Franz Schubert: Mass No. 6 in E-flat major, D 950

aud 92.541

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Fanfare (James Reel - 2006.05.01)

Wolfgang Sawallisch recorded all of Schubert's Masses for EMI with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, and with a starry cast of soloists, but I'll take 1960s Rafael Kubelík over 1970s Sawallisch without hesitation. Kubelík was a consistently interesting conductor, even if he was not consistently successful, and he makes the same Bavarian Radio forces sound more like believers—in Schubert and in God—than did Sawallisch.

This is Schubert's final Mass, completed just weeks before his death, but there's no hint of Requiem about it. It's big and symphonic, but symphonic in the Haydn-Mozart sense; Schubert had to conform to conservative Viennese liturgical strictures that had hardly changed in decades.

Kubelík directs a devotional performance, firm but not overtly dramatic. The soloists are good and the chorus sings well, aside from a few stray moments of unsteadiness (as in the last chord of the Gloria), but its enunciation is often mushy. An example of Kubelík's apt but gentle touch: the woodwind figures that punctuate the solo vocal passages in the Credo have a lovely Viennese lilt. This is not the most gripping performance imaginable, but it is sensitive and effective.

This disc's SACD layer includes a version apparently faithful to the original tapes, and a re-mastered version with various unspecified tweakings. The re-mastered version, not the original, is also on the standard CD layer. The re-mastered audio seems closer and more revealing of detail, but it also makes the violins sound a bit harsher. In every case, it's two-channel sound.

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