



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

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As we move resolutely onward in the Twentyfirst century, an era otherwise born under an inauspicious cloud, there are a few hopeful signs to report. So what if recessionary economics and prohibitive expenses have led to a worldwide reduction of new studio recordings by major orchestras? The upbeat side is the recent burgeoning of live performance recordings on inhouse labels by such major orchestras as the Chicago and San Francisco Symphonies, the London Symphony and London Philharmonic, and the Marijinsky of St. Petersburg. Now that we have gotten past the mental roadblock of absolute perfection and have come to realize that a recording in which conductor and orchestra are inspired by the presence of a live audience may be preferable to a noteprecise but dull studio recording, we are in for some treasurable experiences.

That brings us to the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, whose classic live performances from the 1970s on are now being made available on the Audite Musikproduktion label. Add to the top of the list this wonderful account by Rafael Kubelik and that orchestra of Gustav Mahler's epochmaking Symphony No. 1 in D, the "Titan," recorded 2 November 1979 in Munich. I've never heard a more luminous or compelling recording of this work that gives us such an enlightening preview of all of Mahler's major themes and aspirations. It is truly "the key that unlocks the door."

As do most conductors, Kubelik leaves off the original second movement, entitled Blumine (Flowers), which only amplifies the feeling of joyous exultation at the end of the opening movement that Mahler described as "Spring and No End The awakening of nature from a long winter's sleep," and which is usually taken now as a separate piece to avoid the inevitable longeurs, however charming, that might result from its inclusion. As with what happens in nature itself, Mahler's spring begins in virtual inaudibility and moves through noticeable stages marked by subordinate climaxes. At first, I was puzzled by Kubelik's approach, but came to realize later that he was holding back on these early climaxes in order to emphasize the sheer, overwhelming moment when the full glory and power of Spring with a capital S are revealed in all the stunning impact a symphony orchestra can release.

Kubelik breezes smoothly and splendidly through the second movement, "Under Full Sail," a mixture of Austrian ländler and waltzes "that takes us to the village pub" (Mahler). Of course, Mahler being what he is, it really isn't as lightweight as all that, but it is comparatively untroubled and far less problematic than the third, which the composer described as "a death march in Callot's manner," filled with the world's terrible ironies. There are three themes in this movement: a slow march that begins almost inaudibly in the muted basses and is taken up by other instruments of the orchestra and is based, incredibly, on the nursery school ditty we know in English as "Frère Jacques," a limping, broken backed dance that seems like an anniversary

waltz played by drunken klezmer (undoubtedly reflecting the disillusionment of a youthful idealist), and a consoling, blissful melody of which we get only tantalizing glimpses. Many interpreters come to grief overemphasizing either of the first two themes; Kubelik, with his balanced viewpoint, does not make that mistake.

The finale? More conflict and upheavals lead to a scintillating conclusion. Worldstorming excess clashes with the noisy and defiant youthful bravura that prevails at the end. Even here, Kubelik doesn't allow matters to get offbalance. This show of defiance is part of life, too, but it is not its acme.

