

THE WAYFARER

How We Made Das Lied von der Erde

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‘A Mahlerite on the Spectrum’, Penny Young

In 2021 the GMS UK Committee decided to provide financial support for a Champs Hill recording of the rarely performed and seldom recorded autograph piano version of Mahler's Das Lied von der Erde.
Ian Willett reports

Champs Hill Records was established by the Bowerman Trust, a charity dedicated to classical music, particularly unfamiliar repertoire and the promotion of young musicians. The Trust had agreed to fund a recording of the piano version of *Das Lied von der Erde*, and GMS UK was able to assist with some of the expenses of the artists which helped to make the recording a reality.

The recording was made in 2022 at the Trust's Music Room, Champs Hill, West Sussex.



We were joined on 13 October 2023 by Claudia Huckle (Contralto) and Justin Brown (Piano) who made the recording, together with Alexander Van Ingen, the Executive Producer for Champs Hill Records. Unfortunately, the third participant in the recording, Nicky Spence (Tenor), could not join us for the evening because of other commitments. The discussion took the form of a three-way panel discussion between our three guests chaired by Alexander. This covered topics such as how the recording came about, the technical and artistic problems encountered, and reflections on Mahler's music.

Claudia talked movingly about how her schedule of engagements evaporated with the onset of Covid lockdowns, an experience shared with many other artists. The trauma of Covid and her love of Mahler's music gave her the inspiration to study this version of *Das Lied*.

Claudia had been a Mahler fan since her teens and had previously given performances of the song cycles. She was candid, however, about how daunting she found the challenges posed by *Das Lied* but was determined to use the quiet of the lockdown periods to come to grips with the score. She spent a year learning the work and, encouraged by friends and family, she came up with the idea of this recording and, despite disappointments about the prohibitive costs of a commercial recording quoted by other recording companies, she eventually lighted upon Champs Hill. This is where Alexander became involved and took up the project as it seemed to him to be a well thought out proposal of a little-known version which would meet the requirements of the Trust.

In the meantime, Claudia was searching for a tenor and pianist to complete the complement of artists. Justin Brown, a renowned conductor and pianist in his own right, was recommended by her singing teacher. She also approached Nicky Spence by email and both came on board without hesitation.

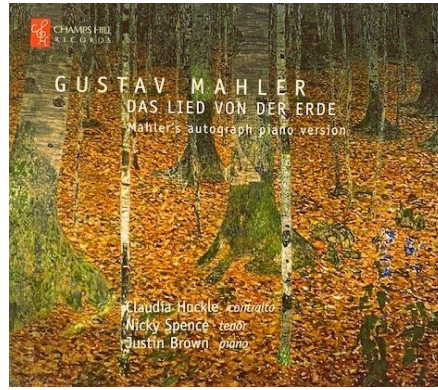


Claudia, Alexander and Justin had been fans of Mahler from an early age. Justin, for instance, knew some of the songs from his childhood as they were performed at home. Alexander referred to his long-standing love of *Das Lied*. Justin said that he had conducted the orchestral version of the score and became fascinated by the differences with the piano version when he became aware of it. The first Mahler Symphony he had conducted was the Deryck Cooke completion of the 10th but he confessed that he had "saved himself" for other late works such as the 9th and *Das Lied*.

Claudia believed that earlier in her career she had not achieved the maturity as a singer to tackle the intimidating technical and artistic challenges of the piece. The piano version of the score was for her a good point of entry and the Covid period provided an ideal opportunity to immerse herself in the score without distractions.

We were given insights into the process of recording. Nicky was concerned that he be allowed to record a certain passage in his first number because it lay so low in his vocal register that he needed to be fresh to tackle it. Claudia was concerned about the stamina she needed for her songs, especially her *Der Abschied* which makes up half of the whole work. She was also worried about the march passage in *Am Ufer* (the title in this recording customarily entitled *Von der Schönheit – Ed.*) where the tempo is very fast and the accompaniment very loud. This is borne out by a famous YouTube video of a disagreement between Christa Ludwig and Leonard Bernstein over the tempo for that passage. There was also a taxing high note at the beginning of the second song *Der Einsame im Herbst* which she found daunting.

Justin referred to the "fiendishly difficult" piano part (he had very sore fingers at the end of the sessions) but also to the fascinating way in which details in the score had been varied by Mahler between the two versions. He pointed out that with *Das Lied* Mahler had again followed his practice when composing his earlier song cycle of writing a piano version in parallel with an orchestral score. These two were always composed as free-standing works, the piano version being in no way a trial run/draft for the version with orchestra. Justin felt that, as Mahler never heard the work performed, he would undoubtedly have revised and corrected his scores.



He amused us with the story that Mahler had said that he hoped that Bruno Walter would know how to conduct the piece because he had no idea of how to.

We were told that recordings are not often made in concert order. Alexander explained that four days had been provided for the recording sessions which was quite generous in his experience and, as things turned out, not all the allocated time was required. However, the generous studio time meant that a more leisurely approach could be taken, thereby keeping the performers fresh.

The schedule was adjusted to reflect each singer's needs. Claudia, for instance, liked to sing low passages in the morning and higher passages towards the end of the day when her voice had fully warmed up.

All paid tribute to the expertise, tact and diplomacy of their recording producer Matthew Bennett, whose task was to point out where things were not quite right. However, everyone involved was usually aware of problems before being told about them, such was the rapport between the artists.

The relationship of *Das Lied* to the 9th Symphony and the 10th was discussed. Justin pointed out that there were thematic links between the 3 works. Responding to a question on Sir Mark Elder's view, expressed at a recent concert, that the 9th Symphony was not a farewell, Justin felt that, as a group, the music aspired to a chamber music ambience, the works together representing a farewell journey because of their thematic links.

Another question related to the difficulty of reproducing Mahler's orchestral sounds on the piano. Justin agreed that this could be difficult (particularly tremolo passages) but the only way of dealing with the complexities in the piano part was to immerse oneself in the music and imagine the sound of the orchestra.

Mahler, as he had already noted, would have made revisions, had he been able, and performers therefore must make decisions about what sounds best. Mahler was a man in a hurry, overworked, ill, composing only in his spare time, with a heavy schedule of concert and opera engagements. This means that, at this stage of his career, what he left us in these late works demands choices from performers.

Justin commented on his association with two famous Mahler conductors: Jascha Horenstein ("the bigger the gesture, the greater the vulgarity") and the possible target for this criticism: Leonard Bernstein. As Justin put it, Bernstein was best experienced in live concert and, 'if you can't have big gestures in Mahler, where can you have them?'

Alexander thanked GMS for providing funding which ensured that the recording could be made. Anthony thanked Claudia, Alexander and Justin for their willingness to give up their time to meet the Society and give an insight into the world of recording.



Anthony closed the event by saying that this recording, born in the pain and anxiety of the Covid period, showed how music could be such a positive force in all our lives.



BBC Radio 3 Building a Library, 28 September 2023
 KEVIN CAREY reports on a close finish from
 Gillian Moore's somewhat narrow field of Mahler's 8th recordings

Introducing Mahler's 8th (in E flat, 1906), host Andrew McGregor noted that it presents both musical and engineering challenges, which no doubt accounted for Gillian Moore's initial shortlist of recordings, the earliest being Bernstein's LSO from 1967; and so, sadly, there was no room for Horenstein's epic 1959 LSO Albert Hall recording (BBC Legends) which is surely in an historical category of its own although, admittedly, there is not much competition from that period precisely because of the engineering challenges.

Moore opened the *Veni Creator Spiritus* with Sir Simon Rattle's CBSO 2004 recording, illustrating the "importance of the hall and the organ", in this case the new Birmingham Symphony Hall, followed by Chailly's 2004 Concertgebouw recording which, to my ears at least, had a less lively acoustic but which, said Moore, suffered from "a rather too stately opening statement, reflecting the conductor's comment that the problem with this piece is that it begins with the climax." She compared this with Tennstedt's live LPO 1990 recording (not to be confused with his other recordings) which was "much freer in its approach".

Then came Solti's monumental 1972 Chicago SO recording, the first where engineering really came into its own; Moore was keen to emphasise the star line-up of soloists: Harper, Popp, Auger, Minton, Watts, Kollo, Shirley-Quirk and Talvela. She then introduced the "much darker and cooler" Boulez Berlin Staatskapelle 2007 recording, followed by Abbado's 1994 Berlin Philharmonic (again, not to be confused with other Abbado recordings) at the point of the entry of the children's choir with: "set light to our senses and infuse love into our hearts", and completed her line-up with Bernstein's 1966 LSO's first stereo recording, but she did not comment on the unbalanced recording producing a lack of clarity or the manifest weaknesses in the chorus, though she did characterise this as "rough and ready in a good way".

In the final Gloria she noted the "supercharged, high energy at Chicago with the soaring voice of Heather Harper" and ended with Abbado who was "more spacious, with a sense of the universal".



Part Two began with Solti, "the master of storytelling in orchestral colour" in the forest. At this point Moore eliminated Chailly as she was "not convinced by his slow, expansive approach"; nor was I. Then Mahler introduces "something like a funeral march" where Rattle's recording "makes the orchestra appear to be moving towards us, accompanied by masterful choral forces". There follows a series of soloists inviting Faust to the heavenly realm (it is remarkable how Dante goes unmentioned) which began with Abbado's Bryn Terfel as the Pater Ecstasticus. There then followed the Pater Profundus, this time with Donald McIntyre with Bernstein. Then Rattle's choir of angels welcomed the soul into the higher regions with the women signalling that redemption is close at hand. Lucia Popp's Gretchen in the Solti recording, Moore thought, was particularly good.

At this point Moore dropped Bernstein "in spite of excitement", and Tennstedt because, in spite of a "wonderful live recording", there is too much "roughness", shortcomings in the soloists and too much audience noise, and Boulez. It is difficult to dispute these choices but Moore might have noted that the great virtue of the Boulez is that it is the only recording, including the Solti, where you can hear every single note of the score.

So we are left with Solti, Abbado and Rattle. Abbado wins, more because of his "sense of mystery and transcendent majesty at the end".

I must say that I felt at the conclusion like a homework marker who has to accept that the answer is correct but that there is not enough evidence of how it was reached.

The Recordings

Abbado/Berlin PO 1994 (DG)
 Bernstein/LSO 1967 (Columbia/Sony)
 Boulez/Berlin Staatskapelle 2007 (DG)
 Chailly/Concertgebouw 2004 (Philips)
 Horenstein/LSO 1959 (BBC Legends)
 Rattle/CBSO 2004 (EMI/Warner)
 Solti/Chicago SO 1972 (Decca)
 Tennstedt/LPO 1990 (EMI/Warner)



On 22nd May 2023

Building A Library featured Flora Wilson surveying recordings of Mahler's *Fünf Lieder Nach Ruckert* (1901-02) which, she said, constituted a grey area between symphony and song. They were first written for voice and piano and had later been orchestrated (with substantially differing forces) and they did not strictly constitute a cycle (Colin Matthews says they have "no inner connection of mood" and there is no fixed order of performance.)

Wilson started with Christa Ludwig and Karajan from 1974 in "Mahler's greatest ever song" *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen*, which, significantly, opens the recording but which is most often performed last; followed by Alice Coote whose singing was "hard to beat" but who was let down by poor orchestral playing by the Netherlands PO under Marc Albrecht. Wilson then turned to the original piano settings (1905) with Christian Gerhaher and Gerold Huber demonstrating "intimacy and delicacy and a different range of colours from the orchestra ... sheer crystalline quality, absolutely stunning".

Then came *Liebst du um Schönheit*, written for Alma, featuring Thomas Hampson with Bernstein and the VPO from 1990, the song usually placed first and not orchestrated by Mahler but by Max Puttman.

The problem for Moore was that "although the singing is superb with beautifully drawn out lines" ultimately "it is just too slow, almost grinding to a halt". Then came Janet Baker "at her absolute tenderest best" with Sir John Barbirolli's New Philharmonia from 1969 (not to be confused with the Halle from 1967) "with a monumental approach, knowing when to hold back as well as when to push on".

Then she turned to Magdalena Kozena with her husband Sir Simon Rattle with the Berlin PO from 2012 in *Liebst Du Um Schonheit* which showed "masterful pacing". Then came Violeta Urmana and Boulez with the Vienna PO from 2004 offering a "cooler approach" before a return to Gerhafer and Huber for *Blicke Mir Nicht in Die Lieder* (in my view by far the weakest song in the set) where the duet emphasised the lieder tradition all the way back to Schubert with "an almost baroque line in the piano".

Ich Atmet Einen Linden Duft requires, said Wilson, "an extraordinary delicacy" which "sorts the orchestral sheep from the goats" which left her with Boulez, Karajan and Barbirolli, and Gerhafer/Huber, as she entered the final phase with *um Mitternacht*. Overall, Boulez presented the clearest performance but "is somewhat middle of the road"; in the climax Karajan was "a little too disparate, glorious dark brass but needing more of a line through"; Baker and Barbirolli were "devastating, with a kind of inexorable progress, and an extraordinary ending".

Of the orchestral performances Wilson chose Barbirolli but, overall, she chose the Gerhafer/Huber performance because of "the starkness of the piano, which made me almost forget that there were orchestral versions. The piano playing is extraordinary, symphonic equalling the best of orchestras".

The Recordings

Albrecht/Netherlands PO/Coote 2017 (Pentatone)
 Barbirolli/New Philharmonia/Baker 1969 (EMI/Warner)
 Bernstein/Vienna PO/Hampson 1990 (DG)
 Boulez/Vienna PO/Urmana 2004 (DG)
 Gerhafer/Huber 2009 (RCA)
 Karajan/Berlin PO/Ludwig 1974 (DG)
 Rattle/Berlin PO/Kozena 2012 (DG)

The timing of Flora Wilson's selection could hardly have been more unfortunate, given that her ultimate choice was for Mahler's piano version, as, shortly after the programme, a new recording was released which, in my view, is even better than Gerhafer and Huber.

Sarah Connolly, a recent but most welcome Mahler advocate, notably with her *Das Lied von Der Erde* recorded during the Covid lockdown with the Berlin RSO under Jurowski (Pentatone, 2020) has come forward with a CD which contains not only the Ruckert songs but also the *Lieder Eines Fahrenden Gesellen* and the *Kindertotenlieder* with pianist Joseph Middleton (Signum 2023). It is only when you hear Connolly that you realise that singing everything correctly, which Gerhafer does, is much less than enough. Connolly has the gift of making every slight inflection tell in a way that is no doubt borrowed from her experience of singing baroque music; for whereas grand gestures can be matched by a major orchestra, the piano accompaniment requires much greater subtlety. Connolly is a worthy equal to Baker.

Review

Mahler: Symphony 2 "Resurrection", Elizabeth Watts (sop), Jennifer Johnston (mez), RPO, Cho/Orch/Vasily Petrenko, Royal Albert Hall, 30/03/23.

The Royal Philharmonic (RPO)'s Mahler 2nd had been seriously held back by the onset of the original Covid lockdowns. Happily, the delay proved worth the wait because this proved a performance of true greatness. Some music is overwhelmed by the Albert Hall, lost in its cavernous spaces, but the monumental Symphonies of Mahler, most obviously the 2nd and 8th, actually gain from the location; indeed the peaks and troughs of Mahler's vision need such a setting for their full realisation. This point was reinforced by a performance of the Mahler 2nd by the RPO at the Royal Festival Hall under Rouvali last June which sounded relatively boxy and earthbound; and it was the present RPO performance which expressed Mahler's heaven-storming picture of the universe and time itself passing away. Even more important, the RPO performance did justice to Mahler's vision of eternity as

joyous and deathless. This occasion seemed truly to present a dimension beyond space and time where all was dominion, power and glory. The occasion also allowed the orchestra, Beecham's last, to show that under the right direction, in this case that of Petrenko's inspired leadership, it remains great. Particularly memorable were the dark majesty of the pianissimo trombones early in the Finale, and the flute and the piccolo which managed wonders in the difficult, fluttering music that leads up to the chorus's first entry. The chorus itself brought an uncanny stillness and mystery to that entry: "Auferstehen, Ja, Auferstehen". The two mellifluous soloists, Jennifer Johnston and Elizabeth Watts, were wisely positioned within the orchestra which enabled their vital contributions to emerge seamlessly from out of the choir.

As it happened, I was present when Vasily Petrenko performed this same symphony about five years ago with the same orchestra at the same location. There were some clear differences between then and now, not least in the disposition of the forces. Previously, the trumpets and trombones had formed a solid phalanx up on the right and, at the central climax and catastrophe of the First Movement, just before everything collapses into the recapitulation, they blazed down at the audience with exorbitant, battering power. Did Petrenko drag back the pesante a little too far both then and now? Perhaps, but who would complain in a context of such overall magnificence. This time Petrenko had the brass laid out in a single line at the back of the orchestra, a line which at the end included Mahler's ten horns in full muster; and how clearly everything told from the brass as a result of this arrangement! As another point of interest I had the impression that previously Petrenko had laid more emphasis on the individuality of the symphony's many episodes but that this time he brought out its overarching unity. This meant that before it had more of a cantata feel about it, whereas this time its symphonic strength was very evident.

Make no mistake, this was a great performance and I do not soon expect to witness another musical experience as meaningful, ecstatic and awe-inspiring as this.

Dr. Paul Dawson-Bowling.

MY MAHLER 2

Simon Spero
Overwhelmed

My Mahler began badly, for myself and, seemingly, for Mahler too. I suppose that it was a sort of blind date. I knew nothing of Mahler but a slightly older friend, with more sophisticated tastes, had successfully introduced me to a more adventurous musical landscape, to Bartok, Shostakovich and Janacek. Now he suggested that I try Mahler.

This was 1961 when he seldom featured on the Third Programme. I vaguely associated his name with sprawling symphonies of inordinate length, a sort of Central European Havergal Brian.

The Fourth Symphony served as my introduction to Mahler's music. Alas, we found one another incompatible. I was expecting something along the lines of Dvorak's 8th Symphony, a few years earlier in date but in the same key. I was to be disappointed. The opening subject seemed to have been unaccountably uncoupled from the engine, chugging along aimlessly, as if adrift from the First Movement. This was not how symphonies were supposed to begin. Serenades perhaps, but not proper symphonies. I was used to the more conventional symphonic structures of Brahms and Dvorak. The music appeared to me to have a pleasant, child-like innocence but completely lacked the sense of purpose and gravitas which I expected from the opening movement of a symphony. Furthermore, none of the themes seemed to be accompanied by a coherent development section. The Scherzo took the form of another rustic dance, slower, with an oddly sinister edge, tiresomely repetitive and lacking any apparent sense of direction. By this time I had completely lost interest and, with the arrogance of youth, I dismissed both the symphony and its composer as an unfortunate aberration.

Two years passed. My repertoire had widened, with a growing interest in chamber music, particularly string quartets and, most significantly, the symphonies of Anton Bruckner, not notable for their brevity. It was this which encouraged me towards my first purchases of Mahler LPs. My choice of recordings was strictly limited by both lack of funds and available options.



Indeed, with several symphonies, including the 6th and 7th, I could find virtually no budget recordings. So I decided to engage with Mahler, face to face, as it were, and for this assignation I chose *The Resurrection Symphony*. Yet this was to be no blind date. I was acquainted with the Symphony through the purchase of a budget recording by The Utah Symphony Orchestra conducted by Maurice Abravanel.



And what a meeting it proved to be. As I took my seat in the front row of the annex at the Festival Hall, overlooking the orchestra, I experienced for the first time that spine-tingling thrill of anticipation as the conductor raised his baton. Haitink, I seem to recall. And Janet Baker was the alto. From the thunderous marching theme, solemn, majestic, yet ominous, I was hurtled into Mahler's domain and, as the vast movement progressed, my emotional responses lurched thrillingly through extremes of nervous energy.

My feelings of emotional involvement were almost palpable.

I was glad of the five-minute pause, customary at that time, to recover my equilibrium. Those welcome moments of respite were succeeded by St. Anthony addressing the fishes and a deceptively cheerful Scherzo before ushering in one of the symphony's most sublime moments, a prayer-like song, *Urlicht*. By now, I was swept into a swirling carousel of almost unbearable intensity, overwhelmed by the shifting tensions which ebbed and flowed, only to reappear in a different guise. The first enthralling appearance of the *Dies Irae* theme, the breath-taking moment as the Alto rises seamlessly through a hushed chorus and the distant off-stage horns, creating a sense of time and space suspended, a stillness which, for me, lies at the core of the symphony. This silence, awesome in its impact, heralded the unforgettable surging climax of this unique symphonic creation.

I emerged from the auditorium emotionally exhausted, yet in a state of euphoria, after what seemed an almost out-of-world experience. Only two years had passed since I had floundered gracelessly through the opening two movements of the Fourth Symphony.

Yet now I was set upon a path of exploration of Mahler's music which endures to this day.



All contributions to
The Wayfarer
are welcome
but we are
particularly interested
in the personal angle
featured in the
My Mahler series.
Editor

LESLIE BERGMAN

completes a live Mahler cycle within less than a year, for no particular reason, or so he says

In deference to what is euphemistically called a "special birthday" year, one ending with a nought or a five, I decided to hear all Mahler's Symphonies live in the calendar year 2023. As it turned out, the project was completed in six months between April and October. In what follows let me mention that, in the interests of transparency, I am a Board Member of the Gustav Mahler Jugendorchester. I was privileged to be accompanied by Mahler-loving friends to all concerts and rather than mentioning them individually each time, I will thank them at the end. Towards the latter part of my journey, I enrolled in David Nice's Mahler 6th-10th course. Too little too late but great added value where applicable. This is a description of a personal journey rather than a detailed critique of each concert, which is not within my skill set. With a few exceptions, I omit the names of voice soloists.

Before the decision to embark on this project, I had heard a very fine Mahler 7th with Sir Simon Rattle and the LPO at the Barbican in April. Rattle's skill with Mahler is texture and there is no better textured Mahler symphony than the 7th. What fun and joy! David Nice thinks it may have been conceived as a suite rather than as a symphony, with its irregular form. Its shameless, fun-poking but admiring borrowing from the ideas and even passages of the works of other composers, shows a carefree side of Mahler.

In March a good friend offered me a ticket to the entire cycle of symphonies at the Leipzig Mahler Festival in May. Ten symphonies, one each day, each with a different well known orchestra/conductor, plus lunchtime recitals, lectures &c. Too much. I can't do it. I get too emotionally involved and simply cannot take in ten Mahler symphonies one after another. So I joined in for two nights. Before commenting on these concerts, let me recommend Leipzig to you if you haven't been there. A delightful and fascinating city musically, but also historically from Roman times to its central role in the unification of Germany, not to mention the Stasi Museum where, in 1989, the East



German Militia refused to shoot into the threatening crowd but joined them. And that was the end of the DDR. The relationship of Mahler to Leipzig is modest, the place where he held his first major position and where his First Symphony was premiered. One can just imagine the brash 25-year-old, ambitious conductor/composer premiering his First, totally unconventional symphony with a take it or leave it attitude, announcing his arrival on the musical podium of Europe. The city is of course intimately associated with Bach who was for decades the Organist/Choirmaster at the Thomaskirche and where he is said to be buried, although he is more probably buried in a nearby village. But Leipzig was also home to Mendelssohn where he lived most of his life and there is a new, fantastic museum in the original Mendelssohn family home, the top floor of which is devoted to Kurt Masur, the legendary conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Communist times and later the turnaround conductor of the New York Philharmonic. He used his stature, which was a major factor, to plead for non-violence in the peaceful demise of the East German Communist regime.

The opening night of the Mahler Festival correctly featured the Gewandhaus with its resident conductor Andris Nelsons in a very satisfying Mahler 2nd. Not the most exciting "Resurrection" I have heard but of the 20 or so in my concert-going career, well up. Somehow the emotion that others created - for example Rattle last year at the Proms with the LPO in what for me has become the gold standard for this symphony and unlikely to be bettered in my lifetime - wasn't there; but nothing to be faulted.

Day 2 brought Mahler's 4th with the Munich SO with Tugan Sokhiev conducting in place of the now persona non grata pal of Vladimir Putin - you know who I mean - and whom I have never liked as a Mahler conductor. My group unanimously agreed that this performance missed the mark, though the final movement *Wunderhorn* song *Das himmlische Leben* was beautifully sung by Christiane Karg. That was the first part of the evening. After the interval came *Das Lied von der Erde* with long-term favourite Ekaterina Gubanova and silky German tenor Andreas Schager. I had only heard this work in its entirety live twice before. This time I was blown away. I read the text, a Chinese folk tale but with a philosophy of life that one could imagine Mahler buying into, sung beautifully with immense feeling. A satisfying evening after all. My Mahler psyche expanded.

I should have stayed in Leipzig for the performance of the 1st and the unfinished 10th with the Gustav Mahler Jugendorchester (GMJO) but, bizarrely, the date clashed with the concert I had arranged for GMSUK in London with the Delphine Trio at the 1901 Arts Club. What a special night that was, featuring Mahler's Piano Quartet and also tenor Zwakele Tshabalala singing Mahler lieder, including an especially haunting *Um Mitternacht*. But as the GMJO were performing these two works on tour (with conductor Daniele Gatti) I caught them a few days later in Vienna at a Sunday morning concert at the Musikverein. My assessment, supported by the critics, was that this was a top performance with special kudos for the difficult, sensitive 10th *Adagio*. Thereafter, a schnitzel lunch at the Hotel Imperiale across the road. And everyone so well dressed for a Sunday morning concert to boot! Such an old worldly civilized city, still presided over by the old Kaiser Franz Joseph.

A meeting in Vienna in June happened to coincide with a performance of Mahler's 3rd. Quite a hot ticket event. Why? Because of Teodor Currentzis, something of a Dudamel, much better known in Germany and Austria than the UK, with his Utopi Orchestra making its debut appearance.

It is a festival-type orchestra which bills itself as a gathering of the "finest musicians from all over the world". The conductor has some links to Russian banks but is not regarded as pro Putin. Now the 3rd is my special love. It was played with the orchestra standing up throughout, 105 minutes of swaying musicians. Mercifully, the harpists were seated. I thought this gimmicky but the performance was good and the choirs exceptional. The



performance was at the Konzerthaus, Vienna's second concert hall which in many another city would be first. It is late Kaiser Franz Joseph imperial architecture, opened one year before the outbreak of the First World War, a cultural swan song of the Empire.

Waiting for friends before the performance, I noticed something I had missed on my many previous visits to the Konzerthaus, a plaque with a raised profile of Mahler on the outside wall near the entrance. It reads: "Here on 13 June 1945 the artistic genius of the greatest musician of Austrian culture was revived". Astonishing.

Just FIVE weeks after the Nazi surrender in bombed-out Vienna, under Russian military occupation, the first concert took place and it was not Beethoven nor Bruckner but Mahler! He, whom conventional wisdom has it, was pretty much shunned in still anti-Semitic post-war Vienna until Bernstein brought Mahler back to the Austrians. Always something new to learn.

At that point the project was conceived. I had heard Symphonies 1,2,3,4,7 and 10 (unfinished) plus *Das Lied*. Now the challenge was to hear the rest. The 9th was already scheduled with the GMJO on its summer tour; I caught it in Amsterdam at the end of August at the Concertgebouw under the in-coming Music Director of the Royal Opera

House, Jakub Hrůša, whom I met at dinner afterwards, vital, charming and unaffected.

The Concertgebouw audience, no slouches when it comes to knowing their Mahler, gave the performance a three-minute standing ovation.

Young musicians, all top of their academy classes because that's how you get into the GMJO, throwing themselves into Mahler's emotional farewell with an intensity that was breathtaking and memorable.

That left a prospective Deryck Cooke 10th at the Proms and the 5th, 6th and 8th between September and the first week in December, after which I was to depart for South Africa. Where was I to find them?

The Deryck Cooke 10th was cancelled. It was to be performed by the BBC SO with Sir Andrew Davis, but he was indisposed and Oramo conducted the 7th instead. Worse things can happen than to listen twice to Mahler 7th within four months. And an excellent performance it was too, especially under the conditions of last minute substitution.

I may be in a minority of one regarding the Royal Albert Hall, for the average programme, especially involving soloists, the acoustics are shocking but if one has a reasonably well-centred seat at a Mahler, Bruckner or Shostakovich symphony at a sold-out 5,000 plus Proms concert, with all the lighting effects and Sir Henry Wood gazing at you, then for me it's the total experience, the Full Monty. It takes a hall of that size to house the large orchestras and choirs for these mega works, and the RAH does it better than anywhere else in the world for a thrilling evening of major symphonic music.



So, at the end of August I was left wondering where to hear the 5th, 6th and 8th? As you can imagine, the biggest challenge was the 8th. Not to be heard in London. Maybe Paris at the end of November but I suspected that I would have a few trips to Paris for the Rugby World Cup and I did.

Munich and Hamburg were possibilities but then I chose Budapest, a city I know reasonably well, though I had not visited it in recent years: a city with very close ties to Mahler as both conductor and composer. The performance in early October was at the Hungarian National Opera, a beautiful neo-Renaissance house built in 1875. I had been there often in the '90s.



It is small and compact, a little architectural gem but with a 1,300 capacity it is just too small for this *"Symphony of a Thousand"*.

It seemed that, because of the smallness of the stage, choirs, solo instrumentalists and even a soloist were tucked away all over the place to fit them in. The Orchestra was the Hungarian National Opera and the conductor was Gabor Hollerung who bounced around the small podium so much that I thought he would fall off.

The soloists, unknown to me, were of mixed impact, two or three very good. The choirs were somewhat muffled by the small space. I am told it is a tradition to perform Mahler's 8th once a year at the Opera House. There must be a Mahler-related reason which awaits research. This was a novel experience accompanied by a late autumn afternoon Danube cruise.

The 5th was also scheduled for an October performance at the Barbican, again with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Sakari Oramo. It was a fine, measured and thoughtful performance in a full hall with deserved audience enthusiasm at the end.

There was a piano/orchestra item of early Rachmaninov prior to the Mahler, an odd choice which did not work for me.

THE GUSTAV MAHLER SOCIETY UK

Address:

GMS UK
11 Whitelands Avenue,
Chorleywood,
Hertfordshire WD3 5RE.
info@mahlersociety.org

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So the final piece in my Mahler jigsaw was the 6th. Not to be heard in London between September and December, nor elsewhere in the UK. And with few choices in other countries which surprised me as this is, after all, a popular symphony; or maybe not. Somehow, Helsinki in November seemed too ambitious. So I went for a safe choice, for me at least, since I know Vienna so well. Mid-October and the Tonkünstler Orchester with its Japanese permanent Conductor Yutaka Sado.



The Japanese seem to get Mahler and many were in the audience. The orchestra is based in both Vienna and the State of Lower Austria and has a long history; but, then, nothing has a short history when it comes to Austria and music. Its name does not translate well, something like "Tone-artists Orchestra". I heard this performance shortly after having had the benefit of an on-line podcast with David Nice on the 6th, noting the huge variation in speed of the opening march, depending on conductor. The major controversy concerns the order of *Andante* before *Scherzo* or vice versa which is lost on me, to be honest. The other controversy is whether there should be two or three hammer blows. There were three that night. I liked that more than two because the controversial third hammer blow near the end seems to sum up this exciting but ultimately bleak work. Placards in Vienna did not even refer to it as Mahler's 6th but only as the "*Tragische*".

The venue was the Musikverein, generally thought to have the finest acoustics for the classical repertoire. We sat in a loge, at the right hand side up front, very close to the percussion which features big in this symphony! I found it a very noisy experience. In general, I do not like sitting too near the front at a Mahler symphonic performance. The music must drift back towards you and encounter you rather than confronting you. Not like Wagner!

And so ended my project. Done and dusted. All the symphonies in six months and four cities. And until a week ago (as at this time of writing) I thought "that's the end of my Mahler year."

But, as to the "special birthday" referred to at the beginning of this article, it arrived in October and, as a present, my daughter bought tickets for the family to go to a November performance of Mahler's 3rd at the South Bank, the LPO with a conductor I don't know, Robin Ticciati, and with mezzo-soprano Alice Coote, a celebrated Mahlerian.

And here, patient reader, I will sign off with something very personal. Until a few years ago, in answer to the question 'which is your favourite Mahler symphony?', I would have said the 3rd but not now. I won't be forced into a 'who is your favourite child?'. I simply can't choose any more. Impossible. But I can say this: of all the grand final movements in the oeuvre of symphonic music, nothing moves me more than the Finale of the Third. Years ago, its beautiful central theme rang a bell with me and, as I recently learned, Deryck Cooke had pointed out in 1970, that it is the same tune as that haunting Second World War song *I'll Be Seeing You*, later made famous by Billie Holiday. But, remember, Mahler composed it 40 years before! And the final climax, the in-harmony twin kettle drums beating loud at first and then softer and softer until they fade away. Spine tingling.

A few months ago we lost our beloved 11-year-old Labradoodle. I would walk him in Regent's Park nearly every day. It was a very special canine/human relationship because this dog had fought off cancer for half his life and with total abandonment. In the weeks after he died I would walk through the Park on my way to my gym: the same paths, past the same trees, across the same bridge, overlooking the same ponds, as I had done with Bruno, but now alone. The pain was sharp. And Mahler gave me solace. Yes, I'll be seeing Bruno in all the old familiar places, once again and always. Because is that not what Mahler is to us? Not just a great composer, not the subject of a futile question which asks whether he belongs in the same pantheon as Beethoven and Bach, or they with him, but far, far more. Mahler is my indispensable companion in the emotional roller coaster of life in that he is *sui generis*; he stands alone.

With thanks to my musical companions who accompanied me to my Mahler Year concerts: Karl and Roelof (London), Albert (Geneva), Rosemary (Dublin) and Klaus, Teresa and Lukas (Vienna).

