Pioneering Haydn On Record

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by Christopher Howell

Symphony no. 83 in G minor "La Poule" Hob. I/83 (1785)
Part 1: Barbirolli

For the 19th century and much of the 20th, there was a tendency to zoom in on minor-key works by 18th century composers with the idea of discovering in them the sort of romantic passion, even tragedy, that later composers led us to expect from the minor mode. In several of Haydn's earlier works, something of the kind was often to be found. Symphony 83, a later piece and one of the "Paris" Symphonies, certainly starts in a tough, even angry vein, with the strange C sharp in the second bar and fierce dotted rhythms. But, come the second subject, Haydn offers us the suave, clucking theme that gave the work its nickname. Moreover, the oboe soon takes up the dotted rhythm which now sounds, not tough but a piquant call from the farmyard. The development plunges back to the opening music, only to be followed by an innocent extension of the clucking theme, prior to a trenchant discussion of the first subject material and a recapitulation that begins in the minor key. In earlier days, minor-key movements recapitulated their second subjects transposed to the minor, but it would surely have been unthinkable to impose a minor key on the clucking theme. After a pause, Haydn transforms the transitional material from the first subject into a triumphant G major and remains there for the rest of the movement.

In three out of the six "Paris" symphonies, including this one, a repeat of the second part of the first movement is indicated. We must suppose that, since Haydn had shown himself perfectly capable, in the other three of the set, of not indicating such a repeat, when he wrote one he meant it. Moreover, the opening of the development section, a G major chord acting as the dominant of C minor, follows on naturally from the end of the movement when the repeat is played. The second and fourth movements of this symphony, too, are in sonata form with both halves repeated, so the symphony becomes quite long if all repeats are observed.

A second movement in E flat major is a natural enough thing in a G minor symphony, but becomes a curious one when the first movement has ended in G major and the remaining movements remain firmly in the major – maybe an ironic comment on what a G minor symphony should traditionally do. This movement is for the most part serene and cantabile, though with a few dramatic outbursts and some quietly original features. In the bar one, the first violins play five repeated quavers on a single note, beginning the melody in the next bar. So are the repeated notes – immediately taken up as the accompaniment in bar two by the lower strings – part of the theme or simply a "till ready" bar before the theme enters? The answer would seem to be "both". The use of a theme that consists at first of repeated notes looks ahead to the second movement of Mozart's own later G minor Symphony, while the ambiguity between theme and accompaniment anticipates the second movement of Beethoven's Fourth Symphony. Moreover, the repeated notes suggest a reminiscence of the clucking theme in the first movement. The importance of these repeated notes in the structure of the movement becomes evident in second subject territory when, after a brusque *forte* downward scale, the second violins and violas are left stranded playing a single repeated chord for four entire bars, marked *sempre più piano*, until they are swept away by a dramatic *fortissimo*. This *fortissimo* bar is actually dominated by the strings playing *tremolo* – that is to say repeated notes again, but much louder and faster. So from one point of view it is dramatic. From another, it is a rude and crude comment on the preceding repeated notes, as though saying "You wanted

repeated notes, now, by Gad, you've gottem!" In the recapitulation, this passage is altered. The harmony changes on the third bar and the fourth bar is omitted. In the first recording, under Sir John Barbirolli, the passage has been altered the first time to match that in the recapitulation. This seems strange, since the passage was printed unaltered in the old Breitkopf edition, which would be the most likely source of a corrupt reading. However, Robbins Landon tells us that Haydn himself later altered this passage, omitting a bar[1]. In which case, why did Robbins Landon not incorporate this alteration in his Urtext edition, at least as an alternative, and how did Barbirolli come to know about it in 1949?[2]

The minuet begins subtly, with two-beat phrases that run counter to the underlying three beats in the bar. The trio is a perky Landler-type piece in which the flute doubles the first violins. The finale is a joyous romp in 12/8 time. As stated above, these last two movements are firmly in the major, though the finale has a few minor outbursts to remind us that the symphony began in a tone of high seriousness. It may not be by chance that Barbirolli, in at least two of his last performances (Los Angeles, 13 November 1969, Turin, 23 January 1970), paired this with a Mahler symphony – respectively nos. 9 and 5. Did he wish to make the point that Haydn and Mahler, in their very different ways, were concerned with integrating apparently incompatible material in a symphonic structure?

The first outing for this symphony, then, was by **Barbirolli and the Hallé Orchestra**, set down on 15 and 17 December 1949 (HMV DB 9470, issued in 1953 as ALP 1038). Barbirolli had already conducted the first recording of Symphony 104, but *La Poule* seems to have been particularly close to his heart. Though nobody asked him to record it again, he returned to it in the concert hall almost obsessively in later years. I have been able to hear six live versions and I would not risk a bet that others are not lurking around. I therefore dedicate the first part of this article to Barbirolli's relationship with this symphony.

By 1949, Barbirolli had been at the helm of the Hallé for six years. Haydn's Symphony 83 had entered their repertoire in a concert at the Manchester Albert Hall on 31 March 1948, with a repeat performance the following day[3]. This was the first time the symphony had been heard in Manchester since Hallé himself had conducted a performance in 1886. By the time of the recording sessions, Barbirolli and the orchestra had returned to the work on 6 April 1948 (London, RAH), 7 April 1948 (Hanley), 8 April 1948 (venue not given), 16 April 1948 (Sheffield), 18 June 1948 (Edinburgh), 23 June 1948 (Aberdeen), 7 July 1948 (Harrogate), 1 September 1948 (Edinburgh), 18 September 1948 (Bristol) and 25 May 1949 (Bath); a total of twelve performances.

I wondered whether a full complement of strings was used for the recording. In any case, textures are lithe and clean. The only problem for modern listeners might be the *portamenti* Barbirolli encourages, or at least allows, particularly in the second movement. In the first movement, the tempo is ideally chosen to combine urgency with precise articulation of the dotted rhythms in the opening paragraphs, while in the clucking theme the conductor conveys his enjoyment of the music. The oboe is delicious. The only oddity is at the end of each section, where we do not hear the dotted rhythms – it sounds as if the orchestra plays three straight chords. First repeat only. The *Andante* also seems to me to proceed at an ideal pace – the music is expressed naturally and unhurriedly, while the tempo is not so slow that the

[1] H. C. Robbins Landon: *Haydn, Chronicle and Works.* Vol. II. *Haydn at Eszterháza* 1766-1790, Thames and Hudson 1978 pp. 609-10.

[2] Or did Robbins Landon mean that Haydn altered the passage *later in the movement*? His notes to the Boston Haydn Society Urtext edition of 1950 state categorically: "this passage, one of the most remarkable things ever written by Haydn, has been totally twisted out of shape in modern editions through the omission of one bar, the changing of the harmpony in bar 27, etc.", without any suggestion that Haydn himself had later omitted the bar in question.

[3] All information about dates and venues of Hallé performances from https://archive.halle.co.uk/work/symphony-no83-in-g-minor-(the-hen), viewed 29 September 2026.

movement becomes bogged down by the repeated notes. No repeats. The minuet struck me as slightly bland – I expected more inflected pointing of its curious rhythms. Perhaps Barbirolli had his sights on a tempo that would allow him to shape the trio with due affection, which he certainly does. The minuet loses its second repeat first time round – presumably in order to fit the movement on a single side. The finale goes at a breakneck tempo, and he just about gets away with it. This would bring the house down at a concert, though I wondered if it was not a shade too hectic at times. First repeat only. The textual question in the second movement has already been mentioned. For the rest, those who follow Barbirolli's performance with the Robbins Landon score will note a few changes to the phrasing and one or two inauthentic *pizzicatos*, but nothing serious.

Though the recording industry showed no further interest in Sir John's interpretation of this symphony, his loyalty to it in his Hallé programmes was unwavering. Further performances took place on 14 November 1950 (Braga), 15 November 1950 (Porto), 14 and 15 March 1951 (Manchester), 8 September 1951 (Edinburgh), 26 September 1951 (Manchester), 12 December 1951 (Stockport), 14 October 1954 (Swansea), 15 and 16 December 1954 (Manchester), 18 December 1954 (Middlesborough), 11 January 1955 (Bolton), 14 January 1955 (Sheffield), 18 March 1955 (Sheffield), 14 March 1955 (Bradford), 15 October 1955 (Norwich), 13 April 1956 (Nottingham), 30 April 1961 (Manchester), 15 May 1961 (Manchester), 17 May 1961 (London RHF), 26 May 1961 (Walthamstow), 24 July 1961 (Buxton), 2 December 1961 (Bradford), 9 January 1962 (Hanley), 11 January 1962 (Preston), 18 January 1962 (Guildford), 22 July 1965 (Cambridge), 30 July 1965 (London RAH, see below), 30 July 1969 (Lincoln), 9 August 1969 (London RAH, see below). 42 performances in all, of which the two Proms performances have been preserved and are discussed below. To these must be added Barbirolli's performances with other orchestras. Apart from those preserved and described below, I have traced a performance with the Los Angeles PO on 13 November 1969.

Northern English listeners who shared Barbirolli's affection for this work had a hard time after his death. It was played twice in 1980, in Manchester and Bradford under Sir Charles Groves, and once in 1989 under Adrian Leaper. The Hallé have not played it at all during the last 37 years.

So how did this interpretation evolve over the years?

Barbirolli's performance with the **Hallé Orchestra on 30 July 1965** was the first Proms outing for *La Poule* since Sir Henry Wood's pre-war traversals in 1932 and 1933. In a typically large-scale programme, it was followed by Beethoven's *Eroica* and Nielsen's *Inestinguibile* symphonies.

The same textual divergence appears in the *Andante* here and in all subsequent performances. In terms of repeats, the minuet is now heard complete, but none are observed in the other movements, reflecting the earlier 20th century tendency to pare Haydn and Mozart symphonies down to a minimum and programme them as a sort of alternative overture. The first movement has acquired a little more girth but then, who could make that kind of music lithe and transparent in the as-yet-untamed Royal Albert Hall acoustics? The recording I have heard, complete with announcement, conserves the famous echo for those who look back on it with nostalgia. Under the circumstances, it is amazing that the two-concerts-for-the-price-of-one effect is not far worse – probably it was in some areas of the hall. In spite of this handicap, Barbirolli shapes the clucking theme deliciously and gets up a good head of steam as the shortened movement proceeds. The finale three chords of each section still sound like straight chords to me, and this remained so for all the subsequent performances I have heard.. The *Andante* is surely as beautiful as it can possibly be. When the second violins take up the theme at bar nine and the firsts add a counter-melody at bar ten, we hear the sort of speaking phrasing that only a great conductor can draw from an orchestra. It is the sort of shaping we associate with solo instruments rather than entire

orchestras. The whole movement is lovingly caressed, but not indulgently – I had supposed it was slower than before, but the stopwatch tells me it is not. The minuet starts, as it did in 1949, rather blandly, but it improves as it goes on and the trio is another moment of pure Barbirolli magic – no unwanted schmaltz or fussy rubato, simply an air of delighted enjoyment. The finale is again fast and seems a bit rough at the beginning, but settles down and the theme is stated to perfection in the recapitulation. The applause at the end is warm – the modern trend of brutish, roaring approval of everything, good or bad, was still well in the future.

In January 1967, the **BBC Symphony Orchestra** visited the Soviet Union for the first time. All three concerts were given in Moscow. The first, on 7 January, was conducted by Barbirolli, who chose Haydn's 83rd Symphony, Elgar's Cello Concerto, with Jacqueline Du Pré, Sibelius's Second Symphony and, for an encore, the fugue from Britten's *Young Person's Guide*. I have heard this in fairly good mono sound, though bass-heavy and with the treble a little dull. The concert is introduced by an announcer with an almost exaggeratedly suave upper class British accent – though "received pronunciation" was very much the BBC thing in those days, I suspect this was an English ex-pat doing service with the Russian international broadcasting system. He gives himself away by pronouncing Barbirolli to rhyme with "holy", and with an Oxford "O" the Queen herself would have been proud to own. The Haydn is preceded by an energetic rendering of the Soviet National Anthem and a highly committed version of the British one, with a big *rallentando* at the end[4].

The Grand Hall of the Moscow Conservatory does not have the acoustic problems of the Royal Albert Hall, but Barbirolli was now in his late stage and adopts a stately tempo for the first movement. This gives much strength to the minor key passages and the development builds up powerfully, but the clucking theme is a touch laboured. It is a sobering thought that the *Andante*, if Barbirolli had taken both repeats, would have stretched to almost 18 minutes – considerably longer than any Brahms slow movement. There is more than a touch of sublimity to this reading, which sustains its length well, with malleable phrasing and tension even in the repeated chords. I would not wish to hear this too often, but as a demonstration that Haydn can be played with Gluckian monumentality, it is *sui generis*. The minuet is a sturdy affair and I find this actually more effective than the two previous performances. Not so the trio which, like the clucking music in the first movement, is a little laboured. The finale, in which Barbirolli allows the first repeat, goes with a splendid swing, the slightly slower tempo actually helping a clearer articulation of the theme and showing that the firebrand *prestissimo*[5] of the 1949 recording was not such a good idea. How interesting that Barbirolli should have deepened his interpretation in several ways, but at the expense of the sheer delight he found in the clucking theme and the trio even only two years previously.

Almost exactly a year later, on **5 January 1968, Barbirolli** was in Naples for a concert with the **Orchestra Alessandro Scarlatti di Napoli della RAI**. Haydn 83 was the opener, followed by Mozart's K.503 Piano Concerto, with Dino Ciani, and Beethoven's Second Symphony. There have been several issues of the Mozart, but the whole programme exists in decent sound.

One imagines that Barbirolli, who never forgot his Italian parentage, felt much more at home in Naples than in Moscow, and no doubt the climate there in January was much pleasanter too. The Italians always regarded him as one of their own and the sometimes tricky Neapolitan band gave him their considerable best. It is particularly interesting to find him conducting this repertoire with what was essentially a

[4] I have heard this on a privately circulating tape. I see that this concert is available in various places with somewhat brighter, closer sound. From a brief sampling, I would say that the more recessed sound of the version I have heard lends a particular magic to the second movement, but may be preferable elsewhere. The "official" issue does not include the announcements.

[5] Haydn's marking is *Vivace*.

chamber orchestra. Helped by a close recording and a rather dry acoustic, the litheness and textural clarity of the 1949 version are back, even though the tempo of the first movement is barely faster than in Moscow. Just enough faster, though, for a gracious interpretation of the clucking theme and a delightful contribution from the oboe. Moreover, Barbirolli charts the progression from the stern minor key opening to the triumphant emergence of the major key and the preparation for the clucking theme with much perceptive phrasing and careful dynamic gradation. Beautifully done, too, are the gentle phrases heralding the recapitulation. The second movement is marginally swifter than in Moscow and, instead of sounding statuesque, Barbirolli transports us to the Elysian fields, helped by that particularly vibrant string playing I have noted elsewhere in these articles when Italian performances are discussed. The orchestras did not provide it on tap for whomever, but they did for Barbirolli. The minuet is a complete success at last, alternating trenchancy with elegance and with a deliciously pointed trio. The finale, too, is a sizzling yet seemingly unhurried dance, its brilliant articulation flying off the page. It is amazing that is virtually identical in tempo to the 1949 recording – the music never sounds rushed. An interesting lesson in the difference between perceived tempi and real ones. A gem of a performance.

On **24 February 1969**, Barbirolli set this symphony down in the studio with the **South-West German Radio Symphony Orchestra of Baden-Baden**. This has been issued by ICA with a live performance of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* with the same orchestra and from the same month.

If the Naples experience seems to have rejuvenated Barbirolli, this studio encounter with Hans Rosbaud's old orchestra suggests that the years were taking their toll. The first movement is similar to the Moscow performance, with a world-weary air to the minor key passages that is not unattractive and a clucking theme that is slightly laboured. I would have said that the *Andante* was even slower than in Moscow, but the stopwatch denies this. Nevertheless, the air of reverent serenity becomes too static, especially in second subject territory. The minuet, Barbirolli's slowest yet, has a doleful grace but, in spite of some robust phrasing in the *forte* passages, it comes across as heavy-handed, with the trio laboured as in Moscow. The finale is considerably slower than any previous version. There is some attentive phrasing but it rarely ignites – only in the development section does Sir John use his slowish tempo to give extra force to the music. I am not sure if it was such a good idea to issue this studio-bound performance.

By the time of the **1969 Proms** performance, with the **Hallé Orchestra**, the Royal Albert Hall's "flying saucers" were in place and the notorious echo had been tamed. The Prom on 9 August was a Viennese evening, into which Sir John evidently dragged his favourite Haydn Symphony by its ears – Haydn was not Viennese and such of his composing life as he spent in Vienna came well after this symphony. The rest of the programme consisted, more pertinently, of Mozart's K.219 Violin Concerto, with Erich Gruenberg, a J. Strauss selection and the suite from *Der Rosenkavalier*.

Barbirolli had resigned as Principal Conductor of the Hallé in 1968 but had immediately been appointed Conductor Laureate and it was not until the year after his death that a successor, James Loughran, was chosen. Back among his "own", before an audience of adoring Promenaders, things are much happier than in Baden-Baden, with tempi swifter in all four movements. The first two, in particular, have the unaffected rightness, without deliberate point-making, that we often associate with a combination of an elderly conductor and an orchestra he knows well. The *Allegro spiritoso* recaptures a much of the litheness of the best earlier performances and the clucking theme is delightfully done. The *Andante* has a nicely flowing tempo. Sir John achieved greater depth in Moscow, greater engagement in Naples, but this does not drag as in Baden-Baden and sounds very natural. The minuet does not quite settle into a single tempo but has a nice lilt and a cheekily pointed trio. The finale begins with excellent articulation of the theme at a tempo which achieves infectious exuberance without sounding over-driven. There is some raggedness,

however – flute and strings part ways when the former takes up the tune. Nevertheless, this finale drew a deserved ovation from the Prommers. I still prefer the Naples performance, but this runs it close.

The **beginning of 1970** saw Barbirolli back in Italy. He did not spare his failing resources – he was by now a sick man – and conducted Mahler 2 with RAI Milano and Mahler 5 with **RAI Torino**. The latter concert, on **23 January**, began with Haydn 83. Also in Turin, on 20 January, he gave a Beethoven concert – Coriolan plus Symphonies 2 and 5. It is worth remembering that Mahler was not an everyday composer in those days and I have not traced earlier performances of either of these symphonies by these particular orchestras, though other Italian orchestras, including RAI ones, had played them from time to time. Barbirolli himself had given Mahler 2 at La Scala in 1959. Nor, for that matter, have I traced any previous performance by the Turin orchestra of Haydn 83, and it is to be doubted whether the rehearsal time needed for Mahler 5 allowed much detailed work on the Haydn. Whereas the Naples orchestra had recorded the complete "Paris" symphonies under Denis Vaughan in 1965, and obviously knew the Mozart and Beethoven works on the programme well. All this has to be born in mind when assessing this performance of the Haydn.

I should also add that I have heard this recording in a less satisfactory state than the Naples one[6]. Cautiously, I would say that this is the most fulsomely Beethovenian of Barbirolli's performances. He pitches into the first movement with considerable intensity, retaining this urgency even in the clucking theme, which lacks its usual charm. The *Andante* has a pleasing flow, though the phrasing is more generic than in earlier years. The minuet is sturdily done – for some reason, Barbirolli seems to have reserved his best performances of this movement for Italy. The trio also has some good-humoured phrasing. The finale is an urgent affair, almost desperately so here and there, though ensemble is slightly less loose than in the last Proms performance. I retain my allegiance to the Naples performance as the Barbirolli's best, with the 1969 Proms version a close second, but this Turin performance is considerably better than I had remembered it and has its place in the Barbirolli canon.

	I	II	III	IV
Barbirolli HO 1949	07:33 first repeat only	06:46 neither repeat	03:22 2nd repeat of minuet omitted	03:32 first repeat only
Barbirolli HO 1965	05:48 neither repeat	06:45 neither repeat	03:59	02:43 neither repeat
Barbirolli BBCSO 1967	06:25 neither repeat	08:56 neither repeat	04:20	03:49 first repeat only
Barbirolli RAI Naples 1968	05:52 neither repeat	08:48 neither repeat	03:54	03:31 first repeat only
Barbirolli SWGRSO 1969	06:20 neither repeat	08:38 neither repeat	04:42	04:28 first repeat only
Barbirolli HO 1969	06:00 neither repeat	07:28 neither repeat	03:59	03:48 first repeat only
Barbirolli RAI Turin 1970	05:56 neither repeat	07:18 neither repeat	04:05	03:41 first repeat only

[6] From a rather confused and now virtually impenetrable site called "Radiopassioni", where it seems to have been recorded on a computer with a hard disc on the point of breaking up. Their source was a quite recent broadcast, but comes across as over-noisy with severe dynamic compression.

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