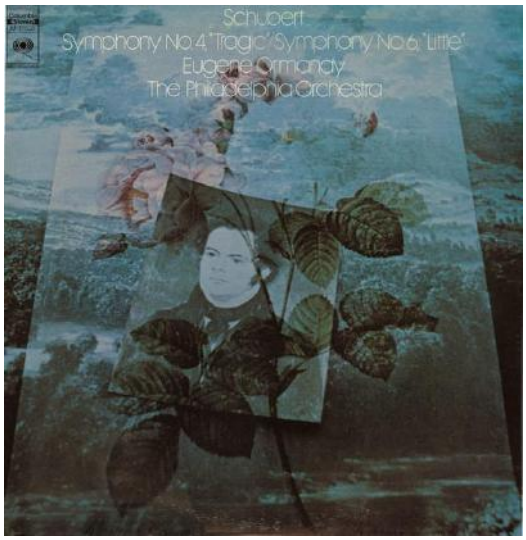
**Off The Beaten Track With Schubert's Sixth**
**Thoughts on some recordings and off-air performances that have gone under the radar**
by Christopher Howell

As with my article on selected recordings of Bruckner's Sixth Symphony, I wish to start by making it clear that this is not a first-time buyers' guide. If you are just entering the world of Schubert's symphonies, or of his early symphonies, the MusicWeb-International search function will show up numerous reviews that should help you to choose. I am assuming, therefore, that my readers are experienced collectors who are aware of the Beecham versions, have already made their basic library choice(s) from among the complete cycles set down by Böhm, Sawallisch, Kertesz, Karajan, Wand, Davis, Muti, Abbado, Harnoncourt, Minkowski and several others, and wonder what might have slipped through the cracks.

"Slipped through the cracks" means both recordings that have fallen from view and conductors' interpretations that, though conserved, were never officially put on disc. As regards availability, I am going to assume that, if this sort of world attracts you, you will be as aware as I am of the various blogs, YouTube channels and members-only discussion groups where these things circulate. I record here my gratitude to all those who have made it possible for me to hear so many little-known recordings, but I prefer not to state specifically where they are to be found. This is a rapidly changing world. Links become dead, the same recording turns up somewhere else. Links on members-only forums cannot be divulged anyway.

Schubert's Sixth Symphony is still, together with the First, the one you are least likely to hear in concert. Discographically, it came in from the cold when, in the 1970s, the recording of complete cycles of this and that became a standard, even obligatory, practice. Today, it would scarcely be respectable for a conductor to record just one or two of his favourite Schubert symphonies. It was not ever thus, and in fact, very few of the versions discussed below come from complete cycles.




To European eyes, at least, **Eugene Ormandy** and the **Philadelphia Orchestra** are about as improbable a combination for early Schubert as can be imagined, so we might start there. This recording was set down on 17 January 1962, closely followed by a version of the Fourth Symphony. They saw the light of day, in tandem, only in 1972, on **Columbia Masterworks M-31635**.

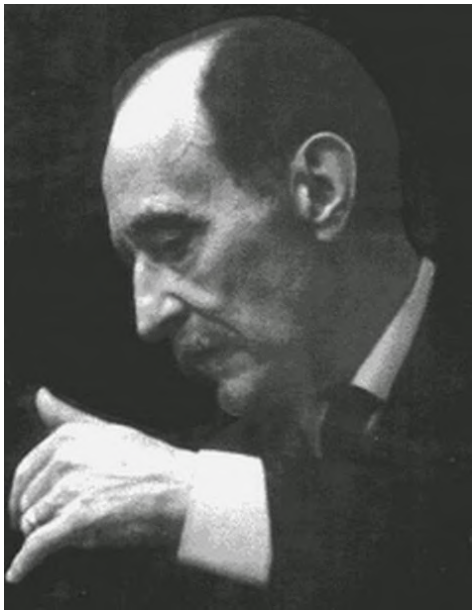
This performance enables us to dispose of several easy assumptions over Ormandy's art. One is that he used a narrow dynamic range, with a disinclination to drop below *mezzo piano* or even *mezzo forte*. There is a lot of delicate playing and plenty of dynamic shading here. The opening of the Scherzo shows a proper regard for pianos and pianissimos, and it also shows that, while the fortes are strong, they are carefully graded in relation to the orchestral forces employed. The sheer expertise of the Philadelphia players means that the violin figuration accompanying the second theme in the finale scampers along delightfully.

Another easy assumption is that Ormandy gets a tense and disciplined response from his orchestra but does not convey a lot of actual enjoyment. Here, at least, the orchestra positively beam to their

task. While there is no false *schmaltz*, the rhythms lilt along delightfully. There is an open, pastoral quality to the woodwind and, most notably, there is a certain softness to the attack which makes the music sound like Schubert and not like Rossini.

Tempi are very convincing. There is time for real substance in the slow introduction, after which the first movement spins along without undue haste. The second movement is slower than many, but there is warmth and tenderness to it. The Scherzo chatters without getting breathless. The finale is just steady enough to convince us that Ormandy has read the *moderato* qualification in the tempo direction, yet it spins along deliciously.

There are just two doubts. The first of them may be Schubert's own fault. I really do not see how the finale could go faster – even the Philadelphia strings would have become frenetic. Ormandy holds steady till the end – no change is indicated. And yet the closing pages sound a little laboured. We shall see, later, how other conductors try to get round this. The other issue is that of repeats. Here Ormandy is decidedly skimpy. No first movement repeat, and in the second and fourth movement, small repeats of just four or eight bars are played, but larger repeated sections are not. Yet the symphony lasts 28 minutes as it is – a full clutch of repeats would have been too much for a single LP side. This, obviously, is an issue that must have affected all issues until the very late LP era.



Remaining in America, this symphony opened the final concert of the season by the "**NBC Summer Symphony Orchestra**", on 31 October 1953. The conductor was **Jonel Perlea**. Some such subterfuge over the orchestra's name was necessary for contractual reasons, since the NBC Symphony Orchestra was officially on holiday. I have expressed my admiration for Perlea in an article in the "Forgotten Artists" series, but his Schubert 9 was one of the performances I was not so sure about. This was partly due to his tendency to see Schubert from the Rossini end. Toscanini's orchestra was, of course, trained by the Maestro to attack the notes sharply and zippily, so the softer attack I noted in the Ormandy performance was probably just not there for the asking. Perlea's concept seems closer to Rossini's world than that of Ormandy, in any case.

He begins impressively, with the gentle melancholy that was the keynote of many of his performances. The *Allegro* has a terse vitality, somewhat faster than Ormandy's, and he gives us the repeat. In second subject territory, though, his refusal to relax makes the music sound breathless and ultimately the movement sounds less interesting than it does under Ormandy. The *Andante* is again quicker than Ormandy, and time is found for one of the larger repeats that Ormandy omits, but not both. The tempo moves forward a little in the louder, contrasting passages, and the music assumes a jaunty, operatic air. The *Scherzo* has plenty of chattering vitality and it had better be said that neither conductor succeeds in making the Trio sound very interesting.

The last movement has the effervescence of an opera buffa finale and, like the best operatic conductors in Rossini or Donizetti *stretti*, Perlea gives an impression of constant acceleration without actually doing so. The trouble is that Perlea belonged – as several operatic performances I discussed demonstrated – to that generation of opera conductors who felt that the typical Rossini or Donizetti *stretto* could be made more effective by topping and tailing it rather than playing it complete. At a

certain point, his primary concern is to get to the end in one big sweep. He begins by snipping even the little four-bar repeats that Ormandy had allowed, and then makes a 46-bar cut. This, of course, is the passage that I found a little laboured under Ormandy. Maybe Perlea felt Schubert himself had lost his way towards the end. Maybe he was right, but not everybody would feel that you can snip bits out of a symphony the way you can – perhaps – with an opera. This performance, which you will not find easily, is not, ultimately, one that adds to our appreciation of either the symphony or the conductor.

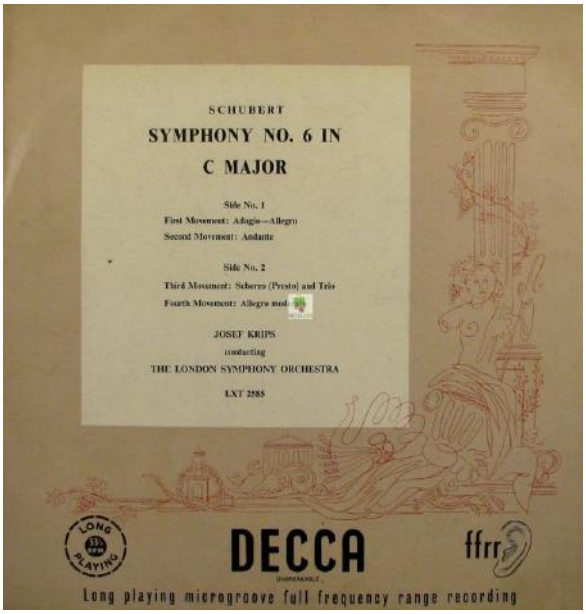
There will be one more American performance in this survey, but now we move to Italy and Naples, where Perlea's Romanian compatriot **Sergiu Celibidache** conducted this symphony with the **Orchestra Alessandro Scarlatti di Napoli** on 22 December 1957. This was long ago available on a Cetra LP in sub-standard sound. You will now find it on YouTube, deriving, I think, from that LP. If, as I suspect, RAI have a much better-sounding tape in their archives, it is high time we were allowed to hear it, though the recording will probably still sound closer than necessary. The Naples orchestra is not exactly the Philadelphia, but Celibidache's famous rehearsals ensured that they play very well, and there are advantages in using what is basically a chamber orchestra.

Celibidache's dislike of exposition repeats is well known, and, true to form, that in the first movement is omitted. The *Andante* and the *Finale* get all their repeats however. In the case of the *Andante*, this combines with a slow, but gently lilting tempo to make this the lyrical heart of the symphony. It lasts 9:25, compared with Perlea's 5:39 and Ormandy's 5:28, but Celibidache succeeds in making this a heavenly length.

Elsewhere, he is uncontroversial in his tempi. The first movement spins along nicely, but finds space to let the second theme dance along without any feeling of pressure behind it. He is a tad slower than some others in the Scherzo, just avoiding the sense of chatter and providing a nice lilt. His landler-like Trio finds more character in this section then than Ormandy or Perlea. His finale is shade faster than Ormandy's – 8:50 compared with 09:01, and that with a repeat that Ormandy does not play. He nevertheless keeps the *opera buffa* feeling at bay. He tightens very slightly towards the end, and this seems to be enough to avoid that laboured effect I noted in Ormandy. A lovely performance.

Before leaving Naples we might note that this same orchestra, slightly renamed for contractual reasons, set down a Schubert cycle under Denis Vaughan in the late 1960s. I have not been able to hear their performance of no. 6.

Now that we are in Europe, Schubert means Vienna and Vienna means the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, repository of Austrian traditions and of a certain way of making the dance rhythms lilt. Oddly enough, though, unless I have missed anything, the VPO, in the twentieth century, recorded this symphony under Karl Münchinger, István Kertesz and Riccardo Muti. Without intending to belittle these conductors in any way, they hail from outside the Viennese tradition, though later we will see to what extent the orchestra's collective personality gains the upper hand when a relatively unassuming maestro such as Münchinger is on the podium.

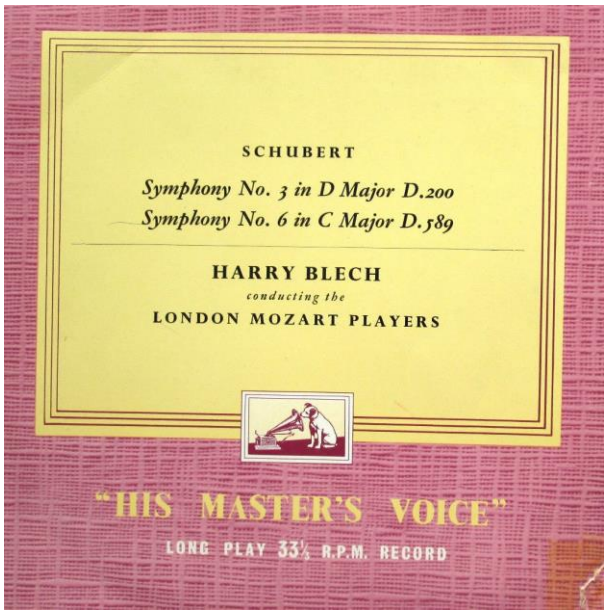



Your *ur*-Viennese conductor might be **Josef Krips**, who set this symphony down with the **London Symphony Orchestra** in Kingsway Hall on 5 April 1948. This performance was first issued on 78s (AK 2119/22) but was soon out on LP (LXT 2585). The fact that it was originally made for 78 issue may explain the remarkable skimpiness over repeats, fewer even than Ormandy. We should not automatically assume that Krips really wanted it that way. A later recording by Krips, set down with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra in 1962, might clear this matter up, but this LP, issued by Tono, has not so far come my way.

For the rest, even if "Made in England", this is pure-breathed Viennese Schubert. Where the other conductors so far have found melancholy in the slow introduction, under Krips the melodies have an assuaging quality even when they go into the minor. The Allegro scampers along, all light and grace, and there is a relaxed lilt to the second subject even though the tempo does not actually slacken. Krips's control over dynamic gradations within piano and his detailed but unfussy phrasing remind us what a very good conductor he was. No repeat.

The Andante is almost as slow as Celibidache's, gently caressed. It moves ahead a little later. Krips makes no repeats whatsoever in this movement. The Scherzo comes across as proto-Mendelssohn, a delicious game of elves and fairies. The Trio is notably slower than the others heard so far. Its lazy, rustic lilt, with droll accents, finds real character in the music at last. Unfortunately, our enjoyment is curtailed by the omission of its repeats.

The finale is steady but light and smiling. One or two oddities are probably due to the circumstances of 78 recording. There is a big rallentando before the recapitulation, after which the sudden return of the original tempo seems too abrupt. Probably, there was a side-change here. In the second part of the movement, the tempo freshens for quite a long stretch. This may have been necessary in order to get the music onto two sides. On the other hand, it may be a cunning trick to avoid the later stages sounding laboured, which they certainly do not. Whatever, this is a performance that conveys old-style Schubertian enchantment in full measure.




Still in the UK, Beecham's famous recordings do not seem to have deterred other Brits. First off the mark was **Harry Blech**, who set the symphony down with the **London Mozart Players** on 4 April 1955 (HMV CLP 1090). By the time I attended a few Blech concerts around 1970, the show had passed its sell-by date. London critics generally did not attend his concerts at all, yet he maintained a following of well-heeled ladies who loved to watch him waddle on, paunch well to the fore, eyes a-

twinkle, and who doted on his flamboyant gestures. It was a standing mystery in musical circles how an ensemble that, as anyone could see, was basically the English Chamber Orchestra with different front desks, at a time when the ECO itself might bid fair to be the finest group of its kind in the world, could become, under another name, such a free-wheeling, happy-go-lucky band. And yet the well-heeled ladies were not altogether wrong, because there was engaging character and bonhomie on display. And the London critics were ungenerous, for the London Mozart Players had been pioneers in the 1950s of small-band Haydn and Mozart and had tirelessly explored the less well-known works of these composers. As Harry Blech proudly pointed out when the time came to retire, they had done all the Mozart and Haydn symphonies in concert. I wonder if he was the first to do so?

Exploration of Beethoven and Schubert with a chamber orchestra, not to speak of original instruments, belonged to a later epoch. Blech stuck to the "lighter" Beethoven symphonies and early Schubert, of which he recorded nos. 3-6. In some ways, the LMP and the Naples Scarlatti Orchestra were parallel institutions, but, at least with Celibidache conducting in Naples, the fact that the forces are smaller is less evident. Hearing this after Krips, the thing that most strikes with Blech is the amount of piquant wind detail that gets through over the strings. That apart, in the first two movements, Blech's concept is very similar to Krips's. The introduction concentrates on warmth and songfulness while the Allegro is athletic and nimble. With only minimal relaxation, Blech manages to treat the second subject affectionately. No repeat.

Not a repeat in sight in the second movement either. Like Krips, Blech goes for a broad, heartfelt tempo with slight speeding up in the middle section. Blech is swift and ebullient in the scherzo, almost suggesting that of Beethoven's First Symphony, in the same key. He omits the second repeat, which even Krips gave. On the other hand, he gives the first repeat (only) in the Trio, which Krips omitted. He relaxes much less than Krips here. If you feel that Krips overdoes it – I love Krips's slower tempo – this may be your reason for preferring Blech. In the Finale Blech, like Krips, does all but the one longer repeat and takes a steady view, just slightly freshening to avoid ponderousness at the end. Good as Blech is, though, I do feel that Krips goes one stage further to provide enchantment.

**Yehudi Menuhin** went a little further than Blech down the road of small-band Schubert, recording a complete cycle with such a group in the late 1960s. The orchestra usually appears as the "Menuhin Festival Orchestra" but, as the original cover shows, nos. 2 and 6 were issued under the name of the **Bath Festival Orchestra** (HMV ASD 2343). I do not have an exact date, but this disc was reviewed in Gramophone in February 1968. What seems to have happened is that Menuhin's relationship with the Bath Festival came unstuck – due to municipal unwillingness to support his operatic projects – during the making of the Schubert cycle, at which Menuhin walked out taking the orchestra with him. It continued to record for some years under its new name. For neatness, later packagings of the cycle have used the blanket description "Menuhin Festival Orchestra". Very much later, Menuhin returned to the cycle with the Sinfonia Varsavia. I have not heard this.


When a great instrumentalist takes up conducting, there is a temptation – not least on

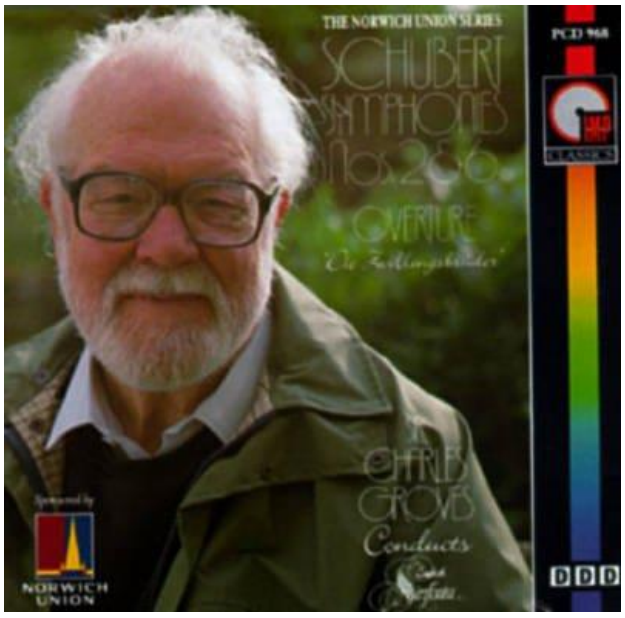
the part of the great instrumentalist – to find in their work nuances and insights denied to mere "real" conductors. This is not really borne out here. The model at first remains that of Blech, but from the beginning there are small interventionist points – a leaning on staccatos, for example – that seem more mannered than insightful. The Allegro starts by scampering nicely, but as Menuhin intervenes to point the second subject the impetus flags as it did not under Blech and it does not entirely recover. The music "goes" quite nicely, but without the vitality that could come only from the rostrum. As many a conductor who is only half a conductor has discovered, it is quite easy to start an orchestra off at a challengingly brisk pace, but by about fifty bars in, things tend to settle into a compromise between what the conductor actually wanted and what the orchestra finds comfortable. The repeat is not played.

All repeats are given in the Andante but, without a Celibidache to guide the ear, I found it difficult to be as grateful in practice as I was in principle. This in spite of the fact that Menuhin takes about two minutes less. At the beginning he is almost as slow as Celibidache, but he forges ahead in the middle section and then, when the first theme comes back, instead of returning to the original tempo, as would be logical, he goes on at the tempo he has now reached. This, I venture to suggest, is a miscalculation he would not have made had he been playing instead of conducting.

Menuhin's Scherzo is lively without special features. His trio is slow in the Krips mould, but slogs rather. The second repeat of the Trio is omitted and I, for one, had had enough of it by then. Menuhin's Finale, though, is rather successful. You might feel that it emphasizes the Allegro part of the marking to the exclusion of the Moderato qualification, but if you want a lively, opera buffa conclusion, you would have to prefer this to Perlea, since Menuhin plays it all, repeats included, and keeps it light and buoyant. You might feel, even so, that Perlea's conducting of his abridged text has a sleight of hand and a mounting verve that only an experienced opera man could achieve.

I have not been able to hear the Sixth from the Classics for Pleasure cycle set down by Sir John Pritchard in the 1970s. A Schubert cycle by **Sir Charles Groves** and the **English Sinfonia** was part of an extensive series of recordings begun by this combination in the last years of Sir Charles's life, also including Haydn and Mozart. I do not have the exact dates, but I presume around 1990.

This is the first Schubert Sixth in our survey to have all repeats. Unless you are such a stickler for this that you refuse to choose except among "complete" versions, I am afraid the claims of this performance are not very high. The English Sinfonia is proficient enough, but is not equal to the London Mozart Players in their heyday, nor does Sir Charles push them beyond their natural achievement, as Celibidache could in Naples. Little imprecisions – and they are only little – are frequent but would hardly matter if there were a more vital current behind the interpretation. As it is, the performance does not go beyond a generalized amiability. The first movement spins along nicely, but the enunciation of the first theme is not clear because the placing of the acciaccaturas has seemingly been left to fend for itself. The second subject busies along without much character. The *Andante* is kept on the move,



thus avoiding the need to speed up in the middle. The *Scherzo* is jolly and bustling, with only a slight reduction of tempo for the *Trio*. The relaxed tempo for the *Allegro Moderato* Finale is theoretically ideal, but in reality it seemed a long haul. And there is the rub. Sir Charles set good tempi but, having sorted out the general style and mood of each movement, was seemingly content to recede into the background and let the players take over. I am sorry not to be more positive, since Sir Charles did much sterling work and left many records by which he is better remembered.

We leave this "English" section as we began, with the **London Symphony** playing under a distinguished guest, **Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt**. This was set down on 1 July 1958 as part of a small batch of recordings the German conductor made for Mercury (SR 90196). If Groves left me wondering if I had been listening to this symphony a bit too often for its own good, Schmidt-Isserstedt made me think I'd hardly heard it at all. Right from the start, there is a ruggedness, a sense of implicit drama, that none of the versions heard so far had provided. The *Allegro* is punchy, terse, rather in the manner of Beethoven's Second. The music can take it. Schmidt-Isserstedt has an interesting solution to the coda. The "*Più moto*" section is fast and brilliant. Then, he extends the pause dramatically and plays the last page at his original tempo. Schubert gave no indication that the "*Più moto*" does not continue after the pause, yet Schmidt-Isserstedt could have argued that this is implicit, since the music of the final page is similar to that of the beginning. It is certainly effective. The repeat is not played.


Beautiful though the *Andante* may sound played as a leisurely four-in-the-bar, especially when there is a Celibidache to preside over it, Schubert actually indicates two-in-a-bar. Schmidt-Isserstedt keeps it on the move at a purposeful though gentle strut. He makes it completely convincing. The middle section becomes urgent and dramatic at this speed. Again, few repeats.

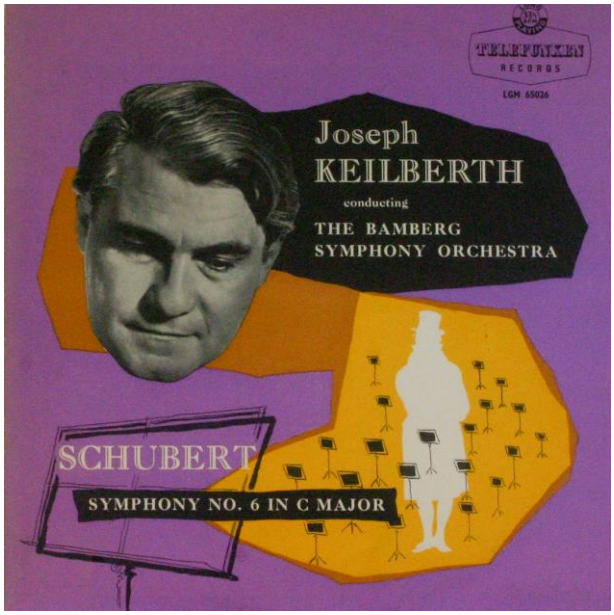
The Scherzo is steadier than most, but in place of a bucolic dance we get a thrusting Beethovenian Scherzo. The tempo is about that usually adopted for that of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, and this may well be Schmidt-Isserstedt's point of comparison, for he adopts a slowish tempo for the Trio, evoking a yodelling effect not far removed from that of the Beethoven. He omits the second repeat in the Trio.

In the Finale, he takes the *Moderato* part of the marking very seriously, but keeps it alive with sharp rhythmic pointing in the accompanying figures. Will the Coda sound ponderous at this tempo? Schmidt-Isserstedt has the answer ready – he plays the finale pages in a swifter tempo. Not so fast, though, as to make a meaningless, barnstorming finale. For me, it makes a perfect close. I have to admit, though that the change of tempo is not marked. All except the longer repeat are given.

I found this performance a revelation, presenting the symphony – and Schmidt-Isserstedt himself – under a new light. I had not associated this conductor with original or challenging interpretations. The common view would have it that he was a well-read Kapellmeister. Well, as I found in my article

on Bruckner's Sixth Symphony, where Keilberth was up there with Horenstein and way above the blazoned Klemperer, Kapellmeisters can spring surprises.

So what about **Joseph Keilberth** himself, who set this symphony down with the **Bamberg Symphony Orchestra** on 4 February 1954 (Telefunken LGM 65026)?




In the first movement, the concept is very similar to Schmidt-Isserstedt's. There is less orchestral refinement but a fine ebullience. At the end, Keilberth does something similar to Schmidt-Isserstedt – that is to say, he returns to his original tempo after the pause before the final page. However, in his case the difference between the two tempi is not so great, so the effect is less dramatic. No repeat.

Keilberth is a little more relaxed than Schmidt-Isserstedt in the Andante, while still maintaining a certain perky strut. His slower tempo allows him to take a more lyrical view of the middle section. Precious few repeats.

Keilberth, like Schmidt-Isserstedt, gives the Scherzo Beethovenian treatment, but relaxes far less for the Trio. He omits the second repeats in both the Scherzo and the Trio. His Finale is a little brisker than Schmidt-Isserstedt's, but not so much as to suggest he is ignoring the Moderato marking. It is jaunty, even punchy, and manages a good conclusion without increasing the speed. All but the longer repeat are played. A combination of close recording and, I fear, a lesser degree of orchestral finesse, means that the faster string passages all through are played with crisp articulation but without the delicate shading we get from the LSO. I would probably have enjoyed this more if I had not heard the Schmidt-Isserstedt beforehand. It presents a similarly tough view, but without quite the same rigour and conviction.

While with the **Bamberg Symphony Orchestra**, we might have a look at a version issued in 1956 on Vox PL 10240. The conductor, **Marcel Couraud**, is one of the few French artists in this survey, though Alain Lombard did make a Schubert cycle with a Swiss orchestra.


The name of Couraud may bring a smile of reminiscence to the lips of those who sought out bargains in the 1960s, since he conducted a well-regarded set of Brandenburgs, issued on Fontana. In truth, his reputation was mostly made as a choral trainer specializing in contemporary music. I presume his best work is to be sought there. He does not reveal any special sympathy with Schubert. After a

dignified introduction, the first movement tears away faster than any other heard till now, so fast that he has to yield here and there. At first, I found it rather stimulating, but after a time it seemed too one-sided a view, with too many felicities in the writing brushed under the carpet. No repeat.

The second movement is fairly swift and keeps the middle section jaunty rather than dramatic. Curiously, Couraud makes the long repeat in the first section, which is more often than not omitted, but drops several repeats later. The Scherzo is frenetically fast, with very little slackening for the Trio. In this movement, Couraud plays all repeats. In the Finale, he omits the short repeat of the opening section, which practically everybody else includes. This is his most successful movement, the tempo brisk but not to the extent of negating the Moderato marking, the mood relaxed but perky. At the end he makes an accelerando. Not a sudden change of tempo, as Schmidt-Isserstedt did, but a gradual increase over the last few pages. Unfortunately, the YouTube offering on which I have had to depend breaks off on the last page, so I cannot say whether Couraud accelerated further, or whether he had reached his maximum tempo by then. Either way, he courts vulgarity in a way Schmidt-Isserstedt did not.


I have discussed chamber orchestra performances from Italy and the UK. Germany, obviously, had several chamber orchestras as well. One of these, the **Saar Chamber Orchestra**, achieved a good reputation in the 1960s for its LPs, mostly of baroque repertoire, available in the UK on the Nonesuch label and always under the direction of its founder, **Karl Ristenpart**. Their performance of Schubert's Sixth Symphony was set down for Les Discophiles Français (DF 118) on 27 August 1954.

It is becoming a pattern in this survey that, just as I am beginning to wonder if it is time I took a rest from listening to this symphony, along comes a performance that clears my mind. After a fairly spacious introduction, Ristenpart sets out at a steady tempo similar to Schmidt-Isserstedt's. The effect is quite different, though, for Ristenpart completely avoids drama in favour of a springy, early morning feeling. He has staccatos played very short and then second subject simply clucks with delight. As with Blech, the wind are more prominent than usual. There are some fine players among the Saar wind principals and Ristenpart allows them a certain freedom to express themselves. No repeat.

This pure delight continues. The Andante is among the slower ones and, unlike some others who start at a similar tempo, Ristenpart makes no attempt to move on in the middle section. But with sharp pointing and springy rhythms, he maintains the feeling of a pleasant country amble. He makes the repeat in the first section, but drops one later on.

The Scherzo is steady, again close in tempo to Schmidt-Isserstedt. Ristenpart does not attempt Schmidt-Isserstedt's Beethovenian drive. This, in his hands, is fresh, bright-eyed, young man's music. He makes no pause before the Trio – he is the first in this survey not to do so – and slackens his tempo only minimally. The result is delightful, inducing the reflection that this Trio sounds at its best

either at a swift dancing tempo or at a gentle yodelling one. At a middle-way tempo it seems to say very little. Ristenpart makes all repeats here.

The Finale – also with all repeats – is steady but alert. It should have you nodding your head to the rhythm. Ristenpart makes no accelerando at the end, just a very slight tightening that avoids any risk of ponderousness. For a youthful, feel-good performance, you could hardly do better.


Another celebrated German chamber orchestra was that of Stuttgart, which made numerous recordings under its founder **Karl Münchinger**. For Schubert's first six symphonies, however, the orchestra was the **Vienna Philharmonic**. No. 6 was set down on 22 February 1965 (Decca SXL 6186). This is the second version in this survey to include all repeats. If this is your bottom line, you would certainly do better with Münchinger than with Groves. The main reason for this is, quite simply, the Vienna Philharmonic. If this sounds disrespectful towards Münchinger, I have to add that I can quite see why the VPO were happy for him to conduct them. He had at least the wit to realize how they felt the music and let them play it that way. It is a pity we cannot also hear Münchinger conducting it with his own Stuttgart orchestra for comparison, for the impression is as if Ristenpart's interpretation had been transferred to an orchestra that did not need to have it spelt out to them. After a very spacious introduction, the first movement dances away very nicely. In place of Ristenpart's sense of new discovery, there is a feeling of pleasurable rediscovery.

In the second movement, which Münchinger takes a gently strolling tempo. What I found myself increasingly noticing was the way accompanying figures are sprung, providing a nice, and definitely Viennese, lilt to the music. In the Scherzo, too, the VPO's specifics come to the fore in the placing of the sforzandos. They are not jabbed at, as might be suitable for a Beethoven scherzo, their placing rather suggests some kind of dance figure that they have known all their lives. Like Ristenpart, Münchinger makes no pause before the Trio and slackens his tempo only slightly. The Finale is steady and is brought alive by the VPO's rhythms – notably in the lower strings' dotted figure accompanying the carolling wind theme.

I find this performance has a rather nice aftertaste. Between hearing it and writing about it, I found myself thinking about it – favourably – rather a lot. I still regret that we cannot hear the VPO under a true-Viennese conductor like Walter or Krauss who might have challenged them to higher things while still sharing their natural feeling for the music. Still, we must be grateful to Münchinger for tapping this natural feeling so effectively.


A more individual conductor, certainly, was **Peter Maag**, though the jury is still out as to whether he was really a free spirit or just plain erratic. He recorded a Schubert cycle with the **Philharmonia Hungarica** for Vox in 1969 (issued on Turnabout TV 34334-38). There is not a lot to enthuse over in this Sixth.

In terms of repeats, he is fairly but not invariably draconian. No first movement repeat, only one small repeat in the Andante, all repeats in the Scherzo and Trio and then, incredibly, none at all in the Finale, not even the tiny four-bar units, the repetition of which is surely part of the phrase structure. In spite of all this, he is only a minute shorter than Münchinger's by no means hurried complete performance.

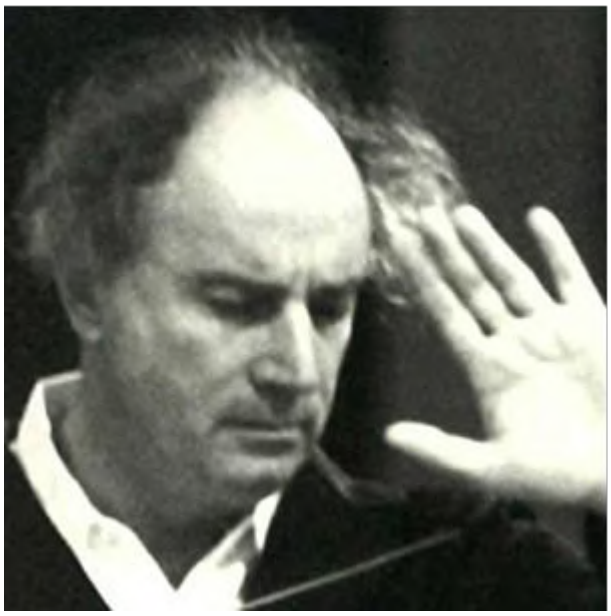
This would not matter if what was left was done supremely well. It is, you will have gathered, on the slow side. I found Münchinger's introduction the slowest so far, but this is slower still. Frankly, here, and elsewhere in the first three movements, the phrases tend to lie side by side instead of building up into an ongoing discourse. Some of the individual phrases are nicely turned and Maag brings out some countermelodies that do not usually register, but the stiff-limbed overall rhythms have a deadening effect. The Finale is considerably better, swinging along at a good tempo, but it is hardly superior to quite a few others. The orchestra has some tuning problems that might have been sorted out for a recording.

Maag was very proud of his early association with Furtwängler. Another conductor who has sometimes been compared with Furtwängler is **Rafael Kubelík**. The comparison is based more on his inspirational approach than on real similarities, since his orchestral textures were invariably much more bass-light than Furtwängler's and he was less prone to dawdle in transitions. The similarity, if any, lay in his ability to surge forward euphorically within a tempo that was not actually particularly fast.

To the best of my knowledge, Kubelík's official Schubert symphony recordings are limited to nos. 3, 4, 8 and 9. A live performance of no. 6 from 1965 seems to have been issued, but the version I have heard dates from 22 June 1978. The orchestra for both is Kubelík's own **Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra**. The 1978 performance is available only on a members-only site. It certainly deserves an official issue. This same site also has a performance from 1971.

If I say the performance is full-scale – all repeats – and full-blooded, I do not wish to suggest that is bloated or heavy-textured. It is full-blooded in the way that Kubelík's very fine recording of Beethoven's Fourth Symphony is full-blooded. That is to say, textures are luminous and the orchestration is not made to sound any bigger than it is, but the performance is borne forward on a tide of feeling. There is no risk, as with Maag, that relatively slow tempi might result in the phrases sitting side by side. Right from the introduction, the ear is led irresistibly on and on. The sheer fullness ends up by making it seem swifter than it really is, though Kubelík does move on a little in the middle part of the Andante. On the other hand, he relaxes a little in second subject territory in

the first movement, without losing his way. He also gives the lie to my thesis that the Trio needs to be either nearly up to tempo or else slow and yodelling. A midway tempo works for him.



Where he courts controversy is in the Finale. He sets out at a far slower tempo than any heard so far, hardly more than an Andante. Here we are in Beecham territory, and this is one Beecham performance that does not convince everyone. It is beautifully sprung, it sounds lovely, but will it stay the course? In fact, with the arrival of the forte, fanfare-like music, Kubelík moves to a faster tempo – pretty well the "normal" one. He goes back to the first tempo for the dotted-rhythm theme, which is delightfully pointed, then moves on again, then back for the recapitulation and so on. In short, he alternates between two tempi – the sort of thing Furtwängler might have done. It could have been a risky procedure and no doubt it is theoretically "wrong". I should not like to hear another conductor doing it the same way, not as a result of inner discovery, but because "Kubelík did it like that". But there it is. As Kubelík did it, it sounds marvellous.

Over and above any attempt to analyse what Kubelík did, I have to record my personal reactions. Here I was, listening to this "minor" Schubert symphony for the fourteenth time in fourteen days, and only the evening before had I come up against one of those performances that made me wonder if it was not time to take a rest. And now, suddenly, I was moved, bowled over, by the human dimensions, by the sheer glory of this music. I do hope it can be made available for everyone to hear.


Another conductor who could be expected to guide the ear forward is **Eduard van Beinum**, who set this symphony down with the **Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam** on 21 May 1957 (Philips L 09002 L). His mission appears to be to demonstrate that this "Little C major" is not really so little after all. He finds in it a grandeur and an urgency that come within hailing distance of the "Great C major" – indeed, he makes it all sound much more like a preview of this latter than like a humble offering at the shrine of Haydn and Mozart, or even Beethoven. Without being exceptionally fast, he is vital in the first movement, with some relaxation in second subject territory. His Andante is fairly swift and is notable for its songfulness rather than any elegant grace. The forte passages in the middle section have eruptive force. The Scherzo and Trio – the latter only slightly slower – are borne along on a strong current. The Finale is steady enough to take account of the Moderato marking but nevertheless strides along very purposefully, with eruptive force again in the forte

passages and more grandeur at the end than you would think could be extracted from the slender instrumentation. He plays all repeats except that of the first movement.

I should point out, since otherwise some reader might gleefully do so, that almost fifteen years ago, I reviewed the volume of the Great Conductors series dedicated to Van Beinum. This symphony was included. I quote my words:

> *In certain moments – the coda of the first movement or the stronger passages of the second – the Schubert symphony has a rude vigour which grabs the attention, and yet I had to admit I was not enjoying it very much. For one thing, the dotted rhythms in the first movement are not always carefully articulated and the ensemble is not more than 90% in the scherzo, but one can gloss over worse than this if the spirit is right. No, listen carefully to the accompanying figures and you will find that every first beat in the inevitable four-bar phrases which lie behind the symphonic thinking of early Schubert is deadeningly equal, with the result that the performance, for all its superficial energy, slogs instead of achieving buoyancy.*
>
> *Hard words? Perhaps, but I am not being asked to pronounce on whether this would be an acceptable bargain version of Schubert 6 (on the whole it would if you don't mind the 1950s mono sound); I am being asked to judge whether this compilation makes an adequate case for considering Eduard van Beinum among the "Great Conductors of the 20th Century" and I have to say that, taking into account the superb quality of the orchestra he had to work with, he doesn't even appear in this instance to be a particularly good one.*

The world tends to look different fifteen years on. I can only say that, by focussing on this single symphony and hearing it in many different interpretations, I have become more receptive of the different conductors' viewpoints. You do not get easy-going Viennese charm from Van Beinum, but his "rude vigour", his demonstration that this "Little C major" was a stepping-stone towards the "Great C major", seem good enough reasons to put him among the versions that count.

I finish with a small group of recordings by conductors with a strong mission towards contemporary music and well known for their inclination to interpret the classics in the light of what they may mean for modern musicians here and now, as opposed to stylistic recreations.

**Hermann Scherchen's** recording, with the **Vienna State Opera Orchestra**, was issued on Parliament 141 and Supraphon LPV 196. I do not have a date, but it appeared in WERM third edition, so 1954 or 1955 seem likely. Scherchen goes much further than Van Beinum down the road of grandeur and drama. Rather than suggesting a preview of the "Great C major", though, he creates a resplendent edifice that is unique to itself. This is a large-scale performance in everything but the repeats – none in the first movement, only the first in the Andante, no second repeats in the Scherzo or Trio, the Finale complete except for the second repeat in the opening section. He takes longer over what is left than does Münchinger with all repeats.

Scherchen finds a wider range of moods in the introduction than many do in the whole work. His slowish Allegro is actually very delicate in the soft passages, but it is the biting attack of the fortes that remains in the mind. Very often, throughout this performance, I thought, not of Schubertian innocence, but a sort of post-Mahlerian nightmare-like distortion of it. The second movement very broad indeed, the main theme having almost an epic quality. The tempo is held rigidly through the middle section and, as the principal theme comes back, there is a remarkably imaginative touch. For the bold fanfare that precedes it, Scherchen has the timpani thunder out the triplet rhythms on its own, or else cuts back the trumpets and horns to the extent that it amounts to the same thing. Then, the repeated-note triplets that are inserted as a variation do not sound decorative, they suggest that the theme is troubled by memories of what has come before. This is an insight that conductors might try introducing into "normal" performances.

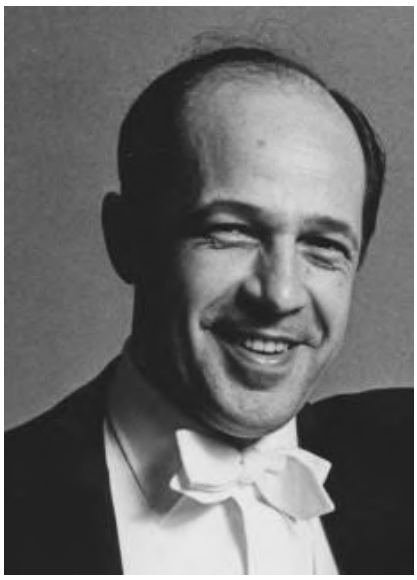
The Scherzo is slow and deliberate – about the tempo that is normally taken for that in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The Trio is slow with fierce accents – no attempts at a Landler here. The Finale is about as slow as Kubelík – but Scherchen sticks to it implacably and grimly. The dotted rhythm theme sounds a bit like the Nazi soldiers' march in Shostakovich's "Leningrad" symphony.

I often get the idea that Scherchen's idea in classical music was to do it as "wrong" as possible, but with such immense conviction and creative force as to have you thinking, while it lasts, that it is "right". I cannot really suppose Schubert imagined the music sounding like this but who knows, he might have felt flattered that somebody took the trouble to make such a magnificently powerful statement out of his youthful charmer. If you are not familiar with Scherchen's work, you should be warned that precision was not a high priority, and the Vienna State Opera Orchestra, theoretically the Vienna Philharmonic, certainly do not provide it.

**Ernest Bour** is described as a French conductor, though his native town, Thionville, was under Germany when he was born there in 1913. His studies in Strasbourg under Fritz Münch and Scherchen define him further as a Frenchman from this uneasy border area that has changed hands several times over history. He is best remembered, moreover, as Hans Rosbaud's successor as conductor of the South-West German Radio Symphony Orchestra of Baden-Baden, a post he held from 1964 to 1979. Like Rosbaud – who unfortunately does not seem to have left a recording of this symphony – he was a dedicated exponent of contemporary music and his recording of Ligeti's *Atmosphères* was used for the soundtrack of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. He did not record widely, but collectors have been seeking him out, not least in classical repertoire. Of the Schubert symphonies, only the Third is apparently missing. If you want to see him at work, there is a video on YouTube of him conducting the *Unfinished* with clear, unfussy gestures. A broadcast performance of the Sixth, with the **South-West German Radio Symphony Orchestra**, is dated 5 June 1972.

Coming after Scherchen, this was like a breath of fresh mountain air. On this showing, Bour was a non-interventionist interpreter, dedicated to keeping things clear and lively. The first movement fizzes along, only just managing not to make the second subject sound uncomfortable at

this swift speed. No repeat. The *Andante* is nicely songful, vigorous in the middle section without attempting drama. Only shorter repeats are taken. The Scherzo is fairly steady, though lively enough, the Trio quite swift. Second repeats are dropped from both. The Finale is the swiftest I have encountered yet, emphasizing the Rossini influence and suggesting a *perpetuum mobile*. This seems to ignore completely the *Moderato* marking but Bour manages to make it sound not too breathless. The second repeat in the first section is missing. This is not a version that scales the heights, but if you want a straightforward, lively performance with a brisk finale, it could be the one for you.



I started this survey in the USA, with Ormandy and the Philadelphia as unexpected Schubertians. I end by going to Cleveland for a more unlikely Schubertian still – **Pierre Boulez**. Boulez' interest in Schubert seems to have passed beneath the radar of his recording companies. Or perhaps they were aware of it and hoped he would not press the point. Collectors have entered the fray and versions of all the completed symphonies have been found – no "Unfinished" seems to have shown up. The Sixth was given by the **Cleveland Orchestra** on 9 November 1967.

Given the cool precision with which Boulez was wont to invest 20th century music, it is disarming to hear the symphony open with Furtwängler-style attempts to get the first two chords vaguely together. There is also a notable muddle as the principal theme of the Andante returns. On the other hand, Boulez' ear ensures that instrumental exchanges and countermelodies are perhaps clearer than in any other version. There is also no suggestion, in the first movement, that each instrumentalist has been left to interpret the acciaccaturas in their own way. In general, Boulez is closer to Bour than anyone else in a fresh, non-interventionist approach. The first movement goes at a nice, sprightly but not over-driven tempo, and he relaxes slightly for the second subject, which Bour did not. No repeat.

Only one small repeat in the *Andante*. He starts at a moderate-to-slow tempo, but perhaps the orchestra had misinterpreted him, since he soon settles into a faster one, the middle section bowling along quite swiftly. The Scherzo is swift but sprightly, the Trio relatively slow. Here and in the Finale, he plays all repeats. The Finale not as swift as Bour's, but is taut and purposeful.

This recording sounds as if it was made off-air on a fairly modest cassette recorder. One is grateful to hear it, but I doubt if Boulez had actually employed such a narrow range of dynamics – nothing sounds below mezzo forte, and my perception of the performance might have been more favourable if I had heard it in better sound. All the same, I find no particular insights and, for a fresh, non-interventionist approach, I would prefer Bour. Possibly Boulez believed – Stravinsky would certainly have agreed with him – that this sort of music is not proper fodder for conductors' personal insights anyway.

I am increasingly uncertain about what constitutes a "great" performance, especially when so many performances claimed as such do not seem better than many others. Of the performances discussed here, those by Kubelik and Scherchen seem to me to warrant the description, because they are wholly engrossing and create a world and a vision of their own. Maybe I would add Celibidache to these in just the slow movement. Without quite inspiring the adjective "great", the versions by Krips, Schmidt-Isserstedt, Ristenpart and Münchinger – the latter more for the orchestra than for the

conductor – seem to me to say important and essential things about the symphony and should be heard. I am glad to have heard Ormandy, Blech, Keilberth, Van Beinum and Bour without feeling an impelling need to return to them, though Blech and Van Beinum are borderline cases that I might upgrade on another day. Menuhin, Groves, Couraud, Maag and Boulez were disappointing.

What a strange world the recording scene is. When discussing Bruckner's Sixth Symphony, I found myself particularly commending a version by a conductor who was never asked to record it – Horenstein – and a recording – by Keilberth – that has generally been passed over in favour of others. Here, I was especially taken by a performance by Kubelik, who recorded prolifically but never recorded this symphony, and one by Scherchen which, though an "official" release, has mainly circulated among collectors.

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