Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 1

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For many Mahlerites over a certain age Rafael Kubelik has always been there, like a dependable uncle, part of the Mahler family landscape for as long as we can all remember. He was one of the first to record a complete symphony cycle after many years of performing the music in the concert hall, and that DG cycle has hardly been out of the catalogue since the 1970s. Marc Bridle and I reviewed it in December 2000.

Yet it has never quite made the "splash" those by some of his colleagues have done. Kubelik's view of Mahler is not one that attaches itself to the mind at a first, or even a second, listening. Kubelik was never the man for quick fixes or cheap thrills in any music he conducted. So in Mahler not for him the heart-on-sleeve of a Bernstein, the machine-like precision of a Solti, or the dark 19th century psychology of a Tennstedt. Kubelik's Mahler goes back to folk roots, pursues more refined textures, accentuates song, winkles out a lyrical aspect and so has the reputation of playing down the angst, the passion, the grandeur. But note that I was careful to use the word "reputation". I often wonder whether those who tend to pass over Kubelik's Mahler as honourable failure have actually listened hard over a period of time to those recordings. I think if they had they would, in the end, come to agree that whilst Kubelik is certainly excellent at those qualities for which his Mahler is always recognised he is also just as capable of delivering the full "Mahler Monty" as everyone else is. It's just that he anchors it harder in those very aspects he is praised for, giving the rest a unique canvas on which he can let whole of the music breathe and expand. It's all a question of perspective. Kubelik's Mahler takes time, always remember that.

In his studio cycle the First Symphony has always been one of the most enduring. It has appeared over and over again among the top recommendations of many critics, including this one. Many others who tend not to rate Kubelik highly in certain later Mahler Symphonies if they were of a mind to rate his First Symphony might feel constrained to point out that the First is, after all, a "Wunderhorn" symphony and that it is in the "Wunderhorn" mood Kubelik was at his strongest. I don't disagree with that as an explanation but, as I have said, I think that in Mahler Rafael Kubelik was so much more than a two or three trick pony. In fact in the First Symphony Kubelik's ability to bring out the grotesques, the heaven stormings and the romance was just as strong as Bernstein or Solti. It's a case of perspectives again.

The studio First Symphony did have one particular drawback noted by even its most fervent admirers. A drawback it shared with most of the other recordings in the cycle too. It lay in the recorded sound given to the Bavarian Radio Orchestra by the DG engineers in Munich. Balances were close, almost brittle. The brass, trumpets especially, were shrill and raucous. There was an overall "boxy" feeling to the sound

picture. I have never been one to dismiss a recording on the basis of recorded sound alone unless literally un-listenable. However, even I regretted the sound that this superb performance had been given. This is not the only reason I am going to recommend this 1979 "live" recording on Audite of the First over the older DG, but it is an important one. At last we can now hear Kubelik's magnificent interpretation of this symphony, and the response of his excellent orchestra, in beautifully balanced and realistic sound about which I can have no criticism and nothing but praise.

Twelve years after the studio recording Kubelik seems to have taken his interpretation of the work a stage further. Whether it's a case of "live" performance before an audience leading him to take a few more risks, play a little more to the gallery, or whether it's simply the fact that he has thought more and more about the work in subsequent performances, I don't know. What I do know is that every aspect of his interpretation I admired first time around is presented with a degree more certainty, as though the 1967 version was "work in progress" and this is the final statement. (Which, in fact, it was when you consider Kubelik first recorded the work for Decca in Vienna in the 1950s.)

Straight away the opening benefits from the spacious recording with the mellow horns and distant trumpets really giving that sense of otherworldliness that Mahler was surely aiming for. Notice also the woodwinds' better balancing in the exposition main theme which Kubelik unfolds with a telling degree more lyricism. One interesting point to emerge is that after twelve years Kubelik has decided to dispense with the exposition repeat and it doesn't appear to be needed. In the development the string slides are done to perfection, as good as Horenstein's in his old Vox recording. Kubelik also manages an admirable sense of mounting malevolence when the bass drum starts to tap softly. Nature is frightening, Mahler is telling us, and Kubelik agrees. The recapitulation builds inexorably and the coda arrives with great sweep and power. At the end the feeling is that Kubelik has imagined the whole movement in one breath.

The second movement has a well-nigh perfect balance of forward momentum and weight. There is trenchancy here, but there is also a dance element that is so essential to make the music work. Some conductors seem to regard the Trio as a perfunctory interlude, but not Kubelik. He lavishes the same care on this that he lavishes on everything else and the pressing forward he was careful to observe in the main scherzo means he doesn't need to relax too much in order to give the right sense of respite. There is also an air of the ironic, a feeling we are being given the other side of one coin.

The third movement is one of the most extraordinary pieces of music Mahler ever wrote. The fact that it was amongst his earliest compositions makes it even more astounding. I have always believed that in this movement Mahler announces himself a a truly unique voice for the first time and Kubelik certainly seems to think this in the way he rises to the occasion. He has always appreciated the wonderful colours and sounds that must have so shocked the first audience but in this recording we are, once more, a stage further on in the interpretation than in his previous version. Right at the start he has a double bass soloist prepared to sound truly sinister, more so than in 1971, and one who you can really hear properly also. As the funeral march develops a real sense of middle European horror is laid out before us. All the more sinister for being understated by Mahler but delivered perfectly by a conductor who is prepared to ask his players to sound cheap, to colour the darker tones. This aspect is especially evident in the band interruptions where the bass drum and cymbals have a slightly off-colour Teutonic edge which, when they return after the limpid central section, are even more insinuating and menacing. Kubelik seems to have such confidence in the music that he is able to bring off an effect like this where others

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don't. In all it's a remarkably potent mix that Kubelik and his players deliver in this movement though he never overplays, always anchors in the music's roots.

In the chaos unleashed at the start of the last movement you can now, once more, hear everything in proper perspective, the brass especially. The ensuing big tune is delivered with all the experience Kubelik has accumulated by this time, but even I caught my breath at how he holds back a little at the restatement. Even though the lovely passage of nostalgic recall just prior to the towering coda expresses a depth and profundity only hinted at in 1967 it is the coda itself which will stay in your mind. As with the studio recording Kubelik is anxious for you to hear what the strings are doing whilst the main power is carried by brass and percussion. Kubelik is also too experienced a Mahlerian to rush the ending. Too many conductors press down on the accelerator here, as if this will make the music more exciting, and how wrong they are to try. Listen to how Kubelik holds on to the tempo just enough to allow every note to tell. He knows this is so much more than just a virtuoso display, that it is a statement of Mahler's own arrival, and his care and regard for this work from start to finish stays with him to the final note.

This is a top recommendation for this symphony. It supersedes Kubelik's own studio recording on DG and, I think, surpasses in achievement those by Horenstein (Vox CDX2 5508) and Barbirolli (Dutton CDSJB 1015) to name two other favourite versions I regard as essential to any collection but which must now be thought of as alternatives to this Audite release.

Simply indispensable.

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