audite

Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 6

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Classic Record Collector (Christopher Breunig - 2002.10.01)

The German firm Audite has given us not only this near complete live cycle of Mahler symphonies (sans 4 or 8), but valuable Kubelik/Curzon readings of four Mozart and two Beethoven concertos. Of particular interest here is 'Das Lied von der Erde', since Kubelik did not record it for DG. Janet Baker fans will welcome a third CD version: and she sounds truly inspired by her conductor. 'Der Einsame im Herbst' may not have the sheer beauty of the version with Haitink but the finale surpasses most on records, with a real sense of the transcendental at the close. Kmentt too makes the most of his words; and the reedy Munich winds suit this score.

Recorded between 1967 and 1971, Kubelik's DG cycle has been at budget price for some time now and the Audite alternatives of 1, 5 and 7 have been in the shops for months. The NHK-recorded Ninth, made during a 1975 Tokyo visit by the Bavarian RSO, was reviewed in CRC, Spring 2001 (I found the sound unfocused and the brass pinched in sound, but welcomed in particular playing 'ablaze' after the visionary episode in the Rondo burleske and a crowning final). No. 1 in DG is widely admired but this 1979 version is more poetic still, wonderfully so in the introduction and trio at (II). There is something of a pall of resonance in place of applause, cut from all these Audite transfers. In No. 7 the balance is more airy than DG's multi-miked productions, and (as in No. 5) Kubelik sounds less constrained than when working under studio conditions, although rhythm in the opening bars of (II) goes awry and the very opening note is succeeded by a sneeze! The disturbing and more shadowy extremes are more vividly characterized, the finale a riotous display.

Some critics feel that Kubelik gives us 'Mahler-lite', which may seem in comparison with, say, Chailly's Decca cycle or the recent BPO/Abbado Third on DG – not to mention Bernstein's. But there is plenty of energy here, and the divided strings with basses set to the rear left give openness to textures. However, the strings are not opulent and the trumpets are often piercing. It would be fair to say that Kubelik conducted Mahler as if it were Mozart!

As it happens, in the most controversial of his readings, No. 6, the DG is preferable to the Audite, where Kubelik projects little empathy with its slow movement and where the Scherzo is less cohesive. The real problem is that the very fast speed for (I) affects ail subsequent tempo relationships. Nor does the finale on No. 3, one of the glories of the DG cycle, quite have the same radiance; the singers are the same, the Tölz Boys making a sound one imagines Mahler must have heard in his head, and this performance predates the DG by one month. Nevertheless, these newer issues of Nos 2 and 3 are worth hearing, the 'Resurrection' not least for Brigitte Fassbaender's account of 'Urlicht'.

Nowadays every orchestra visiting London seems to programme Mahler's Fifth

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Symphony as a showpiece, but in 1951 (when Bruno Walter's 78rpm set was the collector's only choice) a performance would surely have been uncommon even at the Concertgebouw – Mengelberg was prohibited from conducting in Holland from 1946 until he died that year. Although the start of (V) is marred by horns, this is an interesting, well executed account with a weightier sound, from what one can surmise through the inevitable dimness – the last note of (I) is almost inaudible. The three versions vary sufficiently to quote true timings (none is given by Tahra): (I) 11m 34s/12m 39s/11m 35s (Tahra/Audite/DG); (II) 13m/14m 52s/13m 52s; (III) 15m 56s/17m 54s/17m 23s; (IV) 9m 24s/10m 24s/9mm 44s); (V) 14m 26s/14m 57s/15m 29s. The live Munich version is tidier than on DG; the spectral imagery in (III) is heavier in effect, too; and in the Adagietto the dynamic and phrasing shadings and poetic quality of the string playing also give the live performance the edge. Towards the end of the finale, and elsewhere, the engineers reduced dynamic levels.

Tahra's booklet comprises an untidily set-out synopsis of Kubelik's career. Audite's have full descriptions of the works with text for Nos 2 and 3, and different back-cover colour portraits of the conductor.

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