

Friday, 10.26.07

Moreover Mahler

by Jens F. Laurson

Mahler Cycle
Abbado / WPh,
CSO, BPhMahler Cycle,
Bernstein I /
NYPhil, LSO,
Israel PhilMahler Cycle,
Bernstein II /
WPh, RCO,
NYPhilMahler Cycle,
Bertini /
WDRSOMahler Cycle,
Chailly / RCO,
BRSOMahler Cycle,
Gielen /
SWDRSOMahler Cycle,
Haitink / RCO

Mahler's symphonies have come a long way from belittled provincial behemoths to popular stalwarts of every symphony orchestra's program. These days, Mahler may be as present in concert halls as Beethoven and Brahms. That's quite an achievement for a composer who, just 30 years ago, was scarcely worth an hour's attention in conservatories. And, as might be pointed out in the same breath, it took the princess kiss of Bernstein to awaken the neglected Mahler-Frog and turn him to the princely star of international concert houses he is today. Or so the recent optimistic reception of Mahler's (admittedly uncompromising) work would have it.

Overlooking the oddly mixed fairytale metaphor that's by-and-large true, but not quite as simple. Leonard Bernstein, his personality seemingly suited to performance of the troubled composer with Jewish roots, contributed like no other to the broad popularization of Mahler, indeed. He appeared to embody Mahler, to re-compose his symphonies while conducting them, and he convinced audiences across the world – and more importantly, orchestra musicians from London to Vienna to Jerusalem – that Mahler was worthwhile. His enthusiasm was visible when conducting Mahler and still is visible today, thanks to the films made of his Mahler performances.

On the [precious DVD collection of Bernstein's Mahler](#) (DG/Unitel), Bernstein admits he felt like he had to live through the emotions of the music to communicate them to the orchestra. Bernstein brought audiences into Mahler's realm when the music alone might not have done it. It's not unlike *seeing*, and consequently loving, a Bartók performance by the Takács Quartet, where the palpable joy in music making – the puckered lips, the madly waving fop of hair, the delightedly closed eyes – can bring the music, even to the neophyte, as an *experience* rather than a series of difficult to understand notes.

But when Bernstein started his 1960 centenary Mahler cycle with the New York Philharmonic, he wasn't Mahler's lonely prophet in the desert. He may have been his most successful recruiter or PR-man, but Bernstein was one amid plenty others (like Rafael Kubelik and Bernhard Haitink) at around the same time. None of them, though, could have influenced the modern reception of Mahler had they not built upon the work of earlier musicians, those who had never allowed the Mahler flame to be completely extinguished: Dimitri Mitropoulos, Sir John Barbirolli, Otto Klemperer and of course Mahler *protégé* Bruno Walter.

In Amsterdam the most fervent Mahler champion, Willem Mengelberg, conducted and recorded Mahler throughout his 50-year tenure (from 1895 until 1945) where, after

befriending Mahler in 1902, he started that orchestra's long and proud Mahler tradition. The Concertgebouw Orchestra Amsterdam performed Mahler symphonies more than 150 times in the 1910s and over 160 times each in the 1920s and 1930s. The war years naturally brought a collapse, not just of Mahler but of performances in general (though Mahler strikes as *particularly* unsuitable in times of war). But in the 1950s, 89 Mahler performances were back on the program, and over one hundred in the 60s. Even the

Mahler-sparse 70s saw each symphony performed at least once and over 70 performances altogether.

Mengelberg alone conducted the Concertgebouw in complete Mahler symphonies over 400 times. Eduard van Beinum, though better known as a Bruckner conductor, too, kept the flame alive before passing it on to conductors like Kubelik, Haitink, and Riccardo Chailly which has resulted in well over 1500 Mahler performances of the Concertgebouw to-date.

Elsewhere, conductors like Jasha Horenstein, Hermann Scherchen, Carl Schuricht, Maurice Abranavel and George Szell made sure that Mahler never fully receded from the public stage. And at about the same time Bernstein put the spotlight on Mahler, Rafael Kubelik recorded the first planned complete cycle of Mahler symphonies for Deutsche Grammophon. With that, Kubelik started a trend which there's no stopping. To date, about two dozen conductors have completed – or are about to complete – Mahler Symphony cycles:

Claudio Abbado, who might yet finish a second CD cycle with Berlin and a third, on DVD, mostly with the Lucerne Festival Orchestra; Leonard Bernstein (Sony, DG, and DG/Unitel DVD); Gary Bertini (EMI); Pierre Boulez, who just capped his DG adventure with the Eighth with the Staatskapelle Berlin; Riccardo Chailly (Decca); Michael Gielen (Hänssler); Bernhard Haitink, who has one complete cycle and seven-ninths of another from his Christmas concert matinees with his Concertgebouw. (Both on Decca.)

Eliahu Inbal (Denon/Brilliant); Neeme Järvi (out of print, Chandos); Lorin Maazel (Sony); Václav Neumann (Supraphon); Seiji Ozawa (oop, Philips); Simon Rattle, whose pronounced opposition to his Mahler recordings being understood as a “cycle” did not keep EMI from issuing them as such; Leif Segerstam (oop, Chandos); Giuseppe Sinopoli (DG); Sir Georg Solti (Decca); Emil Tabakov (Capriccio); Klaus Tennstedt (EMI); Michael Tilson-Thomas, who will soon finish his San Francisco cycle on the orchestra's own SFMedia label; even Edo de Waart, chief conductor of the Santa Fe Opera, has a cycle with the Dutch Radio Philharmonic Orchestra (oop, RCA).

Yoel Levi and Benjamin Zander, both have recorded six Mahler symphonies on Telarc so far; and finally James Levine, also with six Mahler recordings – five more or less neglected ones on [RCA](#) and one interminable, yet [strangely delightful, Ninth on Oehms](#) with the Munich Philharmonic.

There is no stopping the “Mahleria” (Prokofiev's disdainful but funny comment) that has gripped classical music lovers around the world – and in the run-up to Mahler performances in the region, I will review some new Mahler releases, including the first few installments of David Zinman's new cycle with the Zürich Tonhalle Orchester that RCA is issuing on Super Audio CD hybrids and the Mahler that the NSO's principal guest conductor [Iván Fischer](#) (listen to our interview [here](#)) [has recorded](#) for Channel Classics so far (also available on SACD).

All in time to get ready for Leonard Slatkin's Sixth (and some *Kindertotenlieder* with Thomas Hampson!) [from January 31st to February 2nd](#), then Mariss Jansons' Mahler (No.5) with the Concertgebouw [the next day](#), and finally Maestro Fischer's performances of the “Resurrection Symphony” the [first week of April](#) which will undoubtedly be an 'event'. If you want the NSO to remind you when tickets go on sale (February 9th), you can ask them to do so on [their](#) website.



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