



G. Mahler: Symphony No. 8

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This live Mahler Symphony No. 8, made the same month as Rafael Kubelik's recording for DG, has all of the musicality of his studio effort, with markedly more excitement and spontaneity as well as a feeling of grandeur and commitment critical to the success of any performance of this piece. Kubelik also has what likely is the finest group of soloists on disc, led by the stunning Gretchen of Edith Mathis (incomparable in her second-movement solo before the appearance of the Mater gloriosa) and tenor Donald Grobe's superb Dr. Marianus (a part that defeats almost everyone who attempts it). The choirs rank among the best that have ever recorded this work, singing with great feeling as well as discipline, right down to the children's voices of the Regensburger Domspatzen. This makes for a particularly thrilling first movement, with a hair-raising central double fugue and a coda as glorious as any on disc. All of this stands in stark contrast to the DG recording, which is merely tidy and rather small-scale.

Kubelik's interpretation, outwardly very similar to the studio version (indeed within a few seconds overall), shows markedly more flexibility in matters of tempo and phrasing. He shapes the big moments in the first movement with natural impulsiveness, always responsive to the sense of the text. The vicious choral cries of "Hostem repellas" are particularly startling, even if the brass come to grief in their descending scales. In Part 2, particularly in the luminous passages involving the women and boys, this performance captures more orchestral detail and reveals a greater willingness to luxuriate in the sheer lushness of Mahler's aural palette. In fact, the only thing that prevents this interpretation from getting a highest rating is the curious fact that although Kubelik achieves miracles of ensemble coordination in the contrapuntal thickets of Part 1, there's some strangely sloppy ensemble at comparatively simple moments in Part 2 (listen to the confusion before the boys' choir enters with "Er überwächst uns schon"). It's not terribly serious, but it's quite noticeable.

When played on an SACD player, this disc allows you the opportunity to hear both the unprocessed original master and the performance as remastered for SACD stereo. Audite's sonic restoration is remarkable in comparison, creating a vivid soundstage that favors the voices just a bit, with the organ very well integrated. Most of the live performances in Audite's Kubelik Mahler cycle have been preferable to the conductor's studio recordings, and this one certainly is no exception. Even though the soloists are the same as on the DG release, there's no question that this effort better captures both the work as a whole and Kubelik's conception of it. Minor mishaps notwithstanding, this is a major event.