On the IMG Artists series Great Conductors of the 20th Century

It was a neat trick of history that the dawn of recordings coincided with the turn of the twentieth century. It was in 1902 that Caruso first sang into that horn. So when we speak of “the era of recordings,” we mean the twentieth century, and when we speak of the twentieth century, we mean those years in which recording—preservation, a kind of immortality—was possible.

Four years ago, the Philips label released Great Pianists of the 20th Century, a massive project, encompassing 100 “volumes,” 200 discs, and seventy-four different pianists. Of course, not all of these pianists were “great”—how could they have been, given that number?—but one’s definition had to be elastic. Philips showed us, with great care, the entire panorama of pianists in the twentieth century: all the ones who were lucky enough to get their stuff on vinyl, or whatever the material of the day.

Now it is the turn of conductors. IMG Artists recently launched Great Conductors of the 20th Century. Its first installment consisted of fifteen volumes; in all, they will produce sixty, which is to say sixty double-CD sets (120 discs) representing sixty different maestros. Can that many really qualify as “great”? No, but, again: elasticity. The collection, in the words of the company, “will be researched and packaged by IMG Artists, and marketed and distributed internationally by EMI Classics.” It took a huge amount of cooperation to deliver these goods; the recordings come from a variety of labels, plus radio-broadcast archives, plus private collections. There seems to have been no “turf problem” here.
IMG’s aim is lofty, but realistic, and achieved. “The Great Conductors of the 20th Century series aims to present sound portraits of a wide range of great conductors and their art, who lived, worked, and died in the twentieth century. Through them, all the representative ‘schools’ of interpretation and style, amongst these the French, German, Italian and Russian schools, are explored.” The volumes are handsomely packaged, with superb historical and biographical notes, and wonderful, numerous photos.

And there is, of course, a great variety of music on these discs, chosen with obvious care. Every conductor’s strengths are played to—John Barbirolli would obviously be heard in Elgar (the Enigma Variations) and Mahler (the “Resurrection” Symphony)—and yet most are allowed a range of works, not pigeonholed. We also hear several pieces twice, or three times (or, as the collection grows, more): Haydn’s Symphony No. 92 from both Bruno Walter and Nicolai Malko; La Valse from Ernest Ansermet and André Cluytens. We hear virtually every possible temperament and approach.

The IMG coordinators are not snobbish, either. They give us music both high and low. We hear what Erich Kleiber can do in Mozart’s Symphony No. 40, but we also hear him in the “Du und Du” waltz of Johann Strauss. There are pieces long and short, Classical and Modern, central and peripheral. With most of these conductors, we feel that we are given a fairly complete view—and a conductor ought to be complete. Not every conductor can bring off a Bruckner symphony and an Offenbach galop to perfect effect. But should he be expected to do so? Yes, if he is truly a great conductor.

IMG will complete its series—will dispense the sixtieth volume—in the autumn of 2004. The first fifteen feature a cross-section of conductors; some of them are well-known—their “legacies” long established—and some of them are barely known at all. This opening roster reads as follows: Karel An?erl, Ansermet, Ataúlfo Argenta, Barbirolli, Fritz Busch, Cluytens, Ferenc Fricsay, Nikolai Golovanov, Kleiber (the father, Erich, not the son, Carlos—yet), Serge Koussevitsky, Malko, Igor Markevitch, Eugene Ormandy, Carl Schuricht, and Walter. We will take a look at five of the less exalted ones.

Each of us has a conductor or two whom we feel neglected by history—cheated out of a higher reputation. For many of us, one of those conductors is André Cluytens, Belgian-born but essentially (and by citizenship) French. He never had a truly first-rate podium of his own, but he made many outstanding recordings, including a famous one of the Fauré Requiem with Victoria de los Angeles and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (not included on the IMG discs, but available, as always, from EMI Classics). Robert Layton, who has written the liner notes for the Cluytens volume, reminds us that the conductor also made distinguished Beethoven albums, with the pianist Solomon (only one name, please, like the present Midori) and the violinist David Oistrakh. Layton also mentions that, when Cluytens’s commercial recording of the Symphonie fantastique came out, in 1957, the catalogue was “already crowded with versions by such distinguished rivals
as van Beinum, Munch, Karajan, Markevitch—and a very exciting Berlin account under Willem von Otterloo, which briefly enjoyed cult status.”

One of the things that *Great Conductors* does is provide an almost accidental history of recordings, certainly of orchestral ones.

The two Cluytens discs here begin with Bizet’s Symphony in C. It would seem hard to listen to this piece for the thousandth time, but it is a pleasure—even a minor revelation—under Cluytens. He makes the music fresh. Cluytens has a composure about him, and musical common sense. This may not sound like much, but it makes an enormous positive difference in a conductor. Cluytens is always technically correct, but he conveys the spirit of the music, too. His Symphony in C has both Mozartean grace and Romantic punch. The orchestra is not great—the Orchestre National de la Radiodiffusion Française—and neither is the sound quality, but it matters little, if at all.

Next come Debussy’s *Images*, in which Cluytens proves beyond doubt that he was a supreme conductor of Impressionism. He is attentive to all the things you would expect him to be attentive to: color, shading, nuance (the very concept seems to require a French word: *nuance*!). And yet he is refreshingly straightforward and clear. He does not let the score get lost in the soup. Nor does he approach the music phrase by phrase, bar by bar; he has a unified, and unifying, view of these pieces.

We then have *La Valse*, and perhaps the highest praise that can be given it is that one can listen to it, happily—after a lifetime of hearing Ravel’s hit, often shabbily performed. The Cluytens recording is exceptionally “atmospheric,” which seems too weak a word, but which suggests something. Suffice it to say that Cluytens achieves the effects the composer desires. His account is woozy and waltzy, but not schmaltzy. He milks everything in it, without violating taste.

Disc 2 begins with Schumann’s Manfred Overture, then goes to a live performance of the *Symphonie fantastique*, from Tokyo (1964). Its intelligence and panache make up for the technical deficiencies of the French players. Cluytens was a significant Wagner conductor, too—a complete conductor—and we hear him in the Prelude to Act III of *Lohengrin*, rousing and uplifting, even if the cymbals are overexuberant. Last are excerpts from Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov*, something of a Cluytens specialty (though in the Rimsky-Korsakov version). His Boris is another Boris, Christoff, and the conductor imbues this music with unusual strength and true, unforced drama. The pulse is just right. The playing is not bombastic, not overly grand, although this is “grand opera”—about as grand as you can get. It is musical and knowing, typical of Cluytens.

As Robert Layton sums up, here was “a selfless conductor, unconcerned with imposing his own ego on the score; he illuminated the way rather than got in the way. His refined musicianship and unfailing taste shine through all the recordings he has left us.” This is not just nicely eulogistic language for a CD booklet, but true.
Ančerl, the great Czech conductor, had a full, tumultuous life. He was born in 1908, and in the early Thirties studied with Václav Talich (who will also be represented in Great Conductors). In 1942, according to Patrick Lambert’s notes, Ančerl was “incarcerated in the Terezin ghetto, where despite the terrible conditions, he kept the flame of music burning by founding a string orchestra; he was the only member of his family to survive the Nazi death camps.” He later rose to become director of the Czech Philharmonic, a post he held from 1951 to 1968. “Like many artists of his time,” says Lambert, “he had strong Communist leanings,” and the Czech regime trusted him to travel in the West. In August 1968, when the Soviet tanks rolled into Prague, he was in the U.S., guest-conducting; appalled, he stayed in North America. He spent the last years of his life on the podium of the Toronto Symphony, dying in 1973. Following the Velvet Revolution, his ashes were transported to Prague and reinterred.

We see that Great Conductors entails not only musical history and recording history, but “history history,” too.

On his two discs, we hear Ančerl mainly in Czech music: not only in Dvořák, Smetana, and Janacek, but in Novák, Krejci, and Mácha—also in Martinu’s greatly admired Symphony No. 5. But Disc 1 begins with Shostakovich’s Festive Overture, in which the conductor and his Czech players are nimble, precise, and alive. Ančerl achieves majesty without pomposity. It could not be clearer that a master wields the baton. He knew that hard thing for a conductor: control without stifling. Szell knew it well; the great Toscanini certainly had the control, but on occasion failed not to stifl.

Ančerl had a particular view of the central Czech music—The Moldau and all the rest—and this is a view obviously worth listening to (in every sense). In brief, he thought that Czech music was not accorded enough dignity. As Lambert writes, Ančerl “often found great difficulty, when conducting foreign orchestras, in removing what he called ‘incredible layers of bad taste and bombast, the legacy of the Romantic conception of foreign conductors.’” Indeed, Ančerl’s live performance of Dvorak’s Symphony No. 8, with the Concertgebouw Orchestra (1970), is far “straighter” than most. The music is fairly lean and spare, while retaining its energy and character. Ančerl maintains strict control of tempos: he is not seduced by unwritten accelerandos, for example. He always has the arc of the piece in mind, not giving away too much, letting the piece unfold naturally.
His tempo in the Allegretto is a little slower than we are accustomed to, and it has an unusual sombreness: but it dances as well. Throughout the symphony, the folk elements are played simply—matter-of-factly—and not “dearly.” You can see that Ančerl is keen to avoid any caricature. The trumpet “announcement” at the beginning of the last movement has extraordinary dignity, and this same dignity pervades the movement as a whole. Ančerl’s reading may strike many modern listeners as too restrained—and yet it puts the Dvořák Eighth in a different, admirable light.

A Hungarian counterpart of Ančerl was Ferenc Fricsay (1914–1963). The writer Lutz von Pufendorf informs us that Fricsay—who had “Jewish blood” himself—“was court-martialed in 1942 for wanting [merely wanting] to employ Jewish musicians.” He and his family went underground and survived. His principal posts, after the war, were in Germany: the RIAS Symphony Orchestra, the Bavarian State Opera, and the Deutsche Oper Berlin. He died at forty-eight, just reaching his stride.

To begin his discs is a lightish work for so “serious” a conductor: Dukas’s Sorcerer’s Apprentice. Yet it is a fine test of any conductor, requiring pace, color, dash, technique. This account may lack Stokowski’s wizardry, being a bit more subdued, but it rivets all the same. Then comes a live performance—from the Salzburg Festival, 1961—of Kodály’s Dances of Galánta. The composer was among Fricsay’s teachers at the Liszt Academy, and the conductor makes a superb case for these dances. They are full of nobility and sympathy. Every rhythmic requirement is understood and fulfilled. As with Ančerl, there is no “overconducting” here: Fricsay is without trickery, and without condescension. In addition, the playing is as tight as a drum, the execution exact. Orchestras in those days were well rehearsed, often by martinets.

Fricsay, like most conductors—and most people—was a great lover of Beethoven, and he particularly loved that composer’s lone opera, Fidelio. IMG brings us a live broadcast (from 1961) of the Leonore Overture No. 3, in which Fricsay—as Beethoven intended—tells the entire, gripping story of the opera. It unfolds inexorably. It is perhaps a little slow for its own good, but its profundity is clear. What follows—from that same concert—is Beethoven’s Symphony No. 3, the “Eroica.” This too is slow and important, sometimes sliding over into ponderousness. It would certainly not be the first Eroica you gave a person, nor the last you would want to hear—but it has its points to make.

One of the very most interesting and rewarding volumes is that devoted to Nicolai Malko, a conductor all but forgotten today. Born in 1883, he studied in St. Petersburg with, among others, Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov. In 1926, he was appointed conductor of the mighty Leningrad Philharmonic, and in that same year he premiered Shostakovich’s First Symphony. By now a teacher himself at the Leningrad Conservatory, he counted among his students Evgeny Mravinsky, who, beginning in 1938, led the Leningrad Philharmonic for fifty years (a record tenure—anywhere). Malko fled the Soviet Union in 1928, while he still could. He freelanced widely, enjoying an association with the Royal Danish Orchestra. He ended his career...
in Australia, leading the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. When Malko died in 1961, he was a grand old man, admired by his colleagues and respected by audiences—but he had been denied a major and permanent podium that would have guaranteed a reputation and “legacy” matching his ability.

We begin with that Russian favorite, the Overture to *Ruslan and Ludmilla*, by Glinka. This performance has less abandon than some—it is less “tossed off”—but it is inarguably well-informed, and even somewhat sweet (if you can imagine the *Ruslan and Ludmilla* overture as sweet). Malko takes the same approach with another sometimes-wild Russian staple, the Trépak from *The Nutcracker*.

In 1955, he recorded Prokofiev’s last symphony, the Seventh, with the Philharmonia Orchestra in London. As Robert Layton tells us, this recording was “rush-released” in order to challenge the version made in America by Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra. Malko’s reading is probing, and also rather contained, with emotions in check. His view is that an orchestra’s playing should not cease to be musical just because the score is Prokofiev’s. His Prokofiev is not all sharp elbows, cackles, shudders, and howls. In fact, this Seventh may be too beautiful for some, too refined, not coarse and nutty enough. There is much delicacy and intimacy here, and the piece sometimes sounds as though it could be a chamber symphony. But it has the proper impetus and “pow,” too. Above all, this performance is wise. The last movement has some of the same Romanticism, tenderness, and sweep of the composer’s* Romeo and Juliet* score. One may hear the Seventh—all jagged and spooky in one’s head—as though for the first time.

Haydn’s Symphony No. 92—which Malko does with his Danes in Copenhagen—is moving, stately, elegant. Any suggestion that a Russian is unfit to conduct Classical music is destroyed here. The final movement burbles and flits delightfully. This is a recording to play repeatedly, a model of taste—at a time (1953) when Haydn was supposed to be played grossly.

Further proof of Malko’s worth is that he lends dignity and beauty even to the good ol’ Poet and Peasant Overture, by Franz von Suppé. Malko does not consider this music beneath him, or to be played down to; he elevates it. And so it is with the Danish rarity that concludes this volume, Nielsen’s Maskarade Overture, recorded in high spirits in 1947.

The most obscure of IMG’s first fifteen conductors is Ataúlfo Argenta, a Spaniard who lived from 1913 to 1958 (only). His podium career was even briefer than those dates might suggest, as he only started in earnest ten years before his death. Argenta had an abundance of talent, and movie-star looks (as the photos confirm); he might well have been a world favorite. He began his career as a pianist, and in 1941 went to Germany—yes, Germany, in 1941—to broaden his musical education. Carl Schuricht (also among the first fifteen, recall) encouraged him to take up the baton. Argenta went home to Madrid to do so. Alan Sanders’s notes inform us that the conductor recorded about fifty zarzuelas and other Spanish repertoire for Spanish Columbia, and other, more mainstream works in Paris, London, and Geneva, chiefly for Decca. So much had Argenta grown
as a conductor that Decca planned to record him in the complete Brahms symphonies with the Vienna Philharmonic—but there was not time.

We hear this conductor in Liszt (A Faust Symphony), Ravel (the *Alborada del gracioso*), Schubert (the Ninth), and, best, de Falla (the complete *El amor brujo*). The Ravel is unpolished—Argenta’s players in Paris have the flavor of a pickup orchestra—but clear and engaging. The Schubert can hardly compete with the canonical recordings, but it is perfectly respectable, competently judged. *El amor brujo*, as might be expected, crowns this volume. It comes straight from the Iberian Peninsula, and, like Ančerl’s Dvořák or Fricsay’s *Galánta Dances*, it is not “overcooked,” not a caricature. It is, in fact, rather spare, lean-lined—haunting, plaintive, affecting. Its emotion comes quietly, from within, not in outsize wails. We must wonder—as we do about Guido Cantelli and some others—how Argenta would have continued to develop.

As we consider, and revel in, the conductors of the past, we might well consider the conductors of today—and we are apt to lament. Where have they all gone? There are, it is true, some worthy (or even better) conductors: James Levine and Colin Davis; Claudio Abbado and Kurt Masur. Everyone can fashion his own list. Many people are enthusiastic about Simon Rattle, who has just taken over the reins in Berlin. Some place hope in younger maestros: Franz Welser-Möst (who has just taken over in Cleveland), or Daniele Gatti, or the American David Robertson. But even the most cheerful observer would have to admit that we are not exactly awash in great conductors—ones whom the generations of tomorrow would like to hear, and would cherish, in a bursting boxed set.

But, as Lyndon Johnson once said, risibly, “the future lies ahead of us”—and we let it take care of itself. In the meantime, hats should be doffed to IMG Artists. *Great Conductors* is a noble project, depicting—preserving, and giving back—a noble century of conducting.

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His podcast with *The New Criterion*, titled “Music for a While,” can be found here.

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