

Building a Collection The Top Twenty Symphonies You Should Have in your Library

by Lee Denham

As part of MusicWeb International's Thirtieth Anniversary Year, this is the first of a projected series of occasional articles over the next twelve months showcasing our extensive back-catalogue, all of which is available to view free of charge.

When compiling a top twenty list of anything there will always be controversies, especially so when the list concerned is one containing the top twenty essential symphonies where, undoubtedly, many people reading this will have some very strongly held views indeed regarding which ones should be included, as well as those which should definitely be left out. The latter point is tacitly acknowledged by the final 'symphony' on this list, which was included at the expense of other, perhaps more notable, works instead.

Probably the most 'notable' of these is the '*Eroica*' – but then had that extraordinary work by Beethoven been selected, the argument for also including the same composer's Seventh Symphony would have been overwhelming – and then, likewise, for the *Pastoral* and then the Eighth. Bruckner's own colossal Eighth Symphony could also have occupied the final berth without raising too many eyebrows; similarly, any of the other symphonies by Brahms, in addition to the single one selected. Does any other symphony open with such an eruption of pure joy as Mendelssohn's *Italian* Symphony, or with so much doom and gloom as Rachmaninov's Second, either of which could/should have been included? Likewise, another five by Mozart would sit easily in this company in addition to his sole representation and, indeed, a further nineteen by Haydn to accompany the single one on this list; he was, after all, the 'father of the modern symphony'. To be frank, the top 200 may not even be enough to do justice to the symphonic canon we are so privileged to enjoy today. With that in mind, the following is a purely subjective list which, although it is perhaps aimed at the 'novice' collector, will also, hopefully, contain most of the works more seasoned readers would have recommended, based on merit rather than any other more obscure and questionable agenda, although consideration has been given to geographical representation and a timeline from Mozart and Haydn to the present day.

To add fuel to this already blazing pyre of controversy, some 'recommended recordings' for each symphony are included. In selecting these, in each case, there is one 'historical' (i.e. Toscanini, Furtwangler etc.), one 'classic' (i.e. Karajan, Solti, Bernstein etc.), and another either 'modern' (i.e. Honeck, Dudamel etc.) or historically informed/on period instruments (i.e. Norrington, Harnoncourt, etc.). In addition - and where available - a DVD recommendation has been included, too. Most of these recordings will be familiar to the majority of MusicWeb International's readers, but in case not, there are links to their reviews in the archives of this site where these are available; just click on the 'review' hyperlink to be taken to the appropriate place and if you wish to explore further, clicking the 'Masterwork Index' hyperlink after the introductory paragraphs will take you to an index listing all the reviews of that work by other orchestras and conductors in MusicWeb International's archives. Thereafter, if something piques your interest, then by clicking on '**PURCHASE**', you will also be able to buy the recording, from which MusicWeb International receives a small fee which helps keep the site up and running.

As always, any errors below are mine alone and if you have any comments or suggestions, please feel free to express them (politely) on this site's [Message Board](#).

THE TOP TWENTY

1. Beethoven: Symphony No 5 in C Minor, Op 67

With probably the most famous opening of any symphony and, along with Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, quite possibly the most famous in all symphonic literature, too, nobody can dispute Beethoven's masterpiece being included in this list. Premiered in 1808, the opening may be famous, but the transition between the third movement *scherzo* and the last movement *allegro* was revolutionary for its time and still has the power to thrill today.

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Recommended Recordings:

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Arthur Nikisch (rec. 1913)

Not the first ever recording of the piece as often claimed (that was by Friedrich Kark and the Odeon Symphony Orchestra of Berlin from 1910), but a revelatory recording, nonetheless, with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra's legendary conductor Arthur Nikisch employing, arguably, nineteenth century performance practices.

[review](#) ~ [review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

Vienna Philharmonic/Carlos Kleiber (rec. 1974)

Although there are many who would contend Kleiber père's 1953 account with the Concertgebouw on Decca to be even finer, over the years this has been the most nominated version as the 'best' recording of Beethoven's seminal work.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

Orchestre des Concerts Lamoureux/Igor Markevitch (rec.1961)

Somewhat of a dark horse amongst the many recordings of this symphony, but none is more exciting.

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[PURCHASE](#)

Concertgebouw Orchestra/George Szell (rec. 1966)

Unquestionably, Szell was a great Beethoven conductor and this is one of his best recordings.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

Pittsburgh Symphony/Manfred Honeck (rec. 2014)

The finest account of the symphony from the twenty-first century, in resplendent sound.

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[PURCHASE](#)

DVD

NBC Symphony Orchestra/Arturo Toscanini (rec. 1950)

Toscanini in black and white, eyes blazing, yet hardly moving, producing electrifying results.

[PURCHASE](#)

2. Beethoven: Symphony No 9 in D Minor, Op.125 'Choral'

Completed in 1824, Beethoven's last symphony has had a profound impact on music and culture, influencing countless composers and transcending its time. It remains a universal anthem of peace and solidarity, with the 'Ode to Joy' also adopted as the official anthem of the European Union. An 'essential' symphony if ever there was one.

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Recommended Recordings:

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Herbert von Karajan (rec. 1976)- *Anna Tomowa-Sintow/Agnes Baltsa/Peter Schreier/José van Dam/Wiener Singverein.*

Recorded at the height of his powers, Karajan's 1976 account is the best of his many very fine recordings sound-wise and has a truly international line-up of soloists; of particular note is the coda of the last movement, that has a mounting excitement and fervour which are remarkable.

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[PURCHASE](#)

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Ferenc Fricsay (rec. 1957)- *Irmgard Seefried/Maureen Forrester/Ernst Haefliger/Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau/Chor der St. Hedwig's-Kathedrale, Berlin.*

Another dark horse recording, but one that is slowly gaining recognition as being one of the greatest of all *Choral Symphonies*.

[PURCHASE](#)

Bayreuth Festival Orchestra/Wilhelm Furtwängler (rec. 1951) -*Elisabeth Schwarzkopf/Elisabeth Höngen/Hans Hopf/Otto Edelmann/Bayreuth Festival Chorus.*

There are some who consider this conductor's 1954 Lucerne Festival live taping with the Philharmonia Orchestra to be finer, possibly even the wartime radio transmission with the Berlin Philharmonic from 1942 too, but this is one of the most famous accounts of all, taped at the re-opening of the Bayreuth Festival after the Second World War.

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DVD

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Herbert von Karajan (rec. 1977) - *Anna Tomowa-Sintow/Agnes Baltsa/Rene Kollo/José van Dam/Chorus of the Berlin State Opera.*

Recorded on New Year's Eve in 1977, this is an account of the 'Choral' given the full 'festival' treatment.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

3. Mozart: Symphony No 41 in C Major, K.551 'Jupiter'

Mozart's Symphony No. 41 in C major, K. 551, known as the '*Jupiter Symphony*' is his final symphony and one of the pinnacles of classical music; it was composed in 1788, although it is not known for certain if it was premiered before his death three years later. The nickname '*Jupiter*' was not given by Mozart himself, but is believed to have been coined by the impresario Johann Peter Salomon, or later publishers in the early nineteenth century, supposedly reflecting the symphony's grandeur, majesty, and celestial qualities, reminiscent of Jupiter, the king of the Roman gods. The name also likely references the symphony's bold, powerful opening and its monumental finale, which features a fugal interplay of five themes - a display of intellectual brilliance and dramatic intensity. One of the greatest of all symphonies, this is surely a mandatory work for this list.

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Recommended Recordings:

NBC Symphony Orchestra/Arturo Toscanini (rec, 1945)

In his time, Toscanini was quite possibly the most famous classical music conductor in the world, but appreciation of his art by those who never saw him in the flesh has always been compromised by the sonic limitations due to the age of his recordings, as well as the fact that he chose to make many of them in the notorious Studio 8-H in New York, which the conductor liked for its clarity of sound, but where the results on recordings were too often very dry. With the smaller forces required for Mozart symphonies, these limitations are not so prevalent and even if they still remain, they are not enough to limit one's appreciation of how Toscanini performs the '*Jupiter*' with a burning ardour, tremendous drive and a fierce singing line, all allied to a clarity of texture that is a match for any modern period instrument ensemble.

[review](#)

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New York Philharmonic Orchestra/Bruno Walter (rec. 1956)

If today Bruno Walter (1876-1962) is predominantly remembered for his association with Mahler, during his lifetime it was the music of Mozart with which he was most closely associated. In his autobiography, '*Theme and Variations*' published in 1947, he articulated that his aim with Mozart's music was to give dramatic expression to "*a truth concealed behind the veil of beauty*" and in his recordings of Mozart's symphonies the listener will encounter a range of colours and warmth, allied to an unerring sense of 'rightness' in his interpretations, that can occasionally border on the miraculous. Inner-details shine through with absolute naturalness and accents made with perfect dramatic timing in a way that, in comparison, the majority of period instrument performers or historical informed readings seem to be merely point-making.

Walter recorded the last symphonies three times – with the Vienna Philharmonic in 1938, with the New York Philharmonic in the mid-1950s, as well as the Columbia Symphony Orchestra (a session band of freelance musicians based in Los Angeles) in stereo in the early 1960s. It is the latter, released by CBS/Sony, that are perhaps the most familiar to this day, especially for collectors of a certain age who would have fond memories of them from their youth, but it has to be said those performances are rather too grand and stately, especially to modern ears, so it is the slightly earlier, swifter readings with the New York Philharmonic, in fine mono sound, that is the best representation of Walter's Mozart. In this account of the '*Jupiter*', Walter's grace and warmth is combined with grand and spirited playing by the NYPO to produce an exceptional reading.

[PURCHASE](#)

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra/Riccardo Muti (rec. 1993)

Although Mozart was born in Salzburg, Vienna has often claimed him as one of their own and there are numerous recordings of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra performing the late symphonies, many of which are very special indeed. Muti's accounts of the final symphonies with them made in the mid-1990s for Philips (now Decca) are gloriously recorded and are very fine, combining crisp articulation with a winning warmth, as well as a certain raciness of the opera pit, which seems most appropriate when considering the composer's, orchestra's and conductor's background.

[PURCHASE](#)

Camerata Academica des Mozarteums Salzburg/Sándor Végh (rec. 1994)

In recent years Mozart has increasingly been performed on original instruments, or by major symphony orchestras employing Historically Informed Practices (HIP) and if that is your thing, then this release of the final two symphonies of Mozart will delight and surprise you in equal measure. It will surprise you since Sándor Végh (1912-1997) is predominantly remembered as a chamber music specialist, who for the majority of his career performed with the Végh Quartet which recorded, amongst other things, an extremely highly regarded set of the complete Beethoven quartets. However, towards the end of his life, he taught at the Salzburg Mozarteum and conducted occasional concerts of chamber music with the ensemble there, which is also featured on this release, where smallish forces are employed using modern instruments, that incorporate insights from historically informed performance practices. What will delight you, though, is Végh's wonderfully warm, humane and melodious approach to Mozart's score(s) that has a liveliness of texture and a vocal vividness that elevates it to something really special. Sadly, Végh only recorded the last two symphonies commercially, although there are some live accounts of others, but he did partner Andras Schiff in their complete cycle of the piano concertos with equally winning results, so if you like his way with this composer, then **Charles Mackerras** in his complete cycle with the Prague Symphony Orchestra, or in the last symphonies with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, would be a convenient addendum to Végh's special disc.

[PURCHASE](#)

DVD

Orchestra de Radio Canada/Josef Krips (rec. 1962)

This is a televised concert of Mozart's music, in grainy black and white with mono sound, that is full of magic. Krips is joined an illustrious trio of Mozartians: the Canadians Pierrette Alarie (soprano) and Léopold Simoneau (tenor), and the eminent American pianist Malcolm Frager, for a concert that ends with the '*Jupiter*' symphony.

[PURCHASE](#)

4. Haydn: Symphony No 104 in D Major, Hob.I.104, '*The London*'

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) was nicknamed 'Papa Haydn' even during his lifetime and is commonly acknowledged as being the 'father' of the modern symphony, so it is beyond argument that he should be represented, the only question being which of his 104 symphonies should be the one selected. The '*London*' Symphony was the last composed from a set of twelve written for the Royal Philharmonic Society of London and was premiered in 1795. It was the last symphony he ever wrote, with his final years being devoted towards composing the last six masses, the final string quartets and *The Creation*.

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Recommended Recordings:

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra/Thomas Beecham (rec. 1959)

Recorded in the cavernous acoustic of the Salle Wagram in Paris, using the corrupt nineteenth century editions of which often reflected editorial changes and interpretations including added dynamics, articulation and re-orchestration, especially with brass and percussion parts, Beecham's Haydn does not have much going for it at first sight. However, Beecham's approach in emphasising the music's elegance, charm and wit, has a life-affirming humanity that has to be heard to be appreciated, not least in this account of the London which has a matchless inherent grandeur and swagger.

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New York Philharmonic Orchestra/Leonard Bernstein (rec. 1958)

It seems a little astonishing to note that Bernstein's recording was made earlier than Sir Thomas Beecham's, but during his lifetime he was renowned for his championing of Haydn almost as much as Mahler, setting down nearly all of the symphonies from the Paris onwards with the NYPO, for CBS/Sony. Had he lived longer he may well have remade several more with the Vienna Philharmonic than just the single disc consisting of numbers 88, 92 and 94, but in any case these were heavier in execution when compared to the earlier accounts from New York.

What distinguishes Bernstein's Haydn, perhaps more than any other conductor including Beecham, is his sense of fun. Even when his minuets can be too slow and stately, or the orchestral textures too thick, the music shines through as witty, profound, dramatic and touching in a way few other conductors have matched before, or since and the account of the 'London Symphony' has a rare sense of exultation and exhilaration that mark it out as special.

[PURCHASE](#)

London Philharmonic Orchestra/Eugen Jochum (rec.1971)

In spite of his posthumous reputation as perhaps a Bruckner-specialist, few have been able to match Jochum's poise, warmth, zest and zeal in Haydn. Whereas both Beecham and Bernstein could occasionally be find wanting in the stateliness of their approaches, in spite of the bags of charm and spirit that accompanied it, Jochum was ahead of his time in the early 1970's with the impetus and clarity of his Haydn interpretations and the sound obtained by Deutsche Grammophon for this complete set of the London symphonies is quite superb, clean and lucid, but with great warmth too. There is no question that in number 104 the reduced forces of the London Philharmonic play with great refinement and eloquence, with the whirlwind string interludes in the final movement and the vivid writing for trumpets and drums all register with perfectly natural clarity and balance to produce a reading that stands the test of time over half a century later.

[PURCHASE](#)

Orchestra Of St. Luke's/Charles Mackerras (rec. 1991)

In superb Telarc sound, as ever, Charles Mackerras's performances of Haydn's symphonies are an object lesson in how to play these works on modern instruments whilst at the same time acknowledging recent advances in knowledge on how Haydn's music should be played. So both the outer movements of the 'London' symphony are pacy yet grand, while the Andante flows winningly, with the minuet steering a middle course between the stateliness of older recordings and the manic excitability of too many from 'period instrument specialists'. The trumpets and drums are given their due prominence, but not at the expense of inner detail, which shines through with effortless naturalness. To be frank, it is hard to improve upon this achievement.

[PURCHASE](#)

5. Mahler: Symphony No 2 in C minor 'Resurrection'

It is sometimes overlooked that this huge, *modern* symphony received its first performance during the nineteenth century, in 1895 to be precise, so avant-garde it appears to be. With its large forces, including offstage brass, organ, choir and two female soloists, it has become the standard 'festival work' of our time, blending profound emotion with unparalleled grandeur and has become the standard 'festival work' of our time, so is therefore essential for this list.

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Recommended Recording:

Philharmonia Orchestra/Otto Klemperer (rec. 1962) - *Elisabeth Schwarzkopf/Hilde Rössel-Majdan/Philharmonia Chorus.*

Otto Klemperer was along with Bruno Walter, Willem Mengelberg and Dimitri Mitropoulos one of the great champions of Mahler for the first half of the twentieth century and often assisted the composer in preparing his symphonies for concert. There are many recordings of him, both live and in the studio, conducting the '*Resurrection Symphony*', but this one with the Philharmonia Orchestra, in fine Walter Legge stereo sound, can hold its own with any recording, before or since. In their interpretations, both Klemperer and **Bruno Walter** (CBS/Sony) bring to their readings a special authority that working with the composer can bring, but Klemperer's terse grandeur from the outset is more effective than Walter's more slow-burn approach on his own recording.

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[PURCHASE](#)

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra/Zubin Mehta (rec. 1975) - *Ileana Cotrubas/Christa Ludwig. Vienna State Opera Chorus.*

One of the glories of Zubin Mehta's extensive discography, in stunning Decca stereo sound and with superb soloists, this is indisputably one of the symphony's greatest recordings.

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[PURCHASE](#)

London Symphony Orchestra/Georg Solti (rec. 1966) – *Heather Harper/Helen Watts/London Symphony Chorus.*

Another Decca vintage sonic spectacular with Solti in electrifying form, so much better than in his remake with the Chicago Symphony.

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[DVD](#)

London Symphony Orchestra/Leonard Bernstein (rec. 1972) - *Sheila Armstrong/Janet Baker/Edinburgh Festival Chorus*

Some of the hairstyles may be alarming, the cinematography showing the hidden niches of Ely Cathedral in which this concert was filmed a little passé, but the sight of Bernstein exhorting his players and choruses to ever greater heights at the close of the symphony, inspired the Hollywood movie, *Maestro*.

[PURCHASE](#)

6. Mahler: Symphony No 9 in D major

Another Mahler symphony, this time the last one he completed, although some would lay claim that this composer's Sixth Symphony deserves to be on this list too. This music, at times dark and terrifying but often hauntingly beautiful, is notoriously difficult for orchestras and conductors to perform, was premiered in 1912 and is one of the last great Romantic symphonies, essential to any collection.

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Recommended Recordings:

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Herbert von Karajan (rec. 1982).

Towering over nearly every recording ever made of this symphony are the two set down by Herbert von Karajan with the Berlin Philharmonic in 1979 and 1982. There are some who consider the earlier account made in the studio to be the finer and certainly its warmer analogue sonics can be preferred to those of the more closely recorded digital live account. The later performance however seems to span an even greater canvas and is unusual in ending with a certain calm acceptance in which it differs from the studio version and most other conductors' accounts. In the end, Karajan performed the work only nine times in concert, all in 1982, claiming he felt he could never improve upon his achievements that year.

[PURCHASE](#)

New Philharmonia Orchestra/Otto Klemperer (rec. 1967).

If Karajan's versions were full of haunting beauty, Klemperer's approach to this symphony is one of stoic grimness – and if the symphony comes across darker and less forgiving than in other hands, then the music is the greater for it.

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[PURCHASE](#)

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra/Bruno Walter (rec. 1938).

Walter was the conductor entrusted with the world premiere of this symphony and while his later studio recording has both better playing and sonics, this live account taped just six weeks before Hitler annexed Austria is not only an intense listening experience, but also an important recording in the history of this work and is better than his remake with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra in 1961, in spite of the later recording's better sound.

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DVD

Lucerne Festival Orchestra/Claudio Abbado (rec. 2010)

Abbado's Mahler performances with the hand-picked orchestra of virtuosos assembled for the annual Lucerne Festival have become justly famous and revered.

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7. Schumann: Symphony No 4 in D Minor, Op. 120

Robert Schumann's Fourth Symphony was initially composed in 1841 before the Third Symphony, the 'Rhenish', before being revised in 1851 (hence its numbering) and is notable for its cohesive structure, with all four movements played without pause and connected thematically. The symphony opens with a brooding *Introduzione* that leads into a dramatic *Allegro*, before the lyrical *Romanze* offers tender introspection, followed by a lively *Scherzo*. The transition into the *Finale* finds brass fanfares sounding out across a *Romantic* landscape of shimmering strings, before bringing all the themes together for a triumphant coda. Schumann brought a fresh perspective to orchestral music, blending classical structure with *Romantic* expression, so is essential to any collection.

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Recommended Recordings:

Staatskapelle Dresden/Wolfgang Sawallisch (rec. 1972)

Sawallisch's recordings of the four Schumann symphonies have been the benchmark set ever since their release in the early 1970s and have never been exceeded, if only occasionally matched, even by the conductor's remakes with the Philadelphia Orchestra some twenty years later.

[review](#)

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Mahler's Orchestration

Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra/Riccardo Chailly (rec. 2006)

Not to be confused with this conductor's earlier recordings of the complete symphonies from the late 1980s with the Concertgebouw that were worthy, if a little dull, Chailly's remakes in Leipzig not only contain vastly improved performances, but were also distinguished by using Gustav Mahler's revised editions of the scores. It is important to note that Mahler's 'revisions' are not on the level of Leopold Stokowski's with his habitual swooning strings and cascading harps, underpinned by a huge organ; instead, all that he had done is to refocus the internal balances by amending the timpani parts and reinforcing the woodwinds, with the result the whole thing sounds freshly minted which, when performed in such excellent performances as these by Chailly and the Gewandhaus, demand to be heard.

[PURCHASE](#)

Original version

Gürzenich-Orchester Köln/François-Xavier Roth (rec. 2019)

Apparently, Johannes Brahms believed the original, four movement version of Schumann's Fourth Symphony to be better than the more heavily scored revision from 1851; for most others though, it's like drinking non-alcoholic wine – you know the intent is well-meaning, but it just doesn't taste the same. That said, the 1841 score has increasingly been recorded and performed in recent years, including by such major conductors such as **Simon Rattle** and the Berlin Philharmonic and **John Eliot Gardiner** with the London Symphony Orchestra, but this version by Roth is easily the pick of the bunch.

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8. Bruckner: Symphony No 9 in D Minor, WAB. 109

There are some people who rather disparage the music of Anton Bruckner (1824-1896), but his voice is such a unique one that his inclusion on this list is beyond dispute. However, nominating one work by him proved to be somewhat problematic; the most 'popular' would almost certainly be either his Fourth or Seventh symphonies, while some consider his Eighth to be his greatest achievement. In the end, it was darkest of all his works that was chosen.

Bruckner's Ninth Symphony (or Eleventh, if you wish to include the two student symphonies in the canon), was left unfinished at his death in 1896 and for many years was performed and recorded as a three-movement work that was curiously satisfying in its own right. The music composed by Bruckner for his last symphony his darkest and most modern and after three movements of colossal grandeur and terror, where the sun only occasionally breaks through the dark clouds, it seems as if he then struggled to produce a final movement with which to complete the symphony. When he died, many friends and associates apparently took pages of the unfinished final movement as 'souvenirs', but recently these have been tracked down and pierced together like some kind of musical jigsaw puzzle, to produce something representing Bruckner's thinking at the time of his death, even if there is no guarantee that these ideas would have made it into the final score had he lived to finish the work; what *is* clear, however, is that the whole of the final movement's coda is either missing, or was never composed in the first place. There have therefore been many attempts to produce a completion, of which the most high-profile has been the one by the music editors Samale-Phillips-Cohrs-Mazzuca, who produced the score used by Simon Rattle for his recording of the symphony with the Berlin Philharmonic (see below). However, most of these attempts have not been that well-received by the music-loving public, mainly because the music contained in them somehow does not seem to do justice to what has gone before. One conductor who has tried to address this issue is **Peter Jan Marthé** with his own completion, which he has recorded with the European Philharmonic Orchestra on Preiser. There is supposed to be a very thin line between genius and madness and this attempt by Marthé merrily tips over into both sides of that divide, often at the same time. Loosely basing his composition upon Bruckner's sketches, albeit in such a way to make even the most battle-hardened musicologist drop to their knees in despair, Marthé turns the final movement into some kind of Brucknerian *Ein Heldenleben* and while nobody is pretending it's what the composer would have wanted, least of all the shade of Bruckner himself, it is nonetheless far more enjoyable and packs a much greater emotional punch than you may have expected. This is possibly the version for the 'non-believers' and the accompanying account of the standard three movement work is rather good, too.

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Recommended Recordings:

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Wilhelm Furtwängler (rec. 1944)

Furtwängler's Bruckner is like nobody else's before, or since; fluid and fiery, the transitions are masterly, even if the accelerandos have never been repeated by conductors, before or since. This is the only existing taping we have of him conducting the Ninth symphony and if the sonics occasionally distort and the music-making threatens to boil over at times, then this is dark and terrifying music-making from a dark and terrifying time.

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Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Herbert von Karajan (rec. 1975)

Furtwängler was succeeded at the Berlin Philharmonic by Herbert von Karajan, another great Bruckner conductor. Rather than the white-heat of Furtwängler, Karajan's Bruckner takes its cue from the symphony's dedicatees who included Richard Wagner, emperors and God, Himself; as such the music has a celestial grandeur, with the brass sounding-out across the heavens. He recorded the

Bruckner Ninth on four occasions, including two films, all of which are masterful. Choice between the two studio versions, both with the Berlin Philharmonic on Deutsche Grammophon, is difficult; if the later account just about gets the verdict, then it is only because the closer sound when compared to the earlier 1966 recording, creates an even more overwhelming reading of colossal power.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra/ Carlo Maria Giulini (rec. 1988)

Upon first encountering Carlo Maria Giulini's second recording of the Bruckner Ninth Symphony you may well think it too slow, it being some five minutes longer than his first account with the Chicago Symphony for EMI in 1976, which is also rather leisurely. However, the ear soon adjusts to the burnished splendour of the music-making, gloriously played by the Vienna Philharmonic and captured in expansive sound by Deutsche Grammophon; it is a spiritual performance of Olympian grandeur. If Furtwängler is too cataclysmic and Karajan too overwhelmingly powerful then this recording, perhaps alongside the slightly less well recorded **Eugen Jochum** with the Dresden Staatskapelle, is the version for you.

[PURCHASE](#)

Completed Four-Movement Version

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/ Simon Rattle (rec. 2012)

There are many who consider this recording by Simon Rattle to be the best thing he did during his tenure with the Berlin Philharmonic – certainly it is difficult to imagine a more dedicated and better played account of the final movement than on this finely recorded account, even if **Johannes Wildner's** account with the New Philharmonic of Westphalia runs him very close (*note: this recording contains the first draft of the fourth movement completion that is marginally different from the one on the Berlin recording*). Rattle's version also has the distinction of having the finest account of the first three movements so far this century, alongside **Manfred Honeck's** recording with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

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DVD

Bamberg Symphony Orchestra/Herbert Blomstedt (rec. 2024).

On July 11, 2024, the day of his 97th birthday, Herbert Blomstedt conducted Bruckner's 9th Symphony in the Basilica of St. Florian, in honour of the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Anton Bruckner. The composer began his musical career as a Florian choirboy and later continued there as organist of St. Florian, where he was buried under the organ (n.b. available March 2025).

[PURCHASE](#)

9. Schubert: Symphony No 9 in C Major, D. 944, 'Great'

It is often overlooked that Franz Schubert (1797-1828), died just a year after Beethoven. During his short life he was primarily known for his vocal works, the long shadow of the older composer meaning that his symphonies received comparatively little notice. Indeed, his final symphony, the Ninth (or Eighth, since there appears to be no 'Seventh Symphony'), was completed a year after Beethoven's own Ninth was premiered and includes a direct quotation from the 'Ode to Joy' theme, whispered *pianissimo* by the woodwind section, in the middle of the last movement. Dying tragically young at 31, Schubert did not live to hear his final symphony performed during his lifetime and instead it was left to Felix Mendelssohn and Robert Schumann, no less, to champion and to arrange its premiere in 1839. It was the latter who coined the expression "heavenly length" that is often associated with the work, perhaps in trying to cajole orchestral players at the time to perform it, since they objected not just to the length of the piece, but also in part due to its repetitious writing, especially for the string section. This leads neatly to the vexed question of repeats in this symphony; when all are observed, it clocks in at just over the hour mark; when only the barest minimum are included, then it's a slightly shorter forty-five minutes. The challenge for the performers, therefore, as the (then) ninety-five years young Herbert Blomstedt observed in the liner-notes of his latest recording with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, is: "We don't want listeners to grow bored and say: 'Oh no, here we go again'. No, it must sound like a blessing: 'Ah, once again!'"

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Recommended Recordings:

London Symphony Orchestra/Josef Krips (rec. 1958).

It is sad to note that the Viennese-born conductor, Josef Krips (1902-1974), is largely forgotten today, a victim perhaps of an era when many conducting giants roamed the earth. He was from all accounts, the most charming and amiable man too – in short, all qualities ideal to be an ideal conductor of Schubert's music; and so it proves with this wonderful representation of his art in this recording of the Schubert 'Great' Symphony. Even in the late 1950s the competition on vinyl would have been formidable with this work, most notably with **George Szell** and the Cleveland Orchestra in 1957 (CBS/Sony) and **Charles Munch** with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1958 (RCA), both of which are also deservedly classic recordings. However, whereas the tricky corners of this symphony were negotiated with an imperious terseness by Szell, or with impulsive excitability by Munch, Krips instead does it with charm and sparkle, so when dark clouds do appear on the horizon (such as the climax of the second movement, *Andante con moto*), sunlight quickly breaks through and returns in this most genial of interpretations. You won't find a more joyful account of this work anywhere and Decca's early stereo sound needs no apologies.

[PURCHASE](#)

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Wilhelm Furtwängler (rec. 1950).

Long acknowledged to be one of Furtwängler's finest recordings, listeners encountering it for the first time after being weaned on the score by historically-informed readings will be in for a shock, since the conductor interprets the symphony through the prism of Bruckner – and in particular that composer's darkest score, his own Ninth Symphony. The results are intense and gripping, unlike any other in the catalogue and in surprisingly good sound for its time as well.

[review](#) ~ [review](#) ~ [review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

NDR Symphony Orchestra/ Günter Wand (rec. 1991).

Wand has officially recorded this work three times, in addition to live accounts broadcast on radio that have also made it into recorded catalogue, all of which are exceptional. Of the 'official' recordings, if most prefer the middle recording he made, it is because of the better sonics than the earlier account from Cologne, as well as having a more appropriate 'rustic' air about it when compared to the more luxuriant, later Berlin Philharmonic recording.

[PURCHASE](#)

Philharmonia Orchestra/Charles Mackerras (rec. 2008).

In searching for a 'period-instrument' account, or at least an 'historically-informed' one, to be included on this list, this recording seemed to be the pick of the bunch. It is curious to note that such even such a period-instrument specialist, for example **Nikolaus Harnoncourt**, should have chosen modern orchestras, namely the Chamber Orchestra of Europe and Concertgebouw, for his recordings of the '*Great*' Symphony. With Charles Mackerras's three recordings, the earliest was with the original instrument band, the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (Virgin, 1987), the second was with modern instruments, albeit with the chamber-sized Scottish Chamber Orchestra (Telarc, 1998), whereas the final one was with a full-sized modern symphony orchestra, the Philharmonia. All three recordings are hugely distinguished and so if you want period instruments then the first recording is for you, whereas the Telarc release has the best sonics. However, the Philharmonia account, perhaps because it was taped live at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall, has a terrific sense of occasion in addition to being 'historically aware' that nudges it into first spot.

[PURCHASE](#)

DVD

NDR Sinfonieorchester/Günter Wand (rec. 1995)

Not the same performance as above, coupled with the '*Unfinished*' in a live concert at the Schleswig-Holstein Musik Festival in 1995, beautifully filmed and performed.

[review](#)

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10. Schubert: Symphony No 8 in B Minor, D. 759 '*Unfinished*'

Another unfinished symphony and another one composed by Franz Schubert. Finished in 1822, it consists of two completed movements, an *Allegro moderato*, followed by an *Andante con moto*. The reason for this symphony's 'unfinished' nature—lacking a traditional third and fourth movement—remains a mystery, but its beauty and innovation have secured its place as a cornerstone of Romantic orchestral music. It is one of the most popular symphonies of all, essential for any library.

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Recommended Recordings:

New York Philharmonic Orchestra/Bruno Walter (rec. 1958).

There is a remarkable fusion of opposites in this recording that combines the warmth and grace of Walter's conducting, with the grand and muscular playing of the New York Philharmonic. It all results in a wonderfully leisurely reading, patrician even, that is the equal of the **George Szell's** famous recording with the Cleveland Orchestra also made around the same time.

[PURCHASE](#)

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Herbert von Karajan (rec. 1975).

Although Karajan is nobody's idea of a great Schubertian, his late seventies cycle for EMI is better than you would think, if far from being first choice, with a surprisingly good Ninth, as well as a relaxed and elegant Fifth Symphony. However, it is the '*Unfinished*' that is easily the pick of the bunch, the one Schubert work he conducted frequently throughout his career. Some have claimed this to be Schubert's most '*Brucknerian*' symphony and Karajan's is its most Brucknerian recording of all, full of haunting beauty and gothic splendour – it is about as far away from Roger Norrington that it is humanly possible to get (which some may think is a good thing). Even better is the live account of him with the Vienna Philharmonic from the Salzburg Festival in 1968, released on Deutsche Grammophon, where the electricity of a live concert burns through the dated sonics and also overflows into a winning second half of Strauss's waltzes for which these artists were consummate exponents.

[PURCHASE](#)

Staatskapelle Dresden/Herbert Blomstedt (rec. 1983)

It is little short of extraordinary that, when writing this at the beginning of 2025, Herbert Blomstedt at 97 years young is not just still with us and active as a conductor, but has just released his third recording of the Schubert '*Unfinished*' symphony, on this occasion with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra (from live concerts in 2021). That is a fine recording, but even better are the earlier versions set down with the San Francisco Symphony in 1990, as well as this one that came as part of a complete cycle of the nine symphonies with the Dresden Staatskapelle that many consider the best in the catalogue, even when considering other excellent sets by **Günter Wand** and **Claudio Abbado**. This version of the '*Unfinished*' is gripping right from the beginning, taut, beautifully played, and above all warmly expressive and attuned to its different moods. In particular, it is the Staatskapelle Dresden that is equally the star of the show – you will not hear the woodwind solos in the *Adagio* sound as poignant as in this recording, until the same orchestra re-recorded the piece some ten years later for **Giuseppe Sinopoli** in a beautifully engineered disc for Deutsche Grammophon, which is almost as good.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment/Charles Mackerras (rec. 1987).

Mackerras again, this time performing the piece on original instruments with additional speculative completions and realisations of the symphony's scherzo and finale.

[PURCHASE](#)

DVD

See Schubert Symphony No 9, above.

11. Sibelius: Symphony No 7 in C Major, Op. 105

"If I cannot write a better symphony than my Seventh [completed and premiered in 1924], then it shall be my last," said Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) and indeed, after the premiere of the tone poem *Tapiola* two years later, he composed no further music in spite of living another thirty years. In his famous meeting with Gustav Mahler in 1907, he disagreed when the Austro-Czech composer claimed that a symphony "*should be like the world – and contain everything*", whereas Sibelius instead admired the form's "*severity and style and the profound logic that created an inner connection between all the motifs*". His Seventh Symphony, conceived as a single movement lasting some twenty-two minutes, is the summation of that ideal, concise and concentrated that delivers a staggeringly intense listening experience.

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Recommended Recordings:

BBC Symphony Orchestra/Serge Koussevitsky (rec. 1933).

In spite of his subsequent reputation, the great Russian conductor, Serge Koussevitsky (1874-1951) was a comparatively late convert to the Sibelian cause, only really conducting him regularly from the late 1920's onwards. This Seventh Symphony, from a rare guest conducting appearance with the newly-formed BBC Symphony Orchestra, is one of the most famous recordings of Sibelius in the whole catalogue and the white-hot intensity of the performance burns through the inevitably limited 1930's live mono sound with uncommon ferocity.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra/Lorin Maazel (rec. 1966)

By all accounts, the music of Jean Sibelius was not highly regarded in German-speaking countries after the Second World War, so this music would have been largely unfamiliar to the Vienna Philharmonic when they embarked upon recording all the symphonies for Decca under the young Lorin Maazel; it says much for the achievement of the conductor that the result was a cycle that has dominated the catalogue ever since. If he is not uniformly great in all the symphonies (the Sixth is arguably far too swift, for example), his accounts of the First, Fourth and Seventh are indisputably superb. It is also sobering to note that this Seventh came from a ten-year spell that also saw the release of other recordings by **Thomas Beecham** with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, **Eugene Ormandy** with the Philadelphia Orchestra and **Herbert von Karajan** with the Berlin Philharmonic, all of which are of equal stature to Maazel, who was not able to equal his achievement with his remake in Pittsburgh many years later.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

Lahti Symphony Orchestra, Osmo Vänskä (rec. 1996)

With fairy lightness and glittering sunshine, Osmo Vänskä's Sibelius is as cool and precise as a perfectly cut diamond. There are some who consider his approach too light, especially so in this symphony, but there is no doubt that the results he obtains are refreshing and, at times, texturally revelatory. Do not confuse the very fine readings with the Lahti Symphony Orchestra with the disappointingly over-studied remakes from Minnesota.

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[PURCHASE](#)

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra/Leonard Bernstein (rec. 1988)

If Osmo Vänskä's account was as pure as a crystalline Nordic stream, then Bernstein brings the might of a whole Finnish forest to bear in his reading of the Seventh Symphony. There are some who rate Bernstein's Sibelius very highly, but equally so many who consider his early New York symphony cycle too extrovert and excitable, whereas the later Vienna remakes (of a partial cycle - the conductor did not live long enough to complete it) too self-indulgent. However, he was always great in the Seventh Symphony and in this live account with the Vienna Philharmonic, he draws magnificent playing from the orchestra of dark, mahogany splendour for a broad, yet grippingly intense reading.

[review](#)

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As above

[review](#)

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12. Shostakovich: Symphony No 10 in E minor, Op 93

I am sure there will be many Shostakovich devotees reading this who would sooner nominate this composer's great war time symphony the Eighth, as his greatest symphony – possibly even the revolutionary Fourth, or even the astonishingly brave *Babi Yar*, but instead it is his most classically formed symphony in four movements, the Tenth, that has made the list as being “essential”.

As always with Shostakovich, things never appear as they seem, a situation not helped by Solomon Volkov's *Testimony*, the composer's 'memoir' that was apparently relayed to the writer, which alleges that this symphony's second movement *scherzo* represents 'a musical portrait of Stalin', as well that the central climax of the final movement, when the whole orchestra blasts out the composer's own DSCH motivic signature, D–E flat–C–B (D–Es–C–H (in German notation), relates to the composer's triumph at the death of Stalin – except while the symphony was premiered in 1953, months after the dictator's death, there is much evidence to suggest it had been completed as early as 1951. Further ambiguity surrounds the suggested playing time of fifty minutes noted in the autographed score, a timing exceeded by practically every recording, both from the studio and concert hall.

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Recommended Recordings:

Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra/Yevgeny Mravinsky (rec. 1954)

This symphony was premiered by Mravinsky and the Leningrad Philharmonic in December 1953 and they bring a unique authority, as well as astonishing discipline, to this recording. A further live account from 1976 is also available on Erato/Warner which has part of the opening bar missing and while that has the better sonics and is a likewise a very fine performance, it lacks the crushing intensity of the earlier account.

[PURCHASE](#)

New York Philharmonic Orchestra/Dimitri Mitropoulos (rec. 1954)

It says much for this symphony that within two years of its premiere it had garnered studio recordings, not just from Mravinsky above, but also **Karel Ančerl** and the Czech Philharmonic, **Franz Konwitschny** and the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, as well as the Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by **Efrem Kurtz**, all of which are superb; if this Mitropoulos version is deemed the pick of the bunch, it is by the width of a fag paper. That said, it is exceptional in its brooding savagery, superbly played by the New York Philharmonic and in better sound than the Mravinsky.

[PURCHASE](#)

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Herbert von Karajan (rec. 1966)

The fact that after that cluster of initial recordings in the mid-1950s, this symphony's next major recording was with Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic in 1966 says much about the reputation of the composer at the time, as well as giving lie the old chestnut that Karajan did not conduct much contemporary music. His recording of the (then) thirteen year old symphony has dominated the catalogue ever since, notable for its architectural grip as much for its blistering intensity. It has always been a difficult choice to make between the 1966 recording and the remake in 1981, which enjoys better sonics but takes a little longer to get going; however, even more so than before, Karajan pushes his players to very limits of their capabilities in the *scherzo* and the coda of the finale,

to the extent that you feel even the fabled Berlin Philharmonic is going to come off the rails at any moment. Even better than both, in between Karajan took the work on tour to the Soviet Union in 1969 for concerts in Leningrad and Moscow, at which one was attended by the composer himself as well as a very young, Mariss Jansons, who said of the Shostakovich performances: “*They played at two hundred per cent capacity. It was unbelievable*”. The Moscow performance was broadcast on the radio, but the cavernous acoustic and a bodged transfer to compact disc by Melodiya (the original vinyls sounded better) make the listening experience even more historical-sounding that you may have hoped. In addition, there are two live accounts, one with a rare guest appearance with the Dresden Staatskapelle at the Salzburg Festival in 1976, that is available on Deutsche Grammophon, as well as with the Berlin Philharmonic some half a dozen years later, available from the pirates; both are exceptional performances, the last one especially, but both have small cuts in the first movement’s exposition of around thirty seconds, which makes little sense whatsoever.

[PURCHASE](#)

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra/Frank Shipway (rec. 1996)

The late Frank Shipway (1935-2014) really should have been much better known as a conductor, but the fact he did not enjoy the career his talents perhaps deserved was down to one thing – Frank Shipway. An extremely flamboyant character, he was a tyrant in the rehearsal room, making even Arturo Toscanini in comparison seem as benevolent as a parish priest, with the additional distinction of once causing a whole orchestra to go on strike in protest over his rehearsal methods. As a consequence, professional orchestras were wary of engaging him and he made few recordings, even if the ones he did make were uniformly highly praised by critics and listeners alike. He certainly gets the Royal Philharmonic to play in this recording of the Shostakovich Tenth as if their lives depended on it, which could quite possibly have been the case, and of particular note in this interpretation is how the introductions to the first and last movements are taken extremely slowly, hushed and mournful, as if they were the openings of a requiem mass. Hugely distinctive and distinguished.

[PURCHASE](#)

DVD

Mariinsky Orchestra / Valery Gergiev (rec. 2013)

In the last twenty years or so, Valery Gergiev has been this composer’s most doughty champion and while this live concert from Paris is not bad and is good both visually and technically, the performance is not in the same league as any of the aforementioned, audio-only recordings, even if it is probably the best of the limited number available on DVD featuring this symphony.

[PURCHASE](#)

13. Dvořák: Symphony No 7 in D Minor, Op. 70

Although not as well-known as his Ninth Symphony (*‘From the New World’*), nor as popular as the Eighth, Antonín Dvořák’s Seventh Symphony, written in 1884 and premiered the following year, is widely regarded as his greatest, combining both high drama and structural rigour.

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Recommended Recordings:

London Symphony Orchestra, Witold Rowicki (rec. 1971).

It is quite remarkable to note during these times of record-studio parsimony, that in the late 1960's Decca and Philips (now both part of the Universal Music Group) embarked upon cycles of Dvořák's nine symphonies not just at the same time, but with the same orchestra – namely the London Symphony – which yielded superb accounts of the Seventh Symphony; since the same orchestra had also set down a further famous account of the symphony, this time with **Pierre Monteux** in 1959, they clearly had a real affinity for the work, too. For a long time most people recommended **Istvan Kertész's** set as being the most recommendable, in particular due to the wonderful sonics achieved by Decca at the time, but in reality the account of the Seventh Symphony by the Polish conductor, Witold Rowicki, was even better, dark and dramatic in the first movement, with the second movement taken slowly, truly *adagio*, as Rowicki and his players evoke massive vistas of rolling plains, while the third and fourth movements marry fire, with grace and grandeur. A key moment in the work is the introduction of the development section in the second movement, that starts with a glorious melody intoned by two French horns – if you listen to **George Szell** at this moment in his famous recording with the Cleveland Orchestra, he sails blithely by with nary a second glance. Similarly, **Rafael Kubelík's** Berlin horn players are, of course, wonderful, but he too presses on at this point, whereas Rowicki relaxes and brings out the full magic of the moment. Elsewhere, unsurprisingly, Szell is razor-sharp and brilliant, while Kubelík is grander, but neither surpass the long-forgotten – and hugely underrated – Rowicki in this score.

[PURCHASE](#)

Czech Philharmonic Orchestra/Vaclav Neumann (rec.1972).

Listening to Vaclav Neumann's first Dvorak symphony cycle on Supraphon is like stepping into a long-forgotten, magical sound-world that is all but lost today. For a long time, the first four symphonies of Dvorak were dismissed as 'amateur works' (hence on old record covers the '*New World Symphony*' occasionally being labelled as 'Symphony No 5') and this was the first time the venerable Czech Philharmonic recorded all nine of the symphonies, having previously left symphonies 1-4 to the Prague Symphony. They reward their conductor with playing of the highest order, with velvety, colourful strings, bucolic woodwinds and fairy-bright, translucent brass playing that has been wonderfully captured in the glowing acoustics of Prague's Rudolfinum by warm Supraphon stereo sound. The earlier symphonies in particular have been transformed into the most glorious creations – to be frank, in comparison **Rafael Kubelík** and the Berlin Philharmonic sound uninterested and **Istvan Kertész**, in spite of admirable freshness and drama, two-dimensional (a superb Third Symphony, apart), although both more than make amends in the later works. Some commentators have criticised the conducting in this cycle believing it to be a little lacklustre, but in doing so they have misunderstood Neumann's interpretative aims, which is to seek out the lyricism, local colour, sparkle and charm in these scores, which in his hands positively glow from within. Happily, the same commentators have usually praised the account of the Seventh from this set as being one of its highlights, hence the inclusion here – certainly the more sleek, homogenised sound-world of the Czech Philharmonic conjured by Jiří Bělohlávek and Semyon Bychkov in the orchestra's latest tapings of this work just pale in comparison.

[review](#)

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DVD

Prague Symphony Orchestra/ Jiří Bělohlávek (rec. 1993)

An all-Dvorák cycle recorded in Frankfurt.

[review](#)

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14. Berlioz: *Symphonie Fantastique*, Op. 14

It is always astonishing to learn that Berlioz's 'first' symphony, the *Symphonie Fantastique* was premiered in 1830, just six years after Beethoven's *Choral Symphony*. If Beethoven's work was indisputably 'revolutionary' for its time, there seems a further quantum-leap of 'modernism' in Berlioz's score, with its vivid depiction of a March to the Scaffold and a Witches' Sabbath, the latter containing quite possibly the scariest music ever written. A mandatory symphony for any collection.

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Recommended Recordings:

Boston Symphony Orchestra/Charles Munch (rec. 1962).

Not to be confused with the also very fine earlier recording from 1954, again with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, but in not such good sound. Like Leonard Bernstein, Munch's volatile podium temperament was tailor-made for this composer.

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[PURCHASE](#)

Orchestre National de France/Leonard Bernstein (rec.1976).

Bernstein was always a tremendous champion of Hector Berlioz and recorded the *Symphonie Fantastique* three times. Some think that the earliest, with the New York Philharmonic in 1963, to be the best, but Bernstein's excitable temperament was ideal for this composer and all three recordings are wildly passionate and exciting, with this one having a gallic flavour added to it by the presence of a French orchestra.

[PURCHASE](#)

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Herbert von Karajan (rec.1975).

Something of a dark horse in the recording history of this work, in spite of the high profiles of the participants, but Karajan's mid-seventies recording has tremendous tension from the opening onwards, as well as the greatest bells that have ever tolled during the Witches' Sabbath. The sound too is one of the finest Deutsche Grammophon achieved in the Philharmonie.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

Concertgebouw Orchestra/Colin Davis (rec. 1974).

Colin Davis was a doughty champion of Hector Berlioz throughout his entire career, with at least three official recordings made of the *Symphonie Fantastique*, as well as many live tapings. It is sometimes felt that Davis can be a little too sober ('English'?) for the wild sound-world of Berlioz, a view that this beautifully played and recorded account does not quite dispel, but others may beg to differ.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique/John Eliot Gardiner (rec. 1991).

In selecting a recording on 'period instruments' for this list, this one from Eliot Gardiner gets the nod over Roger Norrington's, as well as François-Xavier Roth's versions, amongst others. The recording has the distinction of being made in the same auditorium that Berlioz often used to attend concerts in and indeed, where he also conducted his own works, while the orchestra has also been laid-out in the manner Berlioz stipulated (with stings, timpani and harps divided). Although all this is most laudable, the results – while not terrible – are not more exciting than any of the aforementioned recordings, nor (curiously) do they sound more 'authentic' than **Thomas Beecham's** 1959 recording with the French National Radio Orchestra, or **Igor Markevitch's** 1961 account with the Orchestre Lamoureux, let alone **Pierre Monteux's** 1931 recording with the Paris Symphony Orchestra, all of which likewise, are the more involving readings too.

[PURCHASE](#)

DVD

San Francisco Symphony Orchestra/Michael Tilson Thomas (rec. 2009)

Part of the 'Keeping Score' series where, in addition to a filmed concert of the symphony, Michael Tilson Thomas analyses Berlioz's music.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

15. Tchaikovsky: Symphony No 6 in B minor, Op. 74, 'Pathétique'

Tchaikovsky's final symphony, premiered in 1893 just nine days before his death, contains the entire spectrum of human emotions from terror, love and hope, before ending in abject despair. Such is the perfection of the finished score, it is hard to imagine quite how, had Tchaikovsky lived longer, he could have composed any more symphonies and as a representation of the finest Russian symphony of the nineteenth century, it should be in every collection.

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Recommended Recordings:

Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra/Yevgeny Mravinsky (rec. 1960).

Originally released as a set of the final three symphonies by Deutsche Grammophon, although have subsequently have been reissued by other labels, this recording of the *Pathétique* is one of the most extraordinary things in the whole classical catalogue, combining playing of almost feral desperation, coupled with an iron-grip from the podium; think of wild horses driving desperately towards the abyss whilst being controlled by a master horseman. Incredibly, some four years earlier the same forces also taped Tchaikovsky's Fifth and Sixth Symphonies for the same label in what many consider to be better performances, albeit in mono sound and with Kurt Sanderling this time conducting the Fourth Symphony in a grand and noble reading, light-years away in temperament to Mravinsky, but equally as valid. Both sets are classics of the gramophone, but the better sonics and the inclusion of the Fourth has perhaps meant the later reading has received the greater prominence.

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[PURCHASE](#)

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Herbert von Karajan (rec. 1971).

If Mravinsky and the Leningraders can come across as slightly too close to the swinging gates of Hell, then a possible alternative could be with Herbert von Karajan, although the experience is no less incendiary or intense. In fact, Karajan took Tchaikovsky's final symphony into the studio no less than seven times during his long career all of which, from the earliest in 1939 with the Berlin Philharmonic to the last in 1984 with the Vienna Philharmonic, are deeply impressive readings. However, most

cognoscenti agree that the recording made with the Berlin Philharmonic for EMI (now Warner Classics) in 1971 to be the pick of the bunch. Often overshadowed by the almost-as-good remake a handful of years later for Deutsche Grammophon, mainly because both were made as part of a set of the last three symphonies and the earlier recording of the Fourth had a faulty microphone which seriously impacted the stereo spread in the final mix; with no room in the calendar to squeeze in additional sessions, the set was released to predictably mixed reviews, mainly concerning the Fourth. That is all the more unfortunate when this *Pathétique* is a performance of extraordinary high drama and searing passion, more *Romantically* hued than Mravinsky maybe, but ending just as desolately.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

MusicAeterna/Teodor Currentzis (rec, 2016).

Tchaikovsky as performed by a chamber-sized orchestra with anything but chamber-sized emotions, swinging from furious timpani rolls and rumbling strings, accompanying horns and trumpets sounding the alarm during the first movement's violent development, that pre-echo Stravinsky's Rite of Spring, to a decadently Hollywood-style treatment of the reprise of the great Romantic theme a few pages later, this is a performance that threatens to boil over at any moment and is the finest recording this symphony has received in the twenty-first century.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

Munich Philharmonic Orchestra/Sergio Celibidache (rec. 1992).

If there is a slower performance than Celibidache's live account from Munich in the catalogue, which clocks-in close to the hour mark, then I have yet to hear it. In spite of being an astonishing four minutes 'faster' in the final movement than Bernstein's (in)famous late recording of the same work with the New York Philharmonic in 1986, Celibidache's is still nonetheless slower overall by over a minute. However, whereas late-Bernstein can sound wilful and self-indulgent, Celibidache, by contrast, is grand and noble; it's the last will and testament of a knight of the Holy Grail and there is no other reading quite like it in the catalogue.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

DVD

Mariinsky Orchestra /Valery Gergiev (rec. 2010)

Recorded at the Salle Pleyel in Paris. Gergiev's *Pathétique* is more volatile than his studio account from 1997 with the same orchestra and while is not as good as any of the aforementioned accounts, is nonetheless as fine as any you will hear in the concert hall today.

[PURCHASE](#)

16. Brahms: Symphony No 4 in E Minor, Op. 98

Undoubtedly any one of Brahms other symphonies, if not all four, could have been included in this list as being 'essential' and nobody would have complained. Instead, just one has been selected, his last - it is a work of greatness, moving between tragedy and wild exclamation, often within the same movement, the culmination of Brahms' symphonic output.

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Recommended Recordings:

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra/Wilhelm Furtwängler (rec. 1950).

Someone once compared Furtwängler's Brahms to being like a river in full flood, swirling through eddies and crashing over rocks, but inexorable in its forward motion. There are many live accounts featuring this conductor, more often than not with either the Berlin or Vienna Philharmonic Orchestras and it is often thought that the Vienna accounts are more lyrical and colourful than the more imposing ones from Berlin. This live 1950 account from the Salzburg Festival may be tricky to find, but is well worth the effort.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

Philharmonia Orchestra/Arturo Toscanini (rec. 1952).

After returning to Britain for the first and, only, time to conduct the Brahms Cycle from which this Fourth Symphony has been taken, Toscanini told Walter Legge that if he was younger he would have de-camped to London to make all his recordings with the Philharmonia. Sadly, ill-health meant his subsequent re-appearance with this orchestra never materialised. An old friend of mine told me the story of having tickets for the second proposed series of concerts, but instead had to make do with Malcolm Sargent conducting them, a double-whammy of epic proportions during a golden era of podium maestros. My colleague, Marc Bridle, writing for MusicWeb International, described this live performance of the Fourth thus: *"This [the Fourth Symphony] is the greatest single performance in Toscanini's NBC cycle and this Philharmonia account is as inspired as that, perhaps the single most impressive 'live' Fourth ever recorded"*. Seek it out on its Testament or Pristine issues for the best sound.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

Philharmonia Orchestra/Otto Klemperer (rec. 1957).

Some five years after Toscanini, the same orchestra set down a very different account of the symphony, this time in the studio with Otto Klemperer. Hewn from a block of granite, terse and imperious, Klemperer's Brahms is unlike any other – and surprisingly more fiery than you may have expected too.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

London Philharmonic Orchestra/Eugen Jochum (rec. 1976).

When the distinguished conductor, Kenneth Woods was [interviewed](#) recently by MusicWeb International, he cited this recording by Eugen Jochum as being one he hugely admired with: *"..... in most of his recorded performances, he starts the opening of the Brahms Fourth much slower than he intends to go for the bulk of the movement, letting the music gradually awaken over the first forty bars or so. In the earlier Berlin recording you can, perhaps, still hear him almost going through the gears, but with the later London one it is almost imperceptible, and so elegantly done. It is as if he has taken an analytical eye to the kind of flexibility someone like Furtwängler might have brought to it and patiently developed the execution of it to another, more subtle and elegant level. It is art which disguises art and I admire it very much."*

[PURCHASE](#)

Pittsburgh Symphony/Manfred Honeck (rec. 2018).

Quite simply the finest Brahms Fourth of the twenty-first century so far. Not only are the sonics completely magnificent, but the electricity coursing through the performance, in particular the last movement, is extraordinary.

[review](#) ~ [review](#) ~ [review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

DVD

Bavarian State Orchestra/Carlos Kleiber (rec. 1996)

Every Carlos Kleiber concert was an 'event' and although he died in 2004, he had been suffering for a long time with inoperable prostate cancer and this concert from Munich's Herkulesaal was one of his last. His conducting is more energetic in the first half with Beethoven's *Coriolan Overture* and Mozart's Symphony 33, but with the restrained elegance of his gestures he clearly obtains what he wants from his musicians in a performance that closely resembles his studio recording with the Vienna Philharmonic from 1980. Although this may be a little tricky to track down, it is worth it.

[PURCHASE](#)

17. Copland: Symphony No 3

The greatest American symphony, premiered in 1946 by the Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Serge Koussevitsky, even if some would argue that Barber's First Symphony is the greater achievement and I personally have a sneaking preference for the Second Symphony by Howard Hanson (seek out the RCA account conducted by Charles Gerhardt for that symphony's finest hour on disc). Its introduction to the final movement has become a standalone piece in its own right, being named *Fanfare for the Common Man*.

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Recommended Recordings:

New York Philharmonic Orchestra/Leonard Bernstein (rec. 1985).

There is no question that Bernstein was a great conductor of Copland's music, arguably his greatest, and while some may think his earlier account of this symphony made for CBS/Sony is fresher, there is no doubting the tremendous sense of occasion captured on this recording, as well as its superior sonics.

[PURCHASE](#)

London Symphony Orchestra/Aaron Copland (rec. 1958).

There is always something special when composers conduct their own works and if Copland is not as dynamic as Bernstein, he still demands to be heard.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

DVD

N/a

18. Elgar: Symphony No 1 in A \flat major, Op. 55

In truth, either of Elgar's two symphonies could easily have been included in this list, but if I have opted for the First, it is only because its opening is so quintessentially 'British', with a certain restrained nobility that is fast becoming unfashionable to acknowledge, that it seemed more appropriately representative for this exercise. In between that stirring opening motif and its return for the symphony's triumphant conclusion, the music is full of the lovely temperate warmth of a British summer's day, with the occasional rough wind shaking the darling buds of May.

[MASTERWORK INDEX](#)

Recommended Recordings:

Staatskapelle Dresden/Colin Davis (rec. 1998).

Colin Davis could often be erratic and self-indulgent with Elgar, but when he gets it right, as he did on this live recording from 1998 with one of Germany's, indeed one of the world's, greatest orchestras, the results can be glorious.

[review](#) ~ [review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

Hallé Orchestra/John Barbirolli (rec. 1956).

It is often commented that conductors are either 'great' with Elgar's First Symphony, or the Second – rarely with both of them. So Sir Adrian Boult was wonderful in the Second and Glorious John was indeed absolutely glorious with the First. This 1956 account is not to be confused with his later remake with the Philharmonia on EMI, which is better played and recorded if more leisurely as well as being a little self-indulgent, nor the live taping again with the Hallé from July 1970, just days before his death, that doesn't show the conductor at his best. Here he is both passionate and grand, exciting and meltingly warm and if the sonics and playing are a little frayed around the edges, few conductors have matched Barbirolli's achievement here before, or since.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

London Symphony Orchestra/Jeffrey Tate (rec. 1991).

For a while in the late 1980s and 1990s, Jeffrey Tate produced many wonderful recordings of which this account of the First Symphony is not only one of the best things he ever did, but also one of the greatest recordings the symphony has received too. Proud and noble, sweepingly grand with splendid pomp and circumstance, all captured in richly upholstered sound, this is indisputably one of the great modern recordings of this work. Make sure you get it coupled with the equally fine *Cockaigne Overture* from the same forces.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

London Symphony Orchestra/Edward Elgar (rec. 1930).

Swifter and more fiery than you may have expected, if in inevitably restricted sonics, any composer conducted their own music demands to be heard.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

DVD

N/a

19. Vaughan Williams: Symphony No 5 in D Major

If Elgar's First Symphony is Britain's most 'British' symphony, then Vaughan Williams' Fifth Symphony is its loveliest – and quite possibly the loveliest in the whole of symphonic literature too. Written at the outset of the Second World War and premiered in 1943, it harks back to a time of peace and tranquillity that must have seemed an impossible dream during those dark days. In recent times of comparable national distress, on this occasion in the middle of the Covid Pandemic, Simon Rattle asked the London Symphony Orchestra which work they wished to perform for the television cameras in an otherwise deserted Royal Albert Hall for what would have ordinarily have been a full-house for a concert at the Proms; they chose this work, with its gentle sense of hope and radiance and the resulting performance (for a long time available on YouTube) was full of magic.

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Recommended Recordings:

Philharmonia Orchestra/John Barbirolli (rec. 1962).

Lovingly and leisurely played, this is one of Barbirolli's greatest recordings and is captured in warm glowing sound, with superb playing from Britain's greatest orchestra at the time.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

London Symphony Orchestra/ André Previn (rec. 1971).

When Previn started to record the symphonies of this quintessentially 'British' composer, eyebrows were raised at how this brash young American from Hollywood could possibly do justice to the music. The triumphant results spoke for themselves, with this Fifth Symphony, not to be confused with the conductor's rather disappointing remake with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in 1989, one of the cycle's many highlights.

[review](#) ~ [review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

London Philharmonic Orchestra/Ralph Vaughan Williams (rec. 1952).

An off-air recording from a Proms concert, featuring the composer conducting his own work, in better sound than we have any right to expect. Unsurprisingly, and like Elgar conducting his First Symphony above, the composer is less sentimental and swifter than others with his music.

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[PURCHASE](#)

DVD

N/a

20. Richard Strauss: 'Eine Alpensinfonie', Op. 64

When you have got to the final item on this list and you realise that you still haven't included the *Eroica*, Mendelssohn's 'Italian' Symphony, Bruckner's Eighth or Nielsen's 'Inextinguishable', then the scale of the challenge of just nominating a 'top twenty' becomes clear. So in recognition of this, the final nomination is a magnificent orchestral work that calls itself a symphony, but in fact really isn't one at all.

Richard Strauss's *Alpensinfonie* was premiered in 1921 and is scored for a huge orchestra which also includes an organ and wind machine. Performed without a break for a duration of around fifty minutes, it's a mountainous journey that begins and ends in the darkness of night, while in between has a sunrise to rival Zarathustra's, danger on a glacier, exultation at arriving at the summit and terror during a storm, before arriving home in the glow of thanksgiving not unlike the last movement of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*.

It was completed in 1915 and received its first recording in 1925 with Oscar Fried and the Berlin State Opera Orchestra, with a further two recordings conducted by the composer himself in 1936 with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and in 1941 with the Bavarian State Orchestra. However, in light of the huge forces required, more modern recordings are required to do the work full justice. (See Ralph Moore's [survey](#) on this work).

[MASTERWORK INDEX](#)

Recommended Recordings:

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Herbert von Karajan (rec. 1980)

Eine Alpensinfonie is unusual in Karajan's Strauss discography inasmuch he only made one recording of it (there are five 'official' recordings of *Don Juan*). If the early digital sound can sound a little dry when compared to more recent recordings, then it is still good enough to reveal the full sonic splendour of Strauss's score as well as Karajan's glorious interpretation, that is distinguished by finding a deep sense of emotion in Strauss's score which evades all others.

[PURCHASE](#)

Concertgebouw Orchestra/Bernard Haitink (rec. 1985)

If anything, Haitink's recording from a few years after Karajan has even better orchestral playing from the Concertgebouw, as well as finer sonics, no doubt aided and abetted by the orchestra's famous concert hall in Amsterdam. As a reading it is as fine as anyone's and while the LSO Live account the conductor made in 2008 is also very fine, the earlier one shades it with the opulence of both its orchestra and hall. Haitink made many exceptional recordings of Richard Strauss with the Concertgebouw, especially of *Ein Heldenleben* and *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and this *Alpensinfonie* joins them as being one of the finest in the catalogue.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

Staatskapelle Dresden/Rudolf Kempe (rec. 1971)

Compared to Karajan's Strauss of glittering dynamism, Rudolf Kempe's was instead warm and humane, revelling in the finesse as much as the excess in the scores. With the Staatskapelle Dresden he recorded all the orchestral works of Richard Strauss with each entry as fine as any in the catalogue and if this account is currently only available as part of that box set, then an earlier recording of the work with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in 1967 (now available on Testament) runs the Dresden account close.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

DVD

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/Herbert von Karajan (rec. 1983)

After recording the work in 1980, *Eine Alpensinfonie* appeared in Karajan's programmes with the Berlin Philharmonic every season until his death in 1989. This account from 1983 is not the same as the studio recording, but is just as glorious.

[review](#)

[PURCHASE](#)

Lee Denham