



G. Mahler: Symphony No. 8

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With Mahler's music now so popular – with a veritable flood of recordings emerging as the 100th anniversary of his death in 1911 approaches – it is all too easy to forget that his symphonies and song cycles were esoteric just a few decades ago. When Mahler himself famously said, “My time will come when his is over,” he was referring to Johann Strauss Jr. – but the quotation nowadays is usually abbreviated to “my time will come” and used to indicate Mahler's expectation that it would take many years for his music to be widely accepted. And so it did: despite the early advocacy of conductors who knew Mahler personally (notably Bruno Walter), it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that Mahler's music was “discovered” by audiences at large and widely accepted as part of the standard orchestral and vocal repertoire.

Mahler's music's progress came in fits and starts, as historic recordings make clear. It was Rafael Kubelik (1914-1996) who first performed a complete cycle of Mahler symphonies, in Munich, and Kubelik's way with Mahler – set firmly in the central European and Germanic tradition – is impressive even today. But for 21st-century listeners, his historic recordings have nearly as many low points as high ones. Audite is selling the live recording of Kubelik's November 2, 1979 performance of Mahler's First at a low price because the CD is packaged as an insert with the Audite 2010 recording catalogue: listeners are essentially paying for the catalogue and getting the disc as a bonus (there is not a shred of information presented about the performance except what is printed on the CD). Despite the irritating packaging strategy, there is a great deal to like in this performance. It flows gorgeously, with the smoothness of a fine wine, and Kubelik shows extraordinary sensitivity to Mahler's mood shifts – naïveté, drama, preciousness, vulgarity and passion all get their full due. But Kubelik, like Walter, came from a tradition in which conductors seeking a work's emotional center played fast and loose with what the composer actually wrote. This does not go down well in Mahler, who was a famed conductor himself and knew perfectly well what forms of expression and tempos he wanted (his scores are filled with instructions for conductors). Mahler wanted the exposition of the first movement of Symphony No. 1 repeated; Kubelik does not repeat it. Mahler wanted consistent tempos within sections; Kubelik varies them constantly, with rubato so frequent that it becomes an integral part of the performance. The tempo changes are usually slight but always noticeable, as Kubelik extends a phrase here and compresses one there in attempting to get to the heart of the music. It has to be said that this is often effective: the contrast between the storms and beauties of the finale is brought out particularly well. But it also has to be said that this approach becomes annoying when it is so pervasive a part of a presentation. There is vigor in this recording, and beauty; but it does not ultimately sound like Mahler – at least not Mahler as the composer wanted his music to sound.

There are similar strengths and weaknesses in Kubelik's Mahler Eighth, another live

recording and an earlier one – dating to June 24, 1970. Some parts of the performance are simply extraordinary. The very opening, for example, strides so boldly that the phrase “Veni, creator spiritus” becomes not a plea for an infusion of the Holy Spirit but a command for it to appear and do Mahler’s bidding. In fact, the entire first part of the symphony is quick and intense – the tempo marking Allegro impetuoso certainly gets its due here. Yet some of the beauty of this first section is missing: Kubelik pushes the music just a little too feverishly at times. In Part II of the symphony, the finale scene from Goethe’s Faust, Kubelik presents some of the most wonderful voices ever to perform this work. What vocal talent! Arroyo, Mathis, Grobe, Fischer-Dieskau – the lineup of stars sparkles, surmounting Mahler’s difficult vocal lines with apparent ease. At the same time, this is a very operatic conception of Part II: instead of being a cantata (or part of a work that is a symphony-cantata hybrid), this section is highly dramatic – and frequently quite speedy (the boys’ chorus does keep up, but it is a near thing a few times). The transcendent message tends to disappear behind the vocal brilliance – although it is certainly a joy to hear such first-rate singers in this music. At the end, when everything resounds – surely even the concert hall in Munich – Kubelik produces a truly overwhelming conclusion. But for all its excitement, the performance lacks a touch of the ineffable. (And on a mundane level, the CD lacks translations of the Latin and German texts, although it provides them in full in the original languages.)