The early Philharmonia Orchestra (featured on the greater part of these recordings) was an extraordinary band. That holds not only for its superlative players, but also with respect to the conductors with whom it worked and, of course, for its presiding eminence, Walter Legge, producer of all the recordings in this set. To be recording with Wilhelm Furtwängler, Herbert von Karajan, and Otto Klemperer, amongst others, would be more than noteworthy for a long-established orchestra, let alone for one just founded. There are many, moreover, who account the period covered here to have been perhaps the finest, most consistent, in Karajan’s lengthy, prolific recording career.

Take the lithe, even blithe, opening to the ‘Gloria’ of the B minor Mass, Karajan’s sprightliness quite different from Klemperer’s granitic splendour. The ‘Cum Sancto Spirito’ fairly whizzes by, more Don Giovanni-like champagne than full-bloodied claret, let alone something more Thuringian or Saxon, whilst the angelic throng’s ‘Et exspecto resurrectionem’ seems to strain towards the world of the Mannheim rocket. Not that grandeur lacks entirely; one hears, even sees, the swing of the censer in the ‘Sanctus’, as much a product of expertly-judged harmonic motion as mere ‘weight’. And, if it is not the abiding characteristic of this performance, mystery is nevertheless present: consider the leisurely yet intense ‘Benedictus’, blessed by Manoug Parikian’s violin, hinting perhaps at Beethoven’s *Missa solemnis*. The Philharmonia’s wind soloists sound as euphonious – just listen to Dennis Brain’s horn obbligato in the ‘Quoniam’ – and often as perky as they do in their Mozart opera recordings made at this time with Karajan; if hardly neo-Classical, there is little claim to Romanticism here.

Even the Wiener Singverein sounds streamlined. Hearing Karajan conduct the Mass in Vienna in the Bach anniversary year, 1950, Toscanini was moved to dub it the best choir in the world. This recording captures Karajan’s dual focus during these years: solo movements recorded in London with the Philharmonia, choral movements with the conductor’s ‘own’ choir in Vienna. Bach may be said to have assembled rather than composed this setting; Karajan and EMI did likewise. Recording and technology always fascinated Karajan – but ultimately as a means to musical ends. That is what we hear here, as ever with the finest vocalists, Marga Höffgen’s contralto in particular a reminder of an almost-lost age of Bach performance, likewise Kathleen Ferrier’s contribution to the additional excerpts. Karajan’s ‘modernity’ remains open rather than restrictive.

Brahms’s *Ein deutsches Requiem* was recorded in post-war Vienna at the same time as Strauss’s great elegy, *Metamorphosen*. Karajan’s was the first recording of the latter; it is perhaps more suprising that Brahms’s humanistic message of grief and consolation had not previously been recorded in full. Elisabeth Schwarzkopf would later recall: ‘It was very special. Certainly, we were remembering those whose lives had been lost.’ Wotan himself, Hans Hotter, works with Brahms to suggest not only that the souls of the righteous may be with the Lord, but also to question that claim. Karajan in some respects offers the other side of the coin. His Vienna Philharmonic, admittedly weighty in expression of loss, increasingly offers a consoling orchestral warmth quite different from, say, the unvarnished, even atheistic ‘truth’ toward which Klemperer, again with Schwarzkopf, would later strain with the Philharmonia.

The *Missa solemnis* receives a deeply felt reading, also conceived in terms we might characterise above all as ‘musical’. That is not to say there is nothing of the metaphysical, but rather that those glimpses into the beyond – alternatively, those epiphanies visited upon us – arise through score and performance rather than determine them. Of our Philharmonia trio, Furtwängler never recorded the work; though he spoke of it as Beethoven’s greatest, he came to find it un-performable. Klemperer’s wrestling with Beethoven’s angels – and dæmons – has long been the ultimate recorded recommendation. Karajan, however, offers a genuinely intriguing alternative – again, in many ways preferable to his subsequent recordings. There is no shortage of intoxication, whether humanistic or divine; the opening of the ‘Gloria’ might be a moment of symphonic or indeed operatic exultation. And what control Karajan exerts over his forces! Not so as to mould them unduly, but so as better to express – or should that be execute? – his conception. The imploring, ineffable sadness, even desolation of the ‘Agnus Dei’ registers equally. Nicola Zaccaria makes a powerful contribution too here, ‘operatic’ maybe, but in a good sense, similarly the more typical ‘Karajan soloists’ who join him: Schwarzkopf, Christa Ludwig, Nicolai Gedda. We struggle less in an overt sense than with Klemperer, but Beethoven offers consolation too; there is unquestionably room, even need, for both. If there is less defiance in the ‘Dona [nobis] pacem,’ is it wrong to present here a heavenly throng rather than a shell-shocked earthly choir? The Viennese chorus certainly does its persuasive best, as does the rich-toned yet ultimately angelic Philharmonia; the Kantian gulf between divine and human remains unbridgeable.

And yet, hearing Schwarzkopf in particular towards the close, is there not something of Goethe’s eternal feminine drawing us upward? Karajan, though not wont to speak in metaphysical terms, nor indeed to make his music in them, was no more uncultured than the composer whom he so resembles in many ways: Richard Strauss. If there were never a better-read composer than Strauss, and certainly none more in thrall to the soprano voice, Karajan emerges quietly, even modestly, in similar vein, with more than a little help from Schwarzkopf, the partnership ever-attentive to words *and* music. The *Fidelio* excerpt emerges as human, Romantic, possessed of a sincerity Karajan’s – and Schwarzkopf’s – detractors would never allow; likewise the splendidly post-Mozartian rendition of *Ah! perfido*. Mozart’s *Ave, verum corpus* is treasured as liturgical foretaste of heaven, and is that not precisely what this unearthly music is? Finally, the *Four Last Songs* receive a performance in which conductor and soloist prove magnificently complementary, never contradictory; Schwarzkopf’s verbal acuity heightens Karajan’s equally Straussian orchestral revels, and *vice versa*. ‘Im Abendrot’ presents a sunset none will be able to resist; and why would one try?