



audite catalogue 2010 & CD - G. Mahler:  
Symphony No. 1

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[Fanfare](#) (Lynn René Bayley - 2010.09.01)

Rafael Kubelík's performances of the Mahler First, particularly the 1968 studio recording that is the Penguin Guide's top choice and has earned a rosette from Gramophone, are familiar to many collectors. I must admit, however, not being a fan of that studio recording for several reasons. First, the phrasing always seemed to me choppy and phlegmatic, having too much rhetoric and not enough of a focused overview of the work. Second, the recorded sound is particularly harsh, dry, and two-dimensional, cramping the almost 3-D effect that Mahler achieved in nearly all of his symphonies. And third, despite the obvious energy he brought to the symphony, Kubelík always seemed to me less engaged in his studio recordings than he was live, a trait that also afflicts his highly praised 1967 studio recording of *Die Meistersinger*. The orchestra plays with lilt and grace, the singers all interpret their roles beautifully, yet somehow it all sounds like a hothouse flower.

This live performance from 1979, then, attracted my attention immediately when I saw it was available for review. Unfortunately, it suffers from exactly the opposite virtues and defects of his studio account. On the positive side the symphony, though well inflected with little ritards and touches of rubato, makes a lot more sense here and seems less arbitrary, except in the latter half of the third movement. Kubelík is also really into the music, creating real atmosphere, particularly in the long, slow peroration in the first movement and the melancholy third. But the sound is the opposite of boxy: It's far too roomy, the orchestra sounding as if it were recorded in the old Astrodome with the roof open and a hot Texas breeze scattering the minute details of the score to the four winds. In short, every musical climax poofs away in a flaccid, soft-grained mushroom of sound. As you can imagine, this is a tremendous detriment to the finale of the first movement and most of the fourth.

It's a pity, really, but what can you do? Kubelík is gone now, and so can't return to remake the symphony under more ideal conditions. If you are a Kubelík completist, however, you'll want it as a fine example of what he could achieve with this symphony under good musical conditions with an orchestra he really loved. To say that Audite's packaging is cheap is an understatement. Both the front and back covers feature a photo of a twig with yellow-brown, dying leaves. The back cover gives you the only information on this performance: composer, title of work, conductor's name, orchestra, city of origin, and recording date. Inside there is nothing except an 83-page, full-color catalog of Audite CDs, which you can't even take out because it's firmly glued in place. I've seen supermarket classical CDs better than this.