



G. Mahler: Symphony No. 5

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WETA fm (Jens F. Laurson - 2009.11.21)

WETA will have finished playing through the three complete Mahler cycles this weekend, but on-line Mahler Month will continue strong until December. And who knows, perhaps the Classical Countdown that is airing the coming week will contain some Mahler, too.

Gustav Mahler's Fifth Symphony, along with the Fourth, is the most popular among Mahler's symphonies... not the least because of the famous slow fourth movement, the Adagietto (soundtrack to "Death in Venice" and Robert Kennedy's funeral, courtesy Leonard Bernstein). It is easy to have that movement get out of hand by slowing its pulse to the point where its heart stops beating. Similarly, some conductors work too hard against this and those results tend to be long on admirable intellectualism (or at least cool air) but short on wanted yearning.

The timing does not tell it all; the pulse is more dependent on how the conductor sees his orchestra through this than the seconds he takes to do it. The same ten minutes might sound lovingly cared for when conducted in two – but interminable when conducted in four. Then again, with duration differences of up to 80% in this movement, the timing does tell at least part of the story. Mahler was reported to have taken just over, and at least once well under, eight minutes for this movement. Bruno Walter, who should know, takes 7:35 in his 1947 recording with the New York Philharmonic and was even faster in his earlier recording. Though what is true to the letter need not necessarily be true to the spirit. Haitink with Berlin, at his most luxurious, clocks in at 14 minutes.

What is certain is that the Adagietto is not an elegy or lamento – even if that's how many listeners think of it. (Again: not the least thanks to Leonard Bernstein and Visconti.) It is an affirmation, a death-to-life affair, maybe a (love-) song without words, and it is so in contrast to both: the variously melancholic and affirmative mood of the Scherzo and the resignation of the (similar sounding but not essentially related) Rückert Song "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen". It's not about weariness or morbidly lounging about the Venice beach, it's an embrace of the world in tender, romantic tones.

Bernstein takes a lovingly cared-for, exaggerated sounding 75 minutes for the symphony in his live recording from Frankfurt with the Vienna Philharmonic. It's fantastic and a catastrophe; typical Bernstein in everything we love of him and also a little of what we can't stand. His Adagietto is so wrong, yet so right. Interestingly: Haitink's Berlin Adagietto, while beautiful, hasn't any of that 'so right and so wrong' element. The latter lasts even longer, but just can't irritate. It is certainly in this case a strength of Bernstein, not a weakness, that he can irritate us. Any emotional response to Mahler is presumably better than none at all. Lennie's was considered

by many the ultimate performance. I find it difficult not to consider the exaggerations all-too mannered, even as I adore the fact that Bernstein goes for them. One should listen to it at least once, though, especially those who like his DG First.

Abbado's second recording with Berlin (DG,), much acclaimed, is on the side of understatement and satisfying throughout. But Chailly and his Concertgebouw have just as much character (not overwhelmingly much in either case, admittedly) and they sound more distinctive, clearer, richer. This may well be the best recorded, best sounding Mahler recording. So good, in fact, that the lack of brimming local color and idiomatic touches is more than compensated for – a rarity in any Mahler recording. Coming surprisingly close to this is Yoel Levi's Fifth on Telarc (review here). If it were not for the (slightly) more colorful and interesting Chailly recording, it would merit mention at greater length.

Why is Kubelik's Fifth on DG not in print in North America? He makes such a strong, dramatic case from the first to the last note, it's beguiling. Kubelik keeps this symphony on his toes – as usual – and he makes a crisp, no-nonsense case for it. It's not rushed, it is dynamic; it does not confuse slowness with gravitas nor speed alone with excitement. The four-note attack of the opening trumpets growing subtly more aggressive on each attempt is just the first of many lovable details (one where Bernstein/New York falls flat, while Zinman/Tonhalle come close) – and the usual lack of bass response on his DG recordings is scarcely noticeable. Alas, it is only available in the Kubelik box of the complete symphonies and the Audite version with the same performers, although similar, is slightly more relaxed, slacker, and effectively less gripping. It is a live recording, of course, and while offering the usual increase in depth and bass over the DG so and, I thought this 1981 recording to be less clear, even a bit muddier, than some of the earlier recordings on Audite.

Preferring Kubelik's DG recording or Chailly to Abbado as I do, the latter fares better compared to the former's Audite recording. Indeed, hearing the straight-laced Abbado recording again was more of a joy here than expected, worthy of second thoughts. Not necessarily distinctive (indeed, almost anonymous) but incredible musical, loving, fine sounding, empathetic... a contender for a main-stream Mahler Fifth were it not for Chailly & Co.

Boulez' recording (DG) has much appeal: Detailed and 'lovely' moments and even gentle, soft touches stand out amid the whipped and furious, the determined and the fierce. Boulez combines the tender with the ferocious in a way similar to (believe it or not) Bernstein's New York recording. There is no interpretive wiggle-room in this performance, it sounds at all times as though it could not be played any other way. In a more general way the reading is not so different from Abbado, except that it exudes conviction, that every contrast is clearly delineated, and that every punch taken finds its target. The Trauermarsch, ironic and lilting, has immense impact, is phenomenally homogeneous and all the more riveting for it. The Adagietto sounds still slower than the eleven minutes it already lasts, and it is one of the most moving accounts thereof, without any saccharine touches. The clarity and the immediacy of the excellent sound makes all the difference. Boulez comes up with one of the very few recordings of this symphony that I don't grow tired of. The reputation of this recording suffers from the usual stereotypes that are applied to Boulez in general and Boulez' Mahler in particular, but you will discover that to be bollocks, once you hear the Vienna Philharmonic in heat as you can here.