Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 6

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Fanfare (Christopher Abbot - 01.05.2002)

According to the booklet that accompanies this release, Audite has released an almost-complete cycle of the Mahler Symphonies conducted by Maestro Kubelik (only the Fourth and Eighth are missing). They are all live recordings, made between 1967 and 1982. The orchestra is the Bavarian Radio Symphony, with whom Kubelik was closely associated and with whom he made a memorable Mahler cycle for DG between 1967 and 1971.

In fact, the performance on this disc would appear to be a concert performance that directly preceded the recording made for DG. It was Kubelik's practice to perform the Symphonies in concert and then to go into the studio (in this case, the same venue as the concert: Munich's Herkulessaal) and record the work for release on disc.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the two performances are nearly identical. The DG version has gained a few seconds per movement, but the differences are negligible. Most noticeable is the slightly more expansive development of the first movement, especially in the ethereal "mountain air" music. Orchestral definition is somewhat clearer on DG too, while there is the occasional lapse in ensemble and intonation on Audite that one forgives in a live performance.

As for the performance, it features many of the attractive characteristics of Kubelik's Mahler. His was a dynamic but somewhat understated approach, mostly free of Bernstein hyperbole and less purely driven than Solti. He shared with Haitink both emotional neutrality and the ability to bring clarity to Mahler's contradictory nature. His Sixth begins in an almost frantic manner with an unnecessary accelerando, but it is certainly energetic; the aforementioned development is atmospheric and is a perfect contrast to the relentlessness of the march. The second movement is possessed of much the same energy, but is leavened with whimsy. Not surprisingly, the Andante is starkly beautiful without being schmaltzy.

The finale strikes a balance between the expressionistic episodes, the mountain reminiscences, and the almost manic attempts to forestall the inevitable. The hammer blows (there are two) are not sharp or dry sounding, but the cowbells and celesta are perfect. The final chord is shattering and well judged.

This release would appear to be superfluous were it not for the fact that Kubelik’s DG recording is available only as part of his complete set, albeit at bargain price. This performance may be no match for the precision of Boulez or the emotional commitment of Tennstedt, and it lacks the overall mastery of Zander. But it is historically important, since it documents the work of a gifted second-generation Mahlerian.

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