



MAHLER Symphony No. 5

- Herbert von Karajan, cond; Berlin PO
 - ST. LAURENT STUDIO 1072 (72:10)
- Live: Grosse Festspielhaus, Salzburg 5/15/1978

Karajan is the greatest Mahler conductor who probably didn't adore the music. He came to Mahler late, as is well known, and conducted the symphonies selectively and sporadically. But this can be attributed to a recognition at the time that Bernstein and Solti were too far ahead of him in the Mahler revolution. A stronger clue might be that once he had performed and recorded a Mahler symphony, Karajan didn't return to it with the obsessive search for perfection he applied to Beethoven, Brahms, and Richard Strauss. Only the Ninth Symphony received a remake. (I don't have access to a Karajan concert archive, so he may in fact have repeated Mahler more often than I am conjecturing from his recordings.)

If a single encounter on disc satisfied him, it doesn't quite satisfy a dedicated collector, which makes this magnificent Mahler Fifth from the Salzburg Festival in 1978 all the more rewarding. Reviewing a Mahler Ninth from the 1982 festival previously remastered by St. Laurent Studio (*Fanfare* 44:4), I took note of a few things that need only a brief repeat. We have relatively few live concerts under Karajan considering his long career and huge output of studio recordings (the scarcity has been addressed in certain measure by the Berlin Philharmonic's Digital Concert Hall). Because of his remarkable inner discipline Karajan rarely changed his interpretations in concert. However, he wasn't immune to the electricity generated in the concert hall, as this performance abundantly proves.

His studio recording of the Fifth Symphony was made much earlier, in February, 1973, using the best-sounding location he availed himself of, the Jesus-Christus-Kirche in Berlin. There were complaints about it sounding too much like Karajan and not enough like Mahler. There hardly seems to be a time when Karajan wasn't a lightning rod for animus—some of it well deserved, one should hastily add—but critical clichés have distorted our view of his musicianship. Despite the dismissive consensus, which holds that he valued beautiful playing too much, glossing over the emotional drama in a score, none of this applies here. The Salzburg Mahler Fifth crackles with energy and surges with emotion. There is never the feeling that Karajan is delivering a gloss on the music.

What this performance achieves is controlled abandon, which isn't a self-contradiction. Mahler deals in cataclysms of sound and extremes of emotion. But chaos is the enemy of music-making, and the essence of Karajan's approach is to keep the orchestra in balance without sacrificing the real Mahler. This reading of the Fifth is too varied to generalize as either hot or cold—Karajan pays attention to every shift in the score just as acutely as Bernstein and Tennstedt do. It is also evident at every turn that he has a supremely virtuosic orchestra at his fingertips.

One result is that amid a discography filled to bursting with remarkable performance of the Fifth Symphony, none in my experience sounds as effortless as this one. The absence of struggle, frayed edges, and rough textures might not be to your liking. (It's almost a relief when the first big brass outburst in the first movement is slightly sour.) Detractors and admirers both point to the hypnotic spell in a Karajan performance that holds the listener from beginning to end—the only difference is that the detractors portray this effect as the product of a control freak. Here, however, I feel that controlled abandon is part of a larger scheme, which makes Karajan's reading deeply satisfying.

I can't imagine a listener not being swept along, and the undeniable sweep and power of this reading is there for all to hear. I'd bring up only two specifics. The Adagietto eschews sentimentality. Karajan doesn't begin at a whisper; in fact, he ignores Mahler's sustained *pp* marking, with the aim of making this movement more direct and powerful. We are at a far remove from Bernstein's DG recording with the Vienna Philharmonic, which for me gives off the fragrance of violet-scented *Weltschmerz*.

In most recordings, even the highly successful ones, the Mahler Fifth effectively ends with the Adagietto because the finale is so unconvincing, which I lay down to Mahler himself. In the midst of overlapping voices and pointless fugal writing, Mahler seems to lose the thread of his inspiration. For RCA James Levine went out of his way to add (unwritten) changes in accent and tempo to enliven the music. Karajan doesn't do that, and so he joins all those recordings in which the conductor allows the music to unroll as written without adding much interpretation. Whatever can be redeemed through beautiful execution is salvaged, but complete success isn't achieved.

The first four movements are so magnificent that I can't hold one drawback against this release. St. Laurent Studio has done its usual excellent job of remastering the sound, which is as good as any studio recording of the time. We get a full dynamic range along with transparent inner detail. You might never suspect that by turning to Karajan you get to ride the whirlwind, but that is what happens here.

Huntley Dent

Five stars: Karajan's Mahler Fifth from Salzburg is magnificent

