

MAHLER Symphony No. 3¹. STRAUSS *Tod und Verklärung* • Jascha Horenstein, cond; ¹Norma Proctor (alt); ¹Ambrosian Singers; ¹Wandsworth School Boys' Ch; London SO • HIGH DEFINITION TAPE TRANSFERS 15476 (2 CDs: 120:22)

Few symphonic recordings have received the kind of universal acclaim accorded this Mahler Third Symphony under Jascha Horenstein. Recorded in July 1970 and released on Unicorn LPs, it has received close to unanimous praise from reviewers around the world. Five different *Fanfare* reviewers have enthused over it, and I entered it into the magazine's Hall of Fame in 1993.

One reservation, however, has been expressed by many critics: limitations in the recorded sound. This was surprising, because famed producer Harold Lawrence oversaw the sessions, and Mahler scholar Deryck Cooke was also present as special consultant. The most significant problem was the weak bass response, diminishing the impact of the cellos and even more seriously the double basses, timpani, and bass drum. Additionally, there was a slight tape hiss present, and the dynamic range was slightly limited. Explosive moments, such as the ending of the first movement, lacked the ultimate punch that one felt must have been present in the playing. More importantly, the overall sound picture was too close, not capturing the space of the hall.

During the sessions, as it happens, a separate recording using different microphones and recording equipment, worked from a separate control room, was made by Jerry Bruck, a leading American recording engineer. Bruck was invited to do this by John Goldsmith, the founder of Unicorn. Bruck made a four-channel recording, which is now receiving its first release by High Definition Tape Transfers (HDTT). John H. Haley of Harmony Restorations and HDTT's Bob Witrak worked from Bruck's original tapes. Out of the six recording sessions, he had edited down only the third movement; the rest had yet to be edited. Cooke's notes for editing all but the first movement were available, but the 34-minute first movement had to be done by listening to the Unicorn release and matching the takes from it.

Since many *Fanfare* readers are familiar with the performance, I will start with the most important point about HDTT's new version. This is a significant improvement over Unicorn's recording (it was also released on Nonesuch and Scribendum). Every sonic deficiency in the original has been addressed here. The most obvious improvement is in the bass response, which Bruck achieved while still retaining sharp focus and clarity. Some ascending scale passages by the double basses in the first movement now make the great impact Mahler must have imagined. Climaxes are overwhelming, and *pianissimi* are hushed but never thin sounding.

Overall, the richness of Mahler's orchestral colors, captured with great sensitivity by Horenstein, is vividly conveyed. For many Mahlerians this recording is a touchstone, and a purchase of HDTT's release will be self-recommending. I should point out that I auditioned it on CD in two-channel stereo. However, since Bruck's original experimental setup was done in four-channel sound, downloads from HDTT are available in that format. Bruck was opposed to the typical multi-microphone setup that most record companies used, preferring a fixed array of four hypercardioid Schoeps microphones in order to capture a natural hall ambience while leaving it to the conductor to take care of orchestral balances. The combination of clarity and blend in this recording proves the wisdom of his approach.

The performance remains one of the glories of the Mahler discography. Horenstein was an uneven conductor, but at his best his grasp of structure and his ability to dig deeply into the emotions underlying a score were close to unmatched. The Mahler Third is the longest symphony in the standard repertoire, and the half-hour first movement can sprawl unless tightly

controlled. Horenstein somehow connects its wildly varying elements into a unified whole that is inexorably headed to its conclusion without wandering along the way. In my Hall of Fame review I noted the conductor's "control of tension and release, whether generated by harmonic, rhythmic, contrapuntal, or melodic developments."

After the intense drama of the first movement, Mahler provides contrast in the delicate and elegant second movement. The score is marked *Tempo di menuetto. Grazioso*, and the *grazioso* is emphasized in this reading. The third movement requires a conductor with a keen ear for balances. Mahler's contrapuntal writing has to be conveyed by keeping the relationship between several moving lines clear and appropriately proportioned. That is done ideally here, and the flugelhorn solos that gave the symphony the nickname of "posthorn" (warmly played by William Lang) are exquisitely accompanied by hushed strings.

The next two movements add fine singing to the performance's attractions. Norma Procter's plush contralto shapes Nietzsche's text in the fourth movement with intensity, and the women's and boys' choruses are excellent in the fifth movement. The Wandsworth School Boys' Choir perform with keener intonation and sharper precision than is often the case.

The crowning glory of the performance is the *Adagio* finale. Using a moderate tempo, Horenstein never seems to be rushing or dragging. The music unfolds naturally, particularly because of the suppleness of the phrasing and the conductor's judicious but deeply felt treatment of *portamento* in the strings. No other recording I am familiar with matches Horenstein's expressive use of that technique. In my Hall of Fame review I said that "[this] makes the final movement unbearably poignant and bittersweet, and gives it an emotional impact profoundly beyond that of any other performance, live or on records, that I have encountered."

The finale is where the HDTT's sonic improvements are most telling. The beauty of the string playing (not something that one could always take for granted with the LSO at the time), the richness of the climaxes, the clarity of detail, all are improved over the Unicorn release.

There was time left at the end of the final session, so Horenstein and the LSO recorded Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration*. The performance is fine but not as deeply engaged as the Mahler, which comes as no surprise after six sessions devoted to such an emotionally draining symphony. It is nice to have the Strauss as filler, but the Mahler is truly historic.

HDTT releases are available at the labels website, highdeftapetransfers.ca **Henry Fogel**

Five stars: Meaningful sonic improvement in a classic recording