



YSL 1174 T Tennstedt Vol. 39

“Among the great Mahler conductors who emerged in the Sixties and afterwards, I think Klaus Tennstedt is the one that demands hearing every performance we can possibly have. Along with Dimitri Mitropoulos he embodied spontaneous inspiration, and when he was ‘on’, as he is here in the Fifth Symphony from Philadelphia in 1979, the aliveness of the music-making surpasses everyone else I can think of except Bernstein, and even there Tennstedt was the greater risk-taker.

As evidence I’ll jump directly to the finale, which is invariably a letdown, the principal reason being a sudden lapse of intensity on Mahler’s part and his burst of (misplaced) academic nostalgia - that’s the only way I can explain the endless noodling of the fugato and canon passages. This movement tests every conductor’s skill and imagination, but Tennstedt had a critical insight. One could view the music as parody, akin to the Rondo-Burleske in the Ninth Symphony. Mahler complained after the poor initial reception of the Fourth Symphony that no one understood his sense of humor. What Tennstedt delivers is coarse, at times rough-shod humor, as if musical inmates of a mental asylum were assigned counterpoint lessons.

There’s room, of course, for other reactions, but no one, I think, can doubt Tennstedt’s wrenching personal involvement with Mahler (he once commented that he lost five pounds when he conducted Mahler, or something to that effect). What one listens for in his multiple recordings of the same symphony - none more multiple than the Fifth - is not points of comparison but his ability to achieve liftoff and take the musicians and audience with him.

One senses immediately that this is going to be an electrifying performance from the intensity of the trumpet fanfare that opens the first movement. For once the solo is musical and not just a burst of dynamic punch. Tennstedt drops into musing lyricism in the second theme, which is another measure of his best Mahler, the variety of mood that seems to be created on the wing. The trap in the first movement of the Fifth Symphony is twofold - it can turn tediously gloomy when played as a relentless Trauermarsch, or it can fail to find its footing if the conducting is too lightweight. Tennstedt is definitely not of either school, and as many times as I’ve heard tis music, he made me pay attention to every measure.

Since I am here to offer unstinting praise, I feel safe in mentioning some sonic drawbacks. The dryness of the Academy of Music in Philadelphia takes its toll in a lack of bloom in the strings, and the engineers focus too much on the brass and timpani, which is a little wearing. The fact that the brass section is out to deliver thrills certainly helps to compensate for this. Otherwise we get very good FM broadcast stereo with a full dynamic range and sufficient channel separation. Producer Yves Saint-Laurent is to

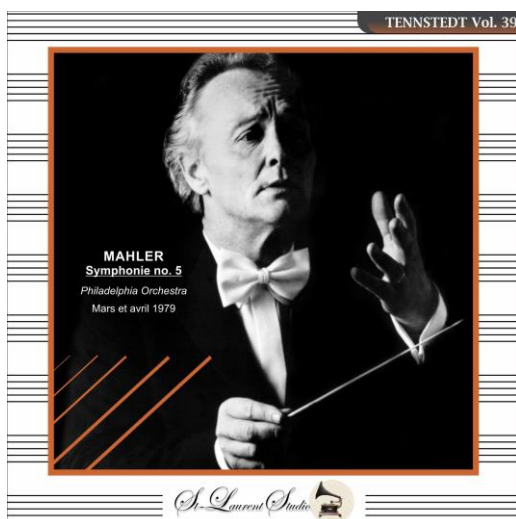
be commended, not only here but for the invaluable Tennstedt Edition he has created, which is now up to Vol. 39. I'll also point out that the audience is not silent for the quiet opening of the finale.

The Mahler Fifth is a pivotal work in my mind. Having imagined the unique fantasy world surrounding the poems of DES KNABEN WUNDERHORN, he abandoned charm for pathos, cataclysmic eruptions, and an unblinking stare into the abyss. No one has captured the starkness of this turn in Mahler's imagination as powerfully as Tennstedt in his live Sixth Symphony with the London Philharmonic on the orchestra's house label, a reading that leaves the listener as wrung out as the conductor.

He comes close here in the two middle movements of the Fifth. The second movement has a harrowing menace that alternates eerily with the lyrical passages that are undercut with an unsettling ratatat beat. I know of no other reading that verges so close to terror. Here and in the Scherzo one is swept away by Tennstedt's imagination and the virtuosic intensity of the orchestra. But he is canny enough to release the pressure in the Scherzo to give a version of the mad carnival music in the finale of Symphony #7. The microphone placement brings out every detail in the interwoven woodwind and brass solos that flit by like fireflies in the night.

Besides charm, all the symphonies after #4 have very little happiness, certainly not of the simple, sunny kind. In their place Mahler reached for rapture, which is the essence of the Adagietto. It loses something if played for grandeur or sentimentality, and I'm afraid I must accuse Bernstein of both. This is the only movement where one gets to fully appreciate the Philadelphia strings, and they support Tennstedt in a reading of hushed, sublime transcendence that at the same time feels completely natural. In a performance that exhibits greatness at every turn, this is perhaps the most moving part.

Tennstedt made a specialty of the Mahler Fifth, and besides the two commercial recordings done for EMI with the London Philharmonic (the live remake from 1988, released as both a video and audio, is preferable), there are half a dozen concert performances on various labels and YouTube, a notable one being part of the New York Philharmonic's box set of The Mahler Broadcasts 1948–1982. The time span for all these Fifths is roughly a decade beginning in 1978.



I know a handful of these other concert performances and can praise each of them. But for the moment, while listening to this Philadelphia recording, one feels that every element has come together to create a deeply moving experience that shouldn't be missed for the world."

- Huntley Dent, FANFARE