



Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 8

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Fanfare (Lynn René Bayley - 01.11.2010)

It's really a pity that this disc is just a reissue of a performance previously available in DGG's set of complete Mahler symphonies conducted by Kubelík, as there's so much I'd like to say about it that's probably already been said, so I shall reduce my comments to the minimum.

Being personally very fussy in regard to symphonies including singers, I'll automatically reject performances with defective voices even if the conducting is considered to be the best ever. For this reason, I don't own the otherwise fantastic performances by Jascha Horenstein and Klaus Tennstedt, and never will, just as I don't own or even listen to most recordings of the Beethoven Ninth made after, say, 1980. Solti's famous studio recording of this Mahler symphony had, perhaps, the best eight singers amassed in one place, but they were recorded separately from the orchestra, which created a flat, two-dimensional sound I find offensive. That being said, I am partial to the recordings by Leopold Stokowski (1950), Bernard Haitink (the earlier recording with Cotrubas, Harper, and Prey), and Antoni Wit, in which the defective voices are, to my ears, less annoying than in the others, and generally just one bad voice per ensemble.

The fact that Kubelík, who never pushed his name or fame and in fact retreated from a publicity machine, was able to entice these eight outstanding singers to Munich for this performance says a lot for how much he was respected as a musician. The one name not universally feted at the time was tenor Donald Grobe, and ironically he produces the finest singing of this very difficult music I've ever heard (James King with Solti notwithstanding). Kubelík also managed to get truly involved and exciting singing out of Martina Arroyo, and that in itself is a miracle. (He did the same with Gundula Janowitz in his studio recording of *Die Meistersinger*, though overall his conducting on that set, like most of his conducting in a studio environment, lacks the full power and emotional commitment of his live work). Sometimes the singers are a little off-mike, coming only out of the left or right speakers, but that's a condition of the original microphone setup and can't be changed.

Undoubtedly the most controversial aspect of this performance is its full-speed-ahead tempos, particularly in "Veni, Creator Spiritus," which Kubelík dispatches in a mere 21 minutes. (Don't believe the designation of 21:30 on the CD box; 25 seconds of that is silence with audience coughing before part II.) But, shockingly, it doesn't sound terribly rushed most of the time, there are few dropped notes, and the whole thing has the ecstatic quality of a satori. If you happen to be allergic to fast tempos in Mahler, then, this recording is not for you, but if that's not a problem you'll find this the greatest Mahler Eighth ever issued. I've hereby retired the Haitink recording from my collection; good as it is, it doesn't have Kubelík's overwhelming emotional impact. Since not every performance in the Kubelík set is of

equal quality (no conductor's integral set is consistently great), I encourage you to add this disc to your collection. Audite's 24-bit remastering brings out every detail of this performance with stunning warmth and clarity. I'd compare the sound favorably to any all-digital Eighth on the market.

