

KOUSSEVITZKY

Recordings Society



Koussevitzky Pirates: A Buyer's Guide

This issue of our newsletter is devoted exclusively to the so-called "pirate recordings" of performances by Dr. Serge Koussevitzky. These recordings derive from two sources: air checks of live concert broadcasts and private, non-broadcast recordings made during live concerts—often without the knowledge (and certainly without the permission) of the performers involved. Both types of recordings add immeasurably to our knowledge and understanding of Koussevitzky's art. A complete discography of these pirate recordings begins on the opposite page.

In 1990, AS Disc's "Sergei Koussevitzky Edition" on compact disc tremendously expanded the scope of material available to collectors. While the Boston Symphony has worked tirelessly to prevent these recordings from reaching the hands of American music lovers (see page 6), it may still be possible to obtain them through European record stores or used record dealers in this country. These sources may also help you acquire copies of the LPs manufactured by the Bruno Walter Society and Rococo. Because of the scarcity of these items, the cost is likely to be quite high. With that in mind, here are my recommendations of the best of the Koussevitzky pirate recordings.

The single most amazing recording in the AS Disc series is the version of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the ORTF Orchestra (AS 555). If there is a more dynamic or thrilling account of this familiar symphony anywhere on disc, it has yet to come to my attention. This is a daring, driving performance that arrests your attention from the first bar and holds

it until the final note. And if you have any doubts about the modest abilities of the ORTF orchestra, here, at least, their playing is every bit the equal of their Boston cousins.

The Beethoven Violin Concerto with Heifetz and the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra (AS 568) is on a slightly less exalted level, though it, too, has a remarkable freshness and vitality. Despite his reputation, Koussevitzky proves to be a more sensitive and effective accompanist than a certain Italian bandmaster who made a breathless commercial recording of this work with Heifetz.

Although Koussevitzky is not generally known as a Bruckner interpreter, that perception is likely to change if his broadcast of the 8th Symphony (AS 560) ever achieves more general circulation. Unfortunately, this lengthy Symphony had to be cut radically to fit into the one-hour broadcast time which the conductor was allowed. Still, the performance is very effective, and Vincent Schwerin contends that Koussevitzky's cuts actually *improve* the work. Especially compelling is the scherzo, where Koussevitzky achieves a demonic intensity that has not been matched either on or off records.

Koussevitzky recorded all too few of the works of Wagner, but each one is a perfect gem. On March 2, 1946, Koussevitzky led the Boston Symphony in a concert including *Siegfried's Funeral Music*, *Forest Murmurs*, the *Tannhäuser* Overture, and the preludes to *Lohengrin* and *Die Meistersinger* (AS 557). All but the *Lohengrin* were never recorded commercially. As Jim Svejda noted during a recent *Record Shelf* radio broadcast,

"...Serge Koussevitzky had a very highly evolved sense of operatic rhetoric and pacing. *Siegfried's Funeral Music* has rarely communicated the same measure of utter desolation that it does in Koussevitzky's 1946 concert recording. From the menacing intensity of the opening brass statement, through the final hopeless rumbling in the basses, the interpretation captures the essential dramatic import of this music as few performances in the opera house ever do." The same level of drama and interpretive insight may be found in all of the performances on this valuable disc.

Koussevitzky's November 1947 Mendelssohn broadcast (AS 553) also is riveting. Here he covers some familiar ground (the *Italian* Symphony), but also offers two works that he never recorded commercially: the *Midsummer Night's Dream* Scherzo and the Piano Concerto #1. Soloist Lukas Foss gives a particularly vivid performance of the concerto.

Koussevitzky was perhaps the greatest exponent of the Rachmaninov Symphonies, and his version of the Third (AS 569) is even more bracing and refreshing than the composer's own recording with the Philadelphia Orchestra. The second movement has rarely seemed more noble, while the finale is both lively and optimistic. Overall this performance is remarkable for its ideal combination of soaring lyricism and dramatic bite.

According to legend, when Koussevitzky told Bela Bartók that his Concerto for Orchestra was the "finest orchestral work of the last 25 years," the composer remarked, "But

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Serge Koussevitzky: A Discography of The Pirate Recordings

BACH, J.S.:

Brandenburg Concerto #3 in G, S. 1048.
7/13/46 **CD:** AS 572

Brandenburg Concerto #4 in G, S. 1049.
8/11/45 **CD:** AS 572

Orchestral Suite #3 in D, S. 1068. 1/5/46
CD: AS 572

Orchestral Suite #4 in D, S. 1069. 7/28/45
CD: AS 572

BARBER:

Symphony #2. 3/4/44 **CD:** AS 563

BARTÓK:

Concerto for Orchestra. 12/30/44 **LP:** Baton
1008 **CD:** Stradivarius STR 13614

BEETHOVEN:

Egmont Overture, Op. 84. 4/20/48 **CD:** AS 564

Leonore Overture #3, Op. 72b. 3/16/46
CD: AS 564

Symphony #3 in E \flat , Op. 55, Eroica. 10/6/45
CD: AS 561

Symphony #7 in A, Op. 92. 1/8/44 **CD:** AS 564

Symphony #9 in d, Op. 125, Choral. ORTF Or-
chestra. Jeanne Micheau, Solange Michel,
Georges Jouatte & Charles Cambon, soloists.
5/25/50 **CD:** AS 555

Violin Concerto in D, Op. 61. Hollywood Bowl
Symphony Orchestra. Jascha Heifetz. 9/2/50
CD: AS 568

BERLIOZ:

Symphonie fantastique, Op. 14. 10/16/43
CD: AS 552

BRAHMS:

Haydn Variations, Op. 56a. 4/8/47 **CD:** AS 567

Piano Concerto #1 in d, Op. 15. Dame Myra
Hess. 3/4/49 **CD:** AS 567

Symphony #1 in c, Op. 68. 2/17/45
CD: Stradivarius STR 13614

Symphony #3 in F, Op. 90. 10/8/46 **CD:** AS 556

Symphony #4 in e, Op. 98. 11/11/47
CD: AS 556

Violin Concerto in D, Op. 77. Efrem Zimbalist.
3/30/46 **LP:** Rococo 2100

BRUCKNER:

Symphony #8 in c. 12/30/47 **CD:** AS 560

CASELLA:

Concerto for Violin, Piano & Cello, Op. 56 -
mvts 1&2. Alfredo Casella, piano. Alberto Pol-
tronieri, violin. Arturo Bonucci, cello. 2/22/36
LP: Tima Club EC-1. **CD:** AS 559

COPLAND:

Quiet City. Georges Mager - t. Louis Speyer - eh.
3/10/45 **LP:** Baton 1008

DEBUSSY:

La Mer. 4/1/49 **CD:** AS 574

Nocturnes—Nuages & Fêtes. 3/11/44
CD: AS 574

GLINKA:

Ruslan and Ludmila Overture. 4/1/44
LP: Rococo 2160

HARRIS:

Symphony #6, Gettysburg. 4/15/44 **CD:** AS 563

MALIPIERO:

Symphony #4, In Memoriam Natalia Koussevit-
zky. 3/2/48 **CD:** AS 559

MENDELSSOHN:

Midsummer Night's Dream Suite -Scherzo.
11/4/47 **CD:** AS 553

Piano Concerto #1 in g, Op. 25. Lukas Foss.
11/4/47 **CD:** AS 553

Symphony #4 in A, Op. 90, Italian. 11/4/47
CD: AS 553

MOUSSORGSKY:

Night on Bald Mountain. 12/30/44 **CD:** AS 550

MOZART:

Symphony #29 in a, K. 201 (186a). 3/4/44
CD: AS 554

Symphony #36 in C, K. 425, Linz. 7/17/49
CD: AS 554

Symphony #39 in E \flat , K. 543. 12/18/43
CD: AS 554

PROKOFIEV:

Buffoon—Dance. 10/28/47 **CD:** AS 570

Scythian Suite, Op. 20. 3/9/48 **LP:** BWS SID-
711. **CD:** AS 570

Symphony #1 in D, Op. 25, Classical. 11/11/47
CD: AS 570

Symphony #5 in B \flat , Op. 100. 11/17/45
CD: AS 570

Violin Concerto #2 in g, Op. 63. Jascha Heifetz.
4/1/49 **CD:** AS 568

RACHMANINOV:

Isle of the Dead, Op. 29. 3/31/45 **LP:** BWS SID-
711. **CD:** AS 569

Piano Concerto #3 in d, Op. 30. Hollywood
Bowl Symphony Orchestra. Vladimir Horowitz.
8/31/50 **CD:** AS 550

Symphony #2 in e, Op. 27. 4/1/44 **LP:** Rococo
2160

Symphony #3 in a, Op. 44. 4/8/47 **CD:** AS 569

Vocalise, Op. 34/14. 3/31/45 **CD:** AS 569

RAVEL:

Daphnis & Chloé Suite #2. 3/9/48

LP: BWS SID-711

Pavane. 12/3/46 **CD:** AS 574

Rapsodie espagnole. 4/21/45 **CD:** AS 574

SCRIABIN:

Poem of Ecstasy. 10/15/46 **LP:** BWS SID-711.

SHOSTAKOVICH:

Symphony #5 in d, Op.47. 3/16/48 **CD:** AS 571

Symphony #9 in E \flat , Op.70. 8/10/46

CD: AS 571

SIBELIUS:

Finlandia, Op. 26. 12/8/45 **CD:** AS 562

Kalevala Legends, Op. 22—#3, Swan of Tu-

onela. 10/13/45 **LP:** Rococo 2103-2.

CD: AS 558

Symphony #1 in e, Op. 39. 10/13/45

LP: Rococo 2103-1. **CD:** AS 558

Symphony #5 in E \flat , Op. 82. 12/25/43

LP: Rococo 2103-2 **CD:** AS 562

Symphony #6 in d, Op. 104. 3/9/46

LP: Rococo 2103-2 **CD:** AS 562

Symphony #7 in C, Op. 105. (recording date unknown) **LP:** Rococo 2103-1

STRAUSS:

Also sprach Zarathustra. 4/15/47 **CD:** AS 573

Don Juan, Op. 20. 4/6/46 **CD:** AS 573

Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks, Op. 28.

10/8/46 **CD:** AS 573

TCHAIKOVSKY:

Francesca da Rimini. 4/6/46 **CD:** AS 565

Romeo & Juliet Fantasy Overture. Hollywood Bowl Symphony Orchestra. 8/29/50

CD: AS 551

Symphony #4 in f, Op. 36. 10/22/46 **LP:** BWS SID-730

Symphony #4 in f, Op. 36. 3/11/49 **CD:** AS 566 (with rehearsal, 3/7/49)

Symphony #5 in e, Op.64. 11/6/43 **CD:** AS 565

Symphony #6 in b, Op. 74, Pathétique. 2/9/46

LP: BWS SID-730. **CD:** AS 551

TOCH:

Pinnocchio Overture. 11/11/44 **CD:** AS 563

WAGNER:

Götterdämmerung - Siegfried's Funeral Music.

3/2/46 **CD:** AS 557

Lohengrin - Prelude to Act 1. 3/2/46

CD: AS 557

Die Meistersinger Prelude to Act 1. 3/2/46

CD: AS 557

Siegfried - Forest Murmurs. 3/2/46 **CD:** AS 557

Tannhäuser Overture. 3/2/46 **CD:** AS 557

The orchestra is the Boston Symphony, unless otherwise indicated. Dates of the actual performance or broadcast are listed, rather than the sometimes incorrect dates given by the manufacturer. Thanks to Edward D.Young, Louis Harrison, Mark Obert-Thorn, Philip G. Moores and Karl Miller.

Koussevitzky CDs: Banned In Boston (And The U.S.)

Although Serge Koussevitzky gave his last performance with the Boston Symphony Orchestra over forty years ago, the controversy over the right to market his BSO broadcast airchecks continues to the present day. As recently as March of this year, the Berkshire Record Outlet listed twenty-one AS Disc compact discs of Koussevitzky's performances in their catalog. The Boston Symphony quickly took legal action to ban their sale. On March 18, their attorney Michael R. Brown wrote: "Manufacture or distribution of these discs is in violation of the Copyright Law of the United States, as well as both state and federal statutes prohibiting unfair competition." The letter ordered the Berkshire Record Outlet to cease all sales of these recordings. The Berkshire Record Outlet wrote to its customers the following month: "Although we are prohibited from carrying these performances, we hope that the BSO will re-evaluate its policies and begin making them available through some source in the U.S. Even though there are no great fortunes to be made off these forty-plus year old airchecks, they present an orchestra at its height and, ironically, are readily available to collectors outside the U.S. If you feel, as we do, that these performances are for hearing, not hoarding, please write and make your feelings known to the Boston Symphony..."

Why has the Boston Symphony chosen to prevent these recordings from being sold in the United States? Other American orchestras (most notably the New York Philharmonic) have not stopped foreign record companies from selling their historic live performances here. Similarly, RCA/BMG has not opposed the sale in the U.S. of Koussevitzky's commercial BSO recordings on the Pearl and Biddulph labels, even though they are technically in violation of our copyright laws. Does the Boston Symphony have plans to make Koussevitzky's Boston Symphony performances available for sale to collectors? If so, which performances are under consideration? And when might these recordings be available for sale? I addressed these questions to the Boston Symphony's Managing Director, Kenneth Haas. He replied:

Dear Mr. Godell:

Thank you for your letter of July 20. I am happy to explain why we cannot permit the unauthorized sale of recordings taken from Boston Symphony broadcasts:

1. These recordings are based on "bootleg" tapes produced without authorization—usually by foreign companies. They are, in effect, stolen, and are being sold without the permission of any of the conductors, musicians or composers whose performances or works are incorporated in them nor of the copyright holder, the Boston Symphony Orchestra;

2. These "bootleg" recordings are issued without appropriate quality control, and do not adequately represent the sound of the original masters;

3. The musicians and composers (or their estates and/or publishers) whose work is contained in historic recordings are entitled to royalty payments. The producers of these records do not acknowledge their obligations to pay such fees.

While the producers of these recordings argue that the law of some foreign countries allows the unauthorized copies of sound recordings to be made after a period of time, these foreign laws do not apply in the U.S. nor in many other countries where these discs are sold. Thus the self-righteous criticisms of

the BSO for not permitting such imports should be clearly seen for what it is, an attempt by certain distributors to participate in a scheme to avoid paying royalties to musicians, composers and the BSO.

We would like to arrange for the legitimate release of historic recordings of the BSO under Serge Koussevitzky, of which we are very proud indeed, but to date have not found a way to cover the costs of issuing such recordings. We will continue to try to find ways to do so. In the meantime, the people at BMG Records, who plan reissues from the old RCA Victor catalog, tell me that they have reissued some Koussevitzky recordings and are planning some others. I certainly would encourage you to write to the chief at BMG and let him know that there is an audience for these discs, as any vote in favor of rereleases helps the company to have greater courage about the investment required.

You might wish to write to Gunther Hensler, President, BMG Classics, 1133 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10036.

With best wishes,

Kenneth Haas

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I thought Shostakovich was your favorite composer." Koussevitzky replied, "Ah, but he is Russian!" Koussevitzky's affection for Shostakovich is obvious from his many concert performances (only the Ninth Symphony and first movement of the Eighth were commercially recorded; RCA's unreleased recording of the latter is a shattering experience that makes every subsequent recording sound dull and uninvolved). The Fifth Symphony (AS 571) receives an idiomatic and thoroughly committed performance. It's discmate, the "little" Ninth, has seldom sounded more profound or been more deeply moving. As is so often the case with Koussevitzky, this live performance is vastly superior to the RCA recording. Some time after the concert, Koussevitzky corresponded with the composer and was persuaded by him to adopt a much quicker tempo for the Moderato second movement. However, the conductor's original instincts were absolutely right, and his approach gives the entire Symphony a weight and power that is not found in other interpretations.

The performance of Prokofiev's *Scythian Suite* (AS 570; also on LP: Bruno Walter Society SID-711) has also never been approached. To Koussevitzky this work was not merely a "poor man's *Rite of Spring*" (as the hapless Erich Leinsdorf once described it). The Russian lavishes all his formidable interpretive skills on the score, and the orchestra plays as if demonically possessed. For the sunrise finale Koussevitzky cuts the indicated tempo in half, and the effect is hair-raising. Once you hear this, every other performance will sound rushed and expressionless in the closing bars.

Koussevitzky had an innate affinity for the rhythms and phrasing of American music which no subsequent

conductor has been able to equal—not even that American-born phenomenon, Leonard Bernstein. Koussevitzky's idiomatic and deeply committed commercial recordings of Harris, Copland and Hanson all bear this out. Unfortunately, Koussevitzky recorded but a few American scores. For example, none of his incomparable performances of Samuel Barber's works survive outside of four known air checks and pirates. Hear his interpretation of Barber's Second Symphony (AS 563) and you'll quickly understand why the composer withdrew the work from circulation: Barber must have known that no one would ever duplicate the intense and dramatically-charged atmosphere which Koussevitzky so effortlessly creates.

By far the greatest of all Koussevitzky's surviving performances is the incomparable reading of the Sibelius Sixth Symphony (AS 562; also on Rococo LP 2103-2). This recording has all of the virtues of the best of Koussevitzky's work: The brisk and invigorating tempos, the glorious phrasing, the sensuous beauty of the playing (particularly the heavenly strings), the total commitment to the music, and, most of all, the depth and dramatic power of the interpretation. If either the LP or the CD crosses your path, don't hesitate to snap it up.

Unfortunately, AS Disc's recorded sound is primitive at best: distant, tubby, muffled and heavily filtered—rather like listening to an orchestra with your ears plugged with cotton. To make matters worse, many of these recordings are adulterated with copious amounts of artificial reverberation. The horrid, phony echo which mars Bruckner's Eighth (AS 560) and Malipiero's Fourth (AS 559) Symphonies is both extremely irritating and distracting.

But the worst horrors are reserved for Koussevitzky's priceless Beethoven Ninth. Here we have a loud, obnoxious hum (audible whenever the orchestra plays at any level below piano), heavy pre- and post-echo, sudden, jarring fluctuations in volume levels, the sound of several radio stations broadcasting a variety of music and talk programming in the background, tape dropouts (an especially irritating one occurs in the middle of the first choral statement of the "Ode to Joy" theme), and—just when you think matters can't possibly get any worse—a gut-wrenching change in pitch heard moments before the Symphony concludes.

Only one recording in the Koussevitzky canon is worse from a sonic standpoint: Tchaikovsky's Symphony #4 as issued by the Bruno Walter Society on LP (SID-730). Apparently the engineer who prepared the master tape from the original 16-inch transcription discs thought the sound was a little dry. So he added some artificial reverb. Not satisfied with the result, he added more to the second movement, and even more to the third. By the time the finale rolls around, we have a nearly impenetrable sonic mush through which Koussevitzky's searing performance can barely be discerned.

By contrast, the sound of the Walter Society's SID-711 (Rachmaninov's *Isle of the Dead*, Scriabin *Poem of Ecstasy*, Prokofiev *Scythian Suite* and Ravel *Daphnis and Chloe Suite #2*) is generally clean and clear with only a hint of annoying reverb. As mentioned above, the Prokofiev is incomparable. The fiery and colorful *Daphnis Suite* is a cut above either of the conductor's two commercial recordings, both of which are vastly superior to any modern recording. Moreover, this LP is packed more generously than most CDs, offering over 74 minutes of music!

The Rococo LPs are uniformly excellent. While the sound is not up to the standard set by Ed Young, the sound is undoctored and generally noise free. Don't miss the two-disc set of four Sibelius Symphonies, including the ethereal Sixth (above). And Koussevitzky's performance of the Rachmaninov Second Symphony is very nearly the equal of the Sibelius. It is nostalgic yet dramatic, incisive and brilliant.

Even counting the many AS Discs, only a tiny portion of Koussevitzky's air check recordings have been issued. Many more treasures await discovery. Several are locked in the vaults of the Library of Congress, where you may find lively performances of Beethoven's First Symphony and Bizet's *L'Arlésienne* Suite. The sound of these late-1930's air checks is especially remarkable. The recording engineer, Voss Greenough, was an early audiophile who produced a presence and near high-fidelity sound which rivals many of the recordings of the 1950s. We can only hope that some day the Library and the Boston Symphony will cooperate to make these extremely rare items available to collectors.

Of the remaining Koussevitzky performances, I hardly know where to begin. Certainly the rehearsals ought to be heard. AS Disc has given us only one: The Tchaikovsky Fourth. The rehearsal of David Diamond's Rounds for String Orchestra (finale) must be heard to be believed. As the broadcast begins, the orchestra gives a fine performance of the conclusion of the last round. But the conductor is not satisfied. He says, "It won't go at all. I don't know what to do." After a pause, inspiration strikes him. He tells the orchestra, "The tempo will be as twice faster... *as twice faster.*" He then tears into the music, and the result is breathtaking. Obviously delighted, Koussevitzky sings along with the lovely melody of the central section. The beauty of this performance still brings tears to my eyes.

Every one of the premieres and all of the the American works which Koussevitzky performed ought to be made available as well. Foremost among these is Barber's Violin Concerto with soloist Ruth Posselt. From this one recording, it is clear that she was a major violinist who has been almost totally forgotten today. Even

Boris Schwarz—in his otherwise comprehensive study, *Great Masters of the Violin*—mentions her only as Richard Burgin's wife. Koussevitzky's affinity for Barber was obvious from his performance of the Second Symphony. This reading of Concerto is equally fine. The score has never shone more brilliantly or sounded more enchantingly lovely.

Koussevitzky's performance of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* is both more idiomatically Russian and more colorful than any other version. And another Russian pot-boiler, Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* (from the broadcast of August 10, 1946), for once has all the power and impact of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. The plight of the Russian people during and immediately after World War Two had a profound effect on the sensitive conductor, and he pours out his feelings in an unbelievably tense reading, which actually makes this overblown piece of fluff appear—for the moment at least—to be a great masterpiece.

Tom Godell
President

Cover Photo (Courtesy of Ed Young): Koussevitzky with composer Irving Fine

About the Koussevitzky Recordings Society, Inc.

The Koussevitzky Recordings Society was established in 1986, and we are dedicated to the preservation and dissemination of the recorded legacy of Serge Koussevitzky. The Society is a non-profit corporation, which is staffed entirely by volunteers.

The Society is involved in a variety of projects, including the creation of an "oral archive" of conversations with those who knew and worked with Koussevitzky and an archive of the conductor's recorded performances. The activities of the Society are highlighted in our bi-annual newsletters.

These include interviews from the oral archive, articles about the conductor, and book reviews.

To become a member and receive our newsletter, send a check or money order in the amount of \$15 to P.O. Box 288, Boston, MA 02254. Memberships run from January to December. Those who join in the middle of the calendar year will receive all the publications for that year. Back issues of our newsletters are also available. For a complete list, you may contact the Society at our Boston address.