THE Karajan Official Remastered Edition comprises 13 box sets containing official remasterings by Warner Classics of material originally recorded for EMI between 1946 and 1984, including Karajan’s recordings of Bruckner symphonies 4, 7 & 8. Given Warner’s claims that the 96kHz 24-bit remastering from the original sources offers “more clarity and detail than ever before”, should collectors owning previous remasterings of these recordings upgrade to the newest versions?

All three Bruckner symphonies were recorded in the Jeses-Christus-Kirche in the Berlin suburb of Dahlem, the preferred venue for Karajan’s recordings with the Berliner Philharmoniker until the mid-1970s. The first to be taped was the Haas edition of the Eighth Symphony in 1957. At 87 minutes, this is the longest of five Karajan’s commercial recordings, his subsequent audio and video versions being approximately a minute shorter in each of the first three movements and two minutes shorter in the finale. The 1957 performance is undeniably beautiful but its stately progress and lack of dramatic tension is not to everyone’s taste. EMI’s slightly distant recording reflects the interpretation, although balances are good and climaxes are accommodated without constriction or distortion. A comparison with the previous remastering reveals a slightly different tonal emphasis but otherwise the sound quality is very much as it was before, with a small amount of tape hiss as one would expect from a recording of this vintage.

The Fourth Symphony was recorded in September and October 1970 and is another interesting example of Karajan rethinking a Bruckner interpretation, the 70 minute running time of the earlier performance being reduced to 64 minutes by the time of his Deutsche Gramophon recording in 1975. The 1970 recording features spacious tempi and noticeably legato phrasing, but is an arguably more attractive conception than the later performance, which often sounds brusque and over driven. Both the previous mastering and the new one sound very good, the only noticeable difference being that the new release is transferred at a slightly higher level.

Karajan recording of the Seventh Symphony, set down in October 1970 and February 1971, has long been critical acclaimed. In his June 1989 review for Gramophone, for instance, Richard Osborne writes of the performance being “so lucidly shaped and so luminously played that one listens to it as if under some rare form of musical hypnosis.” I must admit it’s not a performance I’ve ever responded to. Whatever one thinks of Karajan’s interpretation, however, previous CD releases have suffered from overly reverberant bass, muffled treble and arbitrary balances. Inner voices are also often masked by a surfeit of string tone. The new mastering offers very little improvement, suggesting the problem is inherent in the original master tapes.

In summary, no one who owns the previous releases of the Bruckner symphonies need feel they are missing out by not upgrading, although those approaching Karajan’s Bruckner for the time can rest assured that the latest releases represent the best possible sound quality obtainable from the original sources.

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