

## CD REVIEW 27

### MAHLER Symphony no. 8 in E flat.

Martina Arroyo, Erna Spoorenberg, Edith Mathis, Julie Hamari, Norma Proctor, Donald Grobe, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Franz Cross, Eberhard Kraus (organ), Choirs of BR, NDR, WDR, Bayerischen Rundfunks SO, Rafael Kubelik.

Audite 92.551 SACD

I must confess that Mahler is not a favourite composer. I do not respond to his angst and the Fourth Symphony I cannot listen to. It conjures up big, beefy, blond Germans swigging beer. That Mahler was a very unpleasant man does not help my assessment of him.

I was brought up with experts on Mahler and it is true that they showed me some magnificent moments in Mahler. I was thrilled with the finale of the Symphony no 7 conducted by Bernstein only to be told that this movement was one of Mahler's failures. But I loved it.



I followed the score of Mahler's Symphony no. 5 conducted by Barbirolli and he did not follow the score but was all over the place. I marvelled at Sybil Michelow singing Mahler, but *Das Lied von der Erde* left me cold.

I gloried in the Symphony no 6 and the opening Adagio of Symphony no 10. Moments of the Symphony no 9 are splendid and the final pages of Klemperer's Resurrection Symphony is spell binding.

The I saw some terrible performances of this 'Symphony of a thousand.' Solti was gross and the second part dragged painfully. Haitink played it as if it was Mozart but the worst interpretation was by Simon Rattle. He got the children's choir to sing through cupped hands and the men to sing sitting with their hands clasped between their knees as if they were to have rectum examinations.

I was sitting at the back of the orchestra looking straight at Rattle. He was singing along but his words were different than the soloists and choir. His facial expressions were hideous.

It is always a problem to assess a work that varies in quality. There is no doubt that the first movement, the Whitsuntide hymn, is marvellous but the second half based loosely on the Faust story is not of the same standard, although there are some magical moments. The final pages are quite superb.

The first movement may reflect Mahler's conversion from Judaism to Roman Catholicism which he arranged to further his career, not because of religious convictions. However, it seems that he is still philosophizing over this new faith. The Faust story is neither Christian or Roman but Mahler has taken some aspects of it and varied some to show his possible philosophizing over this as well.

It may not be a musical term but this symphony is like the curate's egg... good in parts. I wish the opening movement was a work on its own for the Coming of the Holy Spirit and the Faust story do not make bedfellows. To me, it does not work.

Having decided to turn my back on this work because of all these problems, I was not keen to visit a

friend who wanted to play this work to me. But I had to be polite.

It was this very performance he introduced me to, and it was sensational. It was an experience not just the listening to a symphony. I admired the clarity, the continuity, the music did not drag, the children's choir was exemplary, the soloists were glorious, the soprano's top C were crystal clear and exciting, and what a line up of soloists there are, the choral singing was with perfect intonation and the performance was profoundly moving... at times, almost unbearably beautiful.

Kubelik (1914-1996) was an amazing conductor and, here, he is in total control of these mighty forces. And this was a live performance in Munich on 24 June 1970 which makes the performance even more special.

The Mahler experts have told me, and on separate occasions, that Kubelik remains the best at Mahler.

A friend who is a well-known conductor said, "If this music is that of a mere mortal, what must the music in Heaven be like?"

At the end of this performance I could feel my tears and I had to shout my approval.

If a performance can do this, it must be good.

Throw away any recordings you have of this work and buy this version. No one should be without it!

---

COPYRIGHT David C F Wright 2007 – This article or any part of it, however small, must not be copied, quoted, reproduced, downloaded or altered in any way whatsoever nor stored in any retrieval system. Failure to comply is in breach of International Copyright Law and will render any offender liable to action at law.