Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 5

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RECORD REVIEW

The specialist German label Audite has already released several recordings from Rafael Kubelik's years as Chief Conductor of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, including two valuable CDs of concerto recordings featuring Clifford Curzon. Here it turns its attention to Mahler, presenting a live recording from 1981 which complements Kubelik's commercial recording of the Fifth Symphony with the same forces for DG.

Kubelik took charge of the Bavarian Radio orchestra in 1961, and so this particular performance is a product of the close relationship between conductor and orchestra which had developed over a period of 20 years. The result is a notable reading: Kubelik gets completely inside the music, creating a performance of exceptional drive and intensity. The second movement, for instance, has a truly demonic character. The subsequent Scherzo is equally powerful, and the famous Adagietto is strongly contrasted, with an atmosphere of great repose. Only in the final movement does Kubelik's intensity start to diminish. Taken as a whole, however, this performance represents a definite development on Kubelik's earlier studio recording. It places his interpretation strongly within the expressionistic style of Mahler conducting, as epitomized most powerfully by Leonard Bernstein and Klaus Tennstedt.

The Bavarian orchestra plays with great eloquence, commitment and virtuosity, not least in the second movement, which constitutes the emotional core of Kubelik's stormy view of the work. The only drawback, which does give cause for concern in this particular work but which presumably reflects the conductor's intentions, is an at times raucous first trumpet.

As was so often the case, the Bavarian Radio recording of a performance in the Herkulessaal is a model of refinement. It presents an excellent overall aural picture, with wide perspective, in which all the strands of Mahler's complex symphonic argument can be clearly heard without any artificial highlighting.

In sum, this recording, supported by brief but pertinent documentation is a valuable document of Kubelik's later years, of his relationship with the orchestra with which he worked for the longest period of his whole career, and of a truly memorable interpretation of music clearly close to his heart.

»audite« Ludger Böckenhoff • Tel.: +49 (0)5231-870320 • Fax: +49 (0)5231-870321 • info@audite.de • www.audite.de