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Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 3

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International Record Review (Graham Simpson - 01.12.2002)

RECORD REVIEW

Despite the (necessary!) tailing off in complete cycles over the last decade, recordings of Mahler symphonies are far from drying up. Rafael Kubelík and Claudio Abbado recorded the first and second such cycles for DG - in a period, from the late 1960s to the early 1990s, during which Mahler passed unstoppably from the periphery to the epicentre of today's musical culture.

As with his live Sixth Symphony (reviewed in June 2002), Kubelík's live Third is contemporary with his studio account - still among the most spontaneous on disc. Similar virtues are in evidence here, though some will question the rushed ascents to the Kräftig's climactic peaks (listen from 11'51" and 27'00"), which undermine an otherwise fluid, coherent approach to this too-often sprawling movement. The Menuetto's coda (8'26") is winsome, while the posthorn interludes of the Comodo (5'32" and 12'51") have a repose to contrast with the fantasy that Kubelík captures elsewhere. Marjorie Thomas is thoughtful rather than profound in the Nietzsche setting, and the balance of boys' and women's voices in the Wunderhorn movement lacks definition. Kubelík again rushes his fences in the finale's central climax (13'42"), but there's no doubting his overall command of form and expression. String playing is assured throughout, though wind intonation in the closing pages (21'09") is raw to say the least.

This is something that could not be levelled at any stage of Claudio Abbado's live traversal: indeed, the fastidious balance and clarity of texture are remarkable even by his standards. An emotional detachment is evident in the opening movement - notably the central development (15'46"), where Abbado evinces little of the character or imagination of Kubelík. After a powerfully sustained reprise (23'42"), the coda is curiously stolid, lacking the joyful discharge of energy essential at this point. The Menuetto, pellucid in tone and manner, is perfectly judged; the Comodo lacking in an imaginative dimension, and with a posthorn balance (listen from 5'21") so distant as to be more a timbral shading than a melodic contour. Abbado's way with the Nietzsche setting - a tensile arioso, with Anna Larsson ideally poised between agitation and restraint - is spellbinding, as is the glinting aggression drawn from the orchestral passage after the Wunderhorn movement's central section (2'16"). In the finale, the inner intensity of the Berlin Philharmonic's playing, and the unerring pacing across its 22-minute span secure an apotheosis that eluded Abbado in his disappointingly bland Vienna account. The audience is suitably impressed, though to retain three minutes of applause on disc does seem excessive.

The sound on the Audite release is decent and not too scrawny, and there are inscrutable booklet notes from Erich Mauermann: worth hearing, though Kubelík's studio account should be made available as a competitive 'twofer'. The DG engineers have worked hard to open up the notoriously cramped Royal Festival Hall acoustic -

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and if the results convey little sense of a specific acoustic, balance of ensemble in a believable ambience makes for a sympathetic listen, enhanced by comprehensive notes from Donald Mitchell. This is a recording which can rank high, if not quite with the best, of those listed.

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