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Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 6

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Gramophone (David Gutman - 2002.08.01)

GRAMOPHONE

Undercharcterised Mahler from Kubelik

Do you remember the 1960s? A time before Mahler symphony series were two-a-penny, when conductors like Abravanel, Bernstein, Haitink and Solti vied to be the first to complete the intégrale on LP (not that any of them would have thought of including Deryck Cooke's performing version of the Tenth)? Rafael Kubelik's ground-breaking DG cycle was generally (though not universally) rated a highlight of his period as chief conductor of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra (1961-79). More recently, the conductor's Mahlerian credentials have been boosted by the appearance of some memorable live concert relays, including a quite outstanding (albeit repeat-shy) account of the First Symphony and a Fifth full of insight (Audite, 4/00). I cannot say that the present release holds comparable interest. Its source is a well-preserved, bass-light Bavarian Radio tape dating from the same period as DG's studio sessions. Hence it offers neither an alternative interpretative slant on the work nor even a radically different sonic experience.

True, the conductor excels himself in the slow movement. Here you'll find the luminous string tone, natural pacing and inner simplicity of his best work, along with sonic unvarnished wind and brass playing. (Don't forget how unfamiliar this music must have been at the time: the Sixth had to wait until 1966 for its French première). The eccentric booklet notes tell us that this Andante moderato 'takes off the stifling corset that prevents one from breathing freely in the other movements'. This isn't - I think - meant to allude to Kubelik's brisk, inflexible pacing, but I found such an approach problematical, particularly in the first two movements where expressive contrasts are consistently underplayed. Given the overall timing shown above, you may be surprised to discover that Kubelik does in fact make the first movement repeat. Only Neeme Järvi races through the music marked Allegro energico via non troppo (but never mind the qualifier) - at quite such a lick. And although Bernstein runs them close, his famously neurotic march has a rhythmic certainty and an alertness to detail and nuance that elude Kubelik in his headlong dash across country. The generalised élan of the finale is rather undermined by the fluffs and false entries, while its coda serves as an unlikely showcase for brass timbre of a more distinctive and regional variety than is beard from this source today. All in all, a bit of a gabble but a gift for confirmed Kubelik fanciers.

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