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Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 6

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Unlike the Audite release of Rafael Kubelik conducting Mahler's First Symphony in 1971 already reviewed, this "live" recording of the Sixth dates from the same week as his studio recording for DG. In fact I think we can say that this would have been the concert performance mounted to give the orchestra a chance to rehearse and perform the work prior to recording it in the very same hall. Consequently there is really no difference between this and the DG version and if you already have the latter there is no need for you to duplicate it. Unlike the 1971 recording of the First Symphony the Bavarian Radio engineers have given the orchestra pretty much the same kind of sound balance as those of their DG colleagues. Everything is close up with little air around the instruments, the winds especially, and a rather light bass end too. Of course, if you don't own the DG version and are interested in collecting this Audite cycle then you will still need to know about Kubelik in this work.

As I wrote when reviewing the Audite release of the First Symphony, Kubelik's reputation in Mahler is often misleading. You often see expressions like "understated", "lightweight" and "lyrical" ascribed to it. It's all relative, of course. True, Kubelik is certainly especially effective when Mahler goes outdoors, back to nature and the "Wunderhorn" moods. But he can also surprise us in those later works where a more astringent, Modernist, fractured approach is called for. This is especially the case if you are prepared to see those crucial aspects through the tinted glass of nature awareness and in context with how he sees the works that go before and after them. No better illustration of his ability to take in the advanced, forward-looking aspect of Mahler's work is provided by his approach to this most Modernist of Mahler's symphonies.

Kubelik's performance of the Sixth is astringent and very pro-active. This is the music of a man of action and vigour which, when Mahler wrote it, he certainly was. The first movement is very fast and this certainly stresses the classical basis of this most classically structured movement and therefore, I believe, the nature of the Tragedy embodied. It makes us see Mahler's "hero" prior to the tragedy that overwhelms him in the last movement in that the pressing forward stresses optimism, a head held high, a corrective to those accounts that seem to want to condemn Mahler's hero to his doom from the word go, like Barbirolli, for example. It also has the effect of making the music jagged and nervy in the way the episodes tumble past kaleidoscopically. I must praise the Bavarian Radio Orchestra here for managing to hang on so unerringly to the notes most of the time. Of course the DG studio version means that there are no errors of playing but you could argue that if you are going to hear a one-off "live" performance a few mistakes only add to the tension. Remember, however, that Kubelik's tempi in Mahler are always on average faster than his

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colleagues and that ought to mitigate a little the speeds encountered here.

The Scherzo is placed second and reinforces the energy, rigour and astringency I remarked on in the first movement. As usual Kubelik is consistent and uncompromising to his vision. Perhaps the speed adopted here does fail to convey the peculiar "gait" of the music and that must be a minus. After this the third movement is beautifully free-flowing and unselfconscious. In fact it is hard to imagine a performance of this movement that could be much better in the way it seems to unfold unassisted, moving in one great breath to a glorious climax that is more effective for being neither under nor over -stated. Notice particularly the nostalgic solo trumpet that is as true a Mahlerian sound as you could wish for. The close-in recording also allows many details to emerge that you may not have hitherto heard so well.

The opening of the last movement is superbly done with trenchancy and harsh detail unflinchingly presented. The main allegro passages emit the same white-hot intensity of the first two movements and yet there remains a controlling mind behind it to guard against the intensity turning into abandonment and so the tension is ratcheted up. There are, as ever, no histrionics from Kubelik. Indeed there is from him just a tunnel-visioned concentration. However, I did begin to feel, particularly after the first hammer blow, that all of this high intensity actually threatens to overwhelm the music's innate poetry where there needs to be a degree more flexibility, a degree more humanity. That this impression crucially impedes the listener's ability to notice contrasting passages where you could reflect on what has gone and what might be to come. I suppose you could say that Kubelik allows no time to catch the breath and I really think there should be some. In fact I think much the same can be said about the first two movements under Kubelik but that it takes the experience of the fourth movement pitched at this pace to really bring this home. The Coda, where the trombone section intones a funeral oration over the remains of the fallen hero is, however, under Kubelik an extraordinary sound with a degree of vibrato allowed to the players that chills to the marrow. That, at least, is deeply moving and well worth waiting for even if my overall verdict on Kubelik in this whole symphony is that it falls short of the greatest.

In the end I am left with the feeling that this is a partial picture of the Sixth, albeit an impressive one, but still a partial one which leaves us unsatisfied. I would advise you to turn to Thomas Sanderling on RS which I deal with in my Mahler recordings survey or Gunther Herbig whose recording on Berlin Classics I nominated a Record of the Month, there is also Mariss Jansons on LSO Live whose recent recording impressed me greatly and Michael Gielen on Hänssler. Look to all of those those first.

Rafael Kubelik views the Sixth as high intensity drama right the way through. A perfectly valid view and thrillingly delivered. But this protean work succeeds when its protean nature is laid out before us and Kubelik, eyes wide open, does not really do that. More space, more weight, more room is needed throughout and at particularly crucial nodal points (the two hammer-blows are too lightweight in preparation and delivery, for example) to really move and impress as this symphony can under those mentioned above.

Kubelik's Mahler Sixth is a very vivid, though very partial, view of the work.

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