



Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 9

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Rafael Kubelik was one of the first conductors to record a cycle of Mahler's nine completed symphonies. Those recordings, all made with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, were set down for DG between about 1967 and 1970. Though highly esteemed by many, Kubelik's Mahler has been judged by others to lack the expansiveness and sheer emotional weight that certain other conductors, such as Bernstein, Solti and Tennstedt offer. In recent years the Audite label has issued live performances by Kubelik of several Mahler symphonies (numbers 1, 3 and 5 have appeared to date). Last year they also put us greatly in their debt by issuing a superb live account of *Das Lied von der Erde*, a work that he never recorded commercially. Now along comes a concert performance of the Ninth recorded some eight years after his studio recording.

In an excellent essay on the Ninth the American writer Michael Steinberg points out the parallel drawn by Deryck Cooke between this Mahler symphony and Tchaikovsky's Sixth. In brief, Cooke suggested that in composing his Ninth Mahler had in mind the formal model of the *Pathétique*, noting that both symphonies begin and end with a long movement, and that in each case the finale is an extended adagio. Both composers place shorter movements in quicker tempi between these two outer musical pillars. Steinberg adds that Mahler conducted a series of performances of the Tchaikovsky symphony in early 1910, after he had completed the full draft of his Ninth. He also reminds us that, though posterity has, perhaps inevitably, imparted a valedictory quality to both works, neither composer intended these respective symphonies to be their last compositions.

This last point seems to me to be of fundamental importance in approaching Mahler's Ninth. Yes, it is the last work that he completed fully and he was deeply superstitious about the composition of a ninth symphony. However, he had no sooner completed the Ninth than he began frantic work on a tenth symphony, which he left fully sketched out at his death. The manuscript score of the Ninth includes a number of expressions of farewell in Mahler's hand but there are even more of these scrawled in the manuscript of the Tenth. So, while there is a strong valedictory flavour to this symphony, most especially in the last movement, I think it's a mistake to play it as if it were an anguished farewell to music.

I say this because Kubelik's performance may be thought by some to be lightweight because it is comparatively swift and because long passages in the last movement in particular are more flowing than we commonly hear them. However, Kubelik's performance is by no means the swiftest on disc. Bruno Walter's celebrated 1938 live

account with the Vienna Philharmonic lasted a "mere" 70'13" but broader conceptions seem to have become more the accepted norm as the years have passed.

The first movement of this symphony is a turbulent, seething invention. Indeed, I wonder if it may be Mahler's single greatest achievement? Kubelik exposes the music objectively and without fuss. There's a complete absence of excessive histrionics but the music still speaks to us powerfully. This is an interpretation of integrity – in fact, that description could well suffice for the reading of the whole symphony. Kubelik has a fine ear for texture and balance, as is evidenced, for example, in the chamber-like sonorities in the passage from 6'27" to 8'40". In these pages all the orchestral detail is picked out, but in a wholly natural way. Although there are one or two overblown notes from the brass (not a trait that is evident in the other three movements) the playing is very fine and committed. There is one unfortunate flaw, however: the timpani are ill tuned at two critical points (at 6'27" and 18'00").

The second movement is an earthy ländler and Kubelik and his players convey Mahler's trenchant irony very well. There are innumerable shifts in the character of the music and Kubelik responds to each with acuity. I would describe his work here as understanding and idiomatic.

The turbulent, grotesque Rondo – Burleske that follows is also splendidly characterised. The contrapuntal pyrotechnics of Mahler's score come across extremely well. The pungent fast music is interrupted (at 6'25" here) by a much warmer episode in which a shining trumpet line is particularly to the fore. This episode is beautifully judged by Kubelik. The brazen coda is well handled though I must admit that I've heard it done with greater panache in some other performances.

A few years ago I attended a performance of this symphony in Birmingham conducted by Simon Rattle. On that occasion he launched straight into the last movement with only an imperceptible break after the Rondo. The effect was tremendous and of a piece with his searing conception of the music on that evening. I suspect that Kubelik would never have made such a gesture for his way with the finale is less overt, less subjective. In fact the start of this movement is nothing if not dignified here. As the massed strings begin their hymn-like melody, singing their hearts out for Kubelik, we are back in the sound world of the finale to the Third symphony. There's ample weight and gravitas from the strings in these pages. The subsequent ghostly passage that commences with the wraith-like contrabassoon solo is well controlled too.

At the heart of the movement is a long threnody, carried mainly by the strings (from 6'11"). Kubelik's tempo is quite flowing here and it's his treatment of this episode in particular that accounts for the relative swiftness of the movement overall. Prospective listeners may want to know that he takes 22'23" for the finale. By contrast Herbert Von Karajan (his 1982 live reading on DG) takes 26'49", Leonard Bernstein, also live on DG (his 1979 concert with the Berlin Philharmonic, his only appearance with that orchestra) takes 26'12". Jascha Horenstein on BBC Legends (a 1966 concert performance) takes 26'50". Somewhat quicker overall is Rattle in his VPO recording for EMI at 24'43". It will be noted that like Kubelik's all these performances are live ones. However, there is one important precedent for Kubelik's

relative swiftness. Bruno Walter, the man who gave the first performance of the Ninth, dispatched the finale in an amazing 18'20" in his 1938 live VPO traversal. These comparative timings are of interest. However, I must stress that though Kubelik doesn't hang about the music never sounds rushed. The phrases all have time to breathe and there's no suspicion that the performance is overwrought. I found it convincing. The extended climax (from 12'56") is powerfully projected. The final pages (from 17'28") are not lacking in poignancy and as the very end approaches (from 19'08") there's a proper feeling of hushed innigkeit and tender leave-taking. Happily, there's no applause at the end to break the spell (indeed, there's no distracting audience noise at all that I could discern).

The recorded sound is perfectly acceptable. The acoustic of this Tokyo hall is a little on the dry side and there isn't quite the space and bloom round the sound not the front-to-back depth that might have been achieved in the orchestra's regular venue, the Herkulessaal in Munich. However, the slight closeness of the recording means that lots of inner detail emerges.

There's a good deal to admire in this recording and there's certainly an atmosphere of live music making. Above all, this release gives us another opportunity to hear a dedicated, wide and committed Mahler conductor performing a great masterpiece of the symphonic literature with authority. This is a fine version that admirers of this conductor and devotees of Mahler should seek out and hear. I hope Audite will be able to source and release more such concert performances and, who knows, perhaps build up a complete live Kubelik Mahler cycle in due course.