

Mahler's Symphony No. 7 – a comparative survey
by Lee Denham

“Three night pieces; the finale, bright day. As foundation for the whole, the first movement.” Gustav Mahler, composer

“[The final movement of the Seventh Symphony] marks the birth of late Mahler, the end of Romanticism and the beginning of the musical twentieth century, with a movement that invents modernity by re-engineering Haydn using a tune by Wagner.” Kenneth Woods, conductor

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1. INDEX OF REVIEWS

Since new recordings, including historical ones, are being released all the time, it has been decided not to list all the recordings below by page number. Instead, Section 5 is a history of Mahler's Seventh Symphony in recorded performances and you will find the recording you are looking for under the year the conductor in question first appears in the story. For example, Claudio Abbado's first recording is from 1984, so if you go to 1984 in Section 5, you will find his first recording with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, as well as all his other subsequent recordings on the same page. This will allow the survey to be updated easily whenever a new recording appears. Recordings of the “original” version, as well as transcriptions are still listed by page number.

Key – all greyed-out entries below are recordings which have been released, but are currently unobtainable and therefore not included in the main survey, something which will be corrected when and if they become available once again.

ABBADO, Claudio

Chicago SO/DG (1984)

Berlin PO/DG Live (2001)

Lucerne Festival Orch/Euroarts DVD (2015) **Reviews 1984**

ABRAVANEL, Maurice

Utah SO/Vanguard (1964) **Reviews 1964**

ASAHINA, Takashi

Osaka PO/Green Door Live (1981) **Reviews 1981**

ASHKENAZY, Vladimir

Czech PO/Exton Live (2000)

Sydney SO/SSO Live (2011) **Reviews 2000**

BARBIROLI, John

Hallé Orch - BBC Northern SO/BBC Legends Live (1960) **1960**

BARENBOIM, Daniel

Berlin Staatskapelle/Warner (2005) **Reviews 2005**

BEINUM, Eduard van

Concertgebouw Orchestra/GMSN (1958) **Reviews 1958**

BERNSTEIN, Leonard

New York PO/CBS (1965)

Vienna PO/DG DVD (1974)

Orchestre de Paris/SLS Live (1981)

New York PO/DG Live (1986) **Reviews 1965**

BERTINI, Gary

Berlin PO/Lucky Ball Live (1981)

Cologne Radio SO/EMI (1990)

Tokyo Metropolitan SO/Fontec Live (2003) **Reviews 1981**

BLOCH, Alexandre

Orchestre National de Lille/Alpha (2019) **Reviews 2019**

BOULEZ, Pierre

Cleveland Orch/DG (1994)

Vienna PO/GNP Live (1996)

Concertgebouw Orch/RCO DVD (2011) **Reviews 1994**

CHAILLY, Riccardo

Concertgebouw Orch/Decca (1994)

Leipzig Gewandhaus Orch/Accentus DVD (2014) **Reviews 1994**

DELFS, Andreas

Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra/MSO Live (2002) **Reviews 2002**

DORÁTI, Antal

Stockholm PO/ADS Live (1972) **Reviews 1972**

DUDAMEL, Gustavo

Simon Bolivar Orchestra/DG Live (2012) **Reviews 2012**

FELTZ, Gabriel

Stuttgart PO/Dreyer Gaido Live (2007) **Reviews 2007**

FISCHER, Ádám

Dusseldorf SO/Cavi Live (2015) **Reviews 2015**

FISCHER, Iván

Budapest Festival Orch/Channel (2015) **Reviews 2015**

GERGIEV, Valery

London SO/LSO Live (2008) **Reviews 2008**

GIELEN, Michael

Vienna RSO/Lucky Ball Live (1980)

SWR of Baden Baden/Hännsler (1993)

SWR of Baden Baden/SWF Live (1993)

Berlin PO/Testament Live (1994)

SWR of Baden Baden/Live Supreme (2002)

NDR Hamburg/Sunjay Classics (2008) **Reviews 1980**

GILBERT, Alan

New York PO/NYP Live (2017) **Reviews 2017**

GROSLLOT, Robert

Symfonieorkest Conservatorium Antwerpen/KVC Live (1999) **Reviews 1999**

HAENCHEN, Hartmut

Netherlands PO/Capriccio Live (1989)

Slovenska Filharmonija, Ljubljana/SF Live (1992) **Reviews 1989**

HAITINK, Bernard

Concertgebouw Orchestra/RCO Live (1969)

Concertgebouw Orchestra/Philips Studio (1969)

Concertgebouw Orchestra/Philips (1982)

Concertgebouw Orchestra/HDTT Live (1983)

Concertgebouw Orchestra/Philips DVD (1985)

Berlin PO/Philips DVD (1992)

Berlin PO/Philips Studio (1992)

Berlin PO/BPO DVD (2009) **Reviews 1969**

HALÁSZ, Michael

Narodowa Orkiestra Symfoniczna Polskiego Radia/Naxos (1994) **Reviews 1994**

HORENSTEIN, Jascha

New Philharmonia Orch/BBC LEGENDS Live (1969) **Reviews 1969**

INBAL, Eliahu

Frankfurt RSO/Denon (1982)

Czech PO/Exton Live (2011)

Tokyo Metropolitan SO/Fontec Live (2013) **Reviews 1982**

JANSON, Mariss

Oslo PO/Simax Live (2000)

Concertgebouw Orch/RCO Live (2000)

Bavarian RSO/BR Klassiks Live (2007)

Concertgebouw Orch/RCO Live (2016) **Reviews 2000**

JÄRVI, Neeme

Residentie Orkest, den Haag/Chandos (2009) **Reviews 2009**

JÄRVI, Paavo

Frankfurt RSO/Unitel DVD (2011) **Reviews 2011**

JIRÁČEK, Václav

Czech RSO/Olympic (1966) **Reviews 1966**

KEGEL, Herbert

Tokyo Metropolitan SO/TOBU Live (1985) **Reviews 1985**

KLEMPERER, Otto

New Philharmonia Orch (1968) **Reviews 1968**

KOBAYASHI, Ken-ichiro

Czech PO/Canyon (1998) **Reviews 1998**

KONDRASHIN, Kirill

Leningrad PO/Melodiya (1975)

Concertgebouw Orch/Tahra Live (1979) **Reviews 1975**

KUBELÍK, Rafael

Vienna PO/Private Collection Live (1960)

Bavarian RSO/DG (1970)

Bavarian RSO/Audite Live (1976)

New York PO/NYP Live (1981)

LEAPER, Adrian

Gran Canaria PO/Arte Nova (1995) **Reviews 1995**

LEVI, Joel

Atlanta SO/Telarc (1998) **Review 1998**

LEVINE, James

Chicago SO/TCA (1980) **Reviews 1980**

LIM, Hun-Joung

Buncheon PO/KBS (2003) **Reviews 2003**

LUISI, Fabio

Sinfonieorchester des Mitteldeutschen Rundfunks/Sounds Supreme Live (2002) **Reviews 2002**

MAAZEL, Lorin

Vienna PO/Pandora's Box Live (1984)

Vienna PO/Sony (1984)

Bavarian RSO/En Larmes Live (2002)

Philharmonia Orch/Signum Live (2011) **Reviews 1984**

MÁCAL, Zdeněk

Czech PO/Exton (2007) **Reviews 2007**

MADERNA, Bruno

Vienna SO/SLS Live (1967)

Milan Radio SO/SLS Live (1971) **Reviews 1967**

MANTEL, Neil

Scottish Sinfonia/SS Live (1997) **Reviews 1997**

MASUR, KurtLeipzig Gewandhaus Orch/DHM (1982) **Reviews 1982****MEHTA, Zubin**Israel PO/Helicon Live (2007) **Reviews 2007****NANUT, Anton**Simfonični orkester RTV Slovenija, Ljubljana/Digital (1988) **Reviews 1988****NEUMANN, Václav**

Leipzig Gewandhaus/Berlin Classics (1968)

Czech PO/Supraphon (1977) **Reviews 1977****NOSEDA, Gianandrea**BBC PO/BBC Magazine **Reviews 2010****NOTT, Jonathan**Bamburg SO/Tudor (2011) **Reviews 2011****NUMAJIRI, Ryusuke**Tokyo PO/Exton Live (2002) **Reviews 2002****OLSON, Robert**Colorado Mahlerfest Orch/MF Live (2004) **Reviews 2004****OZAWA, Seiji**Boston SO/Philips (1989) **Reviews 1989****PEŠEK, Libor**Český národní symfonický orchestr/Victor Entertainment Live (2016) **Reviews 2016****PETRENKO, Kirill**Bavarian State Orch/BSO Live (2018) **Reviews 2018****POSCHNER, Markus**Bremer PO/Timezone Live (2013) **Reviews 2013****RATTLE, Simon**

City Birmingham SO/EMI (1991)

Vienna PO/RCO Live (1995)

Berlin PO/BPO DVD (2016)

Berlin PO/Unitel DVD (2016) **Reviews 1991****RINKEVIČIUS, Gintaras**Lietuvos Valstybinis Simfininis Orkestras/Aurea Live (2006) **Reviews 2006****RÖGNER, Heinz**Berlin RSO/Passion & Concentration Live (1993) **Reviews 1993****ROSBAUD, Hans**

Berlin RSO/Forgotten Records Live (1953)

SWR Orchestra/SWF (1957) **Reviews 1953****SCHERCHEN, Hermann**

Vienna SO/Orfeo Live (1950)

Vienna St Opera/Westminster (1953)

Toronto SO/Music & Arts Live (1965) **Reviews 1950****SCHWARZ, Gerard**Royal Liverpool PO/Artel Live (2005) **Reviews 2005****SEGERSTAM, Leif**Danish Radio SO/Chandos (1991) **Reviews 1991****SINOPOLI, Giuseppe**Philharmonia Orch/DG (1992) **Reviews 1992****SOLTESZ, Stefan**Essener PO/EP Live (2011) **Reviews 2011****SOLTI, Georg**Chicago SO/Decca (1971) **Reviews 1971****SØNDERGÅRD, Thomas**

Royal Scottish National Orchestra/Linn (2020) ****Chamber Version** Page 13**

STANGEL, Peter

Taschen Philharmonie/Taschen (2013) ****Chamber Version** Page 12**

STÁREK, Jiří

Symfonický orchestr Českého rozhlasu/Aecodiva (2008) **Reviews 2008**

STEINBERG, William

Boston SO/SLS (1970) **Reviews 1970**

STENZ, Markus

Cologne RSO/GO Live (2006)

Cologne RSO/OEHMS (2012) **Reviews 2012**

SVETLANOV, Evgeny

Russian State SO/Saison Russe (1992)

NHK SO/NHK Live (1997) **Reviews 1992**

TABAKOV, Emil

Sofia PO/Capriccio (1989) **Reviews 1989**

TAKASEKI, Ken

Gunma SO/ALM (2007) **Reviews 2007**

TENNSTEDT, Klaus

Cleveland Orch/Memories Live (1978)

London PO/BBC Legends Live (1980)

London PO/EMI (1980)

Danish RSO/Saint Laurent Live (1982)

Philadelphia Orch/Saint Laurent Live (1987)

London PO/EMI Live (1993) **Reviews 1978**

TILSON-THOMAS, Michael

London SO/RCA (1997)

San Francisco SO/SFS Media Live (2005) **Reviews 1997**

VÄNSKÄ, Osmo

Minnesota SO/BIS (2018) **Reviews 2018**

WAART, Edo de

Netherlands Radio PO/RCA (1994) **Reviews 1994**

WAKASUGI, Hiroshi

Tokyo Metropolitan SO/Fontec (1989) **Reviews 1989**

WOODS, Kenneth

Colorado Mahlerfest Orch/MF Live (2016) **Reviews 2016**

ZENDER, Hans

Saarbrücken Radio SO/CPO Live (1982) **Review 1982**

ZENKER, Silvia and TRENKNER, Evelinde

Version for two pianos (arr. A Casella)/MD&G (1992) **Page 11**

ZINMAN, David

Tonhalle Zurich/RCA (2008) **Reviews 2008**

2. INTRODUCTION

In 2020, it was decided at MusicWeb International that the time had come to update the late Tony Duggan's surveys of the Mahler symphonies, still some of the most popular sections of the MWI website even after nearly ten years since his sad passing. Since then, revised surveys of the [First Symphony](#), [Fourth Symphony](#) and [Das Lied von der Erde](#) by me and my distinguished MWI colleagues, Ralph Moore and the late Brian Wilson, whom we also sadly lost in 2021, have all appeared. It says much for Tony's legacy that the effort to update his work has taken more than one colleague years to complete, a task that is still ongoing (Marc Bridle is in the process of producing what will undoubtedly be definitive surveys of the Sixth and Tenth Symphonies, too). Since I was

entrusted with the First Symphony, I have now turned my attention to the Seventh and decided to keep the same format as before, which was revised after much constructive feedback from the MWI readership. In some respect this is a bit of an overkill, since there are around one hundred fewer recordings to consider of the Seventh Symphony, but I wanted to make it as easy as possible for the reader to be able to navigate the somewhat lengthy articles by providing consistency.

As before, I do not intend my own surveys to be a replacement of [Tony's own](#) uniquely perceptive articles, but merely to provide a different take with perhaps an emphasis on the past ten years, which, of course, Tony could not consider. Nor is it an attempt to review in depth every single recording of Mahler's Seventh Symphony ever issued although, rest assured, I have tried my hardest to track them all down. As before, this article has been split into four sections, the first being a comprehensive index of all the reviews included, followed by a brief introduction to the music, a short section on transcriptions and other arrangements, before the main narrative, which is of the very many recordings this work has received that I have managed to get my ears on – good, bad, indifferent, in poor sound or otherwise, where I have tried to give the reader an idea of the various merits of each and, perhaps, to guide them on which are the best seek out and investigate further. As always, all the opinions below are solely my own and if I have missed out any reader's favourite version, or have slighted one in any way, then I will apologise at the outset and have, in mitigation, offered a second opinion with a link to an original review by a colleague (if available) from MusicWeb's extensive archives – just click on the [REVIEW](#) hyperlink by the relevant recording to access it. As with every one of these surveys, the moment it is published new recordings will be released, adding to the narrative of this fascinating symphony, and I will read my original notes and wonder if there was any wisdom at all in my proclaimed judgements. As such, this will be revised in due course and I would therefore be very grateful to anyone who is kind and patient enough to point out any errors that I - and I alone - have made.

As with the First Symphony, I have retained a system whereby I have attempted to grade what I consider to be the representative recording of each conductor with a mark out of 10, which I hope will give the reader some kind of guide to my own reaction to the performance. For example, the 8/10 awarded to Hermann Scherchen's studio recording from 1953 reflects how impressed I was with the overall performance, interpretation and playing from that era, as well as the importance of the recording, but that mark clearly doesn't reflect SACD sound quality - which, of course, it is not! The sound quality of each performance is usually mentioned in the narrative, as is whether a performance is live or studio, mono or stereo, which is noted in the brackets after the listed recordings, so if a reader wanted state-of-the-art-sound with no audience noises, a live mono recording from the 1950s is clearly not going to pass muster, no matter how good the performance is. I am therefore relying on the reader to exercise his or her own judgement in these cases, too. However, as a rough guide, any recording that scores an 8 or above is, in my opinion, distinctive and any under 5 poor and to be avoided.

When surveying the First Symphony, I spent a long time trying to work out a narrative and my cause was both aided and hampered by multiple recordings by the same conductors. I considered having an historical category, recognising that for some people Mahler's music demands modern sound so these should be separate, but then I wondered how I was to treat some of the earliest protagonists of the piece, such as Bruno Walter and Jascha Horenstein, who had both historical mono recordings as well as later versions (of the First Symphony) in more-than-acceptable stereo sound. In the end, I decided on a loose historical narrative, which I have retained for the Seventh Symphony and so start with the first recording available (of Hermann Scherchen's in 1950), but then concentrate on the rest of that conductor's recordings before continuing with the next conductor to make a recording (i.e. Hans Rosbaud in 1953) and so on, with the aim of attempting to trace how interpretations of Mahler's work have changed (if at all) down the years, as well as individual conductor's interpretations. As before with multiple recordings by the same conductor, I have highlighted in bold the version that in my opinion is the one the reader should seek out, usually with an explanation in

the narrative as to why one is preferred over the other(s). At the end, there is a brief conclusion where I list the recordings that I would grab if the house was burning – each one of these recordings have an ‘**’ next to them in the main narrative to alert you to them as I go along. I have also decided to include a ‘wild card’ category too on this occasion for a bit of fun, so that I can also mention those recordings which can never be a central recommendation, but still have something special and unique to say about this marvellous symphony. Personally, I hope you find the following of interest and enjoyable.

3. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SYMPHONY’S COMPOSITION

“*Mahler’s mad, mad, mad, mad symphony*” - so said the English musicologist, Deryck Cooke of Mahler’s Seventh Symphony. Slightly more prosaically, Simon Rattle said Mahler did what he did in this work “*because he just could!*” Of all Mahler’s creations, this is the one that seems to be the least understood as well as, perhaps, the least regarded and loved. It also a work that gave Mahler considerable pain and physical hardship to compose – the second and fourth movements, called *Nachtmusiks*, were composed easily enough during the summer of 1904 as he was finishing the Sixth Symphony, but he struggled to work out how to complete the remainder. In a letter from 1910 to his wife Alma, he described the paralysing writer’s block he endured in the summer of 1905, as he grappled with his Seventh Symphony: “*I had intended to complete the Seventh, for which both Andantes were done,*” Mahler recalled. “*For two weeks I tortured myself to the point of melancholy, as you must remember, until I ran off to the Dolomites . . . finally I gave up and went home, convinced that the summer would be wasted . . . I stepped into the boat to be rowed over [the Wörthersee [the lake by which Mahler’s summer home stood]. At the first stroke of the oars, I hit upon the theme (or rather the rhythm and the style) of the introduction to the first movement, and within four weeks, the first, third and fifth movements were completely finished!*” Another three years elapsed before Mahler was able to premiere the work, during which time, he continued to tinker with the orchestration and make numerous other revisions. Even after he began orchestral rehearsals for the premiere, he could not stop making changes, which (according to local contemporary reports) caused great stress for both composer and musicians.

Curiously, whatever the problems may have been in its creation, the Seventh Symphony has a unique and well-balanced symmetry, with a central scherzo book-ended by the two *Nachtmusiks* which, in turn, are flanked by large-scale opening and closing movements. In the recordings below, the main point of difference mainly concerns the fourth movement, the second of the two *Nachtmusiks*, which is typically taken from anything from a swift and flowing twelve minutes, to a more languorous sixteen minutes - and the longer versions may be trying to mirror the first *Nachtmusik* that more often than not lasts around sixteen minutes, too. As always with Mahler, there is a huge orchestra, this time distinguished by the addition of a bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, cowbells, rute, triangle, tam-tam, guitar, mandolin and two harps. Mahler was able to conduct the work himself five times, the last three with the Concertgebouw Orchestra in 1909 where two of the concerts had Willem Mengelberg conducting Beethoven’s First Symphony as a first half, while the final one had Mahler himself conducting the first half with the overture from Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger*. According to Alma’s somewhat tongue-in-cheek assessment, the work only ever enjoyed a ‘*succès d’estime*’.

As the symphony opens, the listener may hear not just those strokes of the oars upon the water of the Wörthersee, but also a solemn procession, a dark and sombre funeral march, no less. In the interpretations below, these opening pages can be anything from a vision of the cold, black, mysterious waters of the river Styx as conjured up by the baton of Daniel Barenboim, to the more clear-sighted views of Michael Gielen, who is at great pains to emphasise the woodwind colours and staccato markings in the opening pages of the score. At this point, Mahler uses a tenor horn to sound out the melody of the first subject (surely that instrument’s finest hour in the orchestral repertoire?), before the music merges into the main body of a *sonata-allegro* movement, that contains no fewer than three different marches. At the climax of the second march, the music suddenly subsides, and

ghostly trumpet fanfares softly herald a chorale, the music switching from focused to veiled over the space of a couple of pages in the score until, with cascading harps, the music soars in an ecstasy the likes of which even Mahler rarely surpassed. This passage has been variously labelled a 'moonlit sequence' or a 'religious vision', the latter perhaps being prompted by comparisons with the 'Urlicht' movement of the Second Symphony, which also begins with soft trumpet fanfares. In the various interpretations on record, this section can be treated with anything from the searing passion of William Steinberg to the almost indescribable cool beauty of Giuseppe Sinopoli. Since nothing before has prepared the listener for music of such serenity, its calm proves short-lived and a sudden plunge of violins returns the music, startlingly, to the slow introduction of the opening and the recapitulation begins. Thereafter, the marches become ever-more trenchant and militaristic and whilst the music does briefly stray into the tonic major, the mood is predominantly grim and claustrophobic - although Jascha Horenstein, almost uniquely, finds an element of hard-won exultation in the closing pages here.

The second movement features the first *Nachtmusik* of the pair featured in this symphony. There has been some debate of the precise meaning of 'Nachtmusik' within the context of this work of Mahler's, some wondering whether it is something akin to an Italian serenade, although more likely he had the concept of the Austro-German model in mind, which is merely music to be performed after nine in the evening, of which perhaps the most famous example of all is Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*. Either way, the opening of the second movement, with its haunting horn calls across the horizon is perhaps most familiar to UK readers for having featured in a well-known and long-running television advert for, of all things, car oil! It starts with a minute or so of uncertainty and preparation, before an extraordinary skid downwards through five and a half octaves lands the music into a march, initially led by the horns that is, by turns, friendly and then spectral. The Dutch conductor, Willem Mengelberg, claimed that in this movement Mahler had been inspired by Rembrandt's painting the Night Watch, an idea the composer Alphons Diepenbrock (who was one of Mahler's Amsterdam friends) explained further: "*It is not true that [Mahler] wanted to actually depict The Night Watch. He cited the painting only as a point of comparison. [This movement] is a walk at night, and he said himself that he thought of it as a patrol. Beyond that he said something different every time. What is certain is that it is a march, full of fantastic chiaroscuro—hence the Rembrandt parallel.*" The music weaves and meanders around this nocturnal journey complete with cowbells (which were last heard in the Sixth Symphony), before the string figurations disintegrate into the mists of soft cymbals and tam-tam, until nothing is left but a cello harmonic and a ping on the harp.

If the first *Nachtmusik* had an amiable nature, albeit one with a whiff of devilry, the central *scherzo* has demons sniggering in the face of the listener. Mahler's marking for this movement is "*schattenhaft*", which can literally be translated to "*like a shadow*" but could more accurately be '*spectral*' in the context of Mahler's music. The opening note is a tug of war between the timpani and the lower strings over what it should be, before more notes scurry around, tiptoeing across the orchestra, as cobwebs catch the listener and shadows appear and disappear unnervingly. The *trio* attempts to console, but flutes laugh maniacally at its feeble attempts, before the original material reappears, only to slowly unravel and eventually disappear with a bang on the timpani and a puff of smoke on pizzicato violas. It is the movement which invariably brings out the best in its performers – Hans Zander and Pierre Boulez, both composers of unashamedly atonal music, relish this movement's modernity, whilst James Levine finds much rude humour in his recording in Chicago. However, no-one comes close to Rafael Kubelík and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra in the studio, who collectively take their listeners on a journey through a haunted forest of such spookiness such that you begin to wonder if it will all end in a witches' sabbath – though perhaps one subtler than Berlioz's in his *Symphonie Fantastique*, a piece which provided Mahler with much inspiration for his Seventh Symphony.

The fourth movement is the second *Nachtmusik*; if the first was a night-time patrol, the second is a nocturnal serenade, marked *Andante amoroso*. With its reduced orchestration (trombones, tuba and

trumpets are silent and the woodwinds are reduced by half) - albeit one featuring a guitar and mandolin - this movement has been described as 'a long stretch of chamber music set amidst this huge orchestral work'. William Ritter (1865-1955) was a music critic and friend of Mahler who describes the opening music as: *"Heavy with passion, the violin solo falls, like a turtledove aswoon with tenderness, down onto the chords of the harp. For a moment one hears only heartbeats. It is a serenade, voluptuously soft, moist with languor and reverie, pearly with the dew of silvery tears falling drop by drop from guitar and mandolin"*. This is the movement in the symphony that finds the greatest divergences of approaches from the interpreters below, from the brief twelve-minute intermezzo of Kirill Kondrashin, to the full-blown sixteen-minute love-affair of John Barbirolli who infuses every bar with the sultry warmth of an Italian night. Some, such as Václav Neumann, take even longer over it than Glorious John, but even with the expert players of the Czech Philharmonic at his disposal, the music is then stretched to breaking point and then withers on the vine. Very few take it faster than Kondrashin - although Neeme Järvi does manage to break the ten-minute-barrier in his probably-best-to-be-avoided recording. Others change their mind - as Claudio Abbado aged, his approach altered in this movement from a full-throated, leisurely Italian aria, to something lighter and swifter on its feet.

In Abbado's live filmed performance of Mahler's Seventh at the Lucerne Festival, as soon as the final bars of second *Nachtmusik* had died away, he immediately launched into the final movement, which opens with a fusillade of thundering drums followed by trills on horns and bassoons and then trumpet fanfares. Mahler marks this movement *"Rondo – finale"* and describes it as *"bright as day."* It is music that alternates between brass-led celebrations and woodwind-dominated dances of apprentices, before ending in a blaze of C major glory, the orchestra at full throttle with bells ringing joyously. William Ritter believed in this music that Mahler "re-begins" Wagner's overture to *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, using it as a symbol for a good-humoured victory-finale. There are, of course, contrarian views; Tony Duggan mused: *"Is it a straightforward celebratory carnival: sheer optimism with no qualification? Or is Mahler giving only pretence of optimism, his aim ironic and sarcastic? Or is this a portrait of a world dancing itself to oblivion?"* In the recordings reviewed below, all those approaches are encompassed, from Yoel Levi, aided and abetted by Telarc's spectacular sonics, who presents it as all pomp and pageantry, to Otto Klemperer who in turn is grimly sarcastic, all the way to Hermann Scherchen (in Toronto) who approaches the finale's music as a manic apotheosis of the Viennese dance. Klaus Tennstedt in not just his final recording of the work, but also the last time he conducted the London Philharmonic and one of the last times he conducted in public before he too, like Mahler, was forced to give up conducting due to ill-health, presents it as a very hollow victory indeed.

At the head of this synopsis is an observation from the distinguished conductor, Kenneth Woods: *"[The final movement of the Seventh Symphony] marks the birth of late Mahler, the end of Romanticism and the beginning of the musical twentieth century, with a movement that invents modernity by re-engineering Haydn using a tune by Wagner."* The 'Romanticism' referred to here has been expanded upon previously by Bruno Walter, who explained that Mahler's fascination with nocturnal nature music in this symphony connects it to an older tradition of Romanticism, especially in the middle movements. We can hear this at the opening of the first *Nachtmusik*, with horns calling and answering to each other across a moonlit landscape and are reminded that this particular form of German Romanticism would be familiar to listeners in previous guises such as the opening of Anton Bruckner's Fourth Symphony, coincidentally nicknamed *'The Romantic'*, as well as Siegfried's horn calls in Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle. Certainly it is an ending of sorts for Mahler, as in the Ninth and Tenth Symphonies (even in just the sole completed first movement), there is no longer the delight of hearing birdsong or cowbells caught on the wind, while the consoling hand of Nature has instead been replaced by the chilly shadow of Death.

It took Mahler twenty-four rehearsals to get his orchestra (the Czech PO - then not quite as good as it would one day be) up to a reasonable performing standard for the work's premiere which, perhaps

inevitably, was a "respectable failure" according to Otto Klemperer, who was in the audience - along with Bruno Walter, as well as the composers Berg and Zemlinsky). Esa-Pekka Salonen, perhaps not the greatest Mahler conductor, but better than most and a fine composer too, is baffled by some of the "*painfully banal moments*" in the second movement, that he "*can't believe Mahler put them actually in there.... I'm not looking for the neurotic quality of the music; it's already there, and I don't think it needs enhancing. This is music that works on so many levels...but it's very uneven, also. Some moments, the worst moments are truly terrible, I think... and the best moments are unbelievable.*" Talking about the Seventh, Bruno Walter once said to Zubin Mehta: "*Don't be shy, play Mahler in a vulgar way.*" Bernstein also told Mehta: "*If it's vulgar, don't try to make it more beautiful than it is.*" Valery Gergiev confessed: "*Conducting Mahler's Symphony Number Seven was for me the scariest project of all [when conducting it] I was charged with extra excitement, but also extra fear, like walking on a high wire. One wrong movement and you go down. I dread this symphony.*" Klaus Tennstedt, on the other hand, believed that the first movement of the Seventh Symphony to be (along with the opening movement on the Ninth) Mahler's greatest creation.

With such extreme views from the podium, is it any surprise to learn of similar reactions from audiences? The first time I saw Mahler's Seventh Symphony live was at London's Barbican Hall, when a provincial British orchestra visited to perform it under their then up-and-coming young Principal Conductor who had started recording a complete Mahler cycle with them for EMI – the hall was barely half-full that night and, many years later, I learned from a friend who was also there the same evening that he had been given his ticket for free when purchasing those for other concerts at the same venue. Mahler himself also had his doubts, as recounted by his wife Alma of the premiere in her memoirs:

I arrived in time for the last rehearsals, and as I was alone he sent Berliner [his assistant] to meet me instead of coming himself, which very much alarmed me. I found him in bed; he was nervous and unwell. His room was littered with orchestral parts, for his alterations were incessant in those days, not, of course, in the composition, but in the instrumentation. From the Fifth onwards, he found it impossible to satisfy himself. The Fifth was differently orchestrated for practically every performance; the Sixth and Seventh were continually in the process of revision. It was a phase. His self-assurance returned with the Eighth But now he was torn by doubts. He avoided the society of his fellow musicians, which as a rule he eagerly sought, and went to bed immediately after dinner so as to save his energy for the rehearsals. . . .

Quite why the music should be so challenging for performers and listeners, is an interesting debate. After all, the (vastly more popular) Fifth Symphony is a similar journey from darkness to light, that also starts with a funeral march, followed by three middle movements, ending with a triumphant, *rondo* finale. However, one of the movements of the Fifth Symphony also contains some of the most celebrated music that perhaps Mahler ever wrote, specifically that of the *Adagietto* - and for me that is a clue. In virtually all of Mahler's non-choral symphonies, there is a movement of haunting sadness that tugs upon the heart-strings of its listeners - from the final movement of the Third Symphony, the third movement *Adagio* of the Fourth, the *Andante* in the Sixth, to the final movement of the Ninth, as well as the aforementioned Fifth's *Adagietto*. Such a movement is conspicuously lacking in the Seventh, in spite of a brief moment of repose in the centre of the first movement, and contains not one, but two "slow" movements, specifically the *Nachtmusiks*. However, it is worth bearing in mind the words of Leonard Bernstein: "*The minute we understand that the word *Nachtmusik* does not mean nocturne in the usual lyrical sense, but rather nightmare—that is, night music of emotion recollected in anxiety instead of tranquility—then we have the key to all this mixture of rhetoric, camp, and shadows.*" Whether you agree with this analysis or not, it is indisputable that the music contained within these movements is not going to be moving anyone to tears and it is that lack of emotional counter-balance to the extremes elsewhere that is, in my opinion, the reason why people find this particular work of Mahler "difficult", perhaps even somewhat forbidding, without that sense of vulnerability offered by his other symphonies. As Iván Fischer has observed: "*Mahler is generally*

understood to be a tragic composer, dark and full of pain.... He is a very honest composer and whatever he writes is clearly from the heart. And this time we have a symphony that is actually a lot of fun, full of humour and extremely optimistic." The music journalist and critic, Edward Seckerson, writing in *Gramophone Magazine*, is even more direct: *"This piece was perhaps the greatest leap Mahler ever made towards the kind of 'pure music' that leaned less heavily on high emotion and instead explored an almost hallucinatory range of colours in terms of both texture and harmonic language."*

Maybe another reason for the symphony's comparative lack of acceptance is because much criticism has been directed at the final movement, some people even going so far as to claim that the music therein is embarrassing. If this is the case, then perhaps, as a result, the musical journey is somewhat unclear as well, for it is after all the symphony's ultimate destination, the end of Mahler's journey through the night. The most perceptive comment I have read about this 'problematic' final movement has come from Kenneth Woods, a fine and too little-known conductor who is also the current Music Director of the Colorado Mahler Festival. He makes the following observations in his very interesting online [blog](#), which is recommended for always being packed full of incident and revelations on all things musical:

And here we find that Mahler's choice of material, some of it banal, some of it borrowed, some of it even embarrassing is no accident. His obvious model here is Haydn, who always seemed to treat the most ridiculous themes in the most sophisticated ways. Think of the Finale of Haydn 92- has such an absurd melody ever been put through such paces? Yes, but only in other Haydn pieces. This process always feels cathartic and humanizing, and so it is in Mahler. He takes this hodgepodge of ideas and makes from them the single most complex and virtuosic movement in all the symphonies, deconstructing almost his whole life's work in the process. When we think of the symbolic power of the brass chorale at the end of the 3rd Symphony and compare it to the brass chorale which forms the refrain of this movement it's almost like a mirror image. One is transcendent, the other is just party music, and yet, by the end, the party has become a transcendent experience

Although the symphony is often referred to by its nickname, "*Das Lied der Nacht*" (*The Song of the Night*), this was not one that Mahler himself would have recognised, even if he did refer to the middle movements as "night pieces" and the final movement as "bright as day". However, it is a work that undoubtedly moves from darkness to the sunshine of C Major in its final movement and, on a personal level, this has helped my own understanding of the work. For me, it is indeed a journey of the night, from the darkness that the listener is plunged into at the end of the Sixth Symphony when the music topples over into the abyss, to the blazing light of the opening of the Eighth Symphony's hymn "*Veni, Creator Spiritus*" and it is a path that Mahler *has* to travel as well as, perhaps, must we the listeners, too. I am helped by my imagination, too, when, at the very end of the second *Nachtmusik*, as the strings softly sigh against a gently trilling clarinet, my mind's ear sees the early streaks of dawn breaking across the night's dark sky, heralding the start of a warm summer's day, one that features the celebrations of a town's festival. I feel the significance of Mahler programming the overture of *Die Meistersinger* as a short first half when he conducted this symphony, a work that culminates in a town's happy summer festival, as being key here and I personally believe this is what the final movement is all about. I'm not so sure about other, more cynical interpretations of the music in the final movement; usually, with Mahler, what you hear is what you get, albeit with occasional shadows lurking in the background (think of the climax in the middle of the bucolic opening movement of the Fourth Symphony, with its trumpet fanfares briefly foretelling the opening funeral march of the Fifth Symphony). There is never that sense of Shostakovichian irony, of a triumphant final movement that is not really triumphant; however...

That does not mean that other views are not equally valid or as persuasive. Stephen Johnson on BBC Radio 3 once opined that he fancied he could also hear these darker elements in the background of both the final movement of the Seventh ("*are the bells at the end those of nightmares, rather than*

celebration ?” he mused), as well as in the preceding second *Nachtmusik*, memorably likening the music there to that of a spider serenading a fly, welcoming it into its lair. More to the point were the events in Mahler’s own personal life: as he was writing the final notes of this score which, according to Iván Fischer, is “*full of humour and extremely optimistic*”, that optimism was not misplaced in 1905, with Mahler being the happy father of a blossoming young family, which was running alongside a career as a world-famous conductor and composer. Between then and the symphony’s premiere three years later though, he had resigned as chief conductor of the Vienna State Opera, scandalously driven out by long-simmering hostility to his Jewish ancestry, his first daughter caught scarlet fever and as she lay on her deathbed Mahler himself learned that he was suffering from terminal heart disease. Perhaps in all those subsequent revisions to the previously “*extremely optimistic*” finished score, the shadow of Death has crept up and is now hiding behind the notes of Mahler’s ever-fascinating *Song of the Night*.

4. TRANSCRIPTIONS AND ARRANGEMENTS

Chamber Orchestra (arr. Peter Stangel)

2013 Jan 19-20 – Taschen Philharmonie/ Peter Stangel (Studio Digital – SONY)

The Taschen Philharmonie (Pocket Philharmonic) was formed in Munich in 2005, originally to produce a series of children’s concerts of the great classical works under the tagline of “Great Music of Little Listeners”. I am not sure if this self-proclaimed “smallest symphony orchestra in the world” ever produced Mahler’s *Seventh Symphony* for one of these concerts, although they have since graduated to more serious and “adult” fare, including recording a complete cycle of Beethoven’s symphonies.

Of course, there is a well-known precedent of presenting Mahler’s symphonies in chamber form that started with Arnold Schoenberg’s Society for Private Musical Performances, which he formed in the 1920s in Vienna where, due to financial constraints, large-scale modern music was presented in chamber form. Indeed, Schoenberg’s well-known chamber music version of Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde* has long held a foothold in (admittedly the outer reaches of) the repertory and you can certainly hear from listening to this chamber-sized version of the *Seventh Symphony* how it influenced Schoenberg’s own *Chamber Symphony No 1*. The booklet is a little coy about the actual reduced orchestration of this version of the *Song of the Night* which has been arranged by the conductor Peter Stangel. Apparently it is supposed to number some 20 instrumentalists, but my ears detected: two violins, viola, a pair of cellos, double bass, harp, flute, oboe, a pair of clarinets, bassoon, two horns, (probably two) trumpets, trombone, plus percussion. No tenor horn for the opening movement, which is instead taken by a French horn, nor (perhaps surprisingly) are there any guitars or mandolins of the second *Nachtmusik* either. As always with these endeavours, the dedication of the players almost carries all before them, but they just cannot replicate the sheer sonic bloom of a Mahler orchestra in full cry nor, perhaps more surprisingly, do they have the lung power to do justice to Mahler’s more ecstatic moments – the central “religious vision” section of the first moment simply does not soar as it can and should. In fact it falls very flat, which is not a criticism of the performers, just an observation of the drawback of the whole endeavour. Curiously too, the central Scherzo lacks its requisite spookiness when played by a chamber orchestra, in spite of Mahler’s “chamber music” approach at this point. To be fair, the conductor, Peter Stangel, directs the whole thing very well and navigates all the awkward tempo transitions with much style, plus there is a genuine feeling of triumph at the close of the whole performance, even if there are no bells, which appear to have been replaced instead by sundry items from the kitchen crockery drawers, plus a senseless cut of about ten bars of music leading into the coda. This one is for the curious minded only, I would contend, rather than mandatory listening.

Chamber Orch (arr. Klaus Simon)

2020 August 8: Royal Scottish National Orchestra, cond. Thomas Søndergård (Live Digital – Linn)

Thomas Søndergård, who had been presenting a Mahler symphony each year at the Edinburgh Festival, hit upon a novel solution in 2020 when, faced with Covid restrictions, that year's performance of Mahler's Seventh Symphony was threatened with being cancelled: he would present it instead in a chamber version by Klaus Simon, who had by that time arranged six of Mahler's symphonies in such a format. A smaller body of players meant that they could still perform the work onstage while at the same time observing the social distancing which was the law at the time. Klaus Simon's version differs from Peter Stangel's above by employing slightly larger forces, which include ten violins, split equally between first and seconds, four violas, three cellos and two basses, one harp, plus one each of woodwind, with players often doubling up with cor anglais and bass clarinet, piano, electric organ (instead of Simon's usual preferred accordion), one trumpet, two horns (one doubling as tenor horn in the first movement), plus a huge array of percussion sans tympani, played by two musicians. As with Stangel, there is no role for a guitar or mandolin. Likewise, as with Stangel, the same problems remain – in the first movement, the 'religious vision' section remains earthbound when there just are not enough players to carry it aloft, while the music immediately after it is not sufficiently contrasted when there are only a limited number of players and instruments available – it is not so much that it is small scale, but on the same scale all the way through. In the lead up to the finale's coda, the use of the piano to "flesh out" the orchestration neither convinces nor impresses, but it must be acknowledged that the solutions for the solo guitar and mandolin in the second *Nachtmusik* are quite clever.

No complaints about Thomas Søndergård, his seventy-two-minute interpretation, nor his selected players from the Royal National Scottish Orchestra, who present this arrangement as well as anyone, or indeed the very fine sonics from Linn. As before, this may be a release for the curious, but I am not sure if the general listener will want to listen to it very often.

Piano Duo (arr. Alfredo Casella)

1992 January 20-22 - ZENKER, Silvia and TRENKNER, Evelinde (Studio Digital – MD&G)

I had high hopes for this arrangement by Alfredo Casella, an Italian symphonist from the first half of the twentieth century. In my view, Casella is one of those first-rate, second-tier composers and any Mahlerian who has not discovered his three symphonies is, in my opinion, in for a treat (providing they are not expecting anything on the level of Mahler's *Ninth Symphony*). In the first decade of the twentieth century, Casella was very much a disciple of Mahler, as can be evidenced by his own "Mahlerian" Second Symphony, from whose premiere he was more than happy to be diverted to directing the first performance of Mahler's *Resurrection Symphony* in France. Apparently, when the two composers met, Mahler was very complimentary about his younger colleague, not least regarding his transcription of the *Song of the Night* for two pianos as featured on this recording.

Alas, my expectations of having a work comparable to Chitose Okashiro's brilliant transcription of Mahler's First Symphony for piano have not been realised here ([REVIEW](#)). This is merely a vehicle from a long-forgotten past before gramophone records, for amateur piano players to perform Mahler's Seventh Symphony at home, with many trills and tremolandos filling out the orchestral textures - as could almost be predicted, the timpani flourishes which open the final movement are transposed to single bass notes on the keyboard, nothing more. No complaints about the performance under consideration, nor the sound, but again, this is hardly revelatory stuff - although others may be curious to explore further.

5. A HISTORY & COMPARATIVE REVIEWS OF MAHNER'S SEVENTH SYMPHONY ON RECORD

1950

Hermann Scherchen

1950 June 22nd – Vienna Symphony Orchestra (Live Mono – Orfeo)

1953 July – Vienna State Opera Orchestra (Studio Mono – Westminster) **

1965 April 22nd – Toronto Symphony Orchestra (Live Mono – Music and Arts)

Hermann Scherchen's first encounter with Mahler's Seventh Symphony was as a violist in the Berlin premiere of the work in the 1920's with Oskar Fried's Berlin Staatskapelle. Since Fried both knew and corresponded with Mahler about his music, you may have thought there could have been some authenticity in Scherchen's own performances as a conductor of Mahler, but unfortunately he proved to be so erratic in his interpretations that any such hopes must be put aside with an artist who variably performed the Adagietto of the Fifth Symphony between anything from just over nine minutes, to just under eighteen, depending upon his mood (and the orchestra in front of him). His currently available three recordings of the Seventh are almost as extreme.

The most extreme of these is the later, live recording from Toronto, dimly recorded and, disappointingly, in mono from 1965 which, at just under seventy minutes is fast by anybody's standards, let alone Scherchen's, who took some eight minutes longer in his earlier studio recording of the same work. It seems as if the conductor on this occasion has taken his cue from the end of the previous symphony which ended in catastrophe and now Mahler's world is full of wild, manic desperation. It is an interesting, valid - even unique - view, but one which does not convince me, as too much of it sounds merely slick or glib at such dizzying speeds.

Much more conventional, as well as far more convincing, are his two earlier recordings from Vienna. Although many plaudits must be given to the 1950 live performance, the first 'entry' in this survey, compared to the studio taping some three years later it is less satisfyingly recorded and, as the performance continues, appears more effortful and episodic. Therefore, in my opinion, the studio account, which has broadly the same interpretation, is the best representation of Scherchen's way with this work.

It is actually a very fine account by anyone's standards – and it was useful to compare it to the only other account made in the studio during the 1950's, albeit one for a radio broadcast, which was with Hans Rosbaud and the SWR Symphony Orchestra in 1957. Rosbaud was a very 'straight' interpreter – he gave you all the notes, no more, no less – whereas Scherchen is far more volatile. For example, the section immediately before the 'religious vision' section in the first movement, is played much more slowly than Rosbaud's stricter tempo, Scherchen instead conjuring up a tremendous sense of disquiet before a release of aching beauty. Immediately after this section in the transition to the recapitulation, both conductors build up enormous intensity, Rosbaud through concentrated playing, Scherchen through huge and oppressive orchestral sonorities. So it continues, with the end of the second *Nachtmusik* warmer and more sensual under Scherchen, while his final movement is slower, more focused on teasing out the colours within the score rather than generating unstoppable momentum or, as under Rosbaud, seeking to wield what can sometimes sound like a disjointed movement into one mighty whole. The playing of the Vienna orchestra under Scherchen, is not as accurate as either of Rosbaud's bands, but they make up for what they lack with tremendous enthusiasm – the trumpets in the finale are terrific.

Ultimately, the studio account is a remarkable achievement, well able to stand up against more modern recordings, even if somewhat inevitably, the sound and playing may fall short of more modern standards: 8/10

1953

Hans Rosbaud

1953 KN – Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra (Live Mono – Forgotten Records)

1957 February 18th & 20th – WDR Symphony Orchestra (Live Mono – SWR Classics) [REVIEW](#)

Hans Rosbaud has been enjoying something of a renaissance in recent years, not least in part thanks to the dedicated work of SWR Classics releasing a surprisingly large legacy of recordings he made for radio broadcasts, including a Mahler Seventh. In the 1950's, performances and recordings of the Seventh Symphony were rare, so to have two versions conducted by Hans Rosbaud is quite remarkable and unlike the only other conductor with a similar distinction, Hermann Scherchen (see 1950), Rosbaud is remarkably consistent in his view of this symphony. Comparing the SWR reading with the one made some four years prior with the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, the later reading is the finer of the two, better recorded and with a slightly more focused interpretation, more settled and integrated, especially in the first movement which can sometimes come across as episodic in the wrong hands, while the second movement is more haunting and the *scherzo* tauter in the later reading. Both recordings feature remarkably assured and confident playing, not least when you consider that the players could not have been familiar with this music at the time. Rosbaud's interpretation is, typically for him, straight-forward and clear-sighted, notable for generating some remarkable intensity in the second half of the opening movement, as well as for the inner-detail of the central movements, and the balance of the mandolin and guitar in the second *Nachtmusik* is expertly done and remarkably clear. In the final movement, Rosbaud also achieves notable cohesion with all the variations as well but, much to my surprise, comparisons with contemporary recordings do him no favours. As explained above, Scherchen can often be the more imaginative and consequently more interesting conductor in this work. Likewise, Eduard van Beinum's radio broadcast from 1958 also has a similarly 'straight' reading which, in spite of slightly disappointing sound and boomy timpani, is nevertheless more involving than Rosbaud's as a result of a greater orchestra at the top of its game – the flair, drive and sheer panache at which the Concertgebouw despatch this score is remarkable. Similarly, a further two years later, John Barbirolli was able to deliver a reading which is brimful with a character that Rosbaud can barely hint at. For an example of this, just listen to the final minute of Barbirolli's performances next to the one with the SWR orchestra - under Rosbaud's steely gaze and iron grip, that final peroration lacks the grandeur and 'lift' of Barbirolli, in spite of an equally thrilling build up, as well as the undoubted superiority of Rosbaud's players' execution. It is always the curse of the reviewer to report that the great is the enemy of the merely excellent but, as is the case with this recording of the Seventh Symphony, I was left hugely impressed rather than overwhelmed. Rosbaud's is a remarkable achievement for the 1950's but it lacks the "x-factor" when compared to many others: 7.5/10

1958

Eduard van Beinum

1958 June 4th – Concertgebouw Orchestra (Live Mono – GMSN) **

To my mind, it's an enormous pity that the legacy of Eduard van Beinum is in danger of being forgotten and overlooked today. Dogged by ill-health, he was dismissed as Principal Conductor of the London Philharmonic Orchestra after only two seasons in 1949 because the orchestra were concerned about his health and he died less than ten years later of a fatal heart attack on the podium rehearsing the Concertgebouw in Brahms First Symphony when he was 59 years old. Personally, I have long admired and counted his recording of the Bruckner Eighth Symphony as amongst the very

best of the many recordings available of that work and this live radio broadcast of the Mahler Seventh is likewise equally remarkable, even if allowances need to be made for the 1958 sonics, which are perfectly listenable save for some boomy timpani. Of special note is the playing of the orchestra: poised, confident and powerful, reflecting their proud heritage with Mahler's music, albeit with a work they hadn't performed since the 1934/35 season – just compare them in this work with the Berlin PO from 1992 (no mean outfit) in the studio under Bernard Haitink, if you are in any doubt as to what I mean.

With a running time of some seventy-two minutes, this (like the aforementioned Bruckner) is another taut and fiery reading, although it certainly does not feel as rushed or hurried as perhaps Scherchen does in Toronto in 1965 (see 1950). Only perhaps in the second *Nachtmusik*, which is despatched in 10m 25s, is the tempo a fraction too fast – it lacks the languor of Barbirolli, for example - but that aside, this is a remarkable reading, as focused as Rosbaud's, if with more flair and flamboyance. If perhaps it lacks the unique character of Barbirolli's reading (see below, 1960), or the colours of Scherchen in the studio (see 1950), it compensates with better orchestral playing and greater drive than both. An important document: 8/10

1960

John Barbirolli

1960 October 20th – Hallé and BBC Northern Symphony Orchestras (Live Mono – BBC Legends/JB Society) ** [REVIEW](#)

It's quite astonishing to think this live Mahler Seventh is a composite from two performances on two consecutive nights that featured Nielsen's Fifth Symphony, no less, as its first half! For the occasion, two orchestras were combined, specifically Barbirolli's own, the Hallé, as well as the BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra and there is certainly a palpable and tremendous sense of occasion as a result. The whole concert has now been released on compact disc by the JB Society, but readers may find it easier to obtain via its BBC Legends issue, where it is coupled instead with a further live performance of Bruckner's Ninth Symphony – there is negligible difference in the sound on each, which is clear, late 1950's radio mono.

Considering the length of the concert, as well as the unfamiliarity of all the music featured, the orchestral playing is actually rather good and fully projects Barbirolli's vision of the score in a way that you doubt a planned 1971 recording with the same conductor with the Berlin Philharmonic would have matched. In fact, this is one most emotionally-charged readings of the score that you will probably encounter, full of romantic ardour. If Scherchen in Toronto {see 1950} takes his cue from the end of the Sixth with a reading teetering on manic desperation, Barbirolli is instead more wistful, more loving, the calm after the storm that ended the previous symphony, gently moving from darkness to light - this is a leisurely reading lasting some eighty-four minutes, a unique, but fully convincing rendition of Mahler's score. The first *Nachtmusik* is delicate and whimsical, the marches and dances gently humorous, whilst the *scherzo* is again playful, rather than sinister - the shadows are still there, but are just not as spiteful as under other conductors. The second *Nachtmusik* is languid and warm and ends like a summer's dawn in Tuscany, the guitar and mandolin exploited by the conductor eager to fulfil Mahler's *amoroso* instruction, which results in the music making that absolutely glows with affection throughout its sixteen-minute duration. In the final movement, Barbirolli eschews the basic excitement pursued by some conductors, by adopting a slightly steadier tempo than usual, seemingly taking a cue from *Die Meistersinger*, the emphasis more on jubilation and festivities rather than rip-roaring excitement. It is an approach justified by the coda which brings the whole thing home with an almost overwhelmingly sense of tremendous optimism, even if I

thought the addition of the bass drum on the final note of all was a bit too much of a good thing, not least for being a split-second late in its execution.

Overall then, this is a very great recording which demands to be heard by all Mahlerians. It showcases Barbirolli's Mahler at its absolute best and is my favourite Mahler Seventh in the mono 'historical' category: 9/10

1964

Maurice Abravanel

December 1964 – Utah Symphony Orchestra (Studio Stereo - Vanguard) [REVIEW](#)

It's something of a surprise to find that the second ever studio recording of this symphony comes from as late as 1964; furthermore, it comes from Utah of all places, which is only compounded by the fact that this was the second instalment of what eventually became a full cycle from this conductor and orchestra, which had started the year before with the *Symphony of a Thousand*. Maurice Abravanel's work with the Utah Symphony Orchestra is still remembered with much affection and respect in the Beehive State and this recording of Mahler's Seventh Symphony may well have been remembered with more reverence had Leonard Bernstein not taped his classic version in New York the following year. What we do have is a very fine interpretation, suitably spooky at times, with the opening of the first *Nachtmusik* notably haunting. Elsewhere, the clear but lightweight sound does not flatter the Utah strings nor the somewhat breathy tenor horn, and while I appreciated the antiphonally divided violins, in the final movement the whole orchestra lacks the heft and sheer panache to do the music justice, plus the tension sags whenever the music is at its quietest. I think this is a worthy: 6/10

1965

Leonard Bernstein

1965 December 14-1^a – New York Philharmonic Orchestra (Studio Stereo – CBS Sony) [REVIEW](#) **

1974 October 8-9 – Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra (DVD Stereo – Deutsche Grammophon)

1981 May 13 – Orchestre de Paris (Live Stereo – Saint Laurent Studios)

1985 Nov 25 – Dec 3 – New York Philharmonic Orch (Live Digital – Deutsche Grammophon) [REVIEW](#)

For any person reading this article from page 1 to the end, you may like to know that at this was final section written for the original version, published in December 2022. Since Leonard Bernstein's name is so closely linked to Mahler's and his vision of this composer's music is so compelling, it is sometimes difficult not to feel that his interpretation is the only way it can be performed, so I left Lenny until last. Here are my thoughts:

I do actually remember the first time I encountered Bernstein's 1965 recording of Mahler's Seventh Symphony. At the time I thought I was familiar with the music, having learnt the score from Klaus Tennstedt's studio recording with the London Philharmonic, which was then joined in my collection by Bernstein's second recording for Deutsche Grammophon, as well as Georg Solti's with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, both of which had impressed me at the time very much. The point is, this 1965 reading impressed me more than all three of them; much more.

It is hard to quite articulate what makes this recording so special, but it is there in the opening bars, the dark and heavy sound produced by the New York Philharmonic players creating a dense and claustrophobic atmosphere, that is propelled along by an audibly galvanised orchestra. It is that sense of how every interpretive decision being taken by the performers in this recording not only sounds right, but is supremely logical too. There are so many examples of this – in the opening movement, it is the energy of the opening *allegro con fuoco* section which then provides the greatest possible contrast to when the religious vision section begins. Or how the *Scherzo* is not just scary, but vicious too which then makes its central *trio* all the more consoling as a result. Even when Bernstein does something unusual, such as the very slow way he starts the (now unfashionably lengthy fourteen minute) *Nachtmusik II*, he makes the harps sound they too are strumming along with the guitar, conjuring up images of a lovelorn youth serenading the object of his desire beneath her bedroom window, as a few bars later the soft trills on the cellos sound like leaves gently rustling in the night's soft breeze. It is beyond magical, an achievement made even more extraordinary when you consider this is only the third commercial recording made of the work. It continues into the final movement, where there is no question that it is triumphant, since Bernstein and his players clearly believe that to be so in every bar. Just before the coda, Mahler marks in the score *Feierlich - noch etwas mässiger* (solemn – still somewhat moderate [bars 506 c.14m50s]) which in this performance has the New York Philharmonic brass blazing as if a shaft of light has been shone down from heaven itself. Even if the unmarked crescendo in the penultimate bar is not marked in the score, somehow Bernstein is able to pull it off as it does not sound out of place in such music. Perhaps at this point you may be assuming that I rather rate this performance, but the plain truth of the matter is that after having auditioned over 130 other recordings of this symphony over two years, it is something to behold that this ancient and pioneering account from 1965 is, if not head and shoulders over all others, still unmatched after all this time. Throughout this eighty-minute recording, there is a magic and a burning belief in every bar that is almost unique – it is Bernstein at his unmatched best and this recording is a mandatory acquisition for anyone remotely interested in this symphony and Mahler.

When a few years ago, the New York Times listed what they considered to be the Top Ten Mahler Recordings of all Time, Bernstein's second recording of the Seventh Symphony was nominated over the original, first recording. There is absolutely no denying that this is a fine recording and is, of course, in better sound than before, fuller and richer, with more impact. Personally, I have long thought that Bernstein's second cycle could often be slightly self-conscious, *The Conductor's Last Words on The Music*, or *The Official Portrait of Mahler by Leonard Bernstein*. However, self-conscious or not, there is rarely a dull Bernstein Mahler performance and this one is still one of the better entries of the second cycle. In many respects, it is very similar to the 1965, although every movement has put on weight and all are slightly slower, but it is only really the opening *Adagio* that is noticeably slower than before – and is not able to replicate the intensity of the earlier recording either. Some may well prefer the later reading for its better sonics, but for that benefit (and there is little wrong with the sound of the 1965 account, especially in its latest remastering) you would be sacrificing the extraordinary sense of discovery and excitement from the earlier reading – and I, for one, am not prepared to give that up, nor do I advise you to, either.

In between these two audio-only recordings are the film from Vienna and an extraordinary concert from Paris. Readers may well be very surprised to learn that in this survey of nearly 140 recordings of Mahler's Seventh Symphony, only two feature French orchestras – ironically, the very last recording of all from 2019, featuring Alexandre Bloch and his Lille Orchestra - and this one. I do find it rather strange how orchestras from France so rarely feature in recordings of Mahler's works (it was the same in my *Conspectus of the First Symphony*), but this recording is also notable for Bernstein conducting the *Orchestre de Paris*, not his usual favoured French ensemble *L'Orchestre Nationale de France*. It is interesting to speculate on the backstory to this – when the *Orchestre de Paris* was first formed in 1967, Charles Munch was its first Principal Conductor, but sadly died suddenly shortly afterwards. Herbert von Karajan then became the orchestra's Music Director until 1971, when he

was succeeded by Georg Solti; both of them were big rivals to Bernstein, who probably conducted and recorded with the “other” orchestra in Paris as a consequence. I am not aware of Bernstein directing this ensemble on any other occasion, so it is an important historical document if only for that reason. Curiously, the results do not quite live up to expectations. In spite of it being virtually the same interpretation as with the later NYPO/DG recording, here too much sounds of it sounds mannered, even self-indulgent at times, particularly the very drawn out close of the second *Nachtmusik*, as well as the during the quieter episodes in the last movement. It seems to my ears that the orchestra and conductor are still trying to understand one another, as although ensemble is on the whole fine, there is often some hesitancy on the players part and in the first movement you can also hear Bernstein shouting instructions to them. Add to that the odd split note, the occasional strange balances (the snare drum leaps out of the sound-picture at the end of the first movement, and the mandolin is far too heavily spotlighted), that even in decent 1980’s radio sound, this means that this recording is probably for the curious and completists only.

It is interesting to note when turning to the 1974 filmed account with the Vienna Philharmonic that Bernstein’s interpretation is already much closer to the later New York Philharmonic version than the tauter reading from 1965. What this film perhaps demonstrates more than anything is the conductor’s almost unique ability to extract the most glorious sonorities from the VPO’s string section, something only Karajan could match at the time, even if the results the two conductors achieved were very different. In this performance you first encounter this early on in the opening movement just after the fiery *Allegro con fuoco* section when the music suddenly switches to something more peaceful, the Viennese strings softly consoling, like a priest conferring benediction upon a particularly unruly congregation. The film also shows how Humphrey Burton’s direction demonstrates an uncanny ability to marry dramatic effect allied to an astonishing working knowledge of the score that no other film of this Mahler symphony can rival, even if they have better, more modern sound. However, as a performance, this Vienna account lacks the conviction of either of the New York recordings and the sound is no match for them either, even if it is always a pleasure to watch a fine conductor galvanising a great orchestra in a way the music conservatories would never teach today.

Overall, Mahler’s Seventh Symphony shows Bernstein’s way with this composer at his unrivalled best. For me, both accounts with the NYPO are great recordings – it’s just that the first one from 1965 is probably the greatest of all, possibly matched only by Michael Tilson Thomas’s own first recording with the London Symphony Orchestra (see 1997). Like that London recording, Bernstein’s first account is the one I recommend and is for me is: 9.5/10

1966

Václav Jiráček

1966 tbc – Czech Radio Symphony Orchestra (Studio Stereo – Olympic)

(The Mahler Foundation website has this recording listed as being made in 1969. However, since Václav Jiráček died in an air crash in 1966, this would probably have been when the original LPs were issued rather than the actual recording date. I have therefore listed it under 1966, but note that this is no more than an educated guess.)

Václav Jiráček (1920-1966) was a pupil of Václav Talich and had an active and high-profile career in (what was then) Czechoslovakia before his early death, particularly conducting ballets, and was distinguished enough to be entrusted to conduct the world premiere of Shostakovich’s Second Piano Concerto at the Prague Spring Festival in 1957. This recording of Mahler’s Seventh appears to have been set down at around the same time as the same composer’s Sixth Symphony with the same

forces, although neither recording has been released to date on compact disc (to the best of my knowledge) and collectors are most likely to be able to acquire them in the guise of their early 1970's releases on the Olympic label, which was distributed by Everest. The sound, albeit on ancient vinyl, does suggest early stereo and has a fairly restricted dynamic range, which may also have been recorded live – there are several more-than-audible coughs in the central movements, and too many split brass notes which really would have been retaken if in a studio (the second horn repeatedly cracks at the opening of the first *Nachtmusik*). There is no applause however and the cover seems to indicate that it is a studio recording.

Jiráček's reading runs to just over eighty mins and is especially successful in the central *scherzo*, which is taken at a moderate tempo that allows the musicians in the orchestra space to characterise the music very well – the strings slither around with great relish and the inner detail emerges surprisingly well, although the clarinet seems to have seriously got lost in the score at around bars 163 - 171, leaping out of the sound-picture without any shame, like some demented squealing goblin; I suppose it is in the spirit of the score, if not actually in the score. The second *Nachtmusik* is also particularly languorous and if there is a surprising amount of portamento for the early 1960's, this may not have been out of place in the early 1900's. However, there is no getting away from the rather lightweight sounding orchestra with its split trumpet notes at the beginning and end of the final movement; furthermore, the conductor's handling of the first movement's many transitions sounds both clumsy and hesitant, as if the orchestra does not know what he wanted, or has not been properly rehearsed. In the end, these faults combined with the (current) poor sonics do not add up to a very convincing rendition, so this cannot really be recommended: 4/10

1967

Bruno Maderna

1967 May 27 – Vienna Symphony Orchestra (Live Mono – Saint Laurent Studios)

1971 Dec 24 – Milan Radio Symphony Orchestra (Live Stereo – Saint Laurent Studios)

Had the Venetian-born composer-conductor Bruno Maderna not died of lung cancer at the comparatively early age of 53 in 1973, his reputation and memory might have grown to match that of his near contemporary, Pierre Boulez, who also forged a successful career as both a composer and conductor of significant repute. Instead, today he is little remembered, in spite of much music that was written to honour his memory, including Boulez's *Ritual in Memoriam* and Berio's *Calmo*, such was the esteem in which he was held by his peers.

A child prodigy, Maderna was conducting the La Scala orchestra at the age of 7 and was the soloist in a public performance of Bruch's First Violin Concerto not long thereafter, whilst his teachers included such luminaries as Gian Francesco Malipiero for composition, as well as Hermann Scherchen for conducting. At one time, he was the Principal Guest Conductor of the Chicago Symphony, no less and there are a number of recordings of him performing Mahler, including these two live performances of the Seventh Symphony.

Unfortunately, the earliest of these with the Vienna Symphony, can be passed over very quickly. This one-off live performance was part of the Vienna Festwochen in 1967, where the Vienna Symphony Orchestra performed all of Mahler's symphonies under a number of guest conductors. Whether due to limited rehearsal time or otherwise, the playing here is too often scrappy with the orchestra apparently unable to comprehend, or understand Maderna's somewhat individual vision of the score. It is not a particularly flattering example of Maderna's art, nor a good entry in the Mahler Seventh discography.

Better played and recorded in close but clear stereo – and at seventy-eight minutes, is some two minutes slower than the early performance from Vienna - is the live performance with the Milan Radio Symphony orchestra. This reveals Maderna to be a highly individual interpreter, perhaps one befitting that of a composer taking the original score as the starting point and then improvising on the music thereon – after all, isn't that is what Mahler himself used to do? My observations include a rather Slavic wobble on the first horn in the second movement and an extremely languorous reading of the second *Nachtmusik*. However, Maderna does also play fast and loose with the instructions in the score, if not necessarily with its spirit, especially in the last movement, where in lesser hands the various disparate elements might well have sounded disjointed with such an approach; instead, somehow, they all hang together and just about convince. A typical example of this would be the very opening of the final movement, which in this reading is taken very slowly and grandly and yet when the same material is repeated later on to introduce the coda, it is taken at twice the original speed. It is a fascinating, if wilful account, almost earning a wild card nomination. One to be investigated by experienced Mahlerians maybe, rather than for mainstream listening: 7/10

1968

Václav Neumann

1968 May – Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra (Studio Stereo – Berlin Classics)

1977 Nov 11 & 1978 Jan 23 – Czech PO (Studio Stereo – Supraphon)

I often think that Václav Neumann's contribution to the Mahler revolution in the 1960's has long been overlooked. At a time when Haitink, Bernstein, Kubelík, Solti and Abravanel were all recording their own Mahler cycles, Neumann was busy recording them as well with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, of which he was chief conductor between 1964 and 1968. Perhaps the reason for this is because only symphonies 5,6,7 and 9 were set down in the 1960's in Leipzig, recordings which have largely been forgotten, or perhaps overlooked; as a consequence of Neumann's complete set, which was recorded some ten years later with the Czech PO for Supraphon, when the Mahler "boom" was in full swing. Another reason could also be evidenced by listening to the two recordings we have of him conducting the *Song of the Night*.

Actually, the first of these with the Leipzig Orchestra is very good indeed, the first movement exceptionally so, where the many transitions in the score are handled masterfully. Aided and abetted by fine sonics, allied to the rich and intense playing of the orchestra, this movement alone is a very fine achievement. It is therefore unfortunate that the central movements aren't quite on such an exalted level – they are not bad by any means, just a touch under-characterised when compared to the finest versions. The final movement of this seventy-five-minute recording, focuses more on the splendour of this music rather than rip-roaring excitement, but it brings the whole thing home most satisfactorily. Overall, this is a very good account of the work, only falling short when compared to the finest.

I was therefore very much looking forward to hearing Neumann's remake with the Czech PO some nine years later with that orchestra's innate understanding of this composer, but alas, my expectations were not met. By and large, Neumann's interpretation has not changed much with pretty much same tempos as before (albeit with one important exception) and indeed, the Czech PO live up to their storied reputation by bringing all the character missing from the earlier performance to the first *Nachtmusik* and central *scherzo*. However, the conductor is not on such fine form as before – in the first movement, the second subject may be taken at a daringly slow tempo, but the whole movement does not hang together so well as it did in Leipzig. Far more ruinously is the tempo taken for the second *Nachtmusik* – at over seventeen minutes, not only is it some four minutes slower than before, but is also longer than other notable "slow renditions" - it is over a minute longer than Barbirolli and even more than two minutes slower than the comparatively flowing Klemperer;

Boulez (who is uncommendable anyway) is a zippy sub-eleven minutes. However, whereas with Barbirolli at a similar tempo, the music is held aloft by his sheer love for the score, here it is loved to death, with even the Czech PO struggling to make it sound persuasive. Whether or not the whole thing was recorded in the same order as the symphony, the enervated mood of this performance of the second *Nachtmusik* then overflows into a low-key account of the final movement. After the promise of Leipzig, this remake is a significant disappointment and so, in my opinion, the representative recording of Neumann in this work has to be his first, rather fine effort from Leipzig which earns from me: 7/10

Otto Klemperer

1968 September 18-21/24-28th – New Philharmonia Orchestra (Studio Stereo – EMI) [REVIEW](#) **

With a running time of over a hundred minutes, had this performance been by any other conductor than Otto Klemperer, who had already made indisputably great recordings of other Mahler works and furthermore was the only conductor in this survey to actually see Mahler himself conduct the Seventh Symphony, then this recording would be dismissed as, at best, hugely eccentric. To compound the problem, this conductor is also responsible for probably one of the fastest *Resurrection Symphony* performances of all on record (with the Concertgebouw, live in 1951) as well as one of the slowest (with the New Philharmonia, live in 1971) - so how much importance should we attach to the (unique and very slow) tempos adopted by this sole witness to Mahler's own conducting of this work in his studio account of the *Song of the Night*, is anyone's guess.

It has been said that there is a very thin line between "slow genius" and "perversely slow" and this recording under Klemperer somehow sits bang on that line – it all sounds very wrong yet, bizarrely at the same time, still carries conviction, as well as a unique authority. There is also some weird fascination with hearing the music played like this, in a performance that lumbers towards its final bars some half an hour after other performances have long packed up and gone home, a sensation that is not dissimilar to watching a car crash in slow motion. It almost seems irrelevant to mention amongst all this carnage that the sound is actually rather good, as is the orchestral playing, but the plain fact of the matter is that whenever I listen to this recording, there are always moments where I honestly feel as if I am listening to a newly discovered work by Mahler, so different it is from the norm. It's all very grim and glacially slow, a recording that every Mahlerian has to hear at least once in their lives, even if perhaps they may never want to listen to it again. Please don't ask me to grade this one for you, as I cannot; it is probably the wildest wild card of all

1969

Jascha Horenstein

1969 August 29 – New Philharmonia Orchestra (Stereo Live – BBC Legends) [REVIEW](#)

It is good that we have a recording of this most mercurial of Mahler symphonies by such a distinguished Mahlerian as Jascha Horenstein, even if there are two rather large obstacles any prospective listener needs to overcome right at the very start. The first of these concern the sound: this performance, taken from London's summer music festival the Promenade Concerts, was taped in the venue where nearly all the performances take place, namely the Royal Albert Hall, the greatest venue on earth for gargantuan musical works such as Havergal Brian's *Gothic Symphony*, Mahler's *Symphony of a Thousand*, or Berlioz's *Grande Messe des Morts*, but equally so the worst for anything smaller including, as on this occasion, Mahler's comparatively miniature Seventh Symphony. It is quite possible that in fact the original tapes sounded very good indeed, but it appears as if these

have been lost and what we have, even on the official BBC Legends release, is probably an amateur off-the-air recording instead and as a consequence the sound is a little distant and diffuse, with boomy timpani and bass drum. In fact, earlier releases (on Music and Arts, for example) actually sound better than the BBC release, even if they are still disappointingly unsatisfactory.

The other issue is that in this one-off live performance, ensemble is a bit shaky at times, including the very opening bars which are, quite frankly a mess and only serve to unnerve the tenor horn soloist who not only fluffs his opening entrance, but then proceeds to have a bad night thereafter.

Of course, if the listener is able to overcome these two issues and listen carefully to the performance, they will be well rewarded, for there are many fine attributes to Horenstein's reading. In particular, the genius of this conductor in Mahler was his ability to create atmosphere, which in the spectral score that is the Seventh Symphony is all to the gain. In particular, I enjoyed the way he gradually infused the haunted first *Nachtmusik* with an eerie and creepy atmosphere in preparation for the macabre *scherzo*. For example, from around bar 141 in the score, he gets his horns to play very softly with the cellos and basses tiptoeing underneath the melody like some ghostly demon in the shadows. Likewise in the second *Nachtmusik*, Horenstein cleverly infuses the *trio* with an infectious lilt that points to the more riotous merry making of the final movement, the latter which is played with much spirit by the New Philharmonia Orchestra, with the coda especially effective.

There are some who believe this to be a great performance which would not have been improved by being recorded the studio. I beg to differ, pointing out the inevitable split notes and occasionally wobbly ensemble which would inevitably have been corrected. Furthermore, I think the final movement would have had made an even greater impression had it been better recorded with more impactful sound. What we have here therefore is something akin to a painting of an old master that badly needs restoring to reveal its true colours and full greatness, a recording that is more *historical* than it needs to be. Fans of Horenstein and the Mahler Seventh need not hesitate, but the more generalised collector needs to be more circumspect: 8/10

Bernard Haitink

1969 November 16: Concertgebouw Orchestra (Stereo Live – RCO Live)

1969 December 19-22: Concertgebouw Orchestra (Stereo Studio – Philips)

1982 December 6 – 13: Concertgebouw Orchestra (Digital Studio – Philips)

1983 September 23: Concertgebouw Orchestra (Digital Live - HDTT) [REVIEW](#)

1985 December 25: Concertgebouw Orchestra (Digital DVD – Philips)

1992 May 29-30: Berlin PO (Digital DVD – Philips)

1992 June : Berlin PO (Digital Studio – Philips)

2009 January 17: Berlin PO (Digital DVD – BPO Concerthall)

When writing the conspectus for Mahler's First Symphony, I couldn't help but notice how once upon a time, comparing complete Mahler symphony recordings was rather simpler than it is today, as the listener was offered the exuberance and volatility of Bernstein on one hand, the sonic blockbusters of Solti on the other, or Kubelík teasing out the more subtle local colourings. Haitink was the "straight man" of the gang of four, affording the music much refinement, dignity and good taste – in his take of the Seventh Symphony, even the things that go bump in the night during the central *scherzo* are a super-polite and a respectable bunch. The problem with this approach is that by comparison to other conductors, Haitink can sometimes sound dull. I doubted whether Haitink's Mahlerian style was probably heard at its best in the First Symphony and now I have similar thoughts with the Seventh, albeit not quite so much.

If Haitink's *style* never really changed with this symphony, his interpretation most certainly did – particularly his view of the more introspective and shadowy moments of the score. The two readings

from 1969 illustrates this quite neatly and finds him to be much more indulgent in the concert-hall during these moments with a reading lasting around seventy-nine minutes, whereas in the studio the following month he takes a much tauter seventy-six minutes with little, or no lingering allowed. Conversely, in the studio remake in 1982, those 'shadowy' moments are taken very slowly indeed, adding up to a total playing time of eighty-one minutes, whereas the two live recordings in the following two years return to the more conventional seventy-seven/seventy-eight minutes. In these surveys such divergences can usually attributed to a conductor being in front of different orchestras, but clearly this isn't the case here, as they are all with the Concertgebouw. When Haitink did change orchestra, the earlier readings with the Berliners clocked in around eighty minutes, but the final one from 2009 is the longest of all at over eighty-four minutes. In short, there is no definitive Haitink interpretation, even if there is a consistent style.

One does have to wonder, though, if Haitink's approach initially was aided and abetted by being at the helm of one of the great Mahler ensembles, the Concertgebouw of Amsterdam, as the first two recordings listed above in Berlin are significant disappointments and can be dismissed quite early on here. When Rattle took over as principal conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic in 2002, he was amazed to find many members of the orchestra who still regarded Richard Strauss as a finer composer than Mahler, even after some fifteen years of Abbado leading them. The recording from 1992 comes early into the BPO's tenure with Abbado and finds neither Haitink nor the orchestra at their best. Of course, the BPO had previously made some famous recordings of Mahler under Karajan, plus a late live Mahler Nine with Bernstein and a couple already with Abbado, but in both the studio recording and the DVD of live concerts made around the same time they sound non-plussed and bemused by Mahler's *Song of the Night*.

There are no such problems in Amsterdam where, on all the listed recordings, the playing is assured and confident to a remarkable degree. It seems to me that Haitink's Mahler underwent some changes from the 1980's onwards, slowing down and often sounding implacable, almost monolithic and this can certainly be evidenced by his two studio recordings of the Seventh from Amsterdam, where in 1982, the performance is some five to six minutes slower than before at eighty-one minutes. There are moments in the later recording when the more reflective parts of the score are taken very slowly indeed, but such is Haitink's and his players' concentration, those passages never drag, although they also don't quite add up to a satisfying whole, either. The earlier recording is a more conventional seventy-six minutes and showcases Haitink's unique alchemy of restraint and refinement with this composer very well indeed – it is undeniably an impressive achievement, although you always get the impression that he has his players at the end of a very tight leash. It is only on the very final chord or all, which shoots out the speakers and hits the listener on the solar plexus in a way that would make even Georg Solti proud, that you feel he has finally let them loose. The 1969 live recording made the month before the first studio account, is available in a RCO anthology box and contains more risk taking and indulgencies within a similar interpretation, but the sound is no match for the results achieved by the excellent Philips engineers in the studio which, without the inevitable split notes of live performances, remains the more satisfying and representative experience.

Conversely, the two live recordings from the early 1980s are the pick of the bunch. Broadly, they are the same interpretation from the studio in 1969 (if, curiously, not the 1982 studio recording) and probably showcases Haitink's tenure of the great Amsterdam ensemble at its peak. Both recordings may be difficult to obtain, but the Kerstmatinee is the one with the slightly better sound and is my pick of the two, whether on CD or DVD. The film from Christmas Day is a model of restraint and well-judged camera angles, with the exception of the final two minutes of the whole piece where, with the whole orchestra going at full throttle, it seemed a strange decision by the director to focus exclusively on the somewhat wild, if evidently effective, gestures from the podium.

In Haitink's final recorded outing at Berlin in 2009, currently only available via the orchestra's digital concert hall, the restraint and refinement are taken to an extraordinary level, the music-making patient and long-breathed, the inner-detail at once revealing and perfectly dovetailed within the musical texture. After the Abbado era and well into Rattle's tenure as principal conductor, the Berlin Philharmonic now plays the music with immeasurably more understanding than they did for Haitink in their earlier recordings for Philips. This won't be a performance to please everyone – it is as if Haitink has carved a monument out of beautiful marble, exquisite in its detail, cool and yet at all times fascinating and super-intense for the entire near eighty-five-minute duration. It is a profound achievement, perhaps the culmination of a lifetime's association with this work, with the slow tempos first hinted at in the studio in 1982 now fully incorporated within a fully unified vision, but it is too left-field for a mainstream prime recommendation.

With Haitink in Mahler, he always seems best on Christmas Day and so for me the representative recording of him in this work remains the Kerstmatinee performance of 1985: 8/10

1970

Rafael Kubelík

(1960 Nov 19 & 20: Vienna PO (Live Mono – TBC)

1970 Nov 27-29: Bavarian RSO (Studio Stereo – DG) [REVIEW](#)**

1976 Feb 6: Bavarian RSO (Live Stereo – Audite)

1981 Feb 28: New York PO (Live Stereo – NYP Edition)

Turning to Kubelík's 1970 studio account from Bavaria, the opening bars are like dipping your head into a bucket of cold water; those juddering strings, which are supposed to represent the oars of a boat passing through water, are here played very forthrightly and literally, with no attempt at all to create "atmosphere". Instead, Kubelík observes that the notes are annotated *staccato* and also brings out the colours of the woodwind, especially the clarinets and bassoons, which are often buried under the more impressionistic, string-dense hue conjured by other conductors at this point. It is one of a number of unique characteristics of Kubelík's interpretation which prove to be useful reference points later on. Another occurs at the end of first movement, where Mahler marks the score *Ganzes Orchester schnell abdampfen*, that broadly means that the whole orchestra has to quickly 'dampen down', which most conductors take to mean no reverberation on the final note, but Kubelík, almost uniquely, takes to mean that the whole of the last bar has to be taken at a much slower tempo than the ones before. In the studio, the *staccato* marking is observed much more closely than in the two subsequent live recordings, whereas the slowing down of the final bar of the first movement is only repeated in New York - not so in the middle live 1976 performance from Bavaria.

Returning to the studio account, the vibrato-rich opening tenor horn solo indicates that this is a performance teeming with Eastern European colours and warmth. Time and again, Kubelík illuminates the inner voices of the score with a subtlety and gentleness that seems lightyears away from Bernstein's more extrovert approach, or Solti's in-yer-face orchestral virtuosity, equally valid those different approaches may be. In the first movement, for example there is real tenderness and warmth during the more introspective episodes – this is a more humane, even more human Mahler than perhaps we encounter elsewhere. Occasionally it does sound small-scale when compared to others – especially in the final movement, where the brass has to be reined in so all the woodwind detail can be heard. It is perhaps symbolic of Kubelík's overall approach, that I am often reminded in this final movement, that his recording of the complete *Die Meistersinger* with the same orchestra, is the top-choice of many reviewers, myself included – not for the brassy trumpet and drums pageantry here in the symphony, but for the sunlit lilting episodes in between which conjure up visions of

Mahler's Bohemian woods and fields. It is still exciting, but if you like your Mahler to sound cosmic, this may disappoint you slightly.

However, the glory of this studio account is the central *scherzo*. Marked *Schattenhaft* ("shadowy, ghost-like"), in Kubelík's hands the shadows aren't as sinister as some, but they are still eerie and ghostly. In particular, at a taut tempo all those runs on the antiphonally divided violins now make sense in a way that no other version comes close to matching, as the melody dazzlingly dances across whole the orchestra and not a bar goes by without the listener catching a hitherto unheard detail all perfectly positioned within a suitably spooky sound-picture. Like all great performances, when listening to it you just cannot imagine it being done any other way, or bettered.

This includes the live recording on Audite made some six years later where, with marginally slower tempos and a more reverberant acoustic, the overall achievement is not quite the same in the *scherzo*. This is a pity for, elsewhere, Kubelík and his players are more unbuttoned in their approach and slightly grander in their execution – no listener can complain about things being small-scaled here, even if the humane approach remains. As with all one-off live performances, there are the odd split notes in the brass and the tenor horn gets lost at one point in the first movement (at 6m 50s), but overall this is a remarkable achievement – if the studio account is my preferred recording, it is only because that *scherzo* is just so good.

Five years later in New York, the last recording we have available of Kubelík in this symphony is quite extraordinary, for possibly all the wrong reasons. I do not intend to make a habit of this, but the individual movement timings from the DG in the studio (which are very similar to the live Audite account) and the NYPO performance, are listed below to prove the point:

	BRSO/DG	NYPO
First Movement	19m:42s	24m:28s
Nachtmusik I	14m:46s	18m:40s
Scherzo	9m:24s	10m:50s
Nachtmusik II	12m:01s	14m:24s
Finale	16m:40s	18m:10s

There were times when I was listening to this performance that I seriously doubted whether Kubelík was actually on the podium and the recording had been mislabelled. Since all the various releases of this performance contain the same timings I can safely discount auditioning a mislabelled recording, which means that either the mastertape is misappropriated, or it is actually (and astonishingly) correct. There is also a musical clue – that final bar of the first movement is also played at a much slower tempo than the preceding ones, just as it was in the conductor's studio account in 1970, a feature almost unique to Kubelík. Quite how, or why, Kubelík thought fit to abandon the fleetness and colour of his earlier interpretations for this bored and heavy-footed trudge through the score, is anyone's guess. If his twenty-four-minute first movement does not quite aim to smash the land speed record of Klemperer's 1968 studio account of over twenty-seven minutes, it is still heavy-going – even if Haitink's final account from 2009 with the BPO (see above in 1969) was of a similar twenty-three minutes, at least he beguiled the listener's ears with moments of great beauty and intensity; here, everything sounds dull and lumbering. Perhaps we should be grateful that someone thought it suitable to release such a different take on this work by an indisputably great Mahler conductor, but this New York taping is for the curious only.

Likewise is the live concert performance from Vienna in 1960, which does exist although plans for a commercial release foundered for various reasons a few years back. This was an important date for the Vienna Philharmonic, as they had not performed the work since 1932 in a radio concert under Clemens Krauss (where is a time-travelling machine when you need one?) and only on two occasions previous to that, again with Krauss, and also with Felix Weingartner, both in 1916. I was therefore

very much looking forward to hearing this performance, not least since when I did my survey on Mahler's First Symphony, Kubelík's early 1954 Decca taping with the Vienna Philharmonic was one of my top choices – this orchestra's reputedly indifferent attitude towards Mahler (which is not wholly without validity) was firmly debunked in a recording of wonderful freshness and joy, allied with totally idiomatic playing. Intriguingly, there are very few differences with Kubelík's reading here in the Seventh Symphony, taped at the Musikverein, with that in the studio with the Bavarian RSO some ten years later (there is a marginally slower *Scherzo*, plus the whole of the final page of the first movement is played at a slower tempo to incorporate that emphasis on the final bar). Overall, it genuinely is not bad, even if lacks the panache of van Beinum's Concertgebouw reading (see 1958), the individuality of Barbirolli (see 1960), as well as the sense of discovery in Bernstein's New York studio account (see 1965), to name three from around the same time. Listening to it, you get a sense of an orchestra that is not entirely convinced by the first movement, but elsewhere appears to be under the spell of Kubelík's baton, responding idiomatically and with greater weight and grandeur than their colleagues at the BRSO. The sound is typical of a mono radio broadcast from the time and much care has been taken by the engineers to spotlight the solo violin, guitar and mandarin in the second *Nachtmusik* to ensure they are heard clearly, even if there is an odd balance here and there in other parts of the performance. Occasionally too, ensemble is a little shaky, especially during the more driven and turbulent episodes during the outer movements, but this is a fascinating document in the performing history of this symphony that one day may be more widely available.

So for me, in spite of some caveats mentioned above, it is Kubelík's studio account on DG that I think is the pick of the bunch – his *Scherzo* simply has to be heard by every Mahlerian: 8/10

William Steinberg

1970 December 18: Boston Symphony Orchestra (Studio Stereo – SLS)

It's often forgotten that while Leonard Bernstein did much pioneering work with Mahler's music in the US, particularly in New York, over in Boston Erich Leinsdorf was also doing equally fine work, recording a number of the symphonies for RCA, while at the same time Bernstein was also recording them for CBS (now Sony). Leinsdorf did not manage to record a whole cycle and was he able to take the Seventh with the Boston orchestra into the studio, nor am I aware of any other recording of him conducting the piece, but what we have here instead is a live, one-off radio broadcast by his successor at Boston, William Steinberg. I have come across Steinberg's Mahler before and have always been impressed – an early First Symphony with the Pittsburgh Symphony is superbly played at supersonic speeds, and a live *Resurrection Symphony* from Cologne (on ICA) is also very good indeed and features an especially fast, but white-hot first movement. The seventy-four minutes running time for this performance may lead you to think that certain parts of it may well be fast and furious too, but probably would not prepare you for just how broadly Steinberg opens the first movement. Where Steinberg is perhaps speedier than most is at those points in the opening movement where the music is quiet and tranquil, such as the central 'religious vision' section, which Steinberg keeps in tempo – there is no haunting repose here, as it is more a passionate lyrical interlude. Likewise, the second *Nachtmusik* is treated in the same way – but please do not misunderstand me; neither is treated coolly or tersely, instead both are shot through with a rare passion. The central *Scherzo* is paced steadily, Steinberg and his players happy to play up the things which go bump in the night here, even if on occasion some inner woodwind detail seems to go missing in the otherwise decent, if somewhat closely balanced, early stereo sound. Contrary to my expectations too, the final movement did not fly out of the traps either, Steinberg seemingly happy to conjure up a festival atmosphere, rather than to chase brilliance for brilliance's sake, as with Solti (see 1971). The whole thing is brought home to a rousing conclusion with enthusiastic applause from the audience, who have remained remarkably quiet, if not totally silent, up until that point.

This live recording is not without its flaws, but it says much about the Mahlerian legacy of Leinsdorf, as well as the excellence of Steinberg, that under their new chief the Boston Symphony plays extremely well by anybody's standards, before or since. Steinberg was no mean Mahlerian himself and the results here are always interesting and involving and while perhaps it is not quite a top recommendation, mainly due to the live sonics not being the equal of those in the studio by Haitink, Bernstein and Solti around the same time, it is certainly worth seeking out: 7/10

1971

Georg Solti

1971 May 12-14: Chicago SO (Studio Stereo – Decca)

When I did my *Conspectus* on Mahler's First Symphony, Georg Solti's early London Symphony account on Decca was one of my top recommendations, albeit with some small caveats that not for him were the home-spun charms of late Bruno Walter in this music. I see no reason to revise my conclusions now, nor my belief then that the middle-period Mahler symphonies may not respond so well to Solti's all-guns-blazin' approach. Not that there is much that is particularly wrong with this recording of *The Song of The Night* – at seventy-seven minutes and contrary to his reputation, Solti is not an especially hard-driven account of the score and there are certainly moments of great sensitivity and tenderness, as in in the central section of the first movement and the second *Nachtmusik*. He is also very observant and respectful of Mahler's various instructions and predictably, the playing of the Chicago orchestra is outstanding, plus the sound, furnished by Decca, is exemplary for one that's over half a century old, even if the latest CD transfers mercilessly exposes some instrumental spotlighting that otherwise must have sounded superb and unnoticeable on the original vinyl. Actually, my hopes were set high in the opening bars where the dark and ominous rumblings of the bass drum are brilliantly caught and lend a wonderfully claustrophobic and menacing air to the proceedings; however, thereafter I am not sure such haunting and shadowy music is best served by Solti's legions of muscular brass, brilliant woodwinds and glittering percussion. Moreover, the final movement has some clunking gear changes, largely due to Solti sprinting out of the blocks too fast at the starting gun, which does not help convince overall. This is important, as it takes us to the final bars of all, which are fabulously performed, but are more of an assault on the senses in the form of a turbo-charged technicolour concerto for orchestra, rather than that of elation at arriving at the end of a long journey from darkness to light, which is what it surely should be. I acknowledge that others may feel differently, but for me this recording, in spite of some good points, has too much sound and fury, signifying not very much: 7/10

1972

Antal Doráti

1972 Mar 8: Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra (Live Stereo – ADCS)

It may be a surprise to some people to learn just how much Antal Doráti championed Mahler during his lifetime, especially since he left such a large discography of recordings, none of which contained any Mahler. However, there exists live tapings of nearly all of the symphonies (except numbers Three and Eight), including this *Song of the Night* from Stockholm from the early 1970s. That said, it may just be possible that his Mahler was not noteworthy enough in an era of Bernstein, Kubelík Solti and Haitink, as well as many others, to warrant being taken into the studio and I do not find this live recording from 1972 persuades me otherwise.

It must first be noted just how good the sound is on this recording, not least since it was clearly taken from a cassette, but then again, as a result, there is also a fade-out midway through the *scherzo* for the obligatory side change, and a slightly compressed dynamic range throughout, as well as some pre-echo with the opening horn calls at the beginning of the first *Nachtmusik*. Perhaps these could have been overlooked had the performance been exceptional, but sadly it is not. Doráti is often remembered for being the most excellent of orchestral trainers and this performance took place just after midway through Doráti's tenure as principal conductor of the Stockholm Philharmonic (1966-1974), but there were certainly times during this seventy-nine minute performance where ensemble is a rather shaky – the very opening is a little unsteady, as is much of the *scherzo*, plus the tempos adopted for the close of the first movement as well as the final one are cautious and steady, which musically results in everything sounding a little heavy-going and effortful. Conversely, the lead-up to and the whole of the central 'religious vision' episode in the first movement is tauter and more brilliant rather than haunting or ecstatic, which indicates to me that the conductor did not feel confident enough to vary the pulse of the performance to let the music blossom naturally. That said, the two *Nachtmusiks* are well done, the first nicely characterful, the second swift and well-detailed, but the whole thing is acknowledged by an otherwise commendably quiet audience with polite applause, which kind of reinforces my own impressions. This is more an important entry in Doráti's discography, rather than that of Mahler's Seventh Symphony, I would contend: 5.5/10

1975

Kirill Kondrashin

1975 Mar 3: Leningrad PO (Studio Stereo – Melodiya)

1979 Nov 29: Concertgebouw Orch (Live Stereo – Tahra) [REVIEW](#)

Kirill Kondrashin's importance to Mahler, especially in Russia, can never be under-estimated. If he did not quite complete a full Mahler Symphony cycle (the symphonies with chorus were both omitted, probably for practical reasons), and furthermore had to contend with variable orchestral playing and even more variable Soviet sonics, the results he achieved are nearly always exceptionally fine, not least when compared to the efforts of his compatriots, Evgeny Svetlanov and Valery Gergiev, to name two. Perhaps had a complete cycle been completed (as with Shostakovich) then maybe his subsequent reputation in this music would have been higher, but his way with the Seventh Symphony has been much celebrated down the years.

I think many, having noticed the total time of seventy-four minutes for this studio account of the *Song of the Night*, may well then be rather surprised at just how broadly Kondrashin takes the opening *adagio* of the first movement. Indeed, he is actually rather broad in all of the first three movements, with only the second *Nachtmusik*, taken as a swift and mercurial twelve-minute intermezzo, followed by the finale, which tears through the score like a good-natured tornado, bringing the total timing down to something below average. Somehow this final movement just avoids the manic haste which so blighted the similarly fast Scherchen in his 1965 live taping in Toronto (see 1953), as well as Herbert Kegel's live performance in Tokyo (see 1985), two others with comparable timings. Kondrashin's cause is slightly hampered by typical Soviet sonics of the era with its reverberant acoustic, but on this occasion he was fortunate that he was in front of what was probably the Soviet Union's finest orchestra, the Leningrad Philharmonic, rather than the less satisfactory Moscow Philharmonic which feature on his other Mahler recordings. They make the finale a success that it was not in the hands of Scherchen and Kegel.

It seems to my ears that the miracle of Kondrashin's interpretation of this symphony is his uncanny ability to manage all the transitions with a subtlety which perhaps the music doesn't deserve. If the

opening *adagio* is indeed slow, the second subject is then taken at a more usual tempo, but the transition to it, as well as the 'religious vision' section further on, is taken with an organic rightness that is remarkable. Further on in the symphony, the trio of the *Scherzo* is taken at such a contrasting tempo to the opening material it is hard to imagine how it would work, but somehow it does. In both recordings, there is real swagger and panache to the marches in the first two movements.

That said, however well the Leningraders played, turning to the Concertgebouw performance a few years later for more or less the same reading, is like swapping a Soviet ZIL for a Rolls Royce. This is not to criticise the Soviet orchestra, who actually play better than many other ensembles in this survey, but to rather emphasise just how good in this music is the Concertgebouw Orchestra which, even in the context of a one-off live performance, is able not just to meet Kondrashin's challenging tempos with consummate artistry (the odd split brass note apart), but even manage to knock a couple of minutes off of the total running time in Leningrad. It almost seems unfair that the engineers, working in the hugely sympathetic acoustic of Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, are also able to trump the efforts of their Soviet colleagues in the studio only a few years earlier, but they do. The balances are excellent all the way through, the guitar and mandolin in the second *Nachtmusik* clearly audible and if the audience is commendably quiet, they certainly make their appreciation known at the end.

It does have to be said that if you prefer the second *Nachtmusik* to be taken with some languor, as well as the final movement to have at least some pomp and ceremony rather than just rip-roaring excitement, then neither Kondrashin recording may be ideal for you - he is not going to entertain his listeners during his party in the final movement with images of Bohemian Woods and Fields, as Kubelík and Mácal do so well in their respective readings (see 1970 and 2007). However, there is something special in the air at the Amsterdam concert which is evidenced by this orchestra being on top of its game – and more: quite how the ensemble stays together in the final movement is almost beyond belief. This is a record of an especially great evening in the concert hall: 8/10

1978

Klaus Tennstedt

1978 Mar 23-25: *Cleveland Orchestra (Live Stereo – Memories)*

1980 Aug 29: *London PO (Live Stereo – BBC Legends)* [REVIEW](#)

1980 Oct 20-22 *London PO (Studio Stereo – EMI)* [REVIEW](#)

1987 Feb 5: *Philadelphia Orch (Live Digital – Saint Lauren Studios)* **

1993 May 14-15: *London PO (Live Digital – EMI)* [REVIEW](#)**

Klaus Tennstedt believed the first movement of Mahler's Seventh Symphony to be the finest thing he ever composed, after the opening movement of the Ninth Symphony. The Seventh was also to be the final Mahler symphony he was to conduct in May 1993 with a planned concert of the same work with the Berlin PO in September the following year cancelled due to ill health. Fortunately, both occasions were recorded, with the 1993 concert with the London PO released by EMI and the Berlin concert, which was instead conducted by Michael Gielen, broadcast on the radio and released some years later by Testament (see 1980). It is interesting to hear the trajectory of Tennstedt's own journey with the *Song of the Night* over the fifteen years of recorded evidence we have available, from the bright-eyed and big-hearted earlier tapings all the way through to the end when, just like the composer, ill-health prompted the shadows in Tennstedt's own performances to grow ever longer and darker. The timings are evidence of this change, from the seventy-five-minute fiery Cleveland performance of 1978, to the final eighty-nine-minute epic from London in 1993.

Until the final years, Tennstedt's Mahler seemed to fully encapsulate the composer's child-like sense of wonder and delight in the world, which also cascaded into his interpretation of the Seventh Symphony. In this work in the central *Scherzo*, there is also a sense of terror of things that go bump in the night, with a warm soothing, almost maternal *trio* that attempts to console, before the witches' waltz returns. Elsewhere, the religious vision section of the first movement, positively swells in its big-hearted affirmation and the second *Nachtmusik* is an ardent declaration of love, before a last movement which generates tremendous heat, excitement and a coda of tremendous, life-giving triumph. All the performances listed tend to last around the eighty-two-minute mark, with the exception of the final London recording and the first, with the Cleveland Orchestra, where the tautness of the interpretation can be explained by swifter openings to the first and second movements, even if the overall ground-plans are all similar.

People often forget that Tennstedt had considerable success in North America during his career, where he was principal guest conductor of the Minnesota Orchestra in Minneapolis between 1979 and 1982, as well as working often with the Toronto Symphony, Boston Symphony, New York PO, Chicago Symphony and Philadelphia Orchestras. The 1978 *Song of the Night* with the Cleveland Orchestra was not the first, nor only time he conducted them (they still talk about a Bruckner Eighth Symphony he conducted with them in 1977) and it is interesting to listen to a performance of this high precision ensemble with a conductor of Tennstedt's notoriously erratic beat. Actually, contrary to Tennstedt's reputation, the precision of the playing is something to behold with just one or two occasional minor ensemble wobbles, quickly corrected, at the end of the first movement and in the middle of the third (comparisons with the Concertgebouw – of all orchestras – under Mariss Jansons in 2000 does not flatter the esteemed Dutch musicians at all). The sound is a little dry, perhaps reflecting the acoustics of Severance Hall, which is a slight negative since it takes a bit of shine off what was undoubtedly a great evening's concert.

Whenever I return to Tennstedt's studio recording nowadays, I am always slightly disappointed, as this was the first recording I owned of the work and how I learnt the piece. At the time, as a rather impressionable schoolboy, I thought it was terrific, a recording which could never be bettered, but nowadays I am more inclined to notice the rather dull, analogue sound and the lower operating temperature when compared to the live performances. This can be confirmed when comparing it to a live concert taped by the BBC from earlier that year at the Edinburgh Festival where, with virtually the same interpretation as in the studio and in spite of some ragged playing here and there (the tenor horn runs out of puff as the first movement goes on and the bells at the end are rather feeble), the voltage generated in the concert hall puts the studio account significantly in the shade. The BBC engineers do a terrific job and the crowd roars their approval at the end – it is another great performance; but there is an even better one.

Truth be told, there is little difference between the live recordings with the London Philharmonic and the Philadelphia Orchestra – the interpretations are the same, with virtual identical timings too, plus there is a palpable sense of occasion with both concerts. There is a difference in the sonics however, with the later Philadelphia concert sounding like an off the air radio taping, but it is still rich and full, if slightly bass heavy and is more than acceptable. There is also a difference in the orchestras too; sometimes in 1980, the LPO sound as if they are hanging on for dear life and scrambling to keep up with their conductor, whereas the Philadelphia players confidently take everything in their stride. Indeed, this 1987 performance opens with a sense of tremendous authority and conviction by both the players and conductor and this confidence means the key moments, such as the climax of the religious vision section in the first movement and the coda of the whole symphony (with much better bells than in 1980), carry an even greater emotional clout than in the Edinburgh concert. Both are fine achievements; the BBC Legends recording may be slightly easier to find, but the Philadelphia performance is the true prize.

Eventually, somebody at EMI recognised that the Klaus Tennstedt in the concert hall is a very different beast to the one in the studio and some of his live Mahler performances were captured for posterity, occasionally filmed, as with the First Symphony in Chicago and the Eighth in London, with numbers Five, Six and Seven just audio only. With the exception of the Eighth Symphony, these recordings capture the conductor in the final phase of his career where, riddled by ill-health and self-doubt, his concerts became events in themselves and the music-making brooded with a dark, despairing intensity. This was very much evident in the recording of the First Symphony with the Chicago Symphony, where the bright-eyed wonder of the earlier readings had been replaced by a reading, not necessarily for the better, where the shadows had become deeper, the triumph more hard-won. It is the same with the *Song of the Night*, where it is almost astonishing to note how some fifteen years earlier he was conducting the work in a little under seventy-six minutes, whereas in this final recording the reading now takes eighty-nine minutes. Of course, Tennstedt is not the first conductor whose interpretation slowed down as he got older – Rafael Kubelík's late live recording with the New York PO is one who springs to mind (see 1970), but what is remarkable is that unlike Kubelík, as well as other similarly timed interpretations, such as Lorin Maazel (see 1984) or Takashi Asahina (see 1981), Tennstedt's later reading doesn't actually sound slow at all, such was his magnetism on the podium over the two evenings from which this recording was made. Indeed, even when considering they were working in the unforgiving acoustics of London's pre-refurbished Festival Hall, the sound produced by EMI's recording engineers is very good indeed and, perhaps even more remarkably, Tennstedt's favourite orchestra plays magnificently, clearly giving their all – and more – for their ailing former leader. As stated, the reading is very different from before and indeed, from many others in this survey and appears, in my opinion, to be viewed backwards from the prism of the Ninth and Tenth Symphonies. Whereas before, the religious vision sequence of the first movement would soar in ecstasy, now it is more despairing than elated (which actually then segues very effectively into the darker mood of the music that immediately follows it). The second *Nachtmusik* has a pervading air of sadness, rather than anything *amoroso* about it, and while the opening fusillade of drums in the final movement is ceremonial enough, the ensuing fanfares are more declamatory than celebratory and often the music that follows borders on hysteria rather than euphoria. The ending is colossal in its impact, with high-flying trumpets and terrific horns, but it all comes across as a Pyrrhic victory, in spite of the cheers from the otherwise clearly spellbound and silent audience. This was one of the last recordings I re-visited for this survey and I struggle to think of another reading that is remotely similar both in terms of its eighty-nine-minute running time, as well as its highly individual approach of despair and sadness – not even with this conductor's previous outings with the work. It is the one reading that challenged my views of the work too – gone now is my certainty that the final movement is all sunny optimism to be replaced by one, as presented by an ailing Klaus Tennstedt whose life at that time, just like Gustav Mahler's was between completing and premiering this symphony, teetering on personal as well as professional tragedy, where life is indeed all sound and fury, signifying nothing. It is, in my opinion, one of the great readings of the score and as such must be heard.

Ultimately, whichever of Klaus Tennstedt's recordings of the Seventh Symphony you get, it is touched with greatness. The studio account is good, the live accounts from Cleveland, Philadelphia and Edinburgh great, with the final one from London very different and unique in its insight. The latter is a must-hear for anyone who has an interest in this symphony, but its individuality probably rules it out as a mainstream recommendation - for that, I feel the Philadelphia performance is, on balance, marginally better than the one given by the London Philharmonic in 1980 (even if that has better sound and may be easier to obtain). However, I would advise the serious collector to have either one of those and the last reading too: 9/10

1980

Michael Gielen

1980 Mar 7: Vienna SO (Live Stereo – Lucky Ball)

1993 Apr 19-23:SWR Orch, Baden Baden (Studio Digital – Hänssler) [REVIEW](#)

1994 Sep 21: Berlin PO (Live Digital – Testament) [REVIEW](#)

2008 May 5: NDR Orch, Hamburg (Live Digital – Sunjay Classics)

In 2019, SWR Classics released a tribute to Michael Gielen to honour his passing of a set containing two recordings of Mahler's Sixth Symphony, both with the SWR Orchestra of Baden Baden, made at the beginning and end of his career, with a twenty-minute difference in the total timing between them. His vision of Mahler's Seventh Symphony underwent similar extremities, from the fiery seventy-seven-minute traversal with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra in 1980, to the astonishing ninety-seven-minute live performance, recorded in 2008.

Gielen's way with the Seventh Symphony is similar to that of Hans Zender and (when the mood took him) Pierre Boulez in that one relishes the ugliness and grotesqueries of the music while embracing its modernism; it is a remarkable, almost unique fusion of qualities all of which are on display in his various recordings. The only attribute missing is a certain gentle humour (and in the other symphonies, such as the First and Fourth, charm), but only the very greatest Mahler interpreters, such as Bernstein or Tennstedt find this humour in the first *Nachtmusik*, whereas Gielen seems studiously to avoid it. Elsewhere in the *Song of the Night*, he is one of the very few conductors in the survey (Barenboim [see 2005] is another) who chooses to interpret the first movement's opening bars with his strings playing individual semiquavers rather than tremolando; furthermore, as with Horenstein (see 1969), he is able to make the end of the first *Nachtmusik I* sound spookier than usual, dovetailing it nicely into the spectral nightmares of the *Scherzo*, which Gielen performs with gusto, the opening notes played by the timpani and lower strings nicely blurring into one. His *Nachtmusik II* is brighter and fresher rather than languorous and usually lasts around thirteen minutes, whereas the finale is a steady cumulative build-up of excitement, as opposed to the white heat generated by other conductors from the opening salvos onwards. As testimony to his skill as a conductor, Gielen is also able to inspire very fine playing from whichever orchestra he is in front of, with a sound-picture that has prominent timpani.

As with the Sixth Symphony, the earliest recording is the fastest at seventy-seven minutes, although the overall ground-plan is very similar to all the other performances, except clearly the underlying pulse here is quicker. It is a very good account, fiery and alive although, somewhat to my surprise, he slows down more than he would do in later performances at the end of the second *Nachtmusik*, teasing out and seeking the poetry in the music more than his usual wont. The big problem with this recording though are the sonics, which are slightly rough and ready, with a cavernous sounding acoustic and clattery percussion, plus the occasional odd balances. I am not so sure if the trumpet fanfares are supposed, or were even intended, to be so clearly heard at the end of the first movement as on this recording; also the cow bells completely disappear down the mountain's pastures in the second movement. It is a pity, as otherwise this is a quite wonderful performance.

Turning to the 1993 studio recording, the sound is thankfully extremely good, weighty and quite forwardly balanced, with the playing of the SWR orchestra also very fine, a worthy tribute to one of its previous music directors, Hans Rosbaud, whose name graces the studio in which this recording was made and who, likewise, made two distinguished recordings of the work himself (see 1953). It seems somewhat churlish of me to note a minor breakdown of ensemble when Mahler indicates '*Più Mosso*' towards the end of the third movement (bars 424-425 [c.46m47s]), which may even be a badly spliced edit, but it is there and listeners with bat-like ears will notice it. Unsurprisingly, this is the recording which, in my opinion, is the representative version of Michael Gielen in this symphony, the one displaying all those unique qualities of ugliness and modernism, welded together into a most persuasive performance, although it is not above those criticisms previously mentioned and likewise others, as the next recording demonstrates.

In September 1984, some eighteen months after Gielen had set down the SWR recording, the Berlin Philharmonic were hoping that despite hardly conducting at all for the previous twelve months, Klaus Tennstedt would be leading them in a performance of this very symphony – and since he had conducted the same work with the London PO in April the previous year (see 1978), they were hoping up until the last minute that he would turn up, but he did not and Michael Gielen was engaged instead at very short notice as a replacement. It was an inspired choice and the conductor has indeed written how rehearsals for this concert with the orchestra were especially productive, not least in comparison with his previous encounters with the Berliners (in Brahms) when they were still very much under the spell of Karajan's interpretations. You can also hear what is missing in the SWR recording with the BPO in September 1984: not only are they the finer orchestra (the trumpets are much better), but as with the earlier Vienna Symphony concert, in the context of a live, one-off occasion there is also greater electricity and forward thrust than with the SWR reading, even if the two interpretations are virtually the same (only the final movement in Berlin is marginally faster). In the first movement, this manifests itself in a most fluent reading with a rare sense of surging emotion, while in the first *Nachtmusik*, the Berlin players also find more poetry in the opening horn calls than in before – needless to say, the final movement is even more exciting for being live, with the final bars absolutely terrific. It is somewhat disconcerting to compare Gielen's achievement here with those of Bernard Haitink, who conducted the Berliners in the same work two years prior, both for a studio recording, as well as a live filmed version – under Haitink, the players sound nonplussed and disengaged, quite the opposite of what Gielen achieves, although it is clear that in the rather disappointing *scherzo* and second *Nachtmusik* that the ensemble still retained some doubts about the music (which, curiously, they did not exhibit with Gary Bertini in 1981 – see below). This was originally a radio broadcast and the sound is at once fuller and closer, capturing the burnished tones of the Berliners exceptionally well, but the weaker performances of those two of inner movements means that the SWR performance is to be marginally preferred.

When turning to the 2008 live recording, not for the first time in this survey I am questioning the authenticity of the performance. There is no doubt that Gielen conducted the NDR Orchestra on 5 May in this work as the archives verify the concerts took place, but it is so different from his previous versions, that doubts creep in – it is in fact nearly twenty minutes longer. Of course, Gielen is not the only conductor who slowed down markedly in this score as he got older: Haitink (see 1968), Kubelík (see 1972) and Tennstedt (see 1978) all did something similar – but Gielen is the most extreme; only Klemperer is slower than this 2008 traversal in this survey. It is a curious performance, very patient and intense – and if I still think it is Gielen on the podium, it is because of the way he opens the *Scherzo* and for his typically bright and fresh second *Nachtmusik*, here stretched out to over sixteen minutes, but still lacking somewhat in *amoroso* quality. The orchestra play dedicatedly and doggedly, the ensemble fine, some split brass notes apart and the sound is very clear and transparent (you hear everything the guitar and mandolin do in the second *Nachtmusik*), if perhaps lacking a little in fullness of tone and therefore impact. Unlike Klaus Tennstedt, whose final recording was also very different from his previous thoughts but equally valid, I am not convinced by Gielen's second thoughts. In the first *Nachtmusik*, just after the orchestra has skidded down five octaves, the opening march crawls along miserably with a tempo that seems to suggest that it is a snail making its way on the nightwatchman's journey and in the final movement the various sections veer between very slow and mannered, to eye-poppingly fast; it really does not convince. That he somehow almost pulls the whole thing off is a credit to the conductor, but there is no getting away from the fact that the operating temperature of this performance is quite a few notches below his other attempts, whether in Vienna, Baden Baden and Berlin (as well as many other conductors in this survey) and so, for me, this final recording is a mere curio, for Gielen and *Song of the Night* completists only. His best Mahler Seventh remains his 1993 effort with the SWR Orchestra of Baden Baden: 8/10

James Levine

1980 July 14-15: Chicago SO (Studio Stereo – RCA)

I have often wondered why this recording of the *Song of the Night* is often overlooked, not least when discussing other recordings of the work made with the Chicago Symphony around the same time by Georg Solti and Claudio Abbado. Perhaps it is because people are prone to forget that in Levine's partial cycle he used three orchestras, the London Symphony, the Philadelphia Orchestra as well as, with this recording, the Chicago Symphony. It is a pity, for Levine gets the players from Windy City to play extremely well, more unbuttoned than with Abbado and less in-yer-face than with Solti. On paper, this eighty-minute reading may appear a little leisurely, but the interpretation is that of a young man's, brash and confident, with no lingering in the shadows and some real soaring ecstasy in the religious vision section in the first movement, as well as much gentleness and delicacy in the second *Nachtmusik*. The final movement has genuine exuberance, with the bass drum happily thwacking away and of course, the Chicago players cover themselves in glory all the way through to the finishing line. There is one slight problem though – it is not very 'nocturnal'.

In this regard, Levine's interpretation is virtually unique in this survey – not so much a *Song of the Night*, but a *Song for any time of the Day*, if you like. So the central *Scherzo* is less about those things that go bump in the night and more about rude Falstaffian noises which one perhaps would not do in polite company. It is all very extrovert, red-bloodied and a riot of colour and passion – maybe a slightly different take perhaps for those who do not respond to the usual approach to this symphony, but done supremely well in its own way: 8/10

1981

Gary Bertini

1981 Mar 28: Berlin PO (Live Stereo – Lucky Ball)

1990 Feb 9-15: Cologne RSO (Studio Digital – EMI) [REVIEW](#)

2003 June 28-29: Tokyo Metropolitan SO (Live Digital – Fontec)

I am increasingly inclined to think that Gary Bertini is "Mr Dependable" in Mahler. I am not the only person who is of the opinion that his (unfortunately currently deleted) complete cycle of the Mahler symphonies including *Das Lied von der Erde*, to be one of the most recommendably consistent of all. For a long time it was available via EMI on super-bargain price and I would have happily have paid much more just for the electrifying performance of the Eighth, but all the other symphonies receive very fine recordings too - and often much more. It is a little difficult to try and describe Bertini's way with the composer – to say "he gets everything right" sounds a little lame, but there is a wise and intuitive logic to his approach which, underpinned by a blazing conviction that cascades into a similarly full-bloodied orchestral response, often results in highly persuasive and consistent performances. If occasionally I sometimes miss a certain "x-factor" (for example, in the First Symphony, which is perfectly acceptable, if nothing special), I most certainly do not in the *Song of Night*.

Consistency is also the word with the timings. Bertini's interpretation usually lasts just over eighty minutes, the slowest being in Berlin at eighty-three minutes and the fastest in Tokyo, a couple of minutes swifter mainly because a minute had been knocked off of the second *Nachtmusik*, which in the final performance is a flowing twelve and a half minutes. That said, the Berlin performance most certainly does not sound slow – far from it, in fact. There are some commentators (mainly on YouTube) who still wonder aloud whether the Berlin PO has any business performing Mahler, so it is interesting to encounter them here in 1981 for the first time in this survey. At the time, they would have been performing the Fourth Symphony several times in concert over the previous twelve months under Karajan and they had started rehearsing and recording the Ninth Symphony with him

too (the first one in the studio), after the famous concert of the same work under Bernstein in 1979. I mention this background information since the orchestra sounds decidedly unsympathetic to the music in both of Haitink's studio and video recordings in 1992 (see 1968), as well as (to a far lesser extent) in a live concert under Michael Gielen two years later (see 1980). In this one-off performance from 1981, the contrast could not be greater. The sound is not the best, a crude off-the-air recording from a radio broadcast, I suspect, with a string-heavy sound, even more so than the type Karajan used to demand – there are times when you can almost sense the resin burning as the strings attack the music with an intensity that can only be admired. Under Bertini's leadership, this is not an orchestra lacking in sympathy for the music on the programme that night and it is amazing to report that an eighty-three rendition of the music does not sound remotely leisurely at all. If the sound were better, this could have been one of the top renditions of the symphony.

Fortunately, the Cologne Radio Symphony recording from a few years later is almost as good. With a slightly tauter second *Nachtmusik* and final movement, it is otherwise a reading identical to the Berlin concert and the sound is happily much better - quite superb in fact, full and rich. If the Cologne Radio Symphony does not quite possess the colossal weight of tone of the Berlin PO of 1981 vintage, they match them everywhere else and Bertini inspires a white-hot response from his players. I have always struggled to put my finger on quite what makes this recording special, as there is nothing particularly noteworthy about it and then again, sometimes I am also left feeling that it is lacking that indefinable element of magic too. Perhaps that lack of individuality is the reason why Bertini's career was not quite as great as it could have been, but when all is said and done if this was the only recording of Mahler's Seventh Symphony in your collection, you would not be missing much – and this is why that complete cycle was so special.

As is almost predictable with Mr Dependable, the live concert recording from Yokohama in 2003 is another fine performance of Bertini's now familiar interpretation – the only difference being that the second *Nachtmusik* that has shed a minute off of its previous thirteen-and-a-half minutes time from Cologne and Berlin, perhaps reflecting the more modern trend of conductors of taking this movement more swiftly than before. Once more, the conductor inspires a tremendously committed response from his players, this time from the Tokyo Metropolitan Orchestra, and my only criticism is the slightly dry acoustic of the concert hall (probably the Minato Mirai) that does not compare favourably with the sound from the Cologne recording. If you are able to source that former EMI recording for your collection, preferably in the boxed set of all the symphonies, you will not be going far wrong: 8/10

Takashi Asahina

1981 July 28: Osaka PO (Live Stereo – Green Door)

There is no doubting the importance of Takashi Asahina (1908 – 2001) to classical music in Japan after the Second World War, as well as to Mahler – he regularly performed the symphonies and *Das Lied* to much acclaim throughout his life although, curiously, never the First Symphony. Preserved on disc are recordings, mainly live, of nearly all the remaining ones, with only the Fifth Symphony (which he did perform) missing. This recording of the *Song of Night* was a one-off live performance in 1981 and was taped in the Bunka Kaikan in Tokyo, with sound that is clear and full, if a little dry. With a running time of ninety-one minutes, it is one of the slower readings you will encounter in this survey, in a performance that veers between sounding effortful for much of the first and last movements, to illuminating at the start of the second or end of the fourth movements. Indeed, his seventeen-minute traversal of the second *Nachtmusik* competes with Neuman with the Czech PO for being one of the slowest of all (see 1968) but, unlike with Neumann, Asahina just about gets away with it, largely because it is in the context of an overall slow performance, whereas with Neumann the more 'normal' tempos elsewhere accentuates the slowness in his interpretation, with the

consequence that it drags. Curiously, the most successful movement is the central *Scherzo*, which is taken at a conventional tempo and is very fine indeed, at once both haunting as well as overflowing with incidental detail.

To their credit, the playing of the Osaka Philharmonic, which Asahina founded, is pretty good, the odd split brass note notwithstanding, although the principal flute and horn are occasionally wrong-footed by their conductor's super-leisurely tempos in the *Nachtmusiks*. However, overall I am not so sure if this is quite the best of Asahina, nor the best Mahler Sevenths when so much of it sounds so effortful, hence for me it is a: 6/10

1982

Hans Zender

1982 January 8-11: Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Saarbrücken (Live Stereo – CPO) [REVIEW](#)

Hans Zender (1936-2019) was a German composer and conductor, who is probably best remembered for his re-workings of some of Schubert's scores, particularly his "Composed Interpretation for tenor and small orchestra" of *Winterreise*, complete with the text alternatively spoken, sung and occasionally whispered. In between his composing of rather knotty original scores and teaching, he also had time to lead the Deutsche Radio Philharmonie Saarbrücken Kaiserslautern from 1972 – 1984, making with them a sizeable body of radio recordings from Mozart to contemporary music, including Mahler's symphony numbers 7 and 9, some of which has now been issued on compact disc.

This seventy-nine-minute *Song of the Night* has enjoyed something of a cult following since its release. It most certainly is not a "composed interpretation", but is distinguished to a remarkable degree by the subtlety of its tempo relations, which collectively go a long way in making the symphony more structurally unified than usual, all of which is underpinned by a surprising amount of emotion. You will notice this almost immediately, with the extremely subtle and clever transition from the opening *adagio* of the first movement to the *allegro con fuoco* section, as well as how the conductor then prepares the music for the 'religious vision' section, which is taken with real emotion. It is interesting to note that in the studio recording made by another twentieth-century composer-conductor of 'difficult' scores, namely Pierre Boulez (see 1994), he takes this passage in a similar manner, which contrasts with his more school-masterly and aloof attitude elsewhere. That said, Boulez is at his best with this symphony in the *Scherzo* and like him, Zender also revels in the sheer modernity of Mahler's score, which is taken at a slightly slower than usual tempo allowing not just the things which go bump in the night to make their full presence felt, but to also show up the daring of Mahler's music at this point. Under Zender, the listener is reminded that this is music that so impressed the young Arnold Schoenberg, who heard the crumbling of Romanticism in the Seventh Symphony's disquieting modernism. Schoenberg's First Chamber Symphony completed in 1906—a year after Mahler completed this score—contains many themes built on the interval of the perfect fourth, something we hear throughout Mahler's Seventh. Yet there is also genuine jubilation with Zender in the finale, even if – and this is my only criticism of the performance – his orchestra, now renamed to a more manageable Deutsche Radio Philharmonie, is a little lightweight when compared to the more powerhouse bands of Amsterdam and New York, amongst others. It is live, although with no applause and a virtually silent audience, but you do get the sense of the brass audibly tiring during the closing pages, with the result that the performance loses some impetus and fire, but overall this is very fine by anyone's standards: 8/10

Kurt Masur

1982 September: Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra (Studio Stereo – DHM) [REVIEW](#)

Mahler does not feature extensively in the recorded legacy of Kurt Masur, nor is he particularly associated with the composer either, so it is surprising to find his first Mahler recording is of the difficult Seventh Symphony, his later tenure with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra producing further recordings of the First and Ninth Symphonies. He is fortunate to be blessed with fine sound and orchestral playing, as he breezes through the whole work in a care-free seventy-four minutes, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, seemingly oblivious to any darkness lurking within the shadows of the score. Kudos must be given for the way the whole thing hangs together, with transitions neatly done and no tempos jutting out of the symphonic argument to spoil the overall flow of the piece. However, it is also a little 'ordinary' – a fine run-through by an expert orchestra and expert conductor, rather than an authentic Mahlerian experience, I would contend: 6/10

1984

Claudio Abbado

1984 Jan 30 & Feb 1 – Chicago SO (Studio Digital – Deutsche Grammophon)

2001 May 5-7 – Berlin PO (Live Digital – Deutsche Grammophon) [REVIEW](#)

2005 Aug 17-18 – Lucerne Festival Orch (Live Digital DVD – Euroarts) [REVIEW](#)

Gustav Mahler was ever-present in Claudio Abbado's concert programmes and there is much recorded evidence of live recordings of nearly all the symphonies given by him, with the exception of the Eighth (probably as much for practical reasons as anything else) as well as, curiously, the Seventh Symphony too - in addition to the three official recordings listed above, there is only one other, a live radio broadcast with a youth orchestra, that was released on CD once and is difficult to track down now. Perhaps, like many listeners, it was not Abbado's favourite Mahler symphony, although, intriguingly, it was the work that he chose for his final concert as chief conductor of the BPO on 13th May 2002, a concert that can be heard via its radio broadcast on YouTube, but has not (to the best of my knowledge) been released on CD or any other medium to date. Broadly speaking, his reading of the work tautened as he got older, from a middle-of-the-road seventy-nine minutes in Chicago to seventy-three minutes in Lucerne, principally by taking the second *Nachtmusik* at a more flowing speed than the more typical fourteen minutes taken in Chicago. Without a doubt, though, all three recordings are significant achievements in their own right.

Abbado's approach to Mahler is also very interesting – Richard Osborne, writing in *Gramophone Magazine*, hit the nail on the head by describing Abbado as the '*unpretentious, keen-eared elucidator*' in this music. Like Bernard Haitink (see 1969), he seems reluctant to embrace the more 'vulgar' and flamboyant aspects of Mahler's music, but whereas the Dutchman squared the circle by taking a serious and sober approach to such elements, Abbado, although equally restrained, is instead more inclined to present them in shades of pastel colours to enhance the score's sense of fantasy and poetry, a quality that was increasingly sacrificed in later performances for ever greater clarity and transparency of sound and texture. It is also curious to note how Haitink needed to get slower in this music the older he became to make his points, whereas Abbado tended to speed up.

Those qualities of colour and fantasy are especially evident in Abbado's first recording with the Chicago Symphony, which also has the benefit of superb digital sound from DG, full and rich, belying its early 1980s provenance. At seventy-nine minutes, this is the longest of the three performances and is also in some ways the most *classical* – in particular, the final movement takes its cue from it being a *Rondo*, itself the most classical of final movements, and it is fascinating to compare Abbado's restraint with the music here with the turbo-charged velocity of Solti, or the boyish exuberance of Levine in their own respective recordings made with the same orchestra around the same time. This

is not to imply that Abbado is in any way lightweight, just that the focus and control sometimes appears to be achieved at the expense of the last ounce of excitement. This is also evident to a lesser degree in this recording during the closing stages of the first movement, where the brass and percussion appear to be tightly marshalled and the flamboyance of the music held in check, with results that may slightly disappoint some listeners, including me. This, though, needs to be offset by the conductor's remarkable ability to integrate all the disparate elements of the score into one mighty whole, as well as to bring to the inner movements more delicacy and elegance than the music probably deserves. For many over the years, this Chicago recording has been a top choice, if not *the* top choice and while I cannot completely agree, you certainly would not be missing much if it was the only recording in your collection.

I think history will probably judge that one of Claudio Abbado's most significant achievements (along with his indisputably fine work in the opera house with the operas of Rossini and Verdi), was the "recreation" of the Lucerne Festival Orchestra in 2003. People sometimes forget that this ensemble was originally formed in the late 1930s with its first concert conducted by Arturo Toscanini, no less, and enjoyed a brief golden era in the 1950s when the likes of Furtwängler and Karajan, amongst others, regularly conducted it. In the early years of its twenty-first century reincarnation, Abbado hand-picked all of its members and with optimum rehearsal times sometimes achieved stunning levels of clarity and focus in its music-making. All these elements can be heard – and seen – in the DVD issue of the 2005 performances of this Mahler Seventh, in a film discretely and conventionally directed by Michael Beyer in fine (if not spectacular) PCM stereo, with the option DTS HD Master Surround as well. This is Mahler's *Song of the Night* given as giant chamber music with all the strengths and weaknesses that such an approach entails. In some respects, this is perhaps the fulfilment of the journey first started in Chicago, where the conductor's approach was far more classical than the norm, with much restraint and clarity, which is here taken to probably its ultimate consummation with every instrumental line and every tiny instruction in the score observed and executed without any underlining or undue attention given to it, as too often happens with other conductors. An example of this is right at the end of the first *Nachtmusik*; this is the only performance in the whole of this survey where the string players properly articulate the accents on the descending pizzicatos leading into the final two bars. Another would be in the middle of the final movement when the music erupts jubilantly with the whole orchestra at full cry, a passage where the rumbustious song of the trombones is brought to an end only by the crash of a tam-tam and downward rushing strings (bars 307&308 [65m22s]). Usually – and probably quite rightly – most performances have the tam-tam drowning out the whole orchestra with the string configuration emerging naturally towards the end of its reverberation, but with Abbado in Lucerne, through a combination of restraint, excellent balances and no doubt endless rehearsals, all the string figurations can be heard through the tam-tam. It is all a remarkable achievement, the likes of which is probably only matched in this survey by Chailly's recording in Amsterdam, even if his results there are achieved within a slightly slower and grander interpretation, presented in even better sound and with a more Mahlerian orchestra. The latter point is not to criticise the Lucerne players in any way, but just to emphasise that theirs is a formidable technical achievement, whereas the Concertgebouw's Decca recording is another example of that orchestra's effortless brilliance in this music. You could justify having both in your collection, one on CD and the other on DVD, as both are mandatory for Mahlerians, but as with Chailly's own recording from Amsterdam, Abbado-Lucerne is not above criticism - his respectable and clear-eyed view of the score occasionally lacks something of the drama and hype that Bernstein, for one, habitually brought to his performances of the work. For me, it is not quite the whole picture, even if it is still a brilliant one in its own right.

In between Chicago and Lucerne, is another Abbado recording of the Seventh, this time with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. Abbado's tenure in Berlin was, allegedly, not without its troubles, but by the end, after heroically battling significant health problems which eventually forced him to announce that he would be ending his tenure sooner than expected, the relationship had righted itself with the orchestra galvanised into giving its collective all for their outgoing and ailing leader.

This live account of the *Song of the Night* was given in Abbado's penultimate season as Principal Conductor and is, in my opinion, one of the very finest things they recorded together. There are some who contend that Abbado recorded too much, a lot of which is not very good and that this Mahler Seventh is not an improvement over the Chicago taping, nor any different – so what was the point? As ever with these things, the truth is somewhat more nuanced. The sound is unquestionably inferior to that in Chicago studio where the DG engineers excelled themselves; working in Berlin's Philharmonie, never the easiest of recording venues even without an audience, posed problems that were not satisfactorily solved some twenty years later, where the sound is very closely miked and perspectives often shift bizarrely. Nor is the orchestral playing, without the security of several days in the recording studio as in Chicago, or even the luxury rehearsal conditions in Lucerne, better, either – although you could also argue that this is like saying that the latest Maserati is not any faster than the best Ferrari or Lamborghini; all three are pretty stunning in themselves.

However, there are some genuine reasons why the Berlin account should have been released. Firstly, as was Abbado's habit in later years, his interpretation had become faster, especially in the long slow movements of Mahler. In the Seventh Symphony, the Chicago taping was some seventy-nine minutes, whereas with the later readings were seventy-five minutes in Berlin and seventy-three minutes in Lucerne, largely due to the conductor changing his approach in the second *Nachtmusik*, from a leisurely fourteen minutes to a swifter and more mercurial twelve (the change in emphasis is clearly more pronounced in the other symphonies with longer slower movements). Elsewhere, the changes are indeed marginal and include such things as the restoration of some tremolos in the mandolin in *Nachtmusik II*, and more being made of the string glissandi in the central *Scherzo*, as well as perhaps greater drive in the last movement. However, what is different here compared to both Chicago and Lucerne, is the sound of the Berlin orchestra, which is inherently darker and heavier than the other two ensembles. So in Berlin, the marches at the end of the first movement have a greater trenchancy and the final movement now has the requisite grandeur in addition to the drive and excitement you also find in Chicago and Lucerne. It is a curious thing that with a/b/c comparisons between these three recordings, the one which is least well-recorded and played is the most exciting and satisfying listening experience. Indeed, you could further argue that the closeness of the sound in Berlin goes some way to compensating the comparative restraint in Abbado's overall approach. Certainly, the finale's coda in Berlin amply demonstrates this, with the orchestra just about staying on the tracks, the sonics not as sumptuous as in Chicago, the orchestral execution lacking the super-refined clarity of Lucerne, but with results that are more exciting than either. The audience at the end roars its approval, as well might you.

Staying with the finale, one curious criticism of Abbado's approach to the Seventh Symphony has been his treatment of the bells at that point in the score, one critic even saying they sounded too much as if they had been borrowed from the set from the Coronation Scene of *Boris Godunov*. In all three of the above recordings, Abbado is the one of a very few conductors who truly observes that the bells specified are *Glockengeläute* (in addition to the cow-bells heard in the second movement), with the instructions that they are to be played as if they are ringing, or pealing and indeed that is what they sound like in his performances - like church bells ringing joyously at a town's festival. In my view, it is an imaginative touch, fully justified by the score and only goes to show up more puny efforts elsewhere.

For me, all three of these Abbado recordings show him at his considerable best in Mahler – my own favourite, as explained, is the Berlin account in spite of its flaws, while the Lucerne film is my pick of the DVDs in this survey. Both for me are: 9/10

1984

Lorin Maazel

(1973 July 1973: Orquesta de Radio Televisión Española (Live Mono – DVD)*)

1984 Oct 1-4: Vienna PO (Live Digital – SONY)

2002 June 6: Bavarian Radio SO (Live Digital – En Larmes)

2007 June 20-23: New York PO (Live Digital – NYP)

2011 May 26: Philharmonia Orch (Live Digital – Signum) [REVIEW](#)

“The first time I heard the Seventh Symphony, I thought it was the ravings of a maniac..... the music construction being totally insane and without any reason to be there – which speaks of how primitive my mind was back then.” Honest words from a conductor who has since conducted all of Mahler’s symphonies many times over, even if there are also many occasions when I personally wonder if the true maniac was the one wielding the baton. Lorin Maazel is truly every reviewer’s nightmare, since you just do not know what you are going to get from him. With Mahler – and of the recordings that I know conducted by Maazel - I can certainly admit to being deeply impressed by his recordings of the Fourth Symphony with the Vienna PO, as well as the Sixth with the New York PO, but in my Conspectus of the First Symphony, of the five versions conducted by Maazel available to review, only one was remotely any good (with the NYPO), with three quite dreadful. As a result of this, I have deliberately given Maazel’s recordings of the Seventh Symphony a wide berth in the past and my hopes were certainly not raised at the very opening, where the second subject is so slow it virtually grinds to a halt. Unlike with the First Symphony though, Maazel is actually very consistent with his interpretations of *the Song of the Night*, all of which clock-in between eighty-six and eighty-nine minutes. The earliest (complete) recording with the Vienna Philharmonic would initially appear to be the fastest at eighty-six minutes, but contains a *Nachtmusik II* which lasts over sixteen minutes, whereas in all the subsequent performances it is a couple of minutes faster, with all the other movements gaining weight and extra times, with the exception of the *Scherzo* that is taken at around an average ten minutes for all the recordings.

The first time we encounter Maazel in Mahler’s Seventh is actually in 1973, in a live televised performance with the Orchestra of Spanish Television and Radio, which can be obtained on DVD from specialist dealers. That it is only the first movement though, coupled with Mozart’s Symphony No 29, makes it a curious proposition, but it is useful in documenting Maazel’s way with the piece, as well as his conducting from the time which, on this occasion is sans baton and very florid. It also showcases, unquestionably, the worst tenor horn soloist in this survey whose contribution to the performance elevates it to pure comedy, with the listener never quite sure what will happen whenever he plays, whether the note will be split, missed out completely, or even (hurrah!) on occasion played correctly. Sadly, his inept performance unnerves his colleagues who struggle to do themselves, as well as the music, justice. At the time, Maazel had just been appointed Principal Conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra, Georg Szell’s precision instrument of astonishing technical accuracy, so what his thoughts must have been when faced with the Spanish players is amusing to conjecture, even if his face gives nothing away on the podium. However, the performance is important inasmuch that it reveals that Maazel always took the opening movement at a slow and leisurely twenty-four minutes.

A dozen or so years later, this time in front of the considerably better Vienna PO, Maazel takes the same movement at virtually the same leisurely tempo and with that early passage in the first movement, when the music virtually grinds to a halt, I will confess that my many preconceptions were being realised. However, this would not be doing his achievements with this work justice as thereafter the performance(s) is (are) actually rather good. Although there are times, especially in the first movement, where the music can sometimes border on the turgid and effortful, what nearly always saves Maazel is the magnificent and dedicated playing he is able to inspire from his orchestras. With the Vienna Philharmonic there is a warmth and beauty to the playing, in particular during the more reflective episodes, that is especially affecting. If the second *Nachtmusik* is an extremely leisurely sixteen minutes, Maazel justifies it when the Vienna players response is so poised

and languid and there is a similar warmth and gentle humour to the first *Nachtmusik* too. The central *Scherzo* is somewhat faceless however, even if it is very well played and there is no doubt that the final movement would have benefitted with a bit more speed and excitement, rather than just steady grandeur, but overall this is not a bad reading at all, if not quite amongst the very best. The sound by CBS-Sony is good, if not matching DG's for Abbado in the same year from Chicago and if there is an audience on a recording apparently put together from many live performances, you would not know it.

For me, the Vienna recording is the pick of the Maazel bunch. If the outer movements gain weight and extra minutes in New York, then the compensations are the superb 24-bit sound from the orchestra's own in-house recording team and the power-house playing of the New Yorkers, even if there is occasionally a sense of crushing might at these tempos which I am not sure is suitable for the music. The lighter toned Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra do not attempt anything similar, but the sound on that live relay is very close and unatmospheric, making it uncommendable to all but the more devoted followers of either Maazel or Mahler.

The final recording, again live, this time in London with the Philharmonia, is the slowest of all, even with a fourteen-minute *Nachtmusik II*. Once again, the highly concentrated playing the conductor is able to coax from his players saves the day – indeed, those who were present at the Royal Festival Hall that night report a most uplifting experience, which does not quite come through into the recording. It is all rather slow, very patient and extremely dedicated, with a silent audience, presented in reasonable sonics (bearing in mind the Festival Hall will never have the acoustics of your dreams). However, for me, the winning warmth and freshness of the earliest account from Vienna remains my preferred version and is: 6.5/10

1985

Herbert Kegel

1985 June 26: Tokyo Metropolitan SO (Live Digital – TOBU)

One of the nicer surprises for me when I did the Mahler First Symphony survey was just how good Herbert Kegel's recordings were of this work. Whether live with the radio orchestra of Leipzig, or in the studio with Dresden's 'other' orchestra, the Dresden PO, more characterful inner movements and more exciting outer ones would be hard to find. By all accounts, Herbert Kegel had quite a glamorous and high public profile during his lifetime in East Germany, something that perhaps curtailed his ambitions to further his career in the West, so it is something of a surprise to find him conducting this one-off Mahler Seventh in Tokyo's Bunka Kaikan with the city's Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra – and in light of his excellence in the First Symphony, I was really looking forward to hearing his interpretation of the *Song of the Night*.

My high expectations were rewarded from as early as the seventh bar when, just after the trumpet has taken over the opening motive from the tenor horn, there is a small crescendo marked in the score (*piano – poco crescendo*) for the trombones and tuba which Kegel invests with much ominous foreboding and darkness. It is a small point, but one of many which illustrates this conductor's characterful way with the score. As the music progresses, Kegel's attention to the rhythms which underpin the melody emphasises that this opening material is a march, in his hands a dark and haunted funeral march and yet when the music relaxes some four minutes into the first movement (from bar 118) and Mahler marks the score "*espressivo*" (with great expression), Kegel takes the composer at his word treats the great yearning motive marked '*mit großem Schwung*' with huge tenderness.

However, as this seventy-seven-minute performance progresses, one or two doubts begin to creep in. Clearly, as the above demonstrates, Kegel has many interesting things to say about the music, all of which are presented with much aplomb by the Tokyo orchestra, the odd split note and missed entry apart and which you must allow for in a one-off recorded performance. The sound, too, is fine and detailed, if a little close and 'punchy' but, as is not uncommon for a radio broadcast with an orchestra on a tiered platform, I sometimes felt the brass and percussion were a little too present in the sound-mix at the expense of the strings which sound a little thin as a consequence. This was especially noticeable in the second *Nachtmusik*, which is nicely paced at around fourteen minutes, piloting a mid-point between the flowing and songful versions of some and the languor of others. However, it is in the final movement which is taken very fast indeed, where this performance fails for me. I suspect Kegel intended to go hell-for-leather in pursuit of excitement and the, otherwise super-humanly quiet, audience do roar their approval at the end, but it all comes across as manic, even maniacally so. Now, there is a school of thought that believes Mahler was being hugely ironic in this movement, that the high spirits are in fact false and that it is all a mad dance to the death – *Elektra in C Major*, if you like. However, I am not one of them. I believe that the key is that Mahler programmed the overture to *Die Meistersinger* more than once when he himself performed his Seventh Symphony and so this last movement is nothing more than a representation of a town festival on a warm summer's day. Of course, there may be many among you wiser and more cynical than I, who disagree, in which case, you will appreciate this performance (as well as Scherchen's later performance in Toronto – see 1950) more than I, but for me it comes across more as an all-out frenzied assault than anything else. Much praise needs to be given to the orchestra for performing it so well at such hectic tempos, but it is a disappointing end for me to a performance that promises much and starts so well: 6.5/10

1986

Eliahu Inbal

1986 May 14-17: Frankfurt Radio SO (Studio Digital – Denon)

2011 Feb 25: Czech PO (Live Digital – Exton)

2013 Nov 8-9: Tokyo Metropolitan SO (Live Digital – Fontec)

Eliahu Inbal has certainly been extremely fortunate (as well as in one respect, very unfortunate) with his sound engineers in his recordings of Mahler symphonies, since Denon, Exton, as well as Fontec are all capable of producing top-level sonics for their time – indeed listening to the air around the instruments in Denon's 1986 recording, as well as the sense of broader sound-picture (you can easily hear in your mind's ear that the violins are antiphonally divided, with the basses to the right and cellos in the middle), it almost beggars belief that this recording is nearly forty years old. Unlike with the First Symphony, Inbal's interpretation of the Seventh remained consistent over the three recordings listed, lasting around seventy-eight minutes, with an "unfashionably" leisurely fourteen minute second *Nachtmusik*, but as with before, his way with Mahler is to nearly always let the music unfold naturally and organically, with little exaggeration or emphasis that many other conductors like to provide; only in the fourth movement does he show an inclination to love the music a bit too much that almost borders on being mannered. With the Frankfurt reading, there were occasionally times when I wished the whole thing could be a little more impactful, a situation that is caused more by the conductor's restraint, rather than with any problems from the sound engineers – for example, the marches at end of the first movement could have a greater trenchancy. That said, in the final movement the sheer joy at which the pizzicatos are articulated by the strings (bars 147 – 149, c.4m 10s) and the way they have been captured by the engineers is hugely impressive.

As with the First Symphony, once again my favourite of the three readings is Inbal's final one with the Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra, where the naturalness of Inbal's pacing, the glorious

sound provided by Fontec, plus the wonderfully responsive Tokyo Metropolitan players produces a reading of quite some note. However there is a huge problem, as I mentioned in my opening, that renders both the later recordings uncommendable. Quite why, with all the technical wizardry on display, Fontec and Exton are unable to block out Inbal's consistent – and consistently bad – singing is somewhat beyond me, where even in the loudest passages, he can still be heard loud and clear whether in Prague or Tokyo. It is all hugely frustrating, as otherwise the later recordings would have been highly recommendable. As it is, I rather feel if this “natural” approach is what you seek, then Gary Bertini's recording with the Cologne RSO (see 1981) would probably be a much better option. For me, I have to say the Frankfurt recording is the most recommendable, but I do regret the significant flaw which otherwise would have merited the Tokyo recording being my preferred option with a much higher rating: 7/10

1988

Anton Nanut

1988 (not given) – RSO Ljubljana, Slovenia (Digital Studio – Stradivari)

You may not know this, but in 1881, Mahler was engaged for six months (September to April) at the Landestheater in Laibach (now Ljubljana, in Slovenia), where he conducted, amongst other works, his first opera, *Il Trovatore*. It seems appropriate, therefore, that a recording by the main orchestra from this city should feature in this survey given by their then chief conductor, Anton Nanut (1932- 2017).

When I reviewed this team's account of the First Symphony, I concluded that it was a “very decent, straightforward, but nothing special performance”. I'm happy to say this eighty-three-minute recording of the Seventh Symphony set down a couple of years earlier is actually quite a bit better – there is much more of a sense of occasion to proceedings and if the orchestra is not quite of the front rank, it still plays extremely well for their conductor, who paces everything skilfully. He has many interesting things to say about Mahler's quixotic score, not least in the first movement where, just after the central ‘religious vision’ section, he infuses the music with much sadness, which is different from the epic gloom usually presented by other interpreters, but is also undeniably effective. In the end, my only criticism is of the slightly too reverberant acoustic which, on the positive side, gives the impression of a more powerful orchestra than the Slovenian RSO really is, but on the negative side, makes the opening of the final movement, for example, sound a bit blurred, as if looking at a Catherine wheel spinning at full pelt. Occasionally my ears picked up what could have been clumsy edits from the recording studio (or just a badly pressed CD), but as this performance jubilantly approached its conclusion, I could not help but conclude that it was overall a most satisfying recording, with hugely committed playing and much sensible direction from the podium. You can do much, much worse than this: 7.5/10

1989

Seiji Ozawa

1989 March: Boston SO (Studio Digital – Philips)

When I considered Ozawa's various renditions of Mahler's First Symphony for my previous conspectus, I could find very little wrong with any of his interpretations – unfortunately, nor could I find anything particularly special about them either, finding his live recording with his Saito Kinen Festival Orchestra to probably be the best, largely because I felt its sense of occasion elevated it from

super-professional to something bordering on noteworthy. Curiously, this one-off studio Seventh contains both of those qualities from before.

Indeed, it has to be said that the first and last movements are absolutely superb, as is the playing and recording throughout. Of particular note is the religious vision section of the first movement which is taken especially slow and dreamily, and where much credit needs to be given to the conductor for the tremendous care and skill he both prepares for and exits from that episode, bringing the music back to the swifter tempo of before. The final movement is also remarkable for its stunning fusion of excitement and grandeur. However, my heart sinks as I have to report that the three central movements revert back to the super-professional level, rather than inspired. It is a pity – this is not a bad Mahler Seventh overall, especially the outer movements, but the rather dull inner movements mean you can do better elsewhere: 7.5/10

Hiroshu Wakasugi

1989 June 7: Tokyo Metropolitan SO (Live Digital – Fontec)

The distinguished Japanese conductor Hiroshu Wakasugi (1935-2009) was well-respected during his lifetime, particularly in the field of Bruckner, Strauss and Wagner; he was also a tireless champion of Mahler, having the distinction of being one of the few conductors to have performed and recorded both the standard version of the First Symphony, as well as the original five movement *Titan* tone-poem from which it derives. Unsurprisingly, this seventy-eight-minute *Song of the Night*, has terrific poise and good taste, as well as being expertly despatched by the orchestra. The sound achieved by the Fontec engineers is clear and well-balanced, even if it is also rather distantly recorded, a point I felt took something away from the impact the recording might have had if the sound were somewhat more full-bloodied. As it happens, this is a fine reading, remarkable for its effortless ability to wield all the moving parts into one coherent whole, even if the overall impression is a little underwhelming compared to so many other rival recordings. In the end, I ended up respecting this recording more than I enjoyed it even if, the otherwise silent audience disagrees – as indicated by their vociferous cheers at the end: 6.5/10

Hartmut Haenchen

1989 Oct 8-12: Nederlands Philharmonisch Orkest (Live Digital – Capriccio)

Through various studio and live tapings, it is quite possible to assemble a complete Mahler symphony cycle conducted by the Dresden-born Hartmut Haenchen. Indeed, I really rated his live recording of the First Symphony made with the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra (available on ICA), far more than the coupled *Symphony of a Thousand*, which I found somewhat insipid. In both of those recordings and also in this one, he has the advantage of working in the Concertgebouw of Amsterdam, one of the world's great concert halls and that is reflected in the sound, which is full and well-balanced for all three symphonies.

Haenchen begins his eighty-one-minute traversal through the Seventh Symphony by closely observing Mahler's *Adagio* instruction, something that can occasionally cause conductors problems as they then need to work out how to speed up into the *Allegro con fuoco* section immediately after it, a problem that is avoided in this performance by not speeding up at all. This all results in a rather slow opening movement lasting just under twenty-four minutes, that drags and lacks tension and consequently seems to afflict the rest of the performance in the same way. In particular, the opening of the *Scherzo* sounds cautious, well played though it may be, although curiously, the second *Nachtmusik* is very enjoyable, with some particularly fine string sonorities. Best of all is the last movement, which begins with a furious flurry by the timpanist, who does his utmost thereafter to

inject some sense of urgency and fire into the proceedings, which all seems just a bit too much on auto-pilot. This is a decently played and well recorded account of a slightly under-characterised performance and my grading reflects this: 6/10

Emil Tabakov

1989 October: Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra (Studio Digital – Capriccio)

Emil Tabakov (b.1947) has certainly had an interesting career. Bulgarian born and trained, a composer, double bass player and conductor, he has at various times led some of the major ensembles in Bulgaria, as well as being his country's Minister of Culture. Readers may well be tempted to acquire his complete set of Mahler's Symphonies 1-9, plus the Adagio of the Tenth, not least since it is performed by an Eastern European ensemble with all the local colours they habitually bring to the music,; furthermore, the whole set is (currently) available at super-budget price. I was therefore curious to hear and assess the merits of this eighty-one-minute *Song of the Night*.

Curiously, the Sofia orchestra do not sound especially Eastern European, which some may view as a missed opportunity, but more significantly their string choir sounds either too small, or just too puny, to do the music justice, a point seemingly emphasised with the sound somewhat close and dry. Tabakov steers a generally sensible path through the score, with the exception of the last movement, which is taken at manic speeds and has everyone hanging on for dear life, not always for the right reasons. Elsewhere the conductor has some interesting ideas, especially in the first movement which is more heartfelt than usual, but overall this is a slightly underwhelming performance by an underwhelming orchestra. It is by no means terrible, but some way short of good: 6/10

1991

Simon Rattle

1991 June 21-22: City of Birmingham SO (Live Digital – EMI)

1995 May 11: Vienna PO (Live Digital – RCO) **

2016 August 26: Berlin PO (Live Digital – BPO)

2016 Sep 2: Berlin PO (Live DVD – Unitel)

Since Simon Rattle is often accused of letting his fascination with the inner-workings of a score be heard at the expense of the line and flow of the music, it is hardly surprising that he excels in Mahler's *Song of the Night*, with its myriad of inner-detail and constantly changing soundscape. He has in fact been amazingly consistent in his approach to the score down the years, with an interpretation of around seventy-seven minutes, with particular highlights, including how at the end of the *Scherzo* the music winds down in such a way as if it has burnt itself out, to be followed by a swift and mercurial twelve minute *Nachtmusik II*, and a last movement characterised by an almost unique approach, where he resolutely refuses to relax between each section, instead tearing through it all with the effect akin to holding a kaleidoscope to one's eye and spinning it around manically. Switching among each of the four listed performances shows a remarkable unanimity of approach, not just in tempos, but also phrasing and colours – not for him as he matured is there any rethink of the kind by Haitink, Tennstedt, Chailly, Gielen, or even Abbado. In some respects, this makes the job of the reviewer easier, as judgement can then be determined solely by the quality of the orchestras, as well as the success of the sound engineers capturing the resulting voltage of the performances - except Rattle's best performances of Mahler's Seventh Symphony are not any of the 'official' ones listed above...

On the 3 September 1989 at a London Promenade concert, Rattle conducted Mahler's Seventh Symphony in a concert which was, from all accounts, sensational. The following day, he and his orchestra, the City of Birmingham Symphony, took the piece into the studio to record it for EMI/Warner, a taping that remains locked in their vaults to this day since the conductor (probably correctly) judged it to be inferior to the previous evening's efforts. Eventually, some two years later, a live recording at The Maltings Concert Hall in Snape captured a performance deemed worthy enough by all to be released, complete with a remarkably quiet audience who let their presence be felt only by their cheering at the end. The engineers do the whole enterprise proud but are unable to disguise the fact that the venue chosen for the recording has a capacity of just under 1000 and this has the effect of making the orchestra sound small-scaled, an issue that neither does neither the players, nor the composer justice. This criticism needs to be offset though by the significant positive of a second-rate orchestra that the CBSO are (after all, they are hardly the Concertgebouw or New York PO) giving their collective all and then some. Ultimately, it is all very good, but one is left with the impression that it could have been better.

Eight years later, on 10 June 1999, Rattle was conducting the work again, this time with the Berlin PO in a performance that has all the virtues of the earlier Birmingham recording, plus the more expansive acoustic of the Berlin Philharmonie and this time an indisputably great orchestra clearly galvanised by Rattle; the results are fabulous. Rumour has it that this was the performance that persuaded the Berliners to ask Rattle to succeed Claudio Abbado as their Principal Conductor and while it has never been released as a recording, the radio transmission of the concert can be heard on YouTube. A dozen or so years later on 26 August 2011, now firmly at the helm in Berlin, Rattle can be seen and heard (courtesy of the orchestra's own Digital Concert Hall) conducting Mahler's Seventh once more. If the performance does not quite have the same voltage of the 1999 performance, it still runs it close and by any standards, this is an exceptional reading and performance. It is dispiriting therefore to then have to report how in the 'official' releases some five years after in 2016, that the fires no longer burn quite so brightly. Compared to the CBSO account, for example, there are now no problems with the orchestra lacking any tonal allure or fire-power, nor is there any issues with the acoustic(s). However, what we have instead is Rattle's interpretation now slickly executed in the most technically unbelievable way, with a liberal dose of professionally applied wonder and excitement randomly distributed throughout the performances, whether live at the Philharmonie on compact disc, or live in London, once again at a London Promenade concert, on a well-directed DVD issued by Unitel (coupled with the first half of Boulez's *Éclat*). They are both enjoyable performances and, unquestionably, respectable ones too although, once again, you still cannot help but to look over your shoulder at the better Rattle performances from previous years with the Berliners.

Perhaps what is missing from those later Berlin tapings can be found instead on the 1995 recording from the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, with Rattle guest-conducting the Vienna Philharmonic. This has all the ingredients to make a great recording of the Mahler Seventh – a great orchestra on tour with a guest conductor, in a great hall, with all the attendant sense of occasion that you would expect (and which was sadly missing in 2016). This recording is not without its faults – the sound is a little 'muddy' and lacks the razor-sharp focus of either the Birmingham and Berlin tapings, and the opening tenor horn solo sounds a little nervous at the outset but, once the performance gets into its stride, it takes wing and delivers on every level. I do not think this is quite as good as the Berlin 1999 or 2011 performances mentioned above, but it is the best of the four listed and is a worthy: 9/10

Leif Segerstam

1991 Nov 4-6: Danish Radio SO (Studio Digital – Chandos)

To say that Leif Segerstam's Mahler Symphony cycle is 'characterful' would be something of an understatement – huge rubato, along with many broad tempos that brood with claustrophobic power and intensity abound, aided and abetted by the typical full and rich Chandos sound of the era.

All of these characteristics can be evidenced in this eighty-nine-minute recording of the Seventh Symphony, which opens extremely broadly – a cynic would comment that it must have been a very slow boat ride for Mahler across the Wörthersee indeed, but more open-eared people would note how the brass glower menacingly and the tenor horn roars like a beast out of the Kalevala. That the second subject is taken at a more conventional tempo is typical of the extremes of speed and rubato Segerstam habitually employs in this music but, as a composer himself, he is also very interested in the colours hidden deep within the score. For example, in the first *Nachtmusik* he delights in the work of the bassoons, frequently bringing them to the fore of the sound picture with results that almost rivals Horenstein (see 1968) in spookiness. The inner movements are played comparatively 'straight' when compared to the outer movements and, as a consequence, sound somewhat under-characterised, as if the conductor has little interest in them. The final movement though does open with a terrific salvo on the timpani and the brass section has genuine swagger, although the huge rubato employed once again at the whim of the conductor, as in the first movement, does result in making Mahler's music sounding somewhat 'disjointed' at times.

However, in the end one must conclude that although this is much more than just a professional run-through and is all hugely characterful, it is hardly idiomatic. Nor, in spite of orchestral playing of great dedication and sensitivity, can one quite overlook the fact that the strings sound too light, even with the typical wide-screen sound furnished by the Chandos engineers of that era, which perhaps makes the orchestra sound more powerful than it really is. Quirky or revealing, depending upon your viewpoint, but undoubtedly big-hearted, this nonetheless is for the specialist collector of Mahler and/or Segerstam only: 6.5/10

1992

Evgeny Svetlanov

1992 February – *The Russian State Symphony Orchestra (Studio Digital – Saison Russe)* [REVIEW](#)

1997 September 11 – *NHK Symphony Orchestra (Live Digital – NHK)*

Evgeny Svetlanov's Russian Mahler cycle nearly always brings a smile to my face, albeit usually for the wrong reasons. One wag once described it as "so bad, you just have to hear it" and it has to be said, they did have a point – for example, in the First Symphony, the Huntsman is treated to a funeral where the trumpets positively drip with sarcasm in a way that would make even Shostakovich blush. In the Sixth Symphony, the final movement is presented by the conductor as some kind of nuclear holocaust warning, complete with the puniest of hammer blows and what sound like explosions from the mightiest of Soviet-era arsenal elsewhere. I was therefore looking forward to auditioning this eighty-five-minute *Song of the Night* – for all the wrong reasons, of course.

It most certainly is not helped by sonics which are vague and diffuse, nor by what is, quite frankly, some very poor orchestral playing. After a ragged opening which also drags, Svetlanov then sprints off into the ensuing *Allegro con fuoco* before all the preparation for the serene 'religious vision' section is undone by out of tune brass and split notes – one just has to wonder how this was allowed to pass the producer's ears in a studio recording. It appears as if the conductor tries to inject some excitement into the proceedings with the remainder of the movement by adopting headlong speeds for the closing marches, but the results just sound formless and superficial.

The longer than usual running time in this performance can largely be attributed to the conductor's extremely leisurely speeds in the inner movements, especially the two *Nachtmusiks*, taken at nineteen and sixteen minutes respectively. The first is fairly warm-hearted but rather aimless, as is the second which is further hampered by too many instances of crude and inelegant solo work, especially the principal horn - it is rather difficult to work up much enthusiasm for either, to be honest. The central *Scherzo* isn't too bad, Soviet musicians probably being all too aware of things that go bump in the night, even if some of the *sforzandos* on the bassoons and tuba are taken with a bit too much relish. One has to admit there is also some excitement in the final movement too, albeit of a fairly rough and ready variety, but even that positive is undone with the bells in the coda, which sound as if Mahler's night journey ended instead at a local clockmaker's hut on the stroke of midnight and is another example of unintentional hilarity in this cycle as a whole; the only thing that's missing is the cuckoo. Ultimately then this *Song of the Night* is for hardy souls only.

Fast forwarding some five years to a one-off live performance in Tokyo reveals one of the reasons why it is so fascinating to do these surveys. Perhaps you would not be surprised to learn that the orchestral playing is now much improved, since Mahler has been revered by audiences in Japan and played by its orchestras for as long as anywhere, unlike in Russia. Nor should you be surprised that the sound is far better as well from a country whose fascination with technology also extends to consistently producing the very finest sounding classical recordings (and pressings) too. However, maybe you would be surprised to learn that Svetlanov's interpretation has changed significantly in the handful of years between the two recordings evidenced, in particular, by the timings of each movement.

If in the earlier reading the first movement could have justifiably benefited from some levelling out between a very broad opening and speedy conclusion, in the later reading the opening is, if anything, even broader with the same speedy ending, which is hardly an improvement. Even worse is the first *Nachtmusik*, which was already rather slow at nineteen minutes, which now gains an extra three minutes in the later reading, which results in a very dull and heavy trudge through the night indeed. The central *Scherzo* is the same as before, except the playing is infinitely more refined with results that are actually rather good, if not exceptional. The hard-working NHK Symphony also nearly convince in Svetlanov's slow-motion reading of the second *Nachtmusik* too, while the final movement is actually marginally faster than the earlier recording with far more appropriate bells. The audience cheer enthusiastically at the end, but in truth, while this is much better than Svetlanov's "official" reading with his own Russian band, it is still hugely idiosyncratic and falls short of the very best: 4.5/10

Giuseppe Sinopoli

1992 May – Philharmonia Orchestra (Studio Digital – Deutsche Grammophon)

I have seen elsewhere (not on MWI) Sinopoli's recording of the Mahler Seventh summarily dismissed as "mannered" with "strange sonics" with an orchestra "whose weak trombones and lack of power in its lower registers fail to do justice to the range of Mahler's unique orchestration". It is not a view that I share, although this *Song of the Night* is not without its problems in a performance where moments of breath-taking beauty are invariably followed by ones of worrisome weirdness. The 'strange sonics' can nearly always be explained by this conductor attempting to seek out weird colours and orchestral balances, which I think is an attempt to deliberately highlight the modernity of the score and while the trombone section of the Philharmonia of the time are perhaps not the sonic equivalent of their superhuman counterparts in the Chicago Symphony, that is only because few are – and there are many much worse in this survey. Moreover, I would content that the whole orchestra plays with great concentration, accuracy and intensity throughout this recording, which does full justice to their

conductor's unique vision of the score – the real question is though whether this 'unique vision' stands up to repeated listening and scrutiny for the prospective listener.

The opening of the first moment gives the first indication of Sinopoli's approach, where right from the beginning the tempo is very slow, presumably to allow the tenor horn to cleanly articulate the demisemiquavers (32nd notes) of their opening phrases. The atmosphere is super-concentrated and when the solo trumpet takes over the motif a few bars later, it pierces through the musical texture like Amfortas' spear. By contrast, the second subject is taken at some pace but, by some strange alchemy, since the conductor leads the transition into it with considerable subtlety, he pulls it off convincingly, unlike Gustavo Dudamel who attempted something similar, but with clunky results (see 2012). Similarly, the music leading into the central 'religious vision' section of the movement is taken very slowly, those ghostly trumpet and woodwind fanfares bordering on the mannered, with the logic of the conductor's approach only revealed when the music takes wing with cascading harps softly pulling back the veil to reveal Mahler's wondrous and serene musical landscape. A more breathtakingly beautiful execution of this section of the first movement you will not find in this survey, but likewise you would also struggle to find a cooler one too – there is none of the searing ecstasy found at this point in the music as with James Levine (see 1980). Further on, the climax of the recapitulation is hugely impressive, arriving as in a blaze of light, and yet immediately after it the tempos are pulled around in the coda too much to allow the music to settle and to arrive at any of the sense of finality it needs.

So it continues – the central *Scherzo* is, in places, hugely impressive with its spookiness and weirdness finding a happy alliance with this conductor's deliberately modernistic approach, but just when you think this is a reading of the movement to rival that of Rafael Kubelík's studio account (see 1970), everything is undone by the central *trio*, which is taken so slowly that the music has all the life sucked out of it. Perhaps this is deliberate on the part of the conductor, bearing in mind his aforementioned treatment of the 'religious vision' section of the first movement, as the same approach is also adopted in the second *Nachtmusik*, that is not so much slow (which at over seventeen minutes it indisputably is), but also curiously grey, sluggish and devoid of charm; I just cannot fathom the "why" of such an approach. The final movement is almost more conventional, except once again the conductor feels the need to manipulate tempos, not always to the music's advantage – as early as bar 22, just after the opening fanfare flourishes when music leads into the horn-led section, Mahler annotates each note to be played with an accent. For some reason (and certainly not due to any instructions in the score), Sinopoli feels the need to slow the tempo right down to almost a standstill, exaggerating the accents, only to immediately revert back to tempo when horns and drums proudly state the main theme of the movement. It is a ruinous decision that robs the music of all the momentum achieved in the opening bars and one that also fails to give the coda of the whole symphony the 'lift-off' it truly deserves, when the same material is repeated at the lead in to the coda of the whole symphony - maybe it is a "mannered" reading after all !

Ultimately, this eighty-seven-minute rendition is certainly a different take, refreshingly original in places, heart-stoppingly beautiful in others, but in the end for the curious only and too wild even for a wild card nomination: 6.5/10

1993

Heinz Rögner

1993 Feb tba: Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra (Live Digital – Passion & Concentration)

The Leipzig born conductor Heinz Rögner had a distinguished career, mainly leading orchestras in East Germany and this live seventy-six-minute performance of the Mahler Seventh Symphony with

the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra was recorded in his final season as their Principal Conductor. It must be said that the orchestra acquit themselves well, even if the horn cracks at the opening of the first *Nachtmusik* as well as the odd scrappy ensemble elsewhere reminds us all that this is live, in spite of an extraordinarily quiet audience whose cheers have been cut at the end. The sound too is of a good standard for 1993, which means it is a clear, well balanced and full toned radio broadcast, even if perhaps the percussion can sound slightly 'clattery' on occasion.

As a performance, it is certainly full-blooded and played with tremendous relish and conviction by the Berlin orchestra, and Rögner has some very some interesting ideas with his interpretation too. During the opening pages however, I rather wondered if this was going to be a mannered reading, as the horn statement (bar 50 – 55, c.3 m), as well as the trombone statement later on (bars 155-158, c.6m) are given significant and perhaps too much emphasis, but thereafter the conductor achieves character in his interpretation more by clever use of colours and phrasing, rather than any unwritten underlining of certain passages. This is best demonstrated in the *Scherzo*, which opens slowly but subtly speeds up, as if something is creeping up behind you until exploding timpani make you jump, after which the strings scurry around with sinister relish, while the winds and percussion clump about like a gleefully dancing witch. It is very good, as is the swift *Nachtmusik II* taken at just under eleven minutes, that does not sound remotely rushed at all. However, none of this will prepare you for the final pages of the whole symphony where, with high flying trumpets trilling as they ride the orchestral tidal wave that crashes down upon the closing bars with bells ringing out, Rögner then asks his orchestra to effect two massive crescendos one after the other as the horns cry out exultantly, before the sprint home to the finishing-line. If no other conductor does this, that is because it is not written in the score and while it is hardly intervention on the scale of a Leopold Stokowski (he would have had tam-tams and an organ roaring away at that point, probably with additional cascading harps too) and nor should it work, that somehow Rögner is able to bring it all home with such triumph is something of an achievement and not for the first time am I left wishing that the audience cheers had been included to join in with my own.

This is one of those recordings which I ended up liking more than perhaps I should. Maybe it is not quite a mandatory listen, but for those who seek the thrill of the forbidden fruit all wrapped-up Mahler-style, then this recording may just be the irresistible sin they seek: 8/10

1994

Riccardo Chailly

1994 April 15-21 – Concertgebouw Orchestra Amsterdam (Studio Digital – Decca)**

2014 March 27-28 - Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra (DVD Digital – Accentus)

The twin glories of Chailly's Decca studio recording of Mahler's *Song of the Night* are the playing of the Concertgebouw Orchestra, as well as the deep and rich sound with which Decca furnishes the whole enterprise – the bass drum in the first movement rumbles as if from the depths of Hell itself and is deeply chilling. Chailly's approach to Mahler in his earlier cycle is cool and lucid – not for him is the emotional pressure-cookers or head-long excitement of Bernstein or Tennstedt. There are certainly times, especially in the leisurely paced twenty-four-minute first movement and even the more conventionally paced final movement, where proceedings are in serious danger of flagging and are only rescued by the resplendent sound and, quite frankly, stunning orchestral playing. Likewise, there is a certain lack of character such as with the opening of the *Scherzo*, where the timpani and lower strings argue over what should be the opening note, which in this recording is done with much good taste and refinement, with nary a whiff of the devilry or modernism that Boulez finds in his own recording with the Cleveland Orchestra made the same year (see below).

However, there is something rather special about this grand and patient eighty-four-minute *Song of the Night*, which, I have to acknowledge, I have not always previously appreciated. This may not be the most exciting nor the most passionate of performances, but there is certainly much to be said for just sitting back and listening to the sheer range of colours, effects and daring of Mahler's score as so successfully realised by Chailly, his players and the Decca engineers working in the sympathetic acoustic of the Concertgebouw, which collectively elevates this recording to a very high position in this survey.

It is therefore fascinating to encounter Chailly conducting the same piece some twenty years later, this time live on a well-filmed hybrid Blu-ray/DVD and with the orchestra he led after departing Amsterdam, the Leipzig Gewandhaus, not least since it knocks some eight minutes off the previous overall running time. Of course, allowances have to be made for the difference between the excitement of the concert hall and the more 'forensic laboratory' conditions of the recording studio, but there is real momentum and (almost) rip-roaring excitement here too, even if Chailly's priorities of clarity and lucidity largely remain. At times, it appears as if he now wants to emphasise the sheer modernity of the score – for example, at the beginning of the first *Nachtmusik*, gone are the haunted horn calls across the moonlit vistas which are replaced instead by something terser, less atmospheric, more modern, if you like. Indeed on the very final chord of all in this movement, the conductor highlights the suspended cymbal note more than usual to emphasise the strangeness of the music Mahler is creating. That said, I am not sure though if what we are seeing and hearing in Leipzig are quite Chailly's final thoughts on this symphony; I rather suspect it is more a reading in transition, as something has been lost on the journey from Amsterdam, namely a little affection, which has been replaced by a more brusque and unsentimental approach, which is not an overall improvement. In addition to the example in the opening of the first *Nachtmusik*, is Chailly's way with the last movement's coda – as high flying trumpets ride the crest of the orchestral tsunami leading into the final page of all, where horns and bells exultantly ring out, until everyone then sprints to the finishing line, Chailly in Leipzig starts his "sprint" several bars earlier than everyone else, with the horns and bells being chivvied along hurriedly; it is as if Mahler is not being allowed his moment of hard-won jubilation at this point, the emotional culmination of the whole symphony passing by with hardly a hint of triumph. It is undoubtedly exciting and, indeed, the final sprint home sees the ensemble slip for the first and only time, with the timpani coming off of the rails, but I was not convinced – nor was I by the conductor then insisting upon silence for a good few seconds after the final note has sounded, holding his baton aloft, eyes closed in rapt contemplation. A more pretentious and counter-intuitive gesture I cannot imagine – I mean, this is hardly the end of Mahler's Ninth Symphony.....

Elsewhere, the Gewandhaus players are technically excellent, but perhaps inevitably are unable to surpass the playing of their colleagues of the Concertgebouw, who display the quiet confidence of an orchestra that knows it was one of only three to have performed the piece under the composer's own baton and has been doing so with supremacy ever since, as evidenced by recordings under van Beinum, Kondrashin and Haitink in the decades prior to this Decca one. It is the curious alchemy of being able to hear to the back desk players knowing that they have something important to contribute to the music and yet are able to deliver it as part of the overall bigger picture, a performing tradition that the Leipzig players (for all their own impressive history) just cannot match.

Ultimately, you may find more exciting and characterful conducting than on Chailly's Amsterdam recording, perhaps - but not often - better sonics, as well as - much less often, if at all - more intuitive orchestral excellence, but you will not find any which exceed the combined sum of all three of those points as are found on this recording – and for that, much respect needs to be given: 8.5/10

Pierre Boulez

1994 November: Cleveland Orchestra (Studio Digital – DG)

1996 Aug 15: Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra (Live Digital – GNP)

2011 Jan 20-21: Concertgebouw Orchestra (DVD Digital – RCO) [REVIEW](#)

I have found Pierre Boulez's Mahler cycle for Deutsche Grammophon to be somewhat variable, to put it mildly, and while some people are big fans of his studio account of the Seventh Symphony, I am much less sure. For once, stating that it is a performance which lasts seventy-five minutes does not inform prospective listeners of the type of performance on offer, as I will try to explain.

In the first instance, Boulez opens the work very slowly and while his first movement, lasting just over twenty-three minutes, is not the slowest in the survey, it certainly sounds as if it is. The opening is dull and dispiriting and drags itself along to the ensuing *Allegro con fuoco*, which is anything but being 'fast and energetic' as instructed. Slightly further on, Mahler's indication in the score of *Mit großem Schwung* ('with great energy') is ignored in favour of cold indifference and the tone for the whole movement appears to have been set. It is something of a surprise to then find some signs of life during the 'religious vision' sequence, not least since Boulez is hardly a conductor renowned for revelling in music of such high passion and visionary beauty but, aided and abetted by some glorious opening sonorities from the Cleveland brass, this passage only gets better from that point on, until the first subject material returns and the emotional temperature once more drops back to zero. My notes commenting on the end of the movement as 'sluggish and lethargic' tells you everything else you need to know.

In contrast to his slow and dull opening movement, Boulez then plays the two *Nachtmusiks* very fast; the first at just under fourteen minutes is not too bad, even if clearly Boulez has no truck with making the opening horn calls sound remotely atmospheric, but the second is astonishingly so, with a running time of ten-and-a-half minutes, which is one of the fastest in the whole survey. In some respects, it is not so much the speed that is the problem, but the sense that the conductor just wants it over and done with as soon as possible, which is its death-knell. The final movement is conventionally paced and is okay, but nothing special, in spite of some more fabulous playing from the Clevelanders and spectacular sonics from DG. However, I have to say that the central *Scherzo* is very good indeed, the opening being particularly noteworthy with the opening timpani strokes blurring into the pizzicato played on the cellos and double basses in the most macabre of fashion. For me though, this *Song of the Night* represents Boulez at his most dogmatic worst.

What I find quite astonishing however, is that this is clearly the interpretation that Boulez intended, rather than it just being an 'off-day' in the recording studio, since the live Vienna Philharmonic radio broadcast and filmed Amsterdam performances are not only identical in execution, but also in effect. The Vienna Philharmonic concert was probably taped during a live performance at the Salzburg Summer Festival, the cavernous acoustics almost certainly being those of the Großes Festspielhaus and benefitting us not one bit. The commendably quiet audience are happy to cheer at the end but the sound engineers cannot replicate the glorious sonics DG provide for the Cleveland recording. Likewise, a dozen or so years later and this time at the helm of the Concertgebouw Orchestra, Boulez gives us virtually the same interpretation, again with little benefit from it being live. Even with one of the greatest Mahler orchestras in the world at his disposal, he hardly ever looks up from his score and appears uninterested in the proceedings, with results that are correspondingly dispiriting. The sound on this DVD is fine and there is a golden glow to the picture which is very handsome to watch, but it appears that nothing can quite rescue Mahler's symphony from Maestro Boulez' murderous grasp. If you insist on Boulez, then the Cleveland recording is the one to have, but for me all three of the above issues are very disappointing: 4.5/10

Edo de Waart

1994 October 8: Radio Filharmonisch Orkest, Nederlands (Live Digital – RCA)

That Edo de Waart (b.1941) not only won the Dimitri Mitropoulos Conducting Competition at the age of 23, then served as Leonard Bernstein's assistant at the New York Philharmonic, before returning to his homeland to be Bernard Haitink's assistant at the Concertgebouw, bodes well for him being a fine Mahlerian. Less so, perhaps, was his assertion, in an interview given around the time of the release of the above recording, that with Mahler there was "the Bernstein way", as well as his own way, the "way of understatement". You could almost accuse him, with some justification, of being a Bernard Haitink without the charisma.

In this seventy-nine-minute performance of the *Song of the Night*, taken from a live performance from Amsterdam's Concertgebouw with a virtually silent audience, de Waart is treated to very fine sound from RCA, and he secures extremely good playing from his orchestra and his interpretation is full of interesting details which can only come from someone who knows all the symphonies inside out – in other words a master Mahlerian, which is particularly evident in the middle movements. In the first *Nachtmusik*, de Waart points out the music's influence from Mahler's early *Wunderhorn* style especially with his orchestra's spirited woodwind contributions, who also come together to produce a very fine *Scherzo* indeed. A flowing twelve-minute *Nachtmusik II*, by no means commonplace in 1994, is followed by a final movement that opens with much brilliance and brio, a neat fusion of grandeur, excitement and inner detail. Unfortunately, I felt the first movement to be somewhat small-scaled and lacking in contrast, otherwise this performance would have been much more recommendable.

At present, this recording has not been available on general release for quite some time, causing a few commentators to wonder why, but the answer is surely that, for all its virtues, it is far too similar in approach to another cycle already on RCA's books, specifically the one by David Zinman, who is able to boast even better sound. In spite of my reservations with the opening movement though, there is still enough excellence here to warrant: 7.5/10

Michael Halász

1994 Nov 28 – Dec 2: Narodowa Orkiestra Symfoniczna Polskiego Radia (Studio Digital – Naxos)

The Hungarian conductor Michael Halász (b.1938) began his career as a bassoonist with the Philharmonia Hungarica, before becoming a conductor, mainly in German opera houses. He has quite an extensive discography for Naxos, including some Mahler symphonies, amongst which is this recording of the Seventh Symphony.

Alas, this seventy-nine-minute version with the Polish Radio Symphony Orchestra is not one of the most distinguished entries in the discography. In spite of the average playing time, the first movement somehow manages to sound both harried and hurried, the orchestra sounding as if it is needing to work hard with the music never really settling, a situation only confirmed when the trumpets miss out a major entry completely towards the end of the movement. Similarly in the final movement, the timpanist too often appears shy and reticent, as if short on confidence about what is going on and indeed he misses out a whole bar in the opening salvos. The bells at the end are non-existent. Furthermore, the inner-movements sound cautious and under-characterised, an impression further compounded by the vague, grey sonics. Naxos have occasionally done the music industry proud with releases of repertoire, both mainstream and rare, at budget price, but this Mahler Seventh is just a cheap effort: 3/10

1995

Adrian Leaper

1995 June 21, 26-30: *Orquesta Filarmónica de Gran Canaria (Studio Digital – Arte Nova)* [REVIEW](#)

This recording of the *Song of the Night* was made shortly after Adrian Leaper took over as the chief conductor of the Gran Canaria Philharmonic and certainly shows what a fine band he had inherited. The whole thing opens very impressively, the bass drum rumbling menacingly, before Leaper manages the transition to the *Allegro con fuoco* material with great skill. Thereafter, I have to confess to have some doubts creeping in as the central 'religious vision' music begins. The problems are threefold: the orchestra, in spite of some technically excellent playing, does not have the string section of either the requisite lustre or intensity to carry the music forward on its journey, a situation not helped by either Leaper's fairly relaxed approach, nor Arte Nova's sonics; the sound obtained by the engineers is always clear and well-balanced, but seems to be miked at a moderate distance which limits the dynamic range of an orchestra that really needs all the help it can get. Leaper's tempos are eminently sensible over this seventy-nine-minute performance, with transitions generally well handled, but the aforementioned relaxed approach does not really do the music justice, with the central *Scherzo* in particular coming across as somewhat under-characterised. The final movement is not bad – most performances can usually generate some excitement at this point – but the final note of all is not quite together, which kind of summarises this 'near-miss' performance.

An amiable performance then, with nothing about it to offend, it had the distinction of being available on one CD at super-budget price before the deletions axe began its merciless work, but you can certainly do much better elsewhere: 5.5/10

1997

Michael Tilson-Thomas

1997 Nov 11-13: *London SO (Studio Digital – RCA)* ** [REVIEW](#)

2005 March tba: *San Francisco SO (Live Digital – SFS Media)* [REVIEW](#)

I have found Michael Tilson Thomas's Mahler cycle from San Francisco to be a bit hit and miss (a marvellous Fourth, an awful Eighth), but I have always hugely admired his earlier recording of the Seventh made with the London Symphony Orchestra for RCA. The sound is very fine, if not quite as opulent as DG's for Sinopoli or Boulez to name two recordings from around the same time, but more than good enough to bring this reading vividly to life through your speakers. Likewise, the playing of the LSO is exceptional - perhaps a small criticism is that their lean, mean string sound could be found wanting compared to their more seductive Central European and more muscular American rivals. However, it is Tilson Thomas's extraordinary interpretation that elevates this recording to the very top of the list of recordings of this symphony.

It is undoubtedly an individual reading which, with a running time of eighty minutes, is broader than most, but he never seeks to unduly underline passages as he does in his remake of the symphony in San Francisco. What there is instead though is a care and imagination at work, bringing the piece vividly to life - phrases that are just repeated in other recordings are here subtly differentiated, not just in volume, but colour and emphasis. The first instance of this is just after the religious vision central episode in the first movement, which the conductor prepares with much logic and then proceeds with it as if it is Mahler's greatest Adagio, slower than most other versions at this point admittedly, but performed with such conviction that you cannot help but think this is the only way it can be done. Immediately thereafter, with the reprise of the opening material, the sound-world is now much darker and ominous than when this music first appeared at the beginning of the movement, an interpretive point that is so logical you wonder why Tilson Thomas is the only

conductor to do it. What is so impressive is how this first movement which opens so broadly, only lasts a little over twenty-one minutes, as the snap, fire and drive of the closing marches not only contrast magnificently from what has gone before, but also seem to have a conviction and sense of rightness that can only be admired.

Such excellence also extends to the inner movements – the first *Nachtmusik* is a leisurely seventeen minutes that contains a sense of wonder, as well as delight, which is almost unique to this performance. The ten-minute *Scherzo* is a little leisurely, not as tense as some other interpretations maybe, but with a nice balance between faux-horror and tongue-in-cheek spookiness, as well as a fascination with the movement's flickering sound-world that is wonderfully realised by the LSO players. The second *Nachtmusik* is a middle-of-the-road fourteen minutes, perhaps more noble than usual, the playing of the orchestra once more noteworthy, nicely poised with the perfumed lyricism of the music winningly projected.

In the Rondo finale, Tilson Thomas once more demonstrates his almost uncanny ability in this recording to not just weld all the seemingly disparate ideas of Mahler into one coherent whole, but to also make individual sections sound different from before. It is a remarkable alchemy and one that also sees both the grandeur of the music, as well as its more pastoral elements fused into one, in a way that few other conductors are able to match. Needless to say, the final pages are absolutely tremendous and, in my opinion, it all culminates in one of the very finest readings of all.

It is perhaps inevitable that the remake some six years later in San Francisco should not quite replicate the achievement in London. That said, it being in even better sound and enjoying very fine playing, and an overall timing of some four minutes less than the LSO performance, means that some people may prefer it, since Tilson Thomas on this occasion seems keener to push the music along, giving it greater drive, if perhaps inevitably at the expense of the sense of wonder he achieved in London with Mahler's ever-shifting textures. One thing I have noticed in his later cycle (likewise in the First Symphony) is the conductor's tendency to exaggerate changes in tempo - as if he is going through the score with a highlighter pen and is keen to point them all out to the listener. There is one very jarring example of that in this performance, near the end of the first movement, where it seems as if several bars have been grafted on from a different, much faster performance, before returning to normal. That this San Francisco reading is a very good recording is not in dispute – however, it is simply not in the same league as Tilson Thomas's earlier achievement, which I think is also one of the very finest in this survey and probably the only one worthy enough to stand alongside Bernstein's first account with the New York Philharmonic: 9.5/10

1998

Ken-ichiro Kobayashi

1998 Sep 19 & 21: Czech PO (Studio Digital – Canyon)

When I wrote my Conspectus for Mahler's First Symphony, Ken-ichiro Kobayashi's 1998 live recording with the Czech Philharmonic was one of my top choices – a more imaginative, better played, better recorded and exciting version would be hard to find, even if a minor health warning is required for the conductor's grunting, which is superbly captured by the sound engineers. So I was very much looking forward to listening to the same team's version of the *Song of the Night* from the same year. In some respects, this recording shares many of the same virtues as before – the sonics are once more glorious (and pick up some grunting again), the playing quite wonderful and the imagination at work in this interpretation is genuinely impressive. However, with a total running time of just over eighty-seven minutes, it is also one of the longest renditions in this survey, a point that may rule it out for many listeners.

Not that it ever sounds slow or dragging – far from it, in fact. There is a unique chemistry here between the imagination of a rather wilful conductor channelled through an orchestra that has an innate and intuitive understanding of the music which is second to none. So in the first movement, the religious vision passage has all the bracing exaltation of reaching the summit of a mountain, with playing that is not just pure and rarefied, but of breath-taking beauty too – you can almost feel the cool mountain air hit your lungs. Likewise, the first *Nachtmusik* is just as distinguished – a more leisurely stroll than usual, this Nightwatchman delights in the incidental detail of his journey, the exquisite playing of the Czech Philharmonic tantalising the listener's ear in hitherto unheard details all presented in colours and weight of tone that is not just astonishing but will make you wish the journey never ends (just listen to how the violas weight and colour each different note of their pizzicato accompaniment towards the end of the movement – bars 262-270, c.13m30s). At just over eleven minutes, the central *Scherzo* is again slower than usual and while the tension does not flag, the elegance of the playing is more of a haunted ballroom rather than how I feel Mahler rather intended his music to be – it is shadowy yes, spectral even, but it is as if all the ghosts and demons are clad in Gucci and Louis Vuitton. Similarly, the (rather long) sixteen-minute *Nachtmusik II* does not outstay its welcome only because the velvety softness of the Czech Philharmonic's strings caress your ears, as they present the music in such beautiful half lights that it all ends up being completely irresistible. The last movement is paced somewhat more conventionally and has an emphasis more on grandeur and nobility, perhaps at a slight loss of excitement, but the final pages are brought home with much aplomb.

In the end, it is almost difficult to believe just how long this interpretation lasts – both the beauty of the sound and orchestral playing, as well as the imagination from the podium here ensures it is an absorbing listening experience in spite of its length, whereas other similarly long readings, such as by Asahina (see 1981) and Maazel (see 1984), are in comparison far harder work to enjoy. As such, this can never be a mandatory recommendation, but is certainly worth seeking out especially for those who particularly want a more leisurely reading, as nobody else does it better. For the more mainstream collector, this is still a very noteworthy addition to the catalogue due to its special qualities and is definitely a wild card nomination: 8.5/10

Yoel Levi

1998 Nov 22-23 – Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (Studio Digital – Telarc) [REVIEW](#)

Yoel Levi's 'near-miss' Mahler cycle for Telarc (symphonies 3, 8 and 9 were entrusted to other conductors) has recently been reissued in 2022 as a very competitively priced boxed set and anyone purchasing it would have a reasonable bargain in their hands – the sound, at least, is nearly always unfailingly spectacular. I am not so sure if this eighty-one-minute performance of the Seventh Symphony is quite the best of that cycle however, the main problem being Levi's fairly relaxed tempos and demeanour in the first four movements. Now, there is nothing wrong with leisurely tempos – and this is by no means the slowest account in the survey – but they need to be carried along by conviction and intensity, qualities that are in too often in short-supply here, where everything is just a little too cool and relaxed. It is all a pity, for the sound is indeed beautiful, as is the playing, plus the last movement is absolutely thrilling – everything that was missing before is present here in spades, with the Atlanta brass on imperious form and the bass drum sending shockwaves through the speakers in true Telarc style that can probably be measured on the Richter-scale. Okay, perhaps the conductor is slightly too broad with the final peroration to quite achieve true lift-off, but the concluding sprint to the finishing line is as exciting as anyone's. If only the rest of the performance was on this level it would have been one of the greatest Sevens of all. As it is, I am feeling miserly by awarding it: 6.5/10

2000

Mariss Jansons

2000 Mar 23-24: Oslo PO (Live Digital/Simax)

2000 Dec 7: Concertgebouw Orchestra (Live Digital/RCO Live)

2007 Mar 8-9: Bavarian RSO (Live Digital/BR Klassiks) [REVIEW](#)

2016 Sep 28-30: Concertgebouw Orchestra (Live Digital/RCO Live) [REVIEW](#)

When Mariss Jansons died in 2019, many would not have necessarily associated him with Mahler's music, perhaps considering Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich and other composers of the Russian school to be more appropriate and closer to his heart. However, Mahler was ever-present in his repertoire and indeed he had two Mahler symphony cycles on the go at the end of his life, one with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra for BR Klassiks, as well as another with the Concertgebouw Orchestra for RCO Live, two ensembles that he led with much distinction. He lived long enough to record the Seventh Symphony with both, as well as with the Oslo Philharmonic, another orchestra which he led (from 1979 to 2002), and there is a further live account from 2004 with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra from when he was their Principal Conductor (from 1995 to 2004), even if only the first movement of that performance has been released so far.

His interpretation was remarkably consistent over the period covered, by and large lasting seventy-eight to seventy-nine minutes, with a second *Nachtmusik* of some thirteen minutes, which is midway between Bernstein and late Abbado, the latter favouring a swift twelve minutes for this movement in his final performances. The weakest of the four recordings is the Amsterdam performance from December 2000, which has been included in a large box set of radio broadcasts devoted to Jansons conducting the Concertgebouw, and was taped shortly before he became the orchestra's principal conductor (2004-2015). I have no information on the background of this performance, but I have sometimes wondered if Jansons was a late substitute for another conductor that night, since ensemble is often a little uncertain during the many transitions of this one-off performance - which is remarkable when you consider this is the Concertgebouw and how good they are in virtually every other recording they appear on in this survey. For example, as early as around eight minutes into the first movement (bar 193), Mahler annotates the score with *ganz zurückhaltend*, which means 'holding back slightly', an instruction Jansons observes rather too keenly in all of his performances, but in Amsterdam in December 2000 causes the ensemble to momentarily fall apart with the tenor horn completely losing the rhythm and confusing their entrance. It is interesting to compare this performance with the one taped earlier the same year with the Oslo PO, when he was still their Principal Conductor. The timings are virtually the same and there is no problem with ensemble in that passage at all, plus there is a fire and exuberance about the music-making that is notably absent in the Amsterdam concert later on that year (just listen to the harps introducing the religious vision section of the first movement, almost Straussian in their decadence). The sound as produced by the Simax engineers is close and personal, so different from the more distanced but still richly detailed sonics from Amsterdam, which conveys an almost patrician and more refined, if rather cooler, listening experience as a consequence. It may come as something of a surprise that the Oslo Philharmonic performance is the finer played and greater experience of the two and, indeed, easily competes as well with the later 2007 performances from Munich. That recording, taken from two live performances after Jansons had been the orchestra's Principal Conductor for four years, is noteworthy for being the world premiere recording of the new critical edition of the score by the International Gustav Mahler Society (Boosey & Hawkes, Bote & Bock), although you would be hard-pressed to hear the rather few and, frankly, minor changes it contains. The interpretation is familiar from the previous two recordings, but is distinguished by the very transparent sound achieved by both the engineers, as well as by Jansons and the Bavarians, which means you do hear more of the score here than many other recordings, especially in its SACD issue. However, for all its revelatory

details, it is a rather cool affair - a somewhat muted audience response is left in at the end, which pretty much mirrored my own.

That said, the live 2016 recording with the Concertgebouw is in another league entirely. As before, the sound is rich and proud and, in the season just after he resigned as their Principal Conductor, the playing is now superlative, the orchestra fully conversant with Jansons and his vision of the score. The performance is little different from before, but what does differentiate it from the earlier recordings, as well as many others this time round, is the all-round accomplishment of brilliant sonics, fantastic orchestral playing and fine conducting all coming together to produce a superb performance. You will indeed find more thought-provoking, more imagination (the section after the religious vision passage could have contained a bit more darkness and menace, for example) and perhaps more excitement in other recordings, but overall this later live taping from Amsterdam is hugely satisfying and is by far the best of Jansons' recordings: 8/10

Vladimir Ashkenazy

2000 April 27-28: Czech PO (Live Digital – Exton)

2011 Mar 9, 11-12: Sydney SO (Live Digital – SSO Live)

One of the nice surprises when doing the survey for Mahler's First Symphony, was to stumble across Vladimir Ashkenazy's live recording with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra from 2010 - a more full-bloodied and exciting performance, red of tooth and claw would be hard to find. The Seventh Symphony is, of course, a much more complicated and subtle beast, which needs more than just red-bloodied intensity to do it justice, so I was curious to audition these two recordings to find out for myself just how they fared.

The earlier of the two comes from a live recording with the Czech PO, of which Ashkenazy was the Principal Conductor from 1996 to 2003. It's actually a little disappointing – Ashkenazy pilots a sensible path tempo-wise through the symphony, with only the last movement perhaps raising an eyebrow for being slightly on the fast side. The orchestra play with all their usual customary understanding and brilliance, while the sound furnished by Exton is very fine indeed. It is very professional – even the audience are super-quiet throughout the seventy-five-minute performance – but it is all a bit safe, ordinary and uneventful really.

A dozen or so years later Down Under is a rather different experience. Ashkenazy himself comes across as more confident and inspired, especially when compared to the rather cautious and professional musician previously in front of the Czech Philharmonic which sounded as if on auto-pilot, whereas his Sydney players sound genuinely engaged. There are also some noticeable differences between the sound of the two orchestras - it is no surprise to learn that the Sydney Symphony lack the lucid transparency of their Czech counterparts, as few other orchestras do, but it is a difference that is slightly exaggerated by the hall that also makes their sound "beefier" too. Ashkenazy's interpretation has matured as well, with a slightly more flowing second *Nachtmusik* and a last movement that makes a significant effort to both differentiate and integrate all the different sections with satisfying results. All in all, it is a very good recording, if not perhaps special: 6.5/10

2002

Andreas Delfs

2002 March 29-30: Milwaukee SO (Live Digital – MSO Classics)

I've not come across much of the work of the German born conductor Andreas Delfs (b.1959), but he succeeded Zdeněk Mácal as the chief conductor of the Milwaukee Symphony in 1997, before relinquishing the position some dozen or so years later. Mácal himself was, of course, a fine Mahlerian (see his own recording of the *Song of the Night* in 2007) and one has to admire the confidence of the Milwaukee players, led by his successor, as they navigate this difficult score with so much confidence and aplomb. They are aided by the very full and rich sound that makes the orchestra sound perhaps more powerful than it really is, which has been achieved by close balances, partly (I suspect) to try and reduce audience noises to a minimum (although the cheers are nicely kept in at the end), even if the odd platform squeak and podium grunt are picked up instead. Less satisfactorily, the close-up focus can sometimes make the Milwaukee players sound a little less refined than I suspect they would have been in the actual concert-hall; in particular, the harps in the first movement, as well as for much of the central *Scherzo*, which sometimes has more than a hint of a Night on a Bare Mountain rather than a haunted forest. A pity, too, that the bass drum appears to have gone AWOL for much of the final movement.

Having said that, Andreas Delfs leads a very fine interpretation, putting hardly a foot wrong over its eighty-two-minute duration. Indeed, on the final page of all, the triumphant horn calls are taken at a daringly broad tempo with bells jubilantly ringing in the background – by rights, this should have failed with everything grinding to a halt, but in fact it is absolutely spectacular and really reinforces the sense of triumph. This one was a nice surprise: 7.5/10

Ryusuke Numajiri

2002 Oct 10: Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra (Live Digital – Exton)

The composer-conductor Ryusuke Numajiri is not a known conductor to me, but he has made a career specialising as a contemporary music specialist, giving many Japanese premieres of works by Glass, Gubaidulina, Berio and Xenakis, plus more 'traditional' scores such as Busoni's *Doktor Faust*, as well as Zemlinsky. His career has seen him often engaged with ensembles in Europe and the USA, including those in his homeland.

In this seventy-nine-minute performance of the Seventh Symphony, he is treated to stunning sound by the Exton engineers and I can only assume it is a one-off live performance because of the occasional split note in the first movement, as the audience is silent both during the performance and at the end. Numajiri plots a faultless, if also somewhat faceless, path through Mahler's symphony – nothing is out of place, the bass drum rumbles ominously in the first movement and thwacks away merrily in the last, and the opening of *Nachtmusik I* is nicely atmospheric. As a live experience of the symphony, it would have been a fine evening at the concert hall, but for repeated home listening less so, I would contend – except for one moment, which is the religious vision sequence in the first movement, which is taken with an exquisite delicacy that is quite frankly breathtaking. No other conductor has attempted anything similar in this survey and if ultimately I am left wishing there were more such unique and insightful moments over the course of the performance, I also have to acknowledge that this recording is touched with greatness, albeit for only a brief moment, which probably increases my rating slightly: 7/10

2005

Daniel Barenboim

*2005 Feb 26-27: Berlin Staatskapelle (Studio Digital – Warner)***

Daniel Barenboim will doubtlessly be remembered for many things, but probably not for conducting Mahler. I have always found it somewhat ironic then that Barenboim, who would certainly be remembered for his Wagner conducting, would then excel in this very symphony, so heavily influenced by Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* in its final movement and that elsewhere Barenboim's hyper-Romantic approach to the score would recall Wagner's own *Song of the Night*, the second act of *Tristan und Isolde*.

Indeed, from the very opening bars, it is apparent this is a unique Mahler Seventh for, unlike every other conductor in this survey apart from one (Michael Gielen – see 1980), Barenboim instructs his strings not to play tremolos just after the entry of the tenor horn, but instead measured repeated individual semiquavers. Aided and abetted to the rather close sonics which captures the bass drum magnificently, as well as the rich and dense sound conjured from the Berlin Staatskapelle, the listener is immediately plunged into a dark and claustrophobic world that is both hugely imaginative, as well as supremely effective. Unlike some conductors, who can be rigidly rhythmic (for example, Solti in 1971, or Petrenko in 2018), Barenboim is not averse to bending the rhythm slightly to create a wondrously Romantic soundscape, as can be evidenced at the start of the second subject in the opening movement, where Mahler marks the score '*mit großem Schwung*' (with great verve) which the horns introduce with such sweet seduction that the Staatskapelle violins can only respond in the same way. Throughout this leisurely paced opening movement, Barenboim is at great pains to paint a night full of magic, similar to Wagner in the central act of *Tristan und Isolde*. The 'religious vision' section is appropriately wondrous and then contrasts very effectively with the passage afterwards that is suitably dark with a hint of danger, the bass drum lending considerable weight to the heaviness of the sound and atmosphere, which continues into the following movement, the first of the *Nachtmusik*s. Like the first movement, Barenboim is very leisurely again here, but once more creates an atmosphere full of tremendous ardour, with Romantically hued horns embellishing the sound at the opening and throughout. Midway through this movement, when Mahler repeats the opening skid down the octaves to introduce a faux-waltz initially played by the cellos, there is more imagination at play with Barenboim's daringly slow tempo fully justified by the characterful response he inspires from his players, who clearly relish their conductor's approach to the music at this point. Indeed, after two leisurely opening movements, listeners may be puzzled by the overall playing time of seventy-five minutes, but the central *Scherzo* is a swift eight-and-a-half minutes and the second *Nachtmusik* is a sweetly mercurial eleven-and-a-half. The final movement is more conventionally paced and finds Barenboim and his players on top, ceremonial form and if there are a couple of passages which are perhaps taken a fraction too slowly for the music's own good, the whole thing is brought home with tremendous conviction and fire.

Overall, this performance is unique and special and, even with the couple of minor caveats outlined above is, in my opinion, one of the very finest in this survey: 8.5/10

Gerard Schwarz

2005 Nov 3-5: Royal Liverpool PO (Live Digital – Artek)**

I have to confess that I am neither familiar with much of the work Gerard Schwarz, or his Mahler cycle with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. However, after auditioning this seventy-six-minute traversal of the Seventh Symphony, I am beginning to wonder if maybe I should be as it is absolutely magnificent, a real surprise. Perhaps the best way I can illustrate just how good is this recording, made live over a number of nights with a virtually silent audience, is to point the listener to the section just after the broad introduction leading into the *Allegro con fuoco* material, where you get a sense of the conductor having to rein in his orchestral charges, who clearly cannot wait to tear into the music and gallop away with it in excitement. It is a sense of an orchestra on the edge of its collective seat giving 100%, and few allowances need to be made for the RLPO not being of the

absolute first-rank of Mahler ensembles. Even though it is live, the sonics (originally provided by RLPO Live and now reissued on Artek) are full, rich and detailed, and contribute to a most enthralling listening experience. In short, this was the biggest surprise in this survey.

Schwarz is certainly alive to all the various nuances and detailed instructions in the score, finding so much character and colour in the music which, in other hands, may have come across as fussy, but in this recording is carried along by the enthusiasm of the orchestra, like an unstoppable river in full flood. As the recording progressed, I was impressed by how the strings absolutely caressed their chords leading into the 'religious vision' sequence, as well as how the bass drum plunged the music into darkness the moment that sequence had finished. The first *Nachtmusik* is supremely characterful, the performance not just live, but *alive* in every bar and relished by the musicians of the RLPO. A taut and swift central *Scherzo*, is then followed by a thirteen-minute *Nachtmusik II*, where the conductor achieves a nice balance between perpetuum mobile and languor, even if marks are lost for the opening violin solo's unashamedly sentimental portamento, which would make even André Rieu blush. All is forgiven though with the final movement, opened and driven along by suitably assertive timpani and which is then carried forward on a torrent of adrenaline all the way through to the final pages.

If this was the only recording of Mahler's Seventh Symphony in your collection, you really would not be missing much – and maybe I cannot pay a higher compliment than that: 8.5/10

2007

Zubin Mehta

2007 February: Israel PO (Live Digital – Decca)

If anyone ever doubts the greatness of Zubin Mehta in Mahler, they just need to listen to his recording of the *Resurrection Symphony* taped at Vienna in 1975, one of the indisputably finest recordings of that work in the catalogue. For many years though – and much to his credit – he refused to conduct any Mahler work after the Sixth Symphony, claiming that he was "not ready" for such challenges. Indeed, he waited until 1988 to first perform the Ninth Symphony (with the New York PO) and this recording of the Seventh from 2007, may well have been his first attempt with this symphony, too.

There is no doubt from the opening bars, however, that the music is being led from the podium by an individual who is both hugely confident, as well as a complete master of this composer. Mehta takes the opening differently from most, the accompaniment to the opening tenor horn is slow and dragging - this night journey of Mahler's is a tired and weary one, redolent of the despair of Schubert's *Winterreise*. It is an interesting idea and one that could have been quite impactful had Mehta made more of an effort with the structure of the opening movement, which in his hands emerges a bit more disjointed than usual. The inner movements that include a fleet and flowing *Nachtmusik II* fare better, even if ultimately they just sound like generalised run-throughs, whilst the last movement again has little attempt at structure, to the extent that the ascending horn scale (bar 22) that leads into the horns singing out the main theme of the movement, almost brings proceedings to a grinding halt both during the opening and when it is repeated again leading into the coda of the whole of work.

At the end of this seventy-seven-minute performance, the crowd cheer after being astonishingly quiet up to that point, probably helped by the engineers who opted for a close-miked, if rich sound picture. However, although perfectly acceptable, this is neither the greatest of Mehta in Mahler, nor the greatest Mahler Seventh: 6.5/10

Ken Takaseki

2007 Mar 10: Gunma Symphony Orchestra (Live Digital – ALM Records)

The Japanese conductor Ken Takaseki (b1955) had a very auspicious start to his conducting career - after winning the Karajan Conducting Competition in 1977, he was for a while Karajan's assistant at the Berlin Philharmonic, during which time he was also invited to Tanglewood to study with both Bernstein and Ozawa. His major conducting debut was in 1985, when he led a concert with the Japan Philharmonic Orchestra and it would appear his career has subsequently centred around his homeland ever since, not least since he is now Principal Conductor of the Tokyo City Philharmonic, a fine ensemble but not to be confused with the august Tokyo Philharmonic, Japan's oldest orchestra.

This seventy-five-minute recording of Mahler's Seventh Symphony was set down during Takaseki's time as Principal Conductor of the Gunma Symphony Orchestra of Japan (1993 – 2008), and shows an orchestra in rude form, the horns especially so (the occasional strained – not split – brass note is the only fault I can find with them). Takaseki plots a wise journey throughout Mahler's symphony, with nothing out of place that would raise any eyebrows. It is captured in very fine sound by ALM and if there is an audience present, you hear them only at the end when they show their approval. This is one of those recordings that has absolutely nothing wrong with it and often has much that is very right (the horns at the opening of the first movement are especially assertive and characterful), but overall this is very decent, if nothing especially remarkable. As a good friend of mine likes to put it: "worthy, but dull". For me: 6.5/10

Gabriel Feltz

2007 April 23-24: Stuttgarter Philharmoniker (Live Digital – Dreyer Gaido)

I am grateful to the eagle-eyed readers of MWI for bringing this Mahler cycle to my attention after I had somehow overlooked it in my first conspectus of the First Symphony. Since then, I have noticed that it has received some mixed reviews throughout the cyberverspace, some highly complimentary, others somewhat more lukewarm. Similar to Simon Rattle's, this cycle features more than one orchestra, as Gabriel Feltz became the Music Director of the Dortmund Philharmonic before the project was complete. For this seventy-nine-minute account of the Seventh Symphony, he is conducting his previous band from Stuttgart, who follow him devotedly, all of which is captured in very realistic sound from Dreyer Gaido.

Feltz's Mahler is either very characterful or rather wilful, depending upon your worldview. Tempo changes are often hugely exaggerated and pauses are drawn out for longer than the score indicates. Sometimes this works very well – certainly the use of longer pauses than usual in the *Scherzo*, heightens the drama and allows the orchestra to emphasise the surprise elements in the score. Similarly, the opening horn calls at the start of the first *Nachtmusik* are hugely atmospheric, too. Later on in the same movement, the reprise of the opening march is taken at a faster tempo than the one used the first time the music appears (and is in direct contradiction to the score which instructs to return to that initial tempo), that does not make sense; furthermore, it disturbs the underlying pulse of the music and the *trio* in the *Scherzo* is far too mannered and all but grinds to a halt at one point. The fourteen-minute *Nachtmusik II* promises languor, but delivers something that veers between fragile delicacy and passionate sweep, depending upon the conductor's whim at any given moment; it is the most volatile performance of this movement in the whole survey.

The last movement absolutely sprints out of the blocks and it has to be said that Feltz manages all the subsequent transitions far better than Georg Solti (see 1971) who starts in a similar fashion.

Indeed, it needs to be noted just how good the playing of the Stuttgart orchestra is at such headlong speeds – that the finale and the previous movements all somehow hang together is very much down to their dedicated playing and so it is no surprise that the very quiet audience shout their approval at the end. This is a performance which is probably best heard as a one-off in the concert hall rather than for repeated listening at home, or as being representative of the symphony as a whole: 6.5/10

Zdeněk Mácal

2007 May 3-4: Czech PO (Live Digital – Exton)

Zdeněk Mácal has had a somewhat curious career – just as it was taking off in the former Czechoslovakia at the end of the 1960's, the events following the Prague Spring in 1968 compelled him to flee his homeland, unplanned and with no obvious destination. He eventually ended up in the US guest-conducting and subsequent spells with orchestras in Australia, as well as with the Czech PO were nearly always short-lived and terminated by him abruptly, as if there was an inability to stay in one place for long. In the UK he burst on to the scene with a very highly regarded recording of Dvořák's *New World Symphony* for EMI's super-budget label, *Classics for Pleasure*, with the London PO in the early 1980's and I remember seeing him with the same orchestra at Watford Town Hall around the same time give a very exciting Beethoven's Seventh. Apparently, consistency, or rather lack of it, was an issue. To prove the point, his recording of Mahler First Symphony the year after this Seventh was a dull and professional run-through, no more, while the remake a handful of years later, with the Prague Symphony Orchestra, was only marginally better – but true to form, is this *Song of the Night* with the Czech Philharmonic is, by contrast, genuinely magnificent.

It is a little hard to quite pinpoint what makes this recording so special – Mácal does not attempt to emulate the sheer panache and flamboyance of Kirill Kondrashin, especially in his live performance from Amsterdam (see 1975), nor is he interested in exploring the dark, diabolical shadows of the score, as do Klaus Tennstedt and Leonard Bernstein (see 1978 and 1965, respectively). Instead, everything is merely warm and big-hearted, beautifully paced and perfectly proportioned. In the first movement, the music broods nicely, with the tenor horn sounding fruitily Eastern European, while there is an infectious jauntiness in the first *Nachtmusik*. The central *Scherzo* is gently humorous, the spookiness kept somewhat tongue in cheek, with the following fourteen-minute *Nachtmusik II* glowing with affection and warmth, while the finale nicely balances grandeur and excitement all with a whiff of Bohemian Woods and Fields in between. However, what really elevates this above other recordings with similar virtues is the stunning sonics and the extraordinary playing. The sound, as captured by the Exton engineers working in the sympathetic acoustics of Prague's Rudolfinum, even with an astonishingly quiet audience present, is full, rich and translucent, with a nicely impactful bass drum. The orchestral playing is exceptional – it may not quite match the technical wizardry of Claudio Abbado's Lucerne players in 2005 (see 1984), but instead offers playing of an ease and understanding of Mahler's score in a way that only the NYPO and Concertgebouw Orchestras on the top of their game can match. They are led over this seventy-eight-minute traversal by an inspired Mácal who, with a wise hand from the podium, lets the orchestra do what it does best, which is to play Mahler with an effortless expertise, as well as an intuitive understanding allied to local colours that elevates the achievement here to the very highest level. It is a performance of which Rafael Kubelík would have been proud – and there are few higher compliments than that: 8.5/10

2008

Valery Gergiev

2008 March 7: London Symphony Orchestra (Live Digital – LSO Live)

Valery Gergiev's London Mahler cycle was a high-profile event in 2008, with all the concerts broadcast on BBC Radio 3 with a discussion afterwards on the merits of the performance by wise and not-so-wise talking heads. By general consensus, the performance of the Seventh Symphony was considered the highlight of the cycle and personally, I have to concur that on the whole this has resulted in a very good, if not great, recording, with some discreet patching up using rehearsal material. The whole thing opens impressively, broad and brooding, Gergiev relishing the symphony's darker shadows, creating an atmosphere of almost ominous foreboding. He does not quite escape the charge of making the first movement sound episodic, as he then has to speed up for the second subject and its development, but Gergiev's *accelerando* is so subtly done and, also, so well executed by his players, that it convinces. In this performance of the *Song of the Night*, Gergiev's vision is one of oppressive darkness and his first movement is a very fine achievement.

Likewise, so is the central, nightmarish *Scherzo*, which sounds more than usual as if it is influenced by the dark, fantastical humour of Mussorgsky, a composer with whom Gergiev has clearly identified in the past, the movement marked by Mahler as *Schattenhaft* ("shadowy, ghost-like"), a point seemingly relished by Gergiev and his players. However, elsewhere Gergiev can sometimes sound impatient with the music, in particular with the two *Nachtmusiks* where I think that the performances on this recording are, in the last analysis, somewhat brusque. In particular the second, marked *Andante Amoroso*, is a rather brisk *Andante* with too little "amoroso" quality. To an extent there is a logic with that approach, since Gergiev then opens the final movement similarly at a fairly sharp lick, but too often in the later movements it seems as if the conductor is grabbing the score by the scruff of the neck and pulling it along, at the expense of seeking out the poetry in the shadows and letting the music blossom organically, as he did so successfully in the first movement. It is the best of his London cycle, but is a: 6.5/10

David Zinman

2008 September 22-25: Tonhalle Orchester Zürich (Studio Digital RCA) [REVIEW](#)

It is not hard to understand why David Zinman's Mahler symphony cycle was so well received at the time of its release – this seventy-nine-minute rendition of the *Song of the Night* is a typical example of it, being dedicatedly played, nicely interpreted and wonderfully recorded; in short, there is very little to criticise. Indeed, the conductor goes to great lengths to illuminate much of the inner-detail of the score, which deserves both mention and praise. However, it is also a little bland, as if the vice squad has been out in force before the recording, clearing away all the undesirable elements off of the streets before Mahler begins his journey through the night. The opening of the last movement really demonstrates this, with polite timpani courteously acknowledging that other instruments may also have something to say, rather than joyfully thundering away – clarity is indeed important, but I felt that at moments like these, Zinman's performance is rather under-characterised and lacked something of the 'x-factor' that the music ideally needs to properly make its full impact. Curiously for a performance where clarity is a priority, the bells are much more recessed than usual in the coda, nor is the final chord of all entirely together. This is a very decent, rather than mandatory account, I would contend: 6.5/10

Jiří Stárek

2008 Sep 19: Czech Radio Symphony Orchestra (Live Digital – Arcodiva) [REVIEW](#)

This recording is an example of something being released with all the right intentions, but for all the wrong reasons. Dubbed by one wag as "*amateur hour from the Czech Radio*", it is slightly depressing to compare it to the previous occasion the Symfonický Orchester Českého Rozhlasu appeared in this

survey, specifically in 1966 under Václav Jiráček, only to find that standards in sonics, as well as orchestral execution, have not noticeably improved.

Eagle-eyed readers would have already spotted that the date and location of this recording is noteworthy, for it is indeed a performance of the *Song of the Night* in the same city 100 years to the day that Mahler himself conducted its premiere there. Inexplicably, and perhaps representative of the whole enterprise, there is absolutely no mention of this in either the liner notes or booklet with the CD – and things only get worse from then on. The performance opens fast and very literally, with absolutely no attempt at creating any atmosphere, a situation not helped by the close-up sonics that rob the instruments of any sense of air around them, or bloom on the sound. Already the listener can sense that the orchestra sounds lightweight, especially the strings, and the ensemble is not entirely secure nor sound confident, a situation also exaggerated by some weird balances from the engineers. An early example of the impending car crash of this performance occurs at the central ‘religious vision’ section in the first movement, which begins with cascading harp glissandos, a magical moment in the score where Mahler seemingly pulls back a veil to reveal something indescribably beautiful - except, for some reason, in this recording, or performance, or both, the harps glissandos are barely audible, even if the instruments are then perfectly balanced and played in the bars immediately after it. I struggle to add anything remotely positive about this reading thereafter in which nobody is helped by some weird rubato from the podium, especially in the last movement that also has the distinction of at one point coming off of the rails completely.

At the end, the audience cheers – as did I, since the ordeal was over. This recording was supposed to commemorate the “respectable failure” (Otto Klemperer’s words) of that first performance of Mahler’s Seventh Symphony, but also seems hell-bent on recreating it too, complete with dodgy ensemble, shaky solos and weird balances. It was a nice idea to record the performance, but the wrong decision to ever release it, for it does nobody any credit whatsoever, least of all Mahler: 2/10

2009

Neeme Järvi

2009 June 5-6: Resident Orkest, den Haag (Studio Digital – Live) [REVIEW](#)

To date, I have not been impressed with any of Neeme Järvi’s various attempts at performing Mahler’s symphonies, finding him at best unidiomatic, and at worse plain eccentric. This *Song of the Night* is actually one of his better attempts and can in effect be summed up quite succinctly – it’s very fast. Comparing it to the only other recording in this survey to race over the finishing line in under seventy minutes, namely Hermann Scherchen in his 1965 live account in Toronto (see 1950), is interesting – with Scherchen, there is definitely more than a hint of manic desperation that seems to take its cue from following on from the tragic ending of the Sixth Symphony, which all culminates in a wild dance to the death, whereas with Järvi it appears that speed is his only answer in attempting to produce something structurally sound. For example, the opening of the symphony is taken swiftly, which means there is a seamless transition into the *Allegro con fuoco* material a couple of minutes later. However, it is achieved merely by totally ignoring Mahler’s instruction for the opening to be taken *Langsam (Adagio)*; furthermore, it alters the entire character of the piece, making it sound at times almost jaunty, as if Mahler’s Wayfarer from the First Symphony is making this journey from darkness to light. This is especially evident in the first *Nachtmusik* with a very high-spirited night patrol, whilst the second is zipped through in a world-record sub-ten minutes, turning it from an *Andante amoroso* serenade to something more akin to speed-dating, Mahler style. It is all typically Neeme Järvi - bright ‘n breezy, with nary a hint of darkness and foreboding within earshot.

There are some good points – I especially enjoyed how the skid down five octaves at the opening of the first *Nachtmusik* ends in an enormous splash on the bass drum, and the final movement is undoubtedly exciting in places, if a little impatient in others, therefore turning it into more of a thrash ‘n bash than usual. The orchestral playing is surprisingly committed and accurate at such breakneck speeds and the Chandos sound is up to their usual high standards, but in the end this is all very one-dimensional, with too little differentiation between the various sections of this symphony to be remotely convincing, with barely a hint of the darker undercurrents lurking beneath the surface of the score: 4/10

2010

Gianandrea Noseda

2010 Apr 24: BBC PO (Live Digital – BBC Music)

Mahler has been a constant presence in Gianandrea Noseda’s repertoire for many years now. He appears to be especially good with large-scale orchestral pieces, as his studio recordings of the Mahler-inspired symphonies of Casella and live recordings of Shostakovich testify – likewise, this live account of the *Song of the Night*.

He certainly has some interesting ideas with the first movement – the tenor horn is played with a more melancholy air than usual, as if emerging from the mists of those swirling string tremolandos, an effect heightened by the somewhat distant sound picture. At seventy-five minutes, this is a forward moving reading, a point the listener quickly becomes aware of as the *Allegro con fuoco* section begins early in the first movement, when the conductor can clearly be heard vocalising the rhythm to his players. I have to say I personally find these kind of podium noises rather off-putting – it all sounds as if Noseda is enduring a rather strenuous shadow-boxing workout – but it has to be said they are only really obvious in the opening movement and they do have the desired effect of “firing the orchestra up” who play with admirable commitment and drive thereafter. In more recent live performances, Noseda has taken to playing the central three movements without any breaks between them – a triptych within a triptych, if you like - and although you cannot tell on the CD issue if that was also the case in this 2010 performance, you do still get the sense of inexorable forward momentum. There is no slowing for the trio in the central *Scherzo*, which actually works better than I would have thought and contributes to a sense of swirling malevolence, whose propulsion then overflows into a fleet *Nachtmusik II* that would have been even more effective had the engineers not recorded the *pianissimos* at such a high level. Noseda does not attempt to solve the finale’s structural problems, but all is carried forward on the wave of the adrenaline of a live performance which certainly ends in a real blaze of glory that brings the otherwise commendably quiet audience to their feet in Manchester’s Bridgewater Hall.

Ultimately, you can understand why the BBC may have considered this performance worthy enough to be preserved on disc, albeit as a freebie with their magazine, but I do feel that the slightly disappointing sonics which (of course!) still manage to capture the conductor’s vocalisations stunningly well, do not quite do the performance justice and this needs to be recognised in any grading: 7/10

2011

Jonathan Nott

2011 Sep 11-15: Bamberg Symphoniker (Studio Digital – Tudor) [REVIEW](#)

It has to be said that Jonathan Nott's Mahler symphony cycle has had a variable press, and has perhaps more positively received in the UK than elsewhere. I concede that I found this team's recording of the First Symphony to be very good in parts, but fussy in others. This eighty-minute account of the Seventh Symphony shares many of the same qualities, but is, in my opinion, overall a finer achievement.

Of special note once again are the very fine sonics afforded to the whole enterprise by the Tudor recording team – if the sound is less self-consciously spectacular than with some other labels (e.g. Telarc's for Levi in 1998), it is instead supremely realistic and enhances both the sound and power of the dedicated playing of the Bamberg Symphony, as well as the conductor's decision to have his violins antiphonally divided. I was also very impressed with Nott's interpretation – structurally he gets nearly everything right, with all tempos very well judged, providing you like your second *Nachtmusik* on the leisurely side. Nott finds a rare fragility in the music in that penultimate movement too, which contrasts well with the rumbustious final *Rondo*, which is tremendous. However, he misjudges the second subject in the opening movement, which is far too slow and almost brings everything to a standstill, and there are times in this movement as well where Nott can be a little too 'literal'. For example, the central religious vision section is played very beautifully, but that is it - there is no sense of wonder or elation in the music-making at this point, nor is there any sense of the claustrophobic darkness in the music which immediately follows. It is as if it is all just a glorious technicolour concerto for orchestra – which, of course, Mahler's symphony is, but it is also considerably more and I think the reason for this is because Nott can sometimes appear to be preoccupied with the inner-detail at the expense of the bigger picture. A small criticism perhaps., but one that just prevents the recording from being merely very good, to something a little more special:
7/10

Paavo Järvi

2011 August 12: Frankfurt Radio SO (Live DVD – Unitel)

In 1985, the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra under their principal conductor at the time, Eliahu Inbal, embarked on what was to become the first complete digital Mahler cycle and here, some thirty odd years later, we have the same orchestra with their (then) current principal conductor undertaking what was to eventually become the first complete Mahler cycle on Blu-ray/DVD. On the technical side, things are very impressive, with extremely good sound and video quality, while the surroundings of the concert hall in Kurhaus Wiesbaden look magnificent. The sound also comes with two-channel PCM or multichannel DTS-HD 5.1. too, if you like that kind of thing, while the 'coupling' is a complete performance of the *Symphony of a Thousand*. I do have to report negligible differences between the Blu-ray issue and standard DVD though, which may be of concern to some.

Thanks to his father's hugely eccentric interpretations of this composer (see 2009), I am always a little wary of how Paavo Järvi himself would approach these symphonies - ironically, on this occasion I am left wanting exactly what there was too much of with Neeme; namely, individuality. Although nobody quite speeds through this symphony as fast as Järvi père (who somehow manages to break the seventy-minute barrier), Paavo is no slouch either, being merely three minutes slower. His is a taut reading, the *Adagio langsam* instructions on the opening page being given only the most cursory of acknowledgements, which does mean it dovetails neatly into the *Allegro con fuoco* passages immediately after. There is a certain logic to his approach in this movement, with a swift opening and close, book-ending a slow central section and I have to acknowledge that when Järvi does relax elsewhere, such as in the opening and close of the first *Nachtmusik*, that the results are effective and very atmospheric – the problem is, he does not do it very often. Elsewhere, including a very flowing eleven minute second *Nachtmusik*, Järvi likes to keep things moving, which is fine although I did rather find the whole interpretation somewhat devoid of character – he seems reluctant to seek out the poetry, fantasy and weirdness in the score, instead just presenting it as a well-played concerto

for orchestra, perhaps in the manner of Georg Solti (see 1971) or Kirill Petrenko (see 2018), if not quite as brilliantly since his orchestra, the otherwise rather fine Frankfurt Radio Symphony, is no match for a turbo-charged Chicago Symphony, or the rehearsed-to-the -eyeballs Bavarian State Orchestra which feature for those conductors (the violins can be a little weak, too, when the music gets heavy).

This is probably the DVD version for those who just want things to be straightforward with none of Bernstein's angst (both visually, as well as interpretatively), Chailly's radical rethinking (in Leipzig – see 1994) or the super-refinement of Abbado in Lucerne (see 1984). It is thoroughly decent, but perhaps also, slightly too ordinary, but still a worthy: 6.5/10

2012

Gustavo Dudamel

2012 March 9: *Orquesta Sinfónica Simón Bolívar* (Live Digital – DG) [REVIEW](#)

Mahler has been a consistent presence in Gustavo Dudamel's repertoire, almost from the very beginning and, of course, it was Mahler's First Symphony that featured at his inaugural concert as Principal Conductor with the Los Angeles PO, while the Fifth symphony was one of his first commercial releases with the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra. By the time of their second Mahler recording in 2012, they had dropped the "Youth" from their name, but in many respects still retain the best and worst qualities of such ensembles, namely huge enthusiasm, plus technically very fine, if sometimes faceless playing. In Mahler's *Song of the Night*, these qualities are mercilessly exposed – so the final movement is, unsurprisingly, hugely exciting with everyone giving their all. However, in the more shadowy and sinister moments in the score, the playing, particularly from the front desk players, while technically fine, lacks character and, as a consequence, the performance occasionally flags in momentum and concentration, even though it was mainly taped from live performances (with discrete patching up sessions afterwards). I'm also not convinced that Dudamel quite has the full measure of the work here either – the *Allegro Energico* second subject of the first movement, for example, is not just energetic but also rather speedy, so requires a clunking gear change to get there from the *Langsam* opening. At the end of the opening movement too, he draws out the trombone theme just before the closing bars to an inordinate length, disrupting the underlying pulse and making more of it than the score asks it to be – a classic case of trying too hard. In the end, it is all a bit of a mixed bag – some very good moments no doubt, but equally so some decidedly average ones: 6/10

Markus Stenz

2012 June 23-27: *Gürzenich-Orchester Köln* (Live Digital – Oehms) [REVIEW](#)

The Gürzenich Orchestra of Cologne has a proud and distinguished history, for not only is it one of the oldest orchestras in Europe, being able to trace its origins back to 1827, but it also premiered Mahler's Third and Fifth Symphonies, so it has every right to set down its own Mahler symphony cycle, which they did between 2009 and 2014 under their Principal Conductor at the time, Markus Stenz.

The Seventh Symphony was one of the final instalments in this cycle and is wonderfully recorded by Oehms – the liner notes claim that it was taken from live performances, but there are no cheers at the end and I did not hear a murmur from the audience elsewhere. What distinguishes Stenz's cycle is indeed the sound of the orchestra, which is much lighter-toned than usual. This means we get to

hear much more of the inner-voices of the Mahler's score than the norm and while the climaxes hit home with impressive force, it is the quieter moments what occasionally lack intensity as a result of the orchestra's comparative lack of tonal heft. This is immediately noticeable in the opening pages of the score, which are played very broadly but lack of the requisite weight and intensity. Nor does Stenz attempt any subtlety with leading into the following *Allegro con fuoco passage*, which is achieved with just a clunking gear change. To be fair, he is much better with managing transitions throughout the remainder of his seventy-four-minute interpretation and you do get to hear all those inner details as well - and the finale is very effective in its own exuberant way, with the bells clearly ringing out.

However, it must not be forgotten that other orchestras are also just as effective, if not more so, at illuminating Mahler's inner-workings, as the Gürzenich ensemble – in particular, I would cite the brilliance of the Lucerne players for Abbado (see 1984), and the extraordinary intuitive understanding of Mahler's idiom of both the Concertgebouw, especially with Chailly (see 1994) and the Czech Philharmonic, in particular in their recording with Zdeněk Mácal (see 2007), all of which are able to present the same transparency, but upon a grander scale and within a more considered interpretation. When compared to these benchmarks, Stenz's achievement is still worthy - just not as great. For me therefore, my grading is: 6.5/10

2013

Markus Poschner

2013 Oct 1: Bremer Philharmonic Orchestra (Live Digital – Timezone)

I was pleasantly surprised when I reviewed Markus Poschner's recording of Mahler's First Symphony for my Conspectus of that work – it really is a very well-played and extremely engaging performance, far better than many more higher profile names. I therefore had high hopes for the same team's Seventh Symphony in this eighty-one-minute recording, gloriously recorded by Timezone, whose achievements are all the more remarkable for this being a live performance, even if the only time you are aware of the audience is with their cheers at the end. Unfortunately, I am not able to share their enthusiasm, as I find this performance somewhat cool and underwhelming. Unlike with the earlier work, I am not sure if it is possible to get away with a light-toned string section in Mahler's *Song of the Night* and this performance suffers not only from that, but also a sense on occasion of it being somewhat cautious – if you listen carefully, you can often “hear” the bar-lines in the playing too. The central *Scherzo* lasts nearly eleven minutes, which is slow by most standards and is presented more as a lumbering presence which is reasonably effective, however the second *Nachtmusik* is very cool indeed, in spite of the beautiful sounds produced by the engineers. Elsewhere, the opening of the first *Nachtmusik* lacks atmosphere and poetry and the finale generates merely some generalised excitement here and there. For me, this is a disappointment: 5.5/10

2015

Iván Fischer

2015 September: Budapest Festival Orchestra (Studio Digital – Channel Classics) [REVIEW](#)

I have been genuinely impressed with much of Iván Fischer's Mahler recordings with the Budapest Festival Orchestra, especially the First and Fourth Symphonies. In a lecture he presented on the Seventh Symphony, he makes the very relevant point that in this work, after the harrowing

experience that was the Sixth Symphony, Mahler probably wanted to have a bit of “fun” – and this is certainly the approach he takes with his seventy-five-minute interpretation of the *Song of the Night*.

Indeed, after the tenor horn has finished its lament at the opening of the symphony, I do not think I have ever heard the following second theme played with such carefree high spirits – Mahler having ‘fun’ indeed. The various military marches in the first movement are likewise far jauntier than usual, too, the shadows not as long or severe as in other hands – the section immediately after the religious vision sequence (which is played and interpreted wonderfully) in the same movement is far less dark and claustrophobic than usual, an impression perhaps exacerbated by the somewhat bass-light sound. Any comparisons with Osmo Vänskä’s interpretation (see 2018) at this point are, almost incredibly, not in Fischer’s favour, which is quite something in light of the comparative successes of these two conductors in the other symphonies of Mahler.

Overall, I have to confess to not being completely persuaded by Fischer’s interpretation; the first movement in particular seems to my ears to be too focused on the moment and less concerned with the overall structure. It is a curious approach, where each section is played for all its worth with little connecting or unifying vision and one that also cascades into the first *Nachtmusik*. An example of this is midway through this second movement when, just after the orchestra has repeated that five-octave skid we first heard at its opening, the two front desk cellos play a snatch of a faux-waltz (bar 200), where Fischer exaggerates the phrasing so much that the result that it comes across as over-interpreted and mannered – just compare the same passage with Barenboim’s recording (see 2005) to hear a far more subtle and characterful interpretation to the music at this point.

Continuing this theme, the central scherzo is more amiable than spooky, further evidence of Fischer’s ‘fun’ approach, but it has to be said the second *Nachtmusik* is a very lovely twelve and a half minutes indeed, and the final movement inevitably responds quite well to Fischer’s high spirits in this symphony, even if you will find more exciting, as well as grander, accounts of that last movement by other conductors in this survey.

Ultimately, I found this account rather disappointing, especially in light of Fischer’s other recordings of Mahler’s symphonies. The usually super-reliable Channel Classics sonics also seem to fall below their high standards – I tried the recording on three different machines, but felt each time that the bass needed a boost, something that diminishes the impact of the percussion and perhaps even exaggerates Fischer’s sunnier than normal interpretation. The playing of the Budapest orchestra is beyond reproach and it has to be said that elsewhere this recording has divided opinion, with both hugely positive as well as negative reviews. However, for me, it is not bad - an unusual approach maybe, but James Levine in his 1980 recording with the Chicago Symphony pilots a similarly high-spirited route through the score with far more success. If you must have a Fischer, then Ádám is the one (see below), but for me Iván’s recording of the Seventh is: 7/10

Ádám Fischer

2015 Nov 19 – 23: *Düsseldorf SO (Live Digital – Cavi)* [REVIEW](#)

I must confess to having been hugely impressed by Ádám Fischer’s first recording of Mahler’s First Symphony, with the Festspielorchester des Gustav Mahler Fest Kassel [\[REVIEW\]](#) – a more daringly original conception would be hard to find and it is an achievement not matched, in my opinion, by his remake with the Düsseldorf orchestra some twenty-five years later, whatever plaudits the later recording may have received.

This Seventh Symphony was the first release in the Düsseldorf cycle. The opening bars are curiously light and underwhelming, but once the tenor horn has finished its opening solo, the performance

suddenly snaps into life. Fischer is quite fiery in his treatment of the opening material all the way up to the 'religious vision' sequence, but what is remarkable about his interpretation is just how logical and natural he makes all the various sequences of the symphony relate to each other. That opening material may indeed sound 'fiery' – but you won't hear any clunking gear changes as you do under so many other conductors on their musical journey through the opening pages, nor will you hear any others in Fischer's seventy-three minute interpretation all the way up to the finale's exultant close - it is a fine achievement by any measure, as are his inner movements, where the wealth of detail he and his players are able to bring out naturally for the listener's delight is really remarkable. The second *Nachtmusik* is taken at a flowing twelve and a half minutes, but everything is so fragrant and delicate that one wishes for even more – which is saying much about a movement some observers believe is one of the weakest Mahler ever wrote. The final movement erupts in joy and is dazzling in its C major merry-making all the way through to the final bars – there are no cheers from the audience, in spite of a 'live' recording, but there may well be from you.

My only criticisms are small: the Düsseldorf ensemble play very well indeed (the odd marginal ensemble slip notwithstanding), even if they clearly are not of the absolute front-rank of orchestras and their cause is not helped by the slightly bass-light sound which I feel robs the strings of a certain bloom and the percussion some power. Fischer's achievement would have been pushing for a front-ranking place if only one of those criticisms applied, but with both I feel that the overall achievement is slightly compromised. That said, I still feel his is a very respectable: 8/10

2016

Libor Pešek

2016 January: Czech Radio SO (Live Digital – Victor Entertainment)

I first became aware of Libor Pešek's excellence in Mahler with his early recording of the Ninth Symphony with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic from 1990. His complete cycle with the Czech Radio Symphony Orchestra has excited some positive reviews as well, so I was keen to hear his take on the Seventh Symphony.

It is to my regret to report that I do not think this is Pešek's finest hour, the live recording catching both the orchestra and recording engineers on an off-day over this eighty-minute reading. In the first instance, the sound, while undeniably clear and full, seems to have many strange balances – it rather reminded me of my penniless student years when my budget only stretched as far to afford seats in the choir section behind the orchestra, which are wonderful with what you are able to see, but less so when the sound of the orchestra could be skewered in favour of whichever set of instruments you were sitting closest to. So in the religious vision section during the first movement of this performance, the harps are extraordinarily prominent throughout the whole passage in a way that could just never be in the concert hall. To my ears it all seems as if the microphones are placed too close to orchestra, with the results that some instruments just sound much more prominent than others; furthermore, you can hear an awful lot of rustling, whether from the orchestra itself or the audience. This is rather disappointing for a modern recording.

The orchestra does not sound on top form, either, with ensemble far from razor-sharp and some glaring mistakes that I would never have associated with this conductor (for example, in the first *Nachtmusik*, the timpanist enters a whole bar early at one point (bar 223, c.11m), and everyone gets out of synch at around the three-minute mark in the *Scherzo*). Part of this may be due to Pešek's occasionally idiosyncratic rubato, the conductor clearly responding to the moment in a live performance which may have unsettled his players, but I was far from convinced when, during an

otherwise flowing twelve-minute *Nachtmusik II*, the central climaxed broadened to an almost complete standstill.

There are cheers left in at the end, but I was rather disappointed with this, not least since at the time of writing in October 2022 this popular and affable conductor had just passed away: 4.5/10

Kenneth Woods

2016 May 21-22: Colorado Mahlerfest Orchestra (Live Digital – MF)

I do not think the Colorado Mahlerfest quite gets the international attention it genuinely deserves. Founded in 1988 by Robert Olson in Boulder, a town some twenty-five miles from Denver, situated at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, it is even able to boast of a Mount Mahler nearby. Each year the festival celebrates a Mahler work with additional talks, chamber presentations and films orbiting the main event and this recording of Mahler's Seventh Symphony was taken from two concerts from the twenty-ninth festival, where it was joined on the programme by the *Nachtmusiken* (op. 104) of Kurt Schwertsik (b.1935), the connection being that of another twentieth century work by an Austrian composer written about the night (it has been recorded by Chandos, if you are curious to explore – and maybe you should too, with a piece whose first movement describes, musically, how Leoš Janáček appeared to the composer in a dream). It was also, coincidentally, the conductor Kenneth Wood's first season as artistic director.

For those who have read the introduction to this survey, you will already know that Woods has some very interesting thoughts on Mahler's Seventh Symphony, so it is to be regretted that none of them is included in the accompanying booklet with this issue which, instead, merely consists of a single card, with minimal details and track timings. This is a pity, since the Colorado MahlerFest Orchestra draws together young professionals, conservatory and university students, as well as advanced amateurs who gather together each year, without pay, for this week-long festival, so you would have thought some acknowledgement may have been warranted in what is, after all, a full-priced release. I also think details like this are important, for I am sure nobody in the ColoradoFest Orchestra would claim their ensemble to be the equivalent of the New York Philharmonic, for example, and indeed their string section sounds either undernourished, or smaller in numbers, in comparison to both the NYPO and other illustrious ensembles in this survey. However, they do generally acquit themselves well and are clearly giving everything for the conductor.

In his [blog](#), Woods makes very subtle observations about how the Seventh Symphony is musically a continuation of the journey started with the final movement of the Sixth Symphony (as well as containing some premonitions of the Eighth), but my ears were more drawn in this composite performance to the parallels he also finds in Mahler's earlier works. For example, as the music slows down midway through the opening movement preparing the way for the 'religious vision' central section, the trumpet fanfares and flute melodies recall the earlier *Wunderhorn* symphonies, especially the opening of the First Symphony, or the idyllic orchestral interludes when the chorus first enters in the final movement of the *Resurrection Symphony*. Further on, when the opening of the symphony is reprised, the solo trombones take us back to the primeval forests of the opening movement of the Third Symphony. Similarly, as the first *Nachtmusik* winds down, Woods highlights the parallels with how the third movement in the *Resurrection Symphony* also winds down in both similar fashion, as well as with similar orchestration. Elsewhere, in the third movement Woods and his players relish the strings scurrying around under the melodies, like an unnerving cluster of spiders and, as the aforementioned introduction demonstrates, Woods clearly understands the final movement as well as, if not better than, anyone, which results in an unusually cohesive interpretation, with a surprising amount of portamento observed.

At seventy-four minutes, this is a swift performance and there are times, particularly at the end of the first movement and in the last when, with the conductor's intensity and pressing tempos, I feel that ensemble is only just holding together. No such problems in the eleven-and-a-half minute second *Nachtmusik*, fleet and nicely detailed, if also lacking slightly in languor, perhaps a reflection of my previous observations of the string section, or even the rather dry acoustic of Boulder's Macky Auditorium. The sound is very good and the otherwise very quiet audience certainly show their appreciation at the end and, in spite of my caveats, this is a very strong contender in this survey and with its unique insights, deserving to be widely considered: 7.5/10

2017

Alan Gilbert

2017 June 8-10: New York PO (Live Digital – NYP Live)

It must be very hard for any conductor to stand in front of the New York Philharmonic to conduct Mahler with its rich heritage – not only has the composer himself been its Principal Conductor in the past, but so, too, have such great Mahler luminaries as Willem Mengelberg, John Barbirolli, Bruno Walter, Dimitri Mitropoulos, Leonard Bernstein and Pierre Boulez. This is an orchestra that now performs Mahler's music with a rare and intuitive understanding, that in my experience is matched by only two others (coincidentally also conducted regularly by the composer himself), specifically the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam and the Czech Philharmonic. Alan Gilbert assumed the role of Principal Conductor of the NYPO from 2009 to 2017 and during that time Mahler featured in his concerts on over sixty occasions, covering all the symphonies apart from the Eighth. Indeed, this live composite recording of the Mahler Seventh was taken from his final concerts as Principal, a gala occasion billed as a 'Concert for Unity', when twenty-two musicians from nineteen countries – including concertmasters from Iran, South Africa, South Korea and Mexico – joined the orchestra in a show of unity, a concert endorsed by the United Nation's Secretary-General, António Guterres.

This is not the first time I have encountered Gilbert's Mahler, as I heard him direct the Ninth with the NYPO at London's Barbican a few years back, a concert which I remember for being 'decent', but no more. Gilbert's seventy-nine-minute traversal of the Seventh is similarly unremarkable, even if it is distinguished by some fine playing from the orchestra, but it is severely hamstrung by the conductor's tendency for slow tempos whenever the music turns dreamy or introspective, as it does several times in the opening movement. Of course, there is nothing wrong with such an interpretive choice, but the issue on this recording is that whenever those moments arrive and the conductor relaxes the tempo, the tension also drops markedly; indeed, the end of the *Scherzo* virtually grinds to a standstill with such an approach and any comparison with Simon Rattle at this moment in the score, especially with the Berlin PO (see 1991), who at a similar tempo then masterfully illustrates the music unravelling and burning itself out, is not to Gilbert's advantage. Curiously, he avoids the temptation to do anything similar in the second *Nachtmusik*, which is fashionably swift and mercurial, before then delivering a rip-roaring account of the final movement. Gilbert has some interesting ideas for this fifth movement, some of which come off better than others, but all are carried forward by the supreme playing of the NYPO, who deliver their all for their outgoing chief - the brass, in particular, are absolutely stupendous, vying for top spot in the whole survey with their lung-busting playing.

I find listening this recording fascinating for the superb and idiomatic playing of the NYPO, who bring out the colours and inner-voices of the score with a gleaming brilliance, contrasting hugely with the more pastel-shaded colourings of the both the Concertgebouw and Czech Philharmonic orchestras, but I rather feel that some of Gilbert's ideas may have come off better in the concert hall than via the medium of home-listening, so overall, in spite of the stunning brass playing in the finale, this is: 6/10

2018

Kirill Petrenko

2018 May 28-29: Bavarian State Orchestra (Live Digital – BSO Recordings)

It is fun to speculate exactly why Kirill Petrenko chose to record the Seventh Symphony first out of all of Mahler's works, not least since it was a particular favourite calling-card of his predecessor at the Berlin PO, Simon Rattle. Indeed, in 2018 when Rattle was giving his final concerts in London as Chief Conductor of the Berliners at the Royal Festival Hall, across town two days later at the Barbican, Petrenko and his Bavarian players were performing Mahler's Seventh. The question is, of course, now that the gauntlet has been thrown down, does Petrenko match Rattle's own considerable achievements with this work ?

It says much for Petrenko's interpretation, over a swift but not rushed seventy-three minutes, that he is able to make this whole, somewhat disjointed, symphony cohere into one seamless, if massive, whole, with each separate idea growing naturally and organically out of the one preceding it. His attention to detail is also masterly; Mahler's multiple strands of orchestration are all executed by his players with a brilliance, glitter and sparkle that few other conductors have come close to matching, let alone surpassing. In truth, these points alone elevates the recording to something more noteworthy than usual – but, there are also some problems.

The first is Petrenko's interpretation – technically, this is very fine indeed but, for me, *musically* there are issues. This first becomes apparent midway through the first movement just after the 'religious vision' section when the opening material resumes with the funeral march. The lyrical music is performed most beautifully, but the resumption of the opening march is taken without any hesitation at all. Some conductors at this point execute a brief, albeit unwritten, pause, others at least a split-second moment of respite to re-orientate the listener, but Petrenko has no truck with either of those approaches with the effect that the march then comes across as part of the lyrical material. Strictly speaking, Petrenko is correct, but his way with the music at this point seems to diminish the significance of that brief moment of soaring ecstasy – it is almost as if it did not happen, or possibly, just did not matter.

What I think the problem is, was highlighted by Bruno Walter who mused on how this symphony, with its emphasis on night and nature was paying homage to a tradition of nineteenth century Romanticism, a point explored with much relish by Daniel Barenboim in his recording from Berlin in 2005. At the start of the second movement, *Nachtmusik I*, we hear this with horns calling out and being answered across the landscape – think of the opening Bruckner's Fourth Symphony, coincidentally nicknamed the *Romantic* for an example of what Walter was referring to. However, in Petrenko's hands this opening just appears as one melody for French horn in *forte*, followed by another in *piano*, rather than something far more evocative, the conductor seemingly reluctant to engage in any sense of fantasy in the music as explored with such delight by exponents such as Klaus Tennstedt (see 1978) and Leonard Bernstein (see 1965). In the central *Scherzo*, there is never the sense of cobwebs brushing against your face and gremlins sniggering in the shadows, as with Rafael Kubelík (see 1970) – rather, Petrenko's priorities are revealed instead when, towards the end of this spectral movement are two pizzicatos played in consecutive bars on the cellos and basses marked *fffff* (bars 401 & 402), a quintuple forte that always brings to my mind the sound of a guillotine falling. They are officially the loudest notes in the symphony and in Petrenko's hands you are left on no doubt that, indeed, they are. In the following movement, the second *Nachtmusik's* nocturnal serenade, the music does indeed glitter and sparkle under Petrenko - albeit with as much warmth as a clear, starlit Siberian night from his homeland. Admittedly, few match the languor of John Barbirolli

in this movement (see 1960), but Petrenko is a very fleet footed, sub-twelve-minute *Andante*, with very little sense of *amoroso*. The final movement, is similarly swift and dazzling with Petrenko, but also, arguably, rather hard-pressed and unsmiling too. To demonstrate what is missing, just turn to another Kirill, namely Kondrashin, live in 1975 with the Concertgebouw Orchestra who, at a similar tempo, is just as exciting but is also able to incorporate so much more variety and colour into the music, rather than just mere diamond-precision velocity.

The second problem is that if your ace card is merely going to be orchestral brilliance, then the bar has already been set very high indeed. As good as Petrenko's Bavarians undoubtedly are, they are not the match of Claudio Abbado's Lucerne Festival Orchestra (see 1984) nor, somewhat ironically in the light of my earlier comments, do they equal, let alone surpass the Berlin PO under Simon Rattle in their later, live recordings from 2016 (see 1991); both of these conductors present their orchestra's virtuosity framed within a more Mahlerian interpretation. Nor are the Bavarians able to match the intuitive understanding of the music as the Concertgebouw Orchestra, especially in their still hugely impressive sounding Decca recording with Riccardo Chailly in 1994, or the Czech Philharmonic, especially in their too little-known, but extremely impressive live 2007 recording with Zdeněk Mácal on Exton, two orchestras proud of their Mahlerian pedigree, respectful of their history of having performed this very symphony under the composer's own baton with, unlike with Petrenko's players (and arguably too, Rattle's Berliners and Abbado's festival band), the virtuosity entirely at the service of the music, rather than for virtuosity's sake alone.

When this recording was released, there were many high-profile reviewers that had clearly been bowled over by Petrenko's podium wizardry – indeed its brilliance is dazzling in this performance, where the details and colours he draws from the score during his own journey through Mahler's *Song of the Night* are enough alone to elevate this release to at least one of 'noteworthy'. That said, overall, this release very much reminds me of another that had a similarly blinding and seductive impact on reviewers when it was first released only for the effects to wear off over time; specifically Georg Solti's with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (see 1971) - and like that one, this is also a: 7/10

Osmo Vänskä

2018 November: *Minnesota Orchestra (Live Digital – BIS)* [REVIEW](#)

In June 2022, Osmo Vänskä celebrated the end of his final season as Music Director of the Minnesota Orchestra with gala concerts of Mahler's *Symphony of a Thousand*. That Vänskä is probably better known for his Sibelius and, with the Minnesota ensemble, most celebrated for his recordings of Beethoven, seems immaterial and shows how important and mainstream Mahler's symphonies are now to both orchestras and conductors. Indeed, Simon Rattle's final (official) concert as Music Director of the Berlin PO was also with a Mahler symphony, as was Alan Gilbert's with the New York PO in 2017. It almost seems inevitable that a Mahler symphony cycle should have been set down during Vänskä's nineteen-year tenure, which saw the orchestra survive both the global pandemic of Covid and a major dispute with the management that saw the conductor resign his position and the orchestra locked out of their hall by its management.

Of course Vänskä was reinstated, but whether you think he is actually temperamentally suited to conducting Mahler, is a fair challenge – cool, detail-conscious, rhythmically alert and unflamboyant, I have sometimes felt with his other Mahler recordings that his fascination with the inner-workings of the scores is at the expense of the bigger emotional picture and the longer line. That said, it may be just because of these very qualities that this seventy-eight-minute *Song of the Night* is actually rather good.

He opens the work impressively, the music darkly glowering as the tenor horn bellows from the mists; the pacing is broad but Vänskä executes a subtle *accelerando* into the *Allegro con fuoco* material that is suitably fiery. Immediately after the 'religious vision' section, he conjures up huge, almost glowering, Sibelian vistas, the music responding well to the majesty and darkness of the conductor's vision at this point – it is as if Mahler's nocturnal journey has taken him into the mighty forests of Tapio from the Kalevala. Overall, this first movement is hugely impressive, bleaker and more ominous than usual. Following it is a nicely paced and detailed *Nachtmusik I* and then the *Scherzo*, which is slightly faster than usual at eight and a half minutes, the music having a more of an *agitato*, than a haunting feeling to it than usual, which is, I suppose, not inappropriate. A fleet, twelve-minute *Nachtmusik II*, is a little cool and leads into a final movement with some carefully rationed excitement. It has to be said that the Minnesota players despatch the music with some aplomb, combining a nice balance between detail and passion and the whole enterprise has been done proud by the magnificent engineers of BIS, who have furnished this release as a hybrid SACD for either multichannel surround or two-channel stereo that has a sound-picture of huge realism and depth. Along with the Fourth Symphony, this *Song of the Night* is the best of Vänskä's Mahler so far and with its superb sound, especially on SACD, is for me: 8/10

2019

Alexandre Bloch

2019 October: *Orchestre National de Lille (Studio Digital – Alpha)*

In the staff tea-room at MWI Towers, it is often speculated why so few French orchestras record Mahler. In this survey – and by my reckoning – this is the first studio recording of Mahler's *Song of the Night* featuring a French orchestra, which is quite remarkable, all things considered. That it is not one of the major ensembles based in Paris, but rather the Lille National Orchestra may initially be even more surprising, but it was this orchestra under their founding conductor, Jean-Claude Casadesus, who together came closest to recording a complete French Mahler cycle and even then they were not able to include the *Song of the Night*. This new recording has now rectified that omission, but instead is with Lille's Music Director since 2016, Alexandre Bloch (b.1985) who joins the other young lions who have tackled the piece: the 31-year-old Gustavo Dudamel, the 37-year-old James Levine, and Simon Rattle who was also 37 when his first recording with the CBSO was taped.

In this regard, Bloch has much in common with James Levine, inasmuch both take a far more exuberant and sunny view of the music, although whether due to necessity or otherwise, Bloch is some six minutes faster and lighter in texture than Levine, who had the turbo-charged powerhouse of the Chicago Symphony at his disposal. Bloch's is a lively, but always alive, seventy-four-minute traversal through the score, the sound of the orchestra well captured by the Alpha engineers in the orchestra's hall, the grand and impressive Auditorium du Nouveau Siècle. Bloch is swift and no nonsense and the flame of inspiration burns bright, but it is all a little unvaried - he seems reluctant to explore the shadows in the score, even in the central *Scherzo* which is almost as exuberant as the last movement and hardly 'shadowy' or 'spectral' at all. The second *Nachtmusik* is light and flowing, at eleven and a half minutes, faster than usual, as is the final movement, clattery timpani and raucous bells included, fierier than the usual *Die Meistersinger* pageantry, I would contend. In this regard, as with Dudamel, there is a certain lack of characterisation to the proceedings – it is all very committed, well played and with the musical goals always in sight, but it lacks the Mahlerian shadows that surely this music demands and James Levine and Simon Rattle are more able to deliver: 6/10

6. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This has been a difficult survey to put together, for while the music is not as harrowing as perhaps that of Mahler's Sixth and Ninth Symphonies, I have found that repeated listenings of this symphony to be surprisingly hard, especially with the number of average performances the work receives, which hardly inspires further exploration. As such – and unlike with the First Symphony – the list below is a little shorter than I would have expected and are my personal choices, those which gave me the greatest joy and/or proved the most revealing when writing this article.

When Tony Duggan wrote his own Survey some twenty years ago, he didn't include any top recommendations. Rather, he focussed entirely on his own favourite recordings which included: Bernstein/1965; Tilson Thomas/LSO; Abbado/Chicago SO; Rattle/CBSO; Horenstein/New Philharmonia; Halász/Naxos; Haitink/Concertgebouw (1982); Rosbaud/SWR; Gielen/SWR and Scherchen, both in the studio and live in Toronto. I think he would have been (darkly) amused to have found three of his nominations endorsed by a well-known US critic on YouTube, who also thought Bernstein/1965, Tilson Thomas/LSO and Gielen/SWR were the top picks, along with Kondrashin's live recording with the Concertgebouw, which Tony likewise thought was excellent and would most certainly have included it had it been released before he wrote his article. A slight divergence of opinion may be found with David Nice on BBC Radio 3's *Record Review* in 1996, whose top pick was Rattle/CBSO followed by, somewhat unusually, Bernstein's second recording of the piece with New York PO for DG from 1986. The same programme in 2018 found Stephen Johnson reverting back to Bernstein/1965, with Tennstedt's later live account with the London PO also a favourite, but with Abbado/Berlin PO as the pick of the bunch.

Of course, these are just opinions – and are just as valid as my own choices below even if there are, inevitably, many shared views as well as the odd disagreement. My own choices contain, perhaps, only one or two surprises both recorded in 2005: first, Daniel Barenboim, who is not usually regarded as a great Mahler interpreter, but who turns in a performance of real individuality and conviction with the Berlin Staatskapelle; the second surprise was Gerard Schwarz - it is to my eternal shame that I have rarely come across much of his work until this survey, but if his *Song of the Night* is anything to go by, he is a Mahlerian of real stature.

Two recordings I felt duty-bound to include were Rafael Kubelík's studio account for DG, as well as Chailly's for Decca. I'm not totally bowled over by Kubelík's studio account as a whole, but since it features by far the best *Scherzo* in the survey, I felt it still had to be one of the top recommendations. On the other hand, Chailly's unique combination of quite fabulous and intuitive orchestral playing all showcased in glorious sound, elevated it to a much higher ranking than its rather grand interpretation on its own would otherwise have merited; it is an incredibly rewarding experience to listen to.

My 'wild cards' are interesting – and are all notably very slow readings, too. I think anybody who aspires to be familiar with the recorded history of this symphony needs to have heard Otto Klemperer's reading at least once during their lifetime. That he was the only conductor in the survey who actually witnessed the composer himself conduct the piece and had previously recorded indisputably great readings of other Mahler works, means that every reader needs to be aware of his recording of Mahler's Seventh Symphony, even if it is ten minutes longer than virtually anyone else's. Ken-ichiro Kobayashi's First Symphony with the Czech Philharmonic was one of my absolute top recommendations in that survey, but here his leisurely eighty-seven meander through the night means it is too long to warrant a mainstream recommendation, but is so breathtakingly beautiful, full of fantasy and wonder, as well as being captured in glorious sound, that it fully justifies its position as one of the best in this survey - as does Klaus Tennstedt's last recording of the symphony with the London PO on EMI which, in my view, is also mandatory listening, if for very different reasons. In the introduction, I mused how the symphony may have changed between the years after Mahler had

finished its first draft in 1905 to its premiere three years later, during which time the score was subjected to numerous revisions, as Mahler himself was suffering unimaginable tragedies in his personal and professional life. Few people, if any, in the Royal Festival Hall over those two evenings in 1993 could have guessed that this would be the last time Tennstedt, himself riddled with ill-health, not only conducted this symphony, but also his favourite orchestra and one of the last times he would conduct in public. The parallels between the turmoil experienced by Tennstedt with his own health and life in 1993 and those of the composer in 1908, are obvious and contribute to a highly individual reading of unremitting despair and sadness. There are not many recordings in this survey which last over eight-five minutes – Haitink’s last recording (only available on the Berlin Philharmonic’s Concerthall) is coolly beautiful, whereas Lorin Maazel, Takashi Asahina and Michael Gielen’s final one are, frankly, a little dull, but Tennstedt’s last recording, longer than virtually all of them, never sounds slow and is gripping from the first to last bar.

Of those remaining, the usual suspects are there – Leonard Bernstein, Michael Tilson Thomas, Claudio Abbado and John Barbirolli, etc., but I would also like to bring to your attention four real ‘dark horses’ of Hans Zender (1982), Heinz Rögner (1993), Andreas Delfs (2002) and Kenneth Woods (2016), all very fine recordings from arguably rather unexpected places, that may as a consequence be otherwise overlooked – they are worth anyone’s time seeking out. Readers would do well to pause for thought, too, before deciding what to investigate - anyone raised on the turbo-charged Mahler of Georg Solti, may not be so enamoured by the very different, more nuanced and subtle approaches of Rafael Kubelík or Zdeněk Mácal, for example. Similarly, those who revel in the warmth and affection of John Barbirolli in the second *Nachtmusik*, may find Claudio Abbado’s later twelve-minute traversals somewhat too cool and swift, beautifully played though they may be. Hopefully the main narrative will give you an indication of the style of each performance to help you investigate further this mad, mad, mad symphony of Mahler’s.

With DVDs, it was something of a surprise to find only eight versions available, all of which have their strengths and weaknesses. The earliest from 1974 is Leonard Bernstein’s with the Vienna Philharmonic, which can claim to be the best directed by Humphrey Burton, but has the worse sound. There are actually two featuring Bernard Haitink: the Berlin account in 1992 is poor, though, and while the Christmas Day account from 1995 is probably Haitink at his best in a Mahler symphony he is probably not best disposed to interpret them. Paavo Järvi’s account from 2011 is rather dull; Boulez at the Concertgebouw in 2011 is quite frankly boring, and Rattle’s 2016 account with the Berlin PO does not show him at his best in this work, either. If technically, in terms of sound and vision, Riccardo Chailly’s account from Leipzig is the finest, it also contains a rather radical rethink of the work by the composer. This leaves Claudio Abbado’s account from Lucerne in 2005 – these were legendary concerts and if the sound and vision is not the equal of some elsewhere, they are more than adequate and the performance is quite special; it is my pick of the bunch, with Bernstein a close second.

As before, a thread will be open on the [Message Board](#) for everyone to air their own thoughts and criticisms of this survey and Mahler’s Seventh Symphony in general, and I will revise it in due course too, as and when new recordings are released and I am able to track down the ones that got away. Meantime, as requested last time, if the house was burning and I only had a chance to grab one Mahler Seventh from the shelves, without a moment’s hesitation it would be Bernstein’s first with the NYPO, with Michael Tilson Thomas’s recording with the London Symphony Orchestra smuggled out too when no-one was looking.

Mono Live – van Beinum/Concertgebouw (GMSN); Barbirolli/Hallé & BBC Northern SO (BBC Legends)
Mono Studio – Scherchen/Vienna St Opera (Westminster)
Stereo Studio – Bernstein/NYPO (Sony); Kubelík/BRSO (DG)
Digital Studio – Chailly/Concertgebouw (Decca); Tilson Thomas/LSO (RCA); Barenboim/Berlin St Orch (Teldec)

Digital Live – Abbado/Berlin PO (DG); Rattle/Vienna PO (RCO); Mácal/Czech PO (Exton);
Tennstedt/Philadelphia Orch (SLS); Schwarz/RLPO (Artek)

DVD – Abbado/Lucerne (Euroarts)

Wild cards – Klemperer/New Philharmonia (EMI); Tennstedt/LPO (EMI Live); Kobayashi/CzPO
(Canyon)