Gustav Mahler: Das Lied von der Erde

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Here is one of the great "lost" Mahler recordings now properly restored. When Rafael Kubelik made his outstanding studio Mahler cycle in Munich for DG in the 1970s (463 738-2) he made no version of "Das Lied Von Der Erde" to go with it. This was puzzling for such a great Mahlerian who even went to the trouble of recording the Adagio from the Tenth Symphony as part of his cycle. We knew Kubelik played the work because this performance had taken place in Munich in February 1970 with Kubelik's Bavarian Radio Orchestra and first appeared, minus a minute or two in the fourth movement and in poor sound, on a pirate label in the 1980s. A number of Kubelik's studio Mahler recordings were made after "live" performances in the same hall at this very time (as other Audite releases have shown) so why didn't Kubelik, the orchestra and his two soloists go on to record it for DG under studio conditions? I wonder if the answer lies in the presence of Janet Baker. At that time Baker was an exclusive EMI artist. Were plans afoot for her to record it with Kubelik but these came to nothing because of that? I know she later recorded the work with Bernard Haitink for Philips but that was some years later when perhaps contract problems were resolvable. Whatever, I know that ever since I heard the pirate version of this performance I had hoped that at some point someone would gain access to the Bavarian Radio master tapes and release them. That is what has now happened and this recording of Mahler's late masterpiece now joins a nearly-completed "live" Mahler cycle conducted by Kubelik from various times during his Munich tenure released by Audite.

For me Janet Baker has always been the greatest interpreter of the female/baritone songs in this work. Her Philips recording with Haitink on Eloquence (468 182-2) was long awaited even when it appeared and did not disappoint her admirers. In my survey of recordings of this work I believe I paid that version the attention it deserved singling out Baker for special praise. However even then I felt her interpretation on a BBC Radio Classics release taken from a later "live" performance in Manchester and conducted by Raymond Leppard was even better – deeper, more profound. The problem was that in no way could the BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra compare with the Concertgebouw, or her conductor Raymond Leppard compare with Bernard Haitink even though hearing Baker "live" seemed to add something to her interpretation. This was partly why when I heard the "pirate" of this Munich version I hoped for an official release. This too is "live" with all the benefit that brings but this time we have in Kubelik a Mahlerian of equal stature to Haitink and in the Bavarian Radio an orchestra that comes close to the Concertgebouw in depth of response to Mahler's sound world. Matched with Waldemar Kmentt she also appears with a tenor who is, for me, superior to James King on the Haitink version and John Mitchinson on the Leppard, fine though both are.

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The key to the greatness of Janet Baker in this work is her total identification with the words. Her care for every detail of them means she lives the part where some merely describe it. Her view of the music seems from the inside out. In these movements one thinks of Baker, Ludwig and Fassbaender among the women and Fischer-Dieskau among the men. In the second song you are made to feel what it is to be lonely rather than simply have loneliness described to you. Technically too she is on top form as the wild horses passage in "Von der Schönheit" proves. At no point in this crazy music does Baker ever give the impression that she will come to grief, even though the tempo adopted by her and Kubelik is suitably swift. They had one shot at this in front of an audience and it comes off triumphantly. Listen also to the delicacy of the description of the young girls swimming in the same movement. Finally in the "Abschied" her range, emotional and musical is total. Everything is covered here from the passages of sterile enunciation to the overwhelming emotional grandeur of the climaxes and all points between subtly graded. Overall this is one of those interpretations that contain depths that will take years to plumb.

Of all the great recordings of this work I know there has, for me, so far only been one where I feel that two of the greatest interpreters are matched on the same recording. These are Christa Ludwig and Fritz Wunderlich for Klemperer on EMI. But now with this release I think there is a second since Waldemar Kmentt is just as convincing in his songs as Janet Baker is in hers. In fact I believe Kmentt can be compared with Wunderlich, Peter Schreier and Julius Patzak as the finest interpreters in the tenor songs on record. In "Das Trinklied" Kmentt is towering, challenging the music to break him in the dramatic sections, but emerging unscathed from them. The "Dark is life, is death" refrain has a world-weary depth that few save Schreier and Wunderlich can match and the "ape on the grave" climax is fearless in his nightmarish delivery. Like Baker, Kmentt can also walk the delicate passages of this work with equal effect. His description of the arrival of spring in "Der Trunkene im Fruhling" is magical and his word painting in "Von Der Jugend" piquant and sharp.

Kubelik's greatness as a Mahler conductor was his ability to cover the whole range of the music from uncomplicated nature painting to calculated high drama and seem equally at home everywhere. He attends to all details of this music with care and discretion, always taking care of the bigger picture too, balancing it with the inner detail. Notice the woodwinds during the funeral march in "Der Abscheid" where every strand is clearly delineated, or the effect of getting his mandolin to play tremolo in the same movement marking up the chinoiserie in a most evocative and unique way. He also recognises what I have always believed to be a crucial aspect of this work. That the two soloists are the equal partners with the conductor and that he is there to support them. With great soloists like these, that is easier. But countless examples of his support for his soloists are apparent in this performance along with the preparation of his orchestra to act almost as a third soloist. The purely instrumental passages in "Der Abschied" reveal Mahler conducting of the highest order. Listen to the birds passage and also to the deep bass growls before the funeral march.

The sound recording leaves little to be desired. It is hard to tell it was made over thirty years ago for radio broadcast. I like the balances between woodwind and strings and the warmth of the acoustic around the orchestra and soloists in the chamber-like sections. The balance between soloists and orchestra are exemplary also. Even the distinctive acoustic of the Herkulessaal is made to sound perfectly suited to the music. You can hear everything and with solo players in the orchestra as eloquent as the two singers are this is important and adds another plus to this

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disc. In sound terms this more than matches the best versions of this work and musically it is the equal of Klemperer on EMI (5 66892 2), Sanderling on Berlin Classics (0094022BC) and Horenstein on BBC Legends (BBCL 4042-2). All very different though each one of those comparable versions are in their interpretative approach. Indeed, this Kubelik recording has the effect of taking many of the virtues of all those great recordings and stitching them into a new and deeply satisfying whole.

This is one of the all-time great Mahler recordings: a classic version of this inexhaustible masterpiece in every way. Indeed I think there are none to surpass it, perhaps only to equal it. You will be moved, delighted and changed by it. I cannot recommend it too highly as it goes to the top of my list for this work.

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