Ludwig van Beethoven: Symphony No. 4 & No. 5

aud 95.493

EAN: 4022143954930

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Gramophone (Rob Cowan - 01.10.2003)

GRAMOPHONE

Kubelik takes the Stage

Some years ago I was involved in a discussion concerning Wilhelm Furtwängler's potential artistic heir. Who might he be? There was no lack of candidates. My suggestion, for the following reasons, was Rafael Kubelik. Both were composers; both preferred an old-fashioned orchestral layout (violins divided, etc) and achieved weight of sonority by allowing a chord to fall naturally rather than slamming it shut. Both favoured flexibility within the bar, an often orgiastic excitability and, most important in this particular context, an overall preference for live performance over recording.

For example, compare Kubelik's 1975 DG studio recording of Beethoven's Fourth Symphony with the Israel Philharmonic with the live Bavarian RSO Audite version of four years later. The IPO account is taut and incisive, with an explosive fortissimo just before the coda (at 5'52", i.e. bar 312) that sounds as if it has been aided from the control desk. Turn then to the BRSO version, the lead-up at around 4'25" to that same passage (here sounding wholly natural), so much more gripping, where second fiddles, violas and cellos thrust their responses to tremolando first fiddles. The energy level is still laudably high but the sense of intense engagement is almost palpable. Again, with the Boston recording of the Fifth, handsome and well played as it undoubtedly is (and with the finale's repeat intact, which isn't the case on Audite), there is little comparison with the freer, airier and more responsive live relay. I'm thinking especially the slow movement, so humble and expressive, almost hymn-like in places – for example, the Bachian string counterpoint from 4'27". Also, the Boston recording places first and second violins on the left: the Audite option has them divided, as per Kubelik's preferred norm.

Audite's Tchaikovsky coupling is an out-and-out winner. Kubelik made two studio recordings of the Fourth Symphony (with the Chicago SO and Vienna PO), both set around a lyrical axis, but this live version has a unique emotive impetuosity, especially in the development section of the first movement. The Andantino relates a burning nostalgia without exaggeration, whereas the scherzo – taken at a real lick – becomes a quiet choir of balalaikas. The April 1969 performance of the Violin Concerto was also Pinchas Zukerman's German début and aside from Kubelik's facilitating responsiveness, there's the warmth and immediacy of the youthful Zukerman's tone and the precision of his bowing. Both performances confirm Kubelik as among the most sympathetic of Tchaikovsky conductors, a genuine listener who relates what he hears, not what he wants to confess through the music.

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Much the same might be said of Kubelik's Mahler, whether for DG or the various live alternatives currently appearing on Audite. In the case of ‘Das Lied von der Erde’ there is no DG predecessor, but even if there was, I doubt that it would surpass the live relay of February 1970 with Waldemar Kmentt and Dame Janet Baker, so dashing, pliant and deeply felt, whether in the subtly traced clarinet counterpoint near the start of ‘Von der Jugend’ or the way Baker re-emerges after the funereal processional in ‘Der Abschied’, as if altered forever by a profound visitation.

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