



Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 3


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 I reviewed a recording of Mahler's Third Symphony I stated again my belief that in this work above all of Mahler's we must look to a group of recordings made over thirty years ago. Only there can we reach into what I believe to be the real soul of this amazing piece. It is surprising that two of those recordings I consider indispensable were not even made for commercial release but for radio broadcasting. Sir John Barbirolli's recording on BBC Legends (BBCL 4004-7), the recording I find I return to most often, was made for broadcast albeit under studio conditions; likewise a superb concert recording by Jean Martinon and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra from 1967, only available in a commemorative box and crying out for single release. Among the commercial studio recordings from that time Jascha Horenstein (Unicorn UKCD20067) still shines out with Rafael Kubelik's (only available now as part of a complete cycle from DG) running it very close. If you add Leonard Bernstein's first version from the same era (Sony SM2K61831) you have a profile of recordings that musically will last you for a lifetime and which, for me, have yet to be equalled in true understanding of what makes this crazy work tick. The dedicated audiophile will, of course, need to purchase more up to date recordings but music making surely comes first.

It takes a particular kind of conductor to turn in a great Mahler Third. No place for the tentative, or the sophisticated, particularly in the first movement which will dominate how the rest of the symphony comes to sound no matter how good the rest is. No place for apologies in that first movement especially. No conductor should underplay the full implications of this music's ugliness for fear of offending sensibilities. The lighter and lyrical passages will largely take care of themselves. It's the "dirty end" of the music - low brass and percussion, shrieking woodwinds, growling basses, flatulent trombone solos - that the conductor must really immerse himself in. A regrettable trait of musical "political correctness" seems to have crept into more recent performances and recordings and that is to be deplored. If you want an example of this listen to Andrew Litton's ever-so-polite Dallas recording. There is much to admire in some recent recordings by Tilson Thomas, Abbado and Rattle to name just three from recent digital years. However they don't approach their older colleagues in laying bare the full implications of the unique sound-world Mahler created in the way that I think it should be heard. The edges need to be sharp, the drama challenging, Mahler's gestalt shrieking, marching, surging, seething and, at key moments, hitting the proverbial fan.

Rafael Kubelik's superb DG recording had one drawback in that the recorded balance was, like the rest of his Munich studio cycle, rather close-miked and somewhat lacking in atmosphere. It never bothered me that much, as you can

probably imagine, but just occasionally I felt the need for a little more space. As luck would have it, this Audite release in the series of "live" Mahler performances from Kubelik's Munich years comes from the same week as that DG studio version and must have been the concert performance mounted to give the players the chance to perform the work prior to recording in the empty hall. It goes some way to addressing the problem of recorded balance in that there is a degree more space and atmosphere, more separation across the stereo arc especially. It thus offers an even more satisfying experience whilst still delivering Kubelik's gripping and involving interpretation with the added tensions of "live" performance. There is a little background tape hiss but nothing that the true music lover need fear. So here is another "not originally for release" broadcast recording of Mahler's Third for the list of top recommendations.

Like all great Mahler Thirds this reading has a fierce unity and a striking sense of purpose across the whole six movements, lifting it above so many versions that miss this crucial aspect among so many others. Tempi are faster than you may be used to. It also pays as much attention to the inner movements as it does the outer with playing of poetry, charm and that hard-to-pin-down aspect, wonderment. In the first movement Kubelik echoes Schoenberg's belief that this is a struggle between good and evil, generating the real tension needed to mark this. Listen to the gathering together of all the threads for the central storms section, for example. Kubelik also comes close to Barbirolli's raucous, unforgettable "grand day out up North" march spectacle and shares his British colleague's (and Leonard Bernstein's) sense of the sheer wackiness of it all. Listen to the wonderful Bavarian basses and cellos rocking the world with their uprushes and those raw, rude trombone solos, as black as an undertaker's hat and about as delicate as a Bronx cheer or an East End Raspberry. Kubelik also manages to give the impression of the movement as a living organism, growling and purring in passages of repose particularly, fur bristling like a cat in a thunderstorm. Too often you have the feeling in this movement that conductors cannot get over how long it is and so they want to make it sound big by making it last for ever. In fact it is a superbly organised piece that benefits from the firm hand of a conductor prepared to "put a bit of stick about" and hurry it along like Kubelik.

In the second movement there is a superb mixture of nostalgia and repose with the spiky, tart aspects of nature juxtaposing the scents and the pastels. Only Horenstein surpasses in the rhythmic pointing of the following Scherzo but Kubelik comes close as his sense of purpose seems to extend the chain of events that was begun at the very start, still pulling us on in one great procession. The pressing tempi help in this but above all there is the innate feel for the whole picture that only a master Mahlerian can pull off and frequently only in "live" performance. Marjorie Thomas is an excellent soloist and the two choirs are everything you would wish for, though Barbirolli's Manchester boys - all urban cheekiness straight off the terraces at Old Trafford or Main Road - are just wonderful. In the last movement no one offers a more convincing tempo than Kubelik, flowing and involving, never dragging or over-sentimentalised. Like Barbirolli, though warm of heart, he refuses to indulge the music and the movement wins out as the crowning climax is as satisfying as could be wished.

This is a firm recommendation for Mahler's Third and another gem in Audite's Kubelik releases.