

# Gustav Mahler's Sixth Symphony: Toward a Critical Discography

by Stephen Francis Vasta

A casual browse through any of Gustav Mahler's symphonic scores, with their heavy overlay of dynamic and tempo indications and other instructions, should be sufficient to suggest the difficulties involved in shaping their performance. Granted, conductors do find that the composer's expert orchestration, fusing distinctive, vivid timbral blends from diverse instruments, solves a lot of problems of balance and clarity. Even an ensemble of medium quality can, with sufficient rehearsal, project clean, uncluttered textures, with the important themes standing out in sharp relief, while the wealth of distinctive orchestral colors has undoubtedly contributed to the composer's increasing and sustained popularity. So in that respect - and in that respect only - Mahler's scores do more or less "play themselves."

But this still leaves the conductor a fair number of decisions to make in matters of tempo and style. Mahler's scores offer rather explicit verbal tempo indications, usually in German, which presumably permitted more precise, nuanced descriptions than did the standard Italian terms. However, he almost never includes metronome markings (the one at the start of the *Resurrection's* first movement is the single exception in the symphonies). This allows the conductor considerable latitude - all manner of tempi, after all, can properly be designated *Allegro* - but, of course, some of the possible choices don't necessarily work well. Questions of style - of execution and of expression - prove even more elusive and subjective. To speed up at a *ritard* or slow down a passage marked *Etwas drängend* is clearly incorrect; but a sound that one listener accepts in a given musical paragraph might sound too lean to another, too vibrant to yet another - and the yardsticks for these reactions may well vary in the context of each individual performance!

The Sixth is one of Mahler's longest and most elaborate symphonies. Despite its adherence to the traditional four-movement format, the long outer movements in particular can be difficult to bring off comprehensibly. It's worth examining the unique problems presented by this score, not just in quest of specific solutions, but to gain insight into similar problems that crop up elsewhere in the composer's output. Along the way, I'll cite recordings that illustrate results I consider better or worse.

The first movement, unlike many of Mahler's symphonic structures, is recognizable as a reasonably strict sonata-allegro. Some movements that *function* as sonata-allegros don't, in fact, adhere strictly to the form: in the first movement of Symphony no.1, for example, the so-called "recapitulation" doesn't actually do so in the conventional sense. The recapitulation here condenses the presentation of the second ("Alma") theme, which comes to full fruition only in the triumphant coda. The correct basic tempo - or, rather, the range of acceptable choices of basic tempo - for the exposition thus becomes particularly important if the movement's structure is to come across clearly.

The initial marking is *Heftig, aber markig*, which the Eulenburg score renders into Italian as *Allegro energico, ma non troppo*. That *non troppo* is a clue: the initial march theme *looks* like it could move quickly, and Szell, Solti, and Järvi all adopt a rather quick pace. Too fast a tempo, however, not only loses the essential juggernaut quality of the driving rhythm, but, when the "Alma" theme (*A tempo subito*) arrives at bar 76, the accompanying filigree is liable to be smudged, if not completely submerged. (Indeed, the sheer density of textural activity in this Symphony is rivaled only by the Ninth.) In Järvi's account - an imperfect realization of a concept incompletely digested to begin with - the passagework is simply lost. Szell, at a comparable speed, miraculously projects every detail, but such is hardly attainable on a regular basis! Solti's Chicago is nearly as lucid, but the "Alma" theme's singing quality is lost.

Horenstein, in both his "official" Stockholm recording and a privately circulated Bournemouth aircheck, adopts, as do others, a heavier, more marked basic tempo, closer to the intent of the German marking. This

allows the march theme its proper weight, and the "Alma" theme its needed space. There is, however, the matter of the indicated exposition repeat. To dismiss it as a mere convention, skippable at will, simply won't do. (The only other symphony where the composer indicates such a repeat is the First, while the development in Symphony no. 4 begins "disguised" as such a repeat, for a surprise effect. At any rate, it's difficult to imagine this maverick composer-conductor as a slave to convention.) But when the movement goes at a slower pace the repeat can become overkill, as happens with Horenstein in the Bournemouth "performance:" when the opening material returns, "this again!" is probably not the intended reaction.

Beyond these broad structural matters, the passage at bar 61 (rehearsal number 7) poses a mild problem. This transitional woodwind chorale is the theme here, with a underpinning of ghostly pizzicato strings intoning the march motif. (If there's any doubt as to the theme, it's the chorale that returns, doubletime and shorn of its march trappings, at bar 341 in the recapitulation.) We should be paying attention to the chorale, but frequently the ear gravitates instead to the familiar motif below. Mahler has not, perhaps, misjudged the literal balance in this passage, but he has, briefly, misjudged basic listener psychology.

This article is not the place to address the ongoing, and sometimes heated, debate about the correct order of the Symphony's two inner movements. (The International Gustav Mahler Society's 1963 edition gives the order as Scherzo-Andante; other Mahler scholars, including Colin Matthews, find no evidence for this "restoration" and claim the reverse order as correct.) If the Scherzo is taken as the second movement, however - as is the case on many older recordings - it does pose a new question: how to differentiate the forceful A-minor chords of the opening from the forceful A-minor chords that opened the first movement? Only Horenstein addresses the issue at all, by taking the Scherzo at a markedly faster pace, and adopting lighter, more airborne phrasing to produce a pronounced contrast with the first movement's *marcato* weight.

Other difficulties crop up regardless of where the Scherzo is played. The opening, in 3/8 time, poses tricky cross-accent: the tympani accent the third beat, the cellos and basses the first. Most recordings blur the effect: those tympani whacks dominate, suggesting an incorrect scansion, and throwing the listener off-balance when the violins introduce the (conventionally stressed) theme two bars later. I suspect that conductors hear wider gradations of sound from the podium than actually get out into the hall: Neumann, in his Leipzig account, and Mehta are among the very few who really take some trouble over this detail, and the movement makes a stronger initial impact as a result.

Then there are the two "trio" sections, reposeful interludes setting off the surrounding turbulence. The composer, in a letter to his wife, called them "timid, hesitant, childlike phrases, stumbling in changing time-signatures." As such, a light-fingered approach would seem called for, rather than any misplaced attempts at emphatic irony. Neumann's gentle daubing of the woodwind *staccati* gets this just right. Horenstein's sunny pastoral lyricism arguably misses the composer's stated point (as does Tennstedt's generalized expressiveness), but is quite winning on its own terms. Most other renditions sound uncomfortably poker-faced.

The *Andante moderato*, conversely, tends to lead performers in the opposite direction, particularly if they impose *Adagietto*-like characteristics on every Mahler slow movement. Deryck Cooke, significantly, refers to the movement as "remote and lonely." He may have intended "remote" in a technical musical sense - E-flat major is as far from the principal key of A minor as you can get - but the word's quotidian sense is not out of place here. The textures are mostly light, and the English horn passage in G minor at bar 89 veers into desolation. Thus, Bernstein and Tennstedt's tonal weight misses the point, incidentally undercutting the real sonorous and emotional peaks beginning at bar 147 (rehearsal cue 100). The unfortunate Järvi's fast, heavy rendering of the theme makes it sound sickly and puling, and he spoils the upward violin glissando at rehearsal no. 99, which could be magical, by exaggerating it. Szell's chamber-music clarity keeps his

quick reading in proportion, at least. Horenstein is oddly impersonal, shaping the phrases abstractly without suggesting any kind of singing quality: the movement as a whole makes an impact, but one wants some affection. Karajan has the lightness, but the hard, glassy violin tone above the staff is uningratiating. It's Boulez, of all people, who strikes just the right balance between horizontal flow and vertical clarity.

Newcomers to the Symphony can find the half-hour Finale a stumbling block in even the best performances. Floros provides a clear analysis of it as a modified sonata-allegro, with the slow introduction included in the recapitulation. This last isn't a new technique - Schubert deployed it, years earlier, in the first movement of his First Symphony - but it's harder to perceive in a movement of Mahlerian scale. And, like the first movement, this Finale incorporates a lot of busy-ness into the textures, requiring a measure of alertness late in the piece that can pose stamina problems. Solti and Haenchen's uneasy, fatigued-sounding renditions thus rule their versions out of court - understandable in the case of Haenchen's concert recording, more puzzling in Solti's high-powered studio account.

Obviously, it's not necessary to be able to "hear" the movement's structure to be gripped by its stark drama. But then it helps if all those moving details, providing plenty of forward impulse, emerge with clarity. Szell, at a brisk tempo, manages this superbly, but sounds relatively weightless. Boulez and Neumann project the movement effectively as a large, gripping piece of abstract symphonic writing, with Neumann injecting an extra measure of thrust and drive into the recurring dotted rhythms. De Waart also does well by this movement: his textures are less sharply defined, but wind detail is especially refulgent.

One can also hear the Finale programmatically - although no actual verbal program exists - as an unnamed protagonist's struggle against hostile forces, forces that strike the protagonist down just as victory looms. Tennstedt and Mehta project this pictorial dimension better than most, though in very different ways. Tennstedt plays most of the movement as if triumph were ultimately assured. He weaves rich textures out of the forward motion of individual musical strands, conjuring a banner-waving affirmation cruelly cut down in the coda, which, in this context, sounds uniquely bleak. Mehta, after a relatively generalized account of the movement, shapes the bounding brass phrases after measure 728 (rehearsal no. 161) as a steady, purposeful uphill march. The final cadence into rehearsal no. 164 is solidly weighted, poised towards resolution, and then - nothing: at rehearsal no. 164, the prize simply evanesces, leaving emptiness.

Thus, the Sixth Symphony presents an unusually complex array of interpretive choices and dilemmas. The requirements for the conductor are stringent: a basic stick technique that is at once clear and flexible; a finely-tuned ear for balance, to assure that the counterpoint emerges as clearly as the composer intended; and a large-scale sense of structure, of the score's peaks and valleys, so that the diverse musical elements can be held in their proper proportions. Thus, the ideal Sixth will perhaps always remain elusive. Then again, continued attempts to realize this score, succeeding with different elements to varying degrees, assure the piece's continuing interest for interpreters and listeners alike.

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**SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY**

**Mahler: Symphony No. 6 in A minor**

**Leonard Bernstein**/Vienna Philharmonic. DG 427697-2 (2 CD-set; with *Kindertotenlieder*).

**Pierre Boulez**/Vienna Philharmonic. DG 445835-2.

**Edo DeWaart**/Netherlands Radio Philharmonic. RCA 74321 276012 (14-CD set of the ten numbered symphonies).

**Hartmut Haenchen**/Netherlands Philharmonic. LaserLight 14140.

**Janascha Horenstein**/Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra. Unicorn-Kanchana (U.K.), OP.

**Neeme Järvi**/Royal Scottish National Orchestra. Chandos CHAN 9207.

**Herbert von Karajan**/Berlin Philharmonic. DG 415099-2 (2 CD-set; with *Rückert-Lieder*).

**Zubin Mehta**/Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. Teldec 4509-98423-2.

**Vaclav Neumann**/Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. Berlin Classics 0090452BC (2 CD-set; with Beethoven: Fidelio Overture; Leonore Overture no. 3).

**Georg Solti**/Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Decca Ovation 425040-2.

**George Szell**/Cleveland Orchestra. Sony SBK 47654.

**Klaus Tennstedt**/London Philharmonic. EMI ZDMD 64476 (4-CD set; with Symphonies nos. 7 and 8).

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