



Franz Schubert: Mass No. 6 in E-flat major, D 950

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The Audite label continues to put collectors in their debt by issuing live performances conducted by Rafael Kubelik. This issue is particularly valuable since I can't immediately recall many instances of commercial recordings of Schubert's music by Kubelik.

There is much fine music in this Mass setting, one of the two most substantial that Schubert composed. I regret that there's not more for the soloists to do. They don't feature at all until the Credo, and then in a limited way, after which they have more to do in the Benedictus and Agnus Dei. Kubelik's team make the most of their relatively limited opportunities to shine. This Mass is a substantial composition in which most of the musical argument is carried by the chorus. Schubert could have pruned it a bit, especially in the Gloria and Credo, without sacrificing much.

In this performance the Kyrie flows nicely. The Gloria starts strongly and Kubelik and his forces make good use of dynamic contrast. I was glad, but not surprised, to find that Kubelik keeps the music moving forward nicely. For my money, however, there are some excessively repetitious passages. The central section of the Gloria, starting at 'Domine Deus' (4:41 in this reading) is dramatic and the Bavarian trombones ring out assertively and darkly. The music is quite jagged at times and Kubelik makes the most of this. But surely Schubert extends this section too much? In even this well paced performance the section lasts over four minutes and I find my attention wandered a bit. Equally, the fugue with which the Gloria rather predictably concludes is too extensive. I like Kubelik's sprightly pacing, despite which his choir articulates the notes well, but even so three and a half minutes is a trifle excessive for the material.

The soloists finally get involved – or some of them do – in an andante terzetto in the Credo at 'Et incarnatus est'. When I first heard this performance I thought the section sounded a bit laboured. But the tempo is virtually identical to that adopted by Wolfgang Sawallisch in his fine 1980 EMI recording, by coincidence also with the Bavarian choir and orchestra. A comparative listening exercise suggested to me that the reason that the passage sounds better under Sawallisch is because his soloists phrase the music more lightly and imaginatively. The musical material for this section is echt-Schubert but for all its merits I do wonder if he should have indulged in a repetition of the music after the choir has sung 'Crucifixus etiam pro nobis'. Apart from any musical considerations the repetition of 'Et incarnatus' at this point makes no textual sense. As in the Gloria this movement concludes with a fugue, lasting this time for some four minutes. Once again I found myself wishing that Schubert had edited his material – and it's an exacting sing for the chorus as I know from personal experience. However, Kubelik's choir delivers it very well.

The opening of the Sanctus is majestic in Kubelik's hands. The lively 'Osanna' is well sung; the choir demonstrates, as they do throughout the piece, lots of commitment and they sing with good, unforced tone. In the Benedictus we hear at greater length from the soloists – the full quartet this time – and they do well.

The concluding Agnus Dei is a powerful movement. In the first four bars that the basses sing there's a tiny moment in which the singing is just less than unanimous. This is remarkable in that it's the only (and very minor) choral blemish that I noticed throughout the whole performance. The choir and orchestra project the dramatic passages here very strongly and they're just as successful in the much more subdued music for 'Miserere nobis'.

This is a very good performance of Schubert's Mass, which, despite its occasional longueurs, is a fine work. Kubelik conducts with dedication and with fidelity to the score. He's well supported by his singers and orchestra. I'd rank this reading as pretty much on a par with Sawallisch's, which I've admired for many years. The recorded sound is very pleasing. I've only listened to the disc as a conventional CD. Audite explain in a booklet note that the recording is presented on what they call a Listen and Compare basis. This means that on an SACD player "one can hear the unrevised historical archive recording [on separate tracks] following the restored version." I'd advise SACD collectors to read the note in full for themselves.

Anyone who doesn't have a version of this work in his or her collection could do far worse than invest in this recording.