Mozart - Symphonies 38 & 39 (Klemperer) [2012]

Symphony No.38 In D Major, K.504 ("Prague") *A1 I. Adagio - Allegro A2 II. Andante A3 III. Finale (Presto)* Symphony No.39 In E Flat Major, K.545 *B1 Adagio - Allegro B2 Andante B3 Minuet (Allegretto) & Trio B4 Finale (Allegro)* Philharmonia Orchestra Otto Klemperer – conductor Recorded: No. 38 - March 1962, No. 39 - July 1956 at Kingsway Hall, London Originally released 1963

In the slow introductions to nos. 38 and 39 Klemperer extracts a maximum of Don Giovanni-like strength and gravity, without heaviness. Thereafter the “Prague” also gets a terse, briskly energized performance. I found plenty to admire in the fierce, fiery first movement but found myself hustled through the rest without sufficient breathing space. The slow movement is almost perfunctory.

No. 39 also has a vital first movement - the “Eroica” parallels predictably engaged Klemperer. Nor does he linger over the second movement, but this time I found him right inside the music, breathing it and expressing it. The Minuet has a purposeful stride - no Austrian charm in the trio, with almost caustic attention paid to the second clarinet’s busy part. The Finale may seem steady at first, but this soon proves the maximum speed at which all the notes will sound really brilliant. With the result that it ends up by sounding almighty fast.

I wouldn’t quite produce this 39 to convert those who say Klemperer’s methods were doubtfully suited to Mozart. Given the methods, though, and unlike the “Prague”, 39 shows them somewhere near their best.

In 1962 Klemperer returned to Mozart in a big way, replacing earlier mono or rudimentary stereo recordings of the “Prague” and the last three symphonies.

I found a definite gain only in no. 39. The tempi are only marginally slower and the result lends the reading a stature it just missed before. This is Mozart seen with Beethovenian hindsight, but this symphony can take it. If the first movement has an “Eroica”-like grandeur, the stomping minuet now exudes enjoyment and the finale has a Puckish relish that looks to Beethoven’s Fourth. The second movement, too, has an outdoor songfulness that relates it more to Beethoven Four than to the “Eroica”. This now joins the select list of Klemperer’s finest Mozart performances.

For the rest I was even doubtful whether the recordings themselves improved matters. It’s a more diffused sound compared with the lean quality of the earlier essays, as if a blunt instrument is being used to shape the music. On the other hand, is this a reflection of Klemperer’s growing tendency to concentrate on the grand design and let details fend for themselves? Fine as this can be in Beethoven and German romantics, the results here seem to show that Mozart really needs detailed sculpting of the single phrases. As it is the music trundles along grandly without greatly engaging this listener, at least. Occasional moments of incandescence only show that Klemperer was by now less able, or willing, to really stretch his players.

Having complained that the “Prague” was almost hustled along before, I certainly didn’t think that here. I suppose there’s gain in the slow movement but the finale is dispiriting.
---Christopher Howell, musicweb-international.com

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