



Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 7

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Still the enigma among Mahler symphonies, or is it that commentators still miss the point, or that the work as a whole is simply not good music? This live account, from a dedicated Mahlerian, does not readily provide answers, but makes speculation the more worthwhile.

A central factor in interpreting the Seventh Symphony is its form, each movement a sonata-rondo derivative that proceeds in circular rather than linear fashion. The outcome: a symphony which repeatedly turns back on itself, tying up loose ends across rather than between movements. Kubelík understands this so that, for instance, the initial Langsam, purposeful rather than indolent, is integral to what follows it. Similarly, the expressive central episode (8'43") is no mere interlude, but a necessary stage in the E/E minor tonal struggle around which the movement pivots. Kubelík catches the emotional ambivalence, if not always the fine irony, of the first Nachtmusik's march fantasy, while the Scherzo not only looks forward (as note writer Erich Mauermann points out) to La valse but also recalls the balletic dislocation of 'Un bal' from Symphonie fantastique. The second Nachtmusik is neither bland nor sentimentalized, just kept moving at a strolling gait, its course barely impeded by moments of chromatic emphasis. The underlying élan of the 'difficult' finale is varied according to each episode, with the reintroduction of earlier material (12'26") felt not as a grafted-on means of unity, but a thematic intensification before the affirmative reprise of the opening music: 'victory' in the completion of the journey rather than in the arrival.

Drawbacks? The extremely high-level radio broadcast, coupled with the frequent sense that Kubelík has rehearsed his players only to the brink of security, gives climactic passages a certain desperate quality — much of the detail is left to fend for itself. The six-note col legno phrase in the second movement is never played the same way twice, while the balance in the fourth movement does the guitar few favours. Yet there is a sense that this is the personal reading Kubelík was unable to achieve in the studio, before he either changed tack or lost the interpretative plot in his bizarrely laboured New York account. In their different ways, Bernstein, Haitink and Rattle are each more 'realized' as interpretations, but overt spontaneity may count for more in this Mahler symphony than any other.