



Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 8

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Concerto
By many, many people own the Kubelik set of Mahler symphonies on DG. But being a live performance, and in remastered sound, this is still an excellent introduction to Mahler's monumental Eighth Symphony. Kubelik is a reliable, no frills conductor, who will always give a balanced, thoughtful reading without extremes of temperament. You could do a lot worse than to learn Mahler from this undoubted master.

This recording also benefits from an excellent set of soloists, whose voices are clearly differentiated: an important consideration in a symphony where the singers so often sing in a group, and where clarity helps bring out the interplay of individual voices. It is also live, as most recordings of this massive symphony are, given the logistics of putting together any performance. If you've got the "thousand" performers together, tape them for the moment may never come again! More seriously, a symphony like this is an event in itself, and an experience so unique that it generates its own atmosphere. The sheer dynamic of coordinating such vast numbers creates a sense of occasion which further inspires the performers to give their best. Even performances where there are elements not quite up to scratch retain this feeling of immediacy. If ever there was a symphony that needs to be listened to for total impact, this is it. It's churlish, I think, to expect utter perfection at all times, especially given the size of the forces involved. After all, the text is about the redemption of Faust and his being accepted into Heaven despite having sinned. Love transcends death, and redeems the flawed soul. Miss that, and you miss a fundamental aspect of Mahler's entire outlook on life, replicated in different forms in the Second, the Fourth, the Ninth and Das Lied von der Erde, if not more subtly elsewhere.

The main minus with this reissue, particularly for newcomers, is the poor booklet notes. On the other hand, that's no disqualification. Listen with your ears and soul, don't bury your nose in the booklet. Then, learn all you can from other sources and recordings.

The opening movement, Veni, creator spiritus is particularly animated. With a powerful surge of the great organ, the symphony gets off the ground, soloists and choruses right on the mark. From an almost silent background, individual soloists rise, their voices weaving and blending together. The soloists are well chosen, as each voice is so distinctive it's easy to track them: there's no mistaking Fischer-Dieskau, for example, though his lines are less spectacular, perhaps, than those of the sopranos. Kubelik's characteristic light touch is persuasive in the non vocal passages. It mirrors the surprising delicacy of the vocal writing. Other conductors can get away with darker textures, perhaps because their singers aren't as transcendently clear as Kubelik's.

Even the rather over-bright recording has its merits, adding to the sense of heightened spiritual illumination. This isn't reality, it's technicolour Heaven, where various manifestations of the Virgin Mary, Gretchen, Faust and other symbolic figures sing, watched, presumably by anchorites in caves - as described in Goethe's original text.

Kubelik bathes the next movement with similar light. Behind the songs of the contraltos and Magna peccatrix, for example, you can hear details like plucked strings and harp. Overall, the singing is good, despite occasional strained notes pitched too ambitiously. In the penultimate chorus, the brass repeats the notes behind the words "Blicket auf !" and the sounds fade away, as if dissolving into space. Then, led by the Chorus mysticus and sopranos, themes from Veni, creator spiritus return rousingly, and in full force. Redeemed by love, Faust is transmuted into eternity and taken into Heaven . "Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan".