and the Eroica Benoît Lejay

Translated by Roger Smithson

Translator's note: This comparative study appeared in a recent French Society bulletin, and we are grateful to M. Lejay for permission to publish this translation.

M. Lejay's identification of the performances of 20 June 1950 and 8 December 1952 accords with the findings presented by Ernst Lumpe in the last newsletter - that is, the version on German Society MMS 8010 is, as labelled, 20 June 1950 and that on Tahra 1008 is 8 December 1952. I have examined the comparative timings in the table below in the hope that they would support a definite conclusion on this matter, either one way or the other, but I find that in themselves they are not conclusive.

Several members have asked for clarification on the version of 7 December 1952, which was not included in Ernst Lumpe's list of attributed and actual dates. This is the recording issued on Discocorp RR 520 and German Society F666.848M (LP) and Rodolphe RPV 32801 and Music & Arts CD 520 (CD).

The legendary 1944 version has been surprisingly slow to appear in good sound on CD. Benoît Lejay refers to Priceless D 16395 as one of the better issues, but since he published his article Preiser have issued this recording in what appears to be a transfer from the original radio master tape. A number of earlier releases have been at too high a pitch; it remains to be seen whether the Preiser disc is satisfactory in this respect.

Finally, it will be seen that no information is available on the version of 31 August 1950 with the Vienna Philharmonic. Neither the WFS nor the French Society have a copy of this, and we would welcome any information which readers may have on this elusive recording.

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#### 1. A survey of the recordings

10 recordings are known, of which 7 have been issued on CD, one on LP only and two remain unissued.

#### Vienna Philharmonic, 19-20 December 1944 (radio recording)

Famed for its supercharged atmosphere, an impression strengthened by the fact that the earliest issues were a semitone sharp! Among its numerous issues, the Priceless CD (16395) was preferable - it was correctly pitched - but is now unobtainable.

#### Vienna Philharmonic, 10-17 November 1947 (EMI 78s)

A very fine studio recording, preferable overall to the 1952 version, but handicapped by poor sound and not often re-issued. SWF LP (7903) was a semitone sharp; Toshiba CD (TOCE 6054) is at the correct pitch but lacks top.

#### Berlin Philharmonic, 20 June 1950 (concert, previously dated 8 December 1952)

German Society CD (MMS 9010) is excellent from the sound standpoint, but this interpretation is the least convincing of the three with the Berlin Philharmonic; the tension often slackens and the tempi are less steady.

#### Vienna Philharmonic (Salzburg), 31 August 1950 (concert)

Unissued. Bach Brandenburg Concertos 3 and 5 have been issued from this concert. (Translator's note: has any reader heard this version?)

#### RAI Turin SO, 19 January 1952 (concert)

Issued only on LP by Cetra and Olympic, wrongly pitched and in poor sound.

#### Vienna Philharmonic, 26-27 November 1952 (EMI LP)

The least convincing version of all. Everything is perfectly in place and the sound is exceptionally good, but the interpretation remains rigid despite the fluctuating tempi shown in the table below. The slow movement and the fourth movement andante are the fastest of the various versions.

Vienna Philharmonic, 29 November 1952  
(concert)

Unissued live recording. (Translator's note: can any reader confirm that this version exists?)

Vienna Philharmonic, 30 November 1952  
(concert)

In this concert Furtwängler seems much more at ease than in the studio recording three days before, and the interpretation is more contrasted overall. Nuova Era CD (013.06300) was in very satisfactory sound, but sadly is no longer available.

Berlin Philharmonic, 7 December 1952  
(concert)

A very fine interpretation, but outclassed by that of the following day. Music and Arts CD 520 is mediocre, but German and Japanese Society LPs were in excellent sound.

Berlin Philharmonic, 8 December 1952  
(concert)

This extraordinary performance surpasses all the others. We have had to wait 25 years for a satisfactory issue, but now Tahra allows us to get rid of our pirate discs. Everything is exceptional:

- the sound (I have been told that even digital recording could not improve on this;
- the phenomenal dynamics: Furtwängler never pushed the fortissimos to such extremes, particularly in the hammering chords of the first movement or the brass in the Funeral March and the last movement andante;
- the inordinately slow tempi and the incredible tension which goes with them. This is the longest Eroica, yet paradoxically the quicker versions give more of an impression of dragging;
- the fluctuations of tempo, even more extreme than in 1944.

2. Comparison of tempi in Furtwängler's Eroica recordings

The tempi of the eight performances have been measured every 20 seconds. Each of the sections measured has been compared to a reference tempo - wherever available, that indicated by Beethoven. A relationship ("rapport") of 1 indicates that the performances corresponds to the reference tempo, 2 indicates half the reference tempo, etc.

For each movement or section, the table shows:

- the timing which would be given by the reference tempo (ie. Beethoven's tempo marking)
- the actual timing in each performance
- the relationship between the average tempo of the movement or section and the reference tempo
- the minimum and maximum values of this relationship, showing the breadth of the fluctuations of tempo

Pierre Boulez has studied this problem and has shown that many composers have mistakenly tried to lay down fixed tempi for their works. This is particularly true of Beethoven, perhaps because of his deafness. His tempi should be considered as outer limits, never applicable to the whole of a movement.

MMS 9010 and Music & Arts CD 520, which have been used respectively for the versions of 20 June 1950 and 7 December 1952, are not absolutely correctly pitched, but the timings have not been corrected. Tahra 1008 is slightly faster than Rodolphe RPV 32801, from which the timings for the 8 December 1952 version have been taken.

First movement: Allegro con brio

The overall timing varies between 15'17 (1944) and 16'36 (RAI 1952). Detailed examination of the tempo shows no significant fluctuations. In the 1944 version accelerations at each crescendo are very noticeable, but the breadth of fluctuation of tempo is in fact no greater than in the other versions. This indicates that the distinctive features of this performance stem more from its attacks, crescendos and fortissimos. As far as the coda is concerned, the versions of 1944 and 8 December 1952 are outstanding.

Second movement: Marcia funebre

This movement lasts around 17'30, except for the 1952 Berlin versions at 18'11 and 19'00. The eight versions differ considerably, with widely fluctuating tempi. None are consistently fast or slow; indeed, at some points the fastest performance becomes the slowest, and vice versa, within the space of a few bars.

- Exposition (bars 1-69): timing varies between 4'55 (EMI 1952, RAI) and a very slow 5'30 (8 December 1952). The 1944, 7 December 1952 and 8 December 1952 versions start very slowly, only reaching "cruising speed" at bar 6; 8 December 1952 is the slowest.
- Major section (bars 69-104): 2'17 (EMI 1952) to 2'35 (8 December 1952). In the latter version, after a very slow transition (bar 69), Furtwängler accelerates up to the trumpet fanfares to return to the average tempo. The final decrescendo (102-104) is extraordinarily slow.
- Return to minor (104-209): between 6'17 (20 June 1950) and 6'53 (8 December 1952). The recapitulation is always particularly slow with Furtwängler (1.5-2 in relation to the reference tempo). By contrast, he adopts Beethoven's tempo for the fugato (114-150), slows from bar 150, then, except in the 7 and 8 December 1952 versions, takes up a faster tempo for the brass fortissimo (158). After choosing a slow tempo for the violin recapitulation (181), he adopts a variety of speeds up to 209: slow (1944, 20 June 1950), fast (EMI 1947 and 1952) or intermediate (7 and 8 December 1952).
- Conclusion (209-247): 3'26 (EMI 1947) to 4'00 (8 December 1952). From bar 209 (violin staccato), he slows to a greater or lesser extent: relationship of 2 from bar 228 in 1944 and 8 December 1952, a later slowing in 20 June 1950; in 8 December 1952 the slowing is even more marked.

### Third movement: Scherzo alla vivace

The overall timing is not significant, as Furtwängler only varies the tempo in the trio. In the outer sections he adopts Beethoven's tempo in 1947 and departs from it only slightly elsewhere (the slowest in RAI 1952). In the Trio he takes a far slower tempo, which differs between performances - slowest in 1944, less so in 1950, slow again on 7 and especially 8 December 1952.

### Fourth movement: Allegro molto-Andante-Presto

- Allegro molto (bars 1-347): This first section, which lasts between 6'46 (10 June 1950) and 7'12 (EMI 1952), is punctuated by numerous pedal points. The tempo varies widely, no version being continuously the fastest or slowest. After a very slow start (as little as half of Beethoven's indication, though less slow in 1947 and 1950), all versions quicken, almost reaching Beethoven's tempo between bars 117-255. Furtwängler slows at the piano marking at 256 (C major violin theme) - the ratio is 1.7 on 8 December 1952 - but accelerates strongly from the horn entry except in RAI and EMI 1952 versions.
- Andante (348-430): timings vary widely, from 4'08 (EMI 1952) to 4'45 (1944 and 8 December 1952). Tempi also fluctuate. The 1947 and 7 December 1952 versions are alternately fastest and slowest, while the most marked fluctuations are found in 1944 and 1947. The introduction (348-356) is particularly slow in 1944 and 1947; for once the 8 December 1952 version is faster than 20 June 1950. At the brass fortissimo (381-396) the 1944 and 8 December 1952 are the slowest, yet the last crescendo fortissimo (404-420) is slower on 7 December than 8 December 1952.
- Presto (431-473): The coda is always particularly successful with Furtwängler, without any two performances being identical. 1944, 1950 and 30 November 1952 versions are fast, those of RAI 1952 and 7-8 December 1952 noticeably less so.

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