



Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 7

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Gramophone (Richard Osborne - 2001.10.01)

GRAMOPHONE

Rafael Kubelik's 1970 Deutsche Grammophon recording of Mahler's Seventh Symphony, made with this same orchestra in this same hall, was and remains as analytically exact as any on record. Swift of foot, with crystal-clear textures, it places the symphony unequivocally in the 20th century. (Audite's notes tell us nothing about Kubelik's Mahler but it is an interesting fact that he studied the work with Erich Kleiber.)

Kubelik's approach suits the music wonderfully well: the opening movement's mighty oar-stroke, the spectral scherzo, the balmy beneath-the-stars caress of 'Nachtmusik II' (which like the Adagietto of the Fifth Symphony is all the more alluring at a quickish tempo), the finale's quasi-Ivesian revel. I would gather from Jonathan Swain's review of Kubelik's live 1980 New York performance that the reading had put on weight by then. That, or the New York Philharmonic lacked the time or inclination to dip their sound in the refiner's fire.

Happily, this 1976 Bavarian Radio performance is very much the reading as it was, with a comparably fine Herkulessaal recording. What it lacks, alas, is the absolute clarity and consistent impetus of the studio version. Recording these Mahlerian behemoths at a single sitting often ends up this way. In the finale, the playing lacks the freshness - the needle-sharp texturing and edge-of-the-seat excitement - of the studio version.

The studio recording is available only as part of Kubelik's complete 10-CD set of the symphonies (glorious performances of Nos 1, 3 and 7, and nothing that is less than fresh and interesting, all advantageously priced). Younger Mahlerians who can't run to that may care to get a sense of this unique reading of the Seventh from the new Audite CD. Sadly, it isn't cheap; indeed, given its provenance and packing, it's unreasonably dear.