

Pioneering Haydn On Record

An occasional series dedicated to commercial and live recordings of Haydn symphonies up to and including those of the first two complete cycles by Ernst Märzendorfer and Antal Dorati

by Christopher Howell

Symphony no. 16 in B flat major Hob. I/16 (c.1760-63)

The opening *Allegro* of Symphony no. 16 is one of the most entrancing symphonic openings I know. While the second violins scamper delicately in quavers, the lower strings play a sinking chromatic theme. This two-part writing is taken up by the first and second violins, then spreads to the full orchestra. The sinking chromatics gradually clear as the first part heads to the dominant major, but return at the start of the development and also, obviously, at the start of the recapitulation, so the mists never seem to be definitively cleared, especially if both repeats are taken, so the progression from groaning chromatics to bright diatonic happens several times over. A strangely ambivalent movement.

The second movement, for strings only, is again highly unusual. A long melody, lyrical and florid, is developed by solo cello, doubled by muted first and second violins an octave higher. For the much of the time, it is accompanied by cellos and basses with the violas doubling an octave above, separating to create three-part harmony at a few points. This movement is therefore largely in bare two-part harmony, unless the performers feel a harpsichord is necessary to fill in the harmonies. For what my own view on this is worth, I believe that the ambivalence between burnished warmth and harmonic bleakness is part of its curious charm.

The finale – there is no minuet and trio – is a more conventionally lively movement in six-eight time. It is marked *Presto* but a note in the Robbins Landon score tells us that one source has *Allegro*. The strings in the outer movements of this symphony are complemented by two oboes and two horns but these play no independent melodic role, simply filling out the sonority.

As with Symphony 15, the first recording was made by **Max Goberman** and the Vienna State Opera Orchestra (HS1M/HS1S, I have it on CBS 32 16 0166). Max Goberman rightly takes a tempo for the opening *Allegro* that allows us to savour the chromatic lines – this is not one of his abrasive, fiercely driven interpretations. He takes both repeats and, mercifully, the engineers have left them in place. He is also gravely tender in the second movement and the harpsichord which graced Symphony 15 is silent (or inaudible) in this work – as it is in the other versions discussed. My only question is, should we hear the solo cello as a real solo, with the muted violins ghosting around it, or should they combine so neither predominates? Goberman certainly believes, or obtains, the latter. This time, both repeats have been expunged. He gives a good, lively performance of the finale, not overdriven – maybe he is aware that it is marked only *Allegro* in one source. The repeats are allowed – it would be very brief without. I have an idea it will be hard to better this performance.

Wilfried Boettcher, whose trio of Symphonies 15-17 followed in 1966 (Turnabout TV 4092/34092S), is very nice in the first movement, but has the sinking chromatic lines played more lightly, so we do not get the same impression of light above and shadow below. He plays only the first repeat. He takes the *Andante* in a swift, serenade-like manner, with the bass line staccato whenever plausible. It is notable that, though he gives the first repeat, he takes considerably less time than Goberman, whose record has neither. The finale is neatly despatched, but a tad slow for a *Presto*, maybe even for an *Allegro*. It is pleasant in its laid-back manner, but with both repeats it seems a long haul, which it did not with Goberman. On the

assumption that Haydn did not wish to inflict a long haul on his listeners, it seems likely that he intended *Presto* to mean what it says. No competition for Goberman here.

At the beginning of the first movement, **Märzendorfer** marks up the dynamics of the sinking chromatic bass line and damps down the scampering strings to near inaudibility, losing the effect of light above and shadow below that Goberman created so well. As the chromatics are dispelled, the music chugs along amiably, but I feel Märzendorfer has for once missed the point of a Haydn movement. He gives both repeats, but omits both in the *Andante*. Here he adopts a tempi somewhere between Goberman and Boettcher and realizes the character of the movement very well. He is perhaps a little more successful than Goberman in making the solo cello stand out, with the muted violins tracing the line above. Unfortunately, the tuning of the octaves between the solo cello and the violins is not always of the purest, something that would become more and more evident with repeated listening to the disc. His finale is a delight, only a tad faster than Boettcher but somehow setting up an infectious rhythm. However, Goberman remains some way ahead overall.

Dorati manages the balance of the two-part writing at the beginning of the first movement better than Märzendorfer, but worries the music with a hairpin swell on the first beat of every second bar. Goberman, and indeed the other two conductors, have shown that the music makes its point better without. This slightly spoils an otherwise vivacious account. Both repeats are played. In the *Andante*, Dorati's attention focuses entirely on the violins, shaping their melody beautifully at a leisurely tempo and with the first repeat. The only question is, what about the solo cello? I sometimes wondered if Dorati had even noticed that the poor soul was there, doubling the melody an octave below. If so, he does nothing to make listeners aware of it. According to its lights, this is very well done, but for burnished warmth we must go to Goberman. The finale is lovely, maybe scampering even more vivaciously than Märzendorfer.

I always approach these surveys hoping to find, at last, a Dorati performance I can prefer to the Märzendorfer. Weighing up my reservations over both of them, perhaps on balance I prefer Dorati here. But both must yield to Goberman.

	I	II	III
Goberman	05:03 both repeats played	04:11 neither repeat played	03:06 both repeats played
Boettcher	03:49 first repeat only	03:33 first repeat played	03:30 both repeats played
Märzendorfer	04:39 both repeats played	03:43 neither repeat played	03:23 both repeats played
Dorati	04:23 both repeats played	05:12 first repeat played	03:04 both repeats played

Christopher Howell © 2026