



G. Mahler: Symphony No. 7

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Mahler's Seventh Symphony is a forbidding work that can baffle the listener even more than the Third. The author of liner notes to one recording tries to help: "What idea might help comprehend the whole symphony? The same as the Third Symphony, it might be "the World". But this time the composer has created a world where we would not find a clear hierarchy or structure of thematic, tonal, graphic links or even associations. Despite numerous research papers on Mahler's music, the Seventh Symphony still is an unsolved enigma, as the composer probably contemplated it." Thanks. Conductor Esa Pekka Salonen meanwhile is baffled by some of the "painfully banal moments" in the second movement that he "can't believe Mahler put them actually in there".

The American Record Guide's introduction for Mahler's Seventh in their 2001 Mahler overview doesn't pretend to explain, but is perfect: "The Seventh is the most atmospheric Mahler symphony, and the conductor who fails to create the atmosphere fails the music. [...] The atmosphere is generally dark but never bitter; soft, gentle, eerie, and mysterious, with an anxiety and tension in the air."

The three middle movements (two serenades titled "Nachtmusik" bracketing a Scherzo titled "Shadow-like") make or break this symphony – and the subtle, dreamy visions across the midnight lake (can) elevate this symphony to one of the most extraordinary Mahler-experiences. The structure of four movements symmetrically arranged around an eerie Scherzo most closely resembles Mahler's plans for the Tenth, and although the Seventh is generally lumped into a triptych with the other purely orchestral Fifth and Sixth symphonies, some of the stressed music in the opening movement has more in common with the grim Tenth than the conventional aggression of the Sixth.

Claudio Abbado's Chicago recording (DG Gold) has long been praised as one of the best and Gramophone Magazine (with which I almost always disagree on Mahler-choices, quite apart from their stanch, near comical Rattle- and Solti-bias) continues to hail its praises. It is well played and much appreciated by these ears, but too firm and straight-laced. His most recent recording, live with the Berlin Philharmonic (DG), however is a work of wonder. Those middle movements have never sounded better; the nightscape of movements two and four has never been evoked more realistically, tenderly, movingly. It is better even than Bernstein (either on Sony or live on DG, both with the New York Philharmonic) in that regard. There is much more mist over that midnight lake and the tempi are steadier. The recordings that have the finest perception of the misty atmosphere don't necessarily help comprehend the work best, but that should not keep one from experiencing these takes.

Bernstein does wonderful things on the live recording in the inner movements; with the New York Philharmonic earlier account (Sony) he's more zany and the recording provides more detail. The timpani whacks that open the finale, for example, are caught in more detail than any other recording, save Simon Rattle's. There's a lusty vigor here that the DG recording (also NYP) trades for atmosphere. Both are very good.

Kubelik always had a way with the Seventh, even if he less indulges in mood and invests more in clarity. The second movement is beautifully enunciated and all the instruments can be picked out. (Again, Audite's superior sound in a similar interpretation as his DG recording makes us forgive the fact that – apart from his First – the DG symphonies are scarcely available individually). But the cowbells in the second movement are more corrugated iron and tin than atmosphere-rich harbingers of nightly visions. I hear other things here, which is interesting enough – and it largely makes up for the distinct lack of mist. But for the type of take that is Kubelik's, I'd opt for Boulez and Cleveland (DG), instead. Here the best (apart from stunning playing and superb sound) comes last: the Meistersingeresque Rondo-Finale breathes with clarity and jollity – albeit not quite a dance-the-night-away joy, since Boulez doesn't ignore the ironic undertones. Intended by Mahler or not, there's the feeling that someone is commandeering: We must be jolly! We must must enjoy the sunshine! (Is that perhaps where Shostakovich took the idea for the finale of his Fifth Symphony from?) If there is a better last movement, I've not yet heard it.

Coming close, though, in that last movement, is Daniel Barenboim on his first Mahler recording I truly enjoy. I used to think the Argentinean a modest Bruckner and Mahler conductor – this perhaps coming at the expense of his undisputed Wagner-greatness. Few of his Bruckner recordings are to my liking (though the Berlin First and Ninth and the Chicago Fourth are very good) and neither live nor on record did his Mahler convince me entirely (a good Lied, Kindertotenlieder and a Fifth on Warner, a Ninth in concert in Washington). But matters seem to be improving progressively and the Staatskapelle Berlin cannot be denied in the Seventh. More hushed brass and horns in the middle Nachtmusik would make me like it even more – there is still more 'nightliness' to be had here. But what a first movement! Listen, in excellent sound, to the unearthly shudders of the strings that open the symphony. It's like getting an old Chevy car started at 30 below, or a wet Alsatian shaking itself before the fireplace. This use of tremolo is a joy to behold every time it pops up, even if its notable presence borders the self-conscious. The sound is burnished like the best of the Warner/Barenboim/Staatskapelle recordings.