



YSL 847 T Bernstein Vol. 7

“Because people know that I have been professionally involved with music for more than fifty years, I am asked all too often whether I have a ‘greatest’ or ‘favorite’ concert. I usually explain, tactfully, that the question is pointless, that music is not sports

with rankings, etc. What, however, would my answer be if someone pointed a gun at my head? I am almost certain that I would choose the two days in July, 1970, when I had the privilege of observing the dress rehearsal and performance of the Mahler ‘Resurrection’ Symphony under review. It has stayed in my memory ever since, and I am thrilled to find that Bernstein’s matchless performance has now been released publicly. Just as importantly for me personally, rehearsing it after such a long absence, was not a disappointment. It completely lived up to my expectations.

About ten years ago at a Cleveland Orchestra concert, I was speaking with their current music director, Franz Welser-Möst, and I said something to the effect of ‘You know, your orchestra provided me with one of the most thrilling concert experiences I’ve ever had’. Without missing a beat, he said, ‘Lenny’s Mahler Second’. Knowing that Welser-Möst was not quite 10 years old when the concert took place, I asked him how he could possibly have guessed. He replied that the musicians still talked about it with reverence. More recently, Giancarlo Guerrero, who has a long relationship with the Cleveland Orchestra as music director of its Florida residency, confirmed that the surviving musicians still talk about it as being something of a unique event, something greater than their many other fine concerts.

The sad irony is that as it was taking place, the person responsible for the quality of the Cleveland Orchestra, George Szell, lay dying in a local hospital. He had only three weeks left to live. There are reports that Bernstein tried to visit him but was not able to get in because Szell’s condition was so grave that he was permitted no visitors.

What I thought I heard in 1970, and now know I heard, is the unique combination of Leonard Bernstein’s interpretive gift, his improvisatory approach, and a driven intensity alongside the incredible precision and elegance of the Cleveland Orchestra’s playing. I cannot recall another live Bernstein recording (and many of his recordings are live) that is as well played (with the possible exception of his Chicago Shostakovich Seventh, and that one was edited from more than one performance). We experience razor-sharp attacks and the kind of ensemble which makes it clear that every musician is listening to every other musician, no matter what liberty Bernstein employs. His knowledge of Mahler’s score is, of course, legendary - he conducted the dress rehearsal with no music in front of him and made corrections knowing the cues and bar numbers of every passage. It seems clear that he felt safe taking any chances that came into his mind as he was conducting.

In terms of overall timing, this performance falls slightly north of the midpoint in Mahler Second timings, including for Bernstein himself. His earliest recorded performance, a Boston Symphony broadcast from March, 1949, times in at 79:53. His last New York Philharmonic recording, for DG in 1988, is 93:28. The Cleveland one is 87:54 (the extra timing in the headnote is for the brief post-concert radio interview with him). At any given moment one might find the tempo uniquely slow or fast, as this was definitely a reading of extremes. But, as with the best of Bernstein's work, it all holds together. Through careful tempo adjustments and dynamic shading, no change is ever jerky or jarring.

This is one of those rare performances where you sense that every single person on the stage, from the conductor and vocal soloists to the last-stand second violinist, is deeply inspired. There is a lovely and sensitive use of portamento in the strings throughout, particularly in the second movement. The hushed choral entrance in the finale is singularly beautiful. The quiet string playing and the explosive brass are all convincing, as is everything in between those extremes. Bernstein and the musicians are keenly aware of the dynamic gradations between mezzo-piano and mezzo-forte, so this is not a performance solely about extremes. The final chords are positively apocalyptic, the ultimate release of the tension built up over the entire symphony.

The recorded sound is quite acceptable for a 1970 stereo FM-radio broadcast. Because the Blossom Center is an outdoor facility, the miking has to be rather close to minimize outside noises, and there is also a sense of slight compression. But St. Laurent Studio has done its usual superb job of transferring the source material, which is clearly better than the underground version that has circulated for years among those of us who qualify as zealots about this performance. Also as usual, St. Laurent Studio provides no notes but sufficient documentation.

There are certainly other Mahler Second Symphony recordings with more splendid digitally recorded sound, but if I were on that mythical desert island where I could take only one recording with me, and it would be the Mahler Second I had to listen to for the rest of my life, I would not hesitate to choose this one. I remember that night in 1970 as if it was yesterday, and I also remember thinking at the time 'This is why we go to concerts, hoping to have a once-in-a-lifetime experience like this'. That it is now available to anyone who wishes to have it is a gift from St. Laurent Studio to all of us. To overlook this release is to deprive yourself of musical greatness."

- [5 Stars: Unforgettable Mahler from Bernstein and the Clevelanders]

- Henry Fogel, FANFARE