

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. 17 in F major Hob. I/17 (c.1760-62)

The first movement of Symphony no. 17, marked *Allegro*, is for the most part a bright and breezy post-baroque affair in which the violins, now combining, now duetting, are accompanied by a chugging bass line. It is “monothematic” in the sense that the so-called second subject begins as the first, though with a different continuation. The development section is quite extensive and finishes with an uneasy passage in the minor. The oboes and horns, as in Symphony 16, add colour and sonority but do not play independently. It is followed by an *Andante, ma non troppo* for strings only in F minor. This has a gentle melancholy that is not entirely dispelled as the music turns towards the relative major. The melody is for the most part played by the first and seconds violins together, though occasionally they part ways and, towards the end, the melody passes to the lower strings. Except for this moment, the violas frequently double the bass line an octave above, adding a third harmonic part only occasionally. So, as with the second movement of Symphony 16, a lot of the music is in bleak two-part writing, unless it is decided to fill the harmonies with a harpsichord. The finale is a spirited affair, marked *Allegro molto* – rather than *Presto* – but with some quite vehement minor-key interjections in which the instruments play in unison.

As with Symphonies 15 and 16, the two complete cycles were preceded by versions under Goberman (1960-1962) and Boettcher (issued 1966). **Goberman** has a forthright first movement, strong on dynamic contrast. First repeat only, at least as issued on LP. He plays the *Andante, ma non troppo* very gently and tenderly. He does not include a harpsichord continuo¹ and neither repeat is included. The finale has plenty of energy without excessive speed and both repeats are played. In this and the previous symphony I much appreciate the way in which Goberman reveals the inherent seriousness of Haydn, and does so through strength not heaviness. This is not to say the others play to the “Papa Haydn” image, but Goberman is particularly successful in making these early works sound important.

On the other hand, I would not describe **Boettcher’s** more graceful approach as superficial or condescending. His first movement, at about the same tempo as Goberman’s, dances along. The bass lines do not chug, baroque fashion, as they do with Goberman and Boettcher phrases the music beautifully, with quite a bit of added dynamic variation. He is more elegant than grave in the second movement – while giving the first repeat, he does not take very much longer than Goberman, whose record has neither. Yet he remains attentive to the underlying sadness of the music, particularly towards the end. His finale is again light on its feet. Boettcher is less assertive over the minor-key interjections, but he does not brush them under the carpet either. I would not know how to choose between these two complementary interpretations.

In the first movement, **Märzendorfer** manages to get the best of both worlds. He has Boettcher’s grace – he does not dig into the chugging quaver bass lines – but, at a fractionally slower tempo, he has something of Goberman’s forthrightness. This is also partly due to the fact that he does not “edit” the dynamics – none of Boettcher’s added *crescendos* and *diminuendos* and echo effects, attractive as these are, just the

¹ Though Robbins Landon’s sleeve-note to the CBS LP issue says that this symphony and number 16 have “a bassoon and harpsichord forming part of the bass line”.

dynamics in the score. Thus far, so good. His *Andante, ma non troppo* is quite swift² – a sad serenade rather than a sad song. It is a nicely sprung, two-in-a-bar not four, which is what Haydn wrote. Though this is not superficial or unfeeling, to my ears both Goberman and Boettcher find more in the music. Märzendorfer's finale is light and dancing, but at a surprisingly sedate tempo that make it seem overlong with both repeats. I like the way he has the oboes pierce through the texture in the last bars, second time round, but overall this performance does not quite match the other two.

Dorati sides with Boettcher in treating the first movement very lightly, with a dancing grace. Indeed, there is even an element of cheekiness in the way his high horns poop through the texture, staccato, in bar 6, and in his snappy dotted rhythm at the end of the same bar. His second subject continuation has a sinuous elegance. Like Boettcher, too, he adds quite a few unwritten dynamics, including some long crescendos. It seems fair to say that, if you like Boettcher, you will like this even more. Whether you will like the rest is another matter. The second movement goes at about Goberman's tempo, and with the first repeat. But, whereas Goberman concentrates on the long line and treats the music gravely, Dorati is all simpering grace, curtseys and curlicues, all but destroying the essential melancholy of the music. I found nearly six and a half minutes of this very tiresome. His finale does not sound remotely *Allegro molto* to me, more a tripping *Allegretto*, almost a fast minuet, with all the artificial graces a Dorati minuet often implies. If I found Märzendorfer sedate, this is listless. Goberman and Boettcher remain unchallenged.

	I	II	III
Goberman	05:02 first repeat only	05:07 neither repeat played	02:45 with both repeats
Boettcher	05:03 first repeat only	05:44 1 st repeat only	02:34 with both repeats
Märzendorfer	05:17 first repeat only	05:19 1 st repeat only	03:11 with both repeats
Dorati	05:07 first repeat only	06:20 1 st repeat only	03:27 with both repeats

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² *Andante, ma non troppo* is unfortunately a highly ambiguous marking. Literally, it means "Going, but not too much", and so a warning against playing too fast. Within a century of Haydn's death, musicians were treating *Andante* as almost synonymous with *Adagio*, so when Brahms wrote *Andante, ma non troppo*, he was warning against playing too slowly. So which did Haydn mean? Incidentally, *Adagio* etymologically means "At ease" (*Adagio*), so a composer who really wanted a slow tempo should have opted for the unambiguous *Lento*.