



The complete symphonies
Adagio from Tenth Symphony

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In many ways, Rafael Kubelik reminds me of Eduard van Beinum. For instance, both conductors revelled in Gustav Mahler's distinct idiom and both (guest) conducted the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra. But most importantly, they operated among their musicians instead of above them, had a natural aversion to a so-called superstar conductor status and served music first and foremost. These qualities pop up constantly in these beloved, often lyrical and never overwrought interpretations that have held up remarkably well in the Mahler sweepstakes. The fact that these performances have been available for such a long time is an indication of their popularity and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra plays with total conviction. Certainly the first, second, third, fourth, seventh and the adagio from the unfinished tenth in this survey match the very finest available. If you never had the chance to sample the Czech's interpretations of his countryman, the DG Collector's Edition is, luckily, still available.

Rafael Kubelik always had a wonderful way with the Wunderhorn period. The First Symphony in particular flows like a breath of fresh air, it's alliance with nature and young love perfectly drawn out. Kubelik's first movement has a remarkable urgency, his funeral march is aptly 'Jewish'. Only in the long finale, where we have become used to a cataclysm of contrasting themes, Kubelik may be surpassed (not least by the DG Bernstein performance from Amsterdam), but it's still a strong feat of endurance. I have never quite shared the complaint that the strings are badly recorded, but if you like a more supple sound picture, you can turn to the conductor's live Audite recording which shares many of the virtues of Kubelik's 1967 studio account.

The Resurrection Symphony harks back to Klemperer's sober outing. Even so, I have seldom heard a more convincing account of the last movement, the Bavarian brass pulling out all

stops, the music urgent and truly apocalyptic. In the Third symphony, the titanic first movement does not quite have the swagger of Leonard Bernstein's legendary 1961 New York account, but the orchestra plays tremendously well, not afraid to make an ugly sound when needed. In terms of spirit and inspiration, I rank Kubelik's Third as one of two or three recordings that may stand as a reference for decades to come. Speaking of which, Kubelik's generally swift and utterly lyrical Mahler Fourth still stands as a benchmark recording and is required listening for everyone who loves the piece. Comparisons with Van Beinum's Mono Decca aplenty, this Fourth knows when to relax, when to dream and when to growl. The slow movement (in one of the fastest timings ever recorded) is especially effective (as opposed to Tilson Thomas's dragging 25 minutes), it's unforced naturalness harking back to Bruno Walter, and, again Van Beinum. Elsie Morison, the conductor's wife, may not be everyone's cup of tea in the finale, but what she lacks in childlike purity is largely compensated by the warmth and affirmation of her delivery. Simply indispensable.

With the Middle period, we are drawn into Mahler's complex world from a new perspective, Mahler's 'Sturm und Drang' phase, if you will. I deem Kubelik's efforts in this phase more controversial and not an overall success. Starting with the Fifth, which is relatively brisk and unsentimental, Kubelik is let down by his engineers, which is all the more surprising as this recording was the last one made. It's not a bad performance, not by any means, but there are better Fifths out there that manage to linger on the mind for a longer length of time. Kubelik's Sixth, in much better sound, with its breakneck pace for the first movement - which many may find a problem - is a blistering account. The Scherzo, placed second (happily!), is as demonic as one could wish for; the Andante flowing naturally and intensely nostalgic. The long finale, harrowing in the best of hands (and Kubelik's is certainly not an exception), is again on the brisk side but never glossing over details and Mahler's intentions. The closing pages define the word 'desperation'. Even though I like the Sixth with a more measured pace, I can't and won't deny Rafael Kubelik's greatness in this music.

The Seventh symphony, recorded near the end of Kubelik's survey, was a distinct specialty of the conductor. I have heard and enjoyed three recordings under Kubelik, the first being this studio recording, the second a 'live' reading with the same orchestra on Audite, and a hard to find live New York recording which was lastly available in an expensive New York Mahler box. Some may find Kubelik too impatient in the first movement, especially since the opening measures are marked *Langsam*. But I actually prefer the Czech's unfussy and straightforward

way with this and most of the other material. Kubelik never loses sight of the long line, his first *Nachtmusik* sounding much more like a real march in the dark, his *Schattenhaft* sounding unusually intense. No one makes the *Finale* sound more convincing than Leonard Bernstein in his 1965 benchmark recording, but Kubelik's reading is positively festive, with trumpets sounding especially piercing, marvellously cheeky woodwinds and a final peroration with bells featured prominently. This is one of the great *Sevenths* and every aficionado of the piece should hear (and own) it.

I have never jumped on the bandwagon for Kubelik's studio *Eighth*, fine as though it is. I was simply more moved by his *Audite* remake which featured a far more convincing interpretation and a more spacious recording. The *Ninth*, the very first symphony to be recorded in this survey, offers a robust sound picture. There are more wrenching accounts of this often recorded symphony available, and I never really got the feeling that Kubelik was in his element. The *Rondo Burleske* could do with a touch more abandon and I find his handling of the theoretically shimmering *Adagio* too fast, no matter how eloquently the Bavarian strings play. Kubelik was a great exponent of Twentieth Century music and it is therefore that his account of the *Adagio* from the unfinished *Tenth* symphony is one of the very finest available. From the desolate opening measures and the frantic outburst to the consoling ending, this is as I feel, together with Bernstein's from New York from 1975, the performance that is most convincing and the one I keep on coming back to the most. Leave it to Kubelik to end his Mahler cycle on a completely positive note.

Rafael Kubelik's natural and unforced Mahler cycle has stood the test of time almost as well as Leonard Bernstein's. From the wonderful readings from the *Wunderhorn* period to the sublime *Adagio* from the *Tenth*, there isn't a moment of dull music making in this set, and several of the individual interpretations deserve the very highest praise. Even the sound, though showing its age, is clear, up front with considerable impact, offering a wealth of detail some other surveys simply pass by. This is also one of the most economic cycles, as the performances, with the exception of the *Third* symphony, fit conveniently on 10 well filled discs. The playing of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra is committed and heartfelt throughout, putting most premier orchestras to shame. It would be unthinkable to do without this cycle... Go for it!

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