



MAHLER Symphonies Nos. 1¹ and 2, “Resurrection”² •
Klaus Tennstedt, cond; ¹Edith Mathis (sop); ¹Doris Soffel (mez); NDR SO & ²Ch Hamburg • ST. LAURENT STUDIO
1059 (2 CDs: 140:33) Live: Hamburg ¹11/14/1977, ²9/9/1980

A specific motivation made me eagerly await any new release of Klaus Tennstedt’s Mahler, even though his discography is full of overlaps in every symphony. Collectors like to think that the performers they obsess over create significant differences among their interpretations. Sometimes this isn’t the strongest rationale, a prime example being Karajan, whose ability to duplicate the same tempo in performances separated by decades verges on the uncanny. His opposite number is Tennstedt, who searched for inspiration on the wing and very largely avoided duplicating yesterday’s efforts. For this reason, as with Furtwängler and Sviatoslav Richter, collectors can be assured of something interesting every time, and once in a while Tennstedt surpasses himself in a truly treasurable reading.

That was the case in St. Laurent Studio’s recent Mahler Seventh with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1987. It’s a must-listen no matter how many previous versions you own under Tennstedt. Lightning strikes twice in this new release that pairs the First and “Resurrection” Symphonies with the NDR Symphony Orchestra in Hamburg. Neither work is a problem score like the Seventh Symphony, and one doesn’t listen to hear certain passages clarified or interpretive challenges overcome, particularly not in Symphony No. 1. Instead, Tennstedt is in a relaxed mood, and he paints the Mahler First with a broad brush on a perfect day in June. The spirit of the performance is like hearing Beethoven’s “Pastoral” Symphony, where you feel welcomed into the composer’s sense of unblemished well-being.

Temperamentally this performance from November, 1977 sits squarely between the propulsive energy of Bernstein’s two recordings (with the New York Philharmonic and the Royal Concertgebouw) and Riccardo Chailly’s scrupulously detailed and refined reading, also with the Concertgebouw. The closest similar performance is Bruno Walter’s stereo account with the Columbia Symphony, which is more genial and easy-going than his classic mono version with the New York Philharmonic. In Hamburg the first three movements under Tennstedt are winsomely innocent and joyous, avoiding any exaggerated effects to make the music sound more bucolic in the first movement, bumptious in the second, and caricatured in the third.

For utmost power and virtuosity, one can view a YouTube video of the Mahler First that Tennstedt conducted with the Chicago Symphony in 1990. It has an intensity and overall mood very different from the Hamburg concert 13 years earlier, when the conductor was getting his first taste of international fame. The audio and video quality of the Chicago broadcast is superior, and one is transfixed by how personally Tennstedt lives through the music as he conducts it. The surprise touch, which I don’t actually like, is the slow, tense way he shapes the finale. EMI’s studio recording with the London Philharmonic in 1978 is a little stiffer and less involving. In Hamburg the finale is so natural in its pacing and phrasing that I’d place the whole performance at the top. The orchestra plays very well, and the full, vivid broadcast sound is remarkable for an artifact from the Seventies.

Even though the Second Symphony lost its single-minded theme of death when Mahler expanded the original symphonic poem titled *Totenfeier* (Funeral Rites), the score represents a

huge leap beyond the First Symphony—when Mahler played the piano score of *Totenfeier* for Hans von Bülow, the older man “went into nervous shock,” Mahler reported in a letter. When performance were rare, going back to the Sixties, the shockwaves persisted; Bernstein and Solti deliberately made their performances sound seismic. By 1980, when Tennstedt led the “Resurrection” Symphony in Hamburg, the shock had waned, and he didn’t intend to revive it.

This is evident in the first movement, which opens forcefully with agitated rumbling in the double basses but soon settles into a lyrical interpretation. Dynamics aren’t exaggerated, and one never feels that the music will erupt tempestuously at any moment. The prevailing mood is often as innocently joyous as in the performance of the First Symphony. But this makes the cataclysmic passages all the more riveting when they occur. The playing is quite beautiful and sensitive, which portends that the performance might be under-inflected. It is far from that—Tennstedt’s music-making has a remarkable sense of aliveness that marks his best performances. There is enormous variety and vibrancy in the first movement, and one never hesitates to consider it great.



The second-movement Menuetto proceeds very lyrically with more expression than we usually hear in this unassuming music. Tennstedt makes sure that every phrase is warmly *cantabile*, in contrast to many conductors who merely mark time in this movement. (It was here that I noticed an imbalance in the engineering that favors the brass section, at times making the first horn as prominent as the rest of the orchestra, but this anomaly doesn’t stick out in the other movements.) The Scherzo is based on a song from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* that pokes gentle fun at St. Anthony fervently preaching to an open-mouthed congregation of fish. We begin with a startling artillery blast from the timpani

before the movement settles down to a graceful statement of the principal melody. Tennstedt doesn’t evoke the original song’s wit, but almost no one does. On its own terms the performance is very pleasing, because the music’s lyric line is maintained while paying attention to Mahler’s sharp interjection

The “Urlicht” movement also derives from the *Knaben Wunderhorn* world but in a hushed mystical tone uncommon to that world. The prominent German mezzo Doris Soffel sings securely but lacks the poetry of Janet Baker and Christa Ludwig. Because she sustains the slow-moving line very well, Soffel makes a positive contribution, however. In my concert-going experience audiences sit patiently through the three middle movements in anticipation of the symphony’s resplendent apotheosis. If nothing else survived from Mahler, we would be astonished at these climactic episodes leading to the soul’s redemption.

The final half hour is such a sure-fire hit with audiences that conductors often milk it shamelessly, and even when they don't, slow tempos add a grandiosity that preempts the actual apotheosis in the last few minutes. Tennstedt proceeds at a forward-moving pace in the introductory part, instinctively knowing that he can't afford to make the music too big too soon. But there's sufficient intensity to insure that we aren't just marking time. He keeps his eye on the clock, as it were, to assure that each event makes an impact while still moving inexorably toward the grand conclusion. (Only a handful of conductors have this sixth sense about pacing such a monumental work.) Great conductors have the ability to inspire orchestras to excel, and this certainly happens here—you are unlikely to find another "Resurrection" Symphony recording that lifts you out of your seat in the waiting time before the chorus and soloists enter.

Two niceties are not observed, however. The excellent chorus enters without real softness, and the offstage complement of brass are loud enough to be on stage. Tennstedt's intention to go directly to the heart of Mahler's emotional world sometimes bypasses details in the score. Anyone waiting for the soprano to appear in a sublime hush will be disappointed. When the conducting is this inspiring, one hopes that the two solo singers will also be inspired. Edith Mathis and Soffel are quite good, indeed without blemish, but I've heard more personal and expressive singing in their solos and duets.

The overriding fact is the enormous presence one feels in the last two movements, which Tennstedt handles with consummate skill while never becoming a field marshal massing the troops. Recorded sound that is close to studio quality keeps everything clear and uncongested. Tennstedt can be found wanting in the last measures of the finale, where he refuses to milk immortality for all its worth. But every preceding minute is galvanizing. The fact that both Symphony No. 1 and No. 2 receive glorious performances makes this release another must-listen in St. Laurent Studio's Tennstedt series, which has now reached Vol. 33. Few historical projects can hope to be this significant.



St. Laurent Studio recordings are available through Norbeck, Peters & Ford (www.norpete.com).

Huntley Dent

Five stars:

Tennstedt's Mahler at its glorious best