

St Laurent Studio YSL T-1026 KLAUS TENNSTEDT Vol. 32

“It makes the sun shine brighter when you discover a performance as great as this one of the Mahler Seventh under Klaus Tennstedt. He shares with two other eminent Mahler conductors, Jascha Horenstein and John Barbirolli, a peculiar unevenness between the best he was capable of and his off days. Here in Philadelphia in 1987, Tennstedt had a very ‘on’ day, and the result is riveting and moving in a way few can rival.

Reviewing Tennstedt’s studio recording of the Seventh, done for EMI with the London Philharmonic in 1980, Benjamin Pernick reminds us of a bygone era: ‘With only six listings in Schwann, the Seventh is tied with the Eighth as the least recorded of the Mahler symphonie’. (FANFARE 5:4) Gone is the scarcity of that time, Arkivmusic now listing 37 conductors with recordings in print of the Seventh Symphony and the same number for the Eighth. Tennstedt’s studio recording wasn’t so outstanding that it surpassed the Mahler Sevens I would call the top tier: Bernstein (twice), Abbado (twice), Sinopoli, and Dudamel.

Those standings are altered by this live account, which displays Tennstedt’s remarkable ability, most often heard in concert, to lead music from the inside and to communicate his deepest feelings and imagination to the orchestra. Captured in excellent broadcast stereo, we hear the Philadelphia Orchestra at its best, every solo passage played with beguiling individuality. Such individuality is a crucial element that marks the greatest orchestras. If I may risk saying so, the Philadelphia Orchestra’s two music directors, Eugene Ormandy and Riccardo Muti, didn’t offer opportunities for the first-chair players to really express themselves, but Tennstedt does. Dudamel also has this ability, but his young Simón Bolívar musicians on DG, willing as they are, naturally cannot compete with the polish and sheer beauty of Philadelphia.

What this virtuosity is in service of is Tennstedt at a height of inspiration, coupled with an amazing naturalness in shaping a symphony usually considered recalcitrant and awkward. Bernstein seemed to be definitive in the Seventh Symphony, but Tennstedt has the edge in spontaneity and aliveness, achieving the kind of sublime poetry one hardly expects in this work. Every movement sings. The soaring lyricism in the first movement marks the first of many places where this performance is heart-stopping.

Although there was lamenting during the Muti era that the famed Philadelphia strings no longer kept their special Ormandy-era sheen, Tennstedt gets wonderful playing from them, as luminous as anything in the past but more daring, as evidenced by the spectral mood created in the Scherzo, with eerie glissandi that sound like devilish mockery. For transparency and inner detail in the two ‘Nachtmusik’ movements, I’ve heard nothing to surpass Abbado’s live reading with the Berliners (DG), but Tennstedt evokes a more intimately personal mood.

Critics in Mahler's lifetime, and afterwards, pointed to the finale as tawdry fairground music and particularly disliked the abrupt juxtaposition of major and minor chords. Tennstedt is perhaps at his most imaginative in this movement. Where Bernstein gives free rein to the rollicking atmosphere of a carnival, he finds more expression. This is music that begs to be let off the leash, but Tennstedt probes beneath the surface without losing momentum. For unadulterated excitement, one turns to Bernstein, but Tennstedt has more to say.

I find every reason to nominate this superb release for the Classical Hall of Fame. In the glut of the Mahler market, there aren't many revelatory new recordings, but this is one. As filler we get an eloquent reading of Barber's Adagio for Strings from 1985, although the recorded sound is a touch gritty."

- Huntley Dent, FANFARE

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BARBER
Adagio for Strings
November 21, 1985

MAHLER
Symphony no. 7
February 5, 1987
Philadelphia Orchestra

St-Laurent Studio 