

**Gustav MAHLER (1860-1911)**  
Symphony No.4 in G (1899-1900)  
An Update by Brian Wilson

We are currently working on updating Tony Duggan's (hereafter TD) very popular [Synoptic Survey of the Mahler symphonies](#). That takes us up to May 2006, so I'm comparing TD's choices for Symphony No.4 with some of the newer recordings which have appeared since 2006. I'll skip introducing the music, since that's well covered in TD's article and by Michael Wilkinson in his [review](#) of a recent BIS recording. What I had not realised was how many fine recordings of this symphony have been released since 2006, though I reviewed many of them myself.

As TD left matters, his favourite versions were 'Horenstein, Kubelík and Kletzki from the past generation, and Gatti, Boulez and Tilson Thomas from the present' with that of Michael Tilson Thomas 'a truly great version and certainly the best all round for performance and recorded sound together'.

Some of those older recordings are now hard to come by. The **Horenstein** is tied up in the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary box set of all Mahler's works (Warner 6089852, 16 CDs, around £44, or lossless download for around £29: Bargain of the Month – [review](#)). **Kubelík's** Fourth on DG Eloquence is download only, and more expensive than when it was available on CD, or in the box set of all his recordings of Mahler (4637382, 10 CDs). The **Kletzki** Fourth and *Das Lied von der Erde* remain available on a budget-price twofer (Warner Gemini 4769122).

A more recent **Daniele Gatti** Fourth (live 2017) comes as a rather expensive SACD, with slightly less expensive 16- and 24-bit downloads (RCO18004) or as a DVD video, with Symphony No.1 (9029687474). **Pierre Boulez** remains available at full-price on CD (DG 4632572), with a much less expensive download on offer. The complete *Boulez conducts Mahler* comes on 14 CDs, for around £55, with a lossless download around the same price (4779528).

The Gatti is the Concertgebouw's second recent Mahler Four release; in 2015 they issued **Mariss Jansons'** recording on RCO Live RCO15004 SACD, one of his last recordings as chief conductor, with Dorothea Röschmann in the finale. He has the advantage of an orchestra who must know the work inside out, and he produces a very fine, straight account.

It may raise a few eyebrows – mine included – that Bruno Walter and George Szell, both recorded by CBS didn't make the final cut. It's equally surprising that the **Szell** recording, with Judith Raskin an ideal soloist, is available only as a download, without booklet, and more expensive than when it was available as a budget CD (Sony G0100013929977, with *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, Andrew Davis, or Columbia G010003872253J). The Sony costs around £12 in lossless sound – as much as you would expect to pay for a new recording. The Columbia is less expensive, around £8.50, but offers the symphony only. Some dealers still have the Sony CD for around £10.

First released in 1967 on Columbia SAX5283 in the UK, the Szell recording confounded expectations of a conductor more renowned for hard-driven performances, with Judith Raskin, not a voice for all seasons, genuinely capturing the child-like mood of the finale. Two years later it was an even stronger recommendation as one of the first releases in the CBS Classics mid-price series on 61056. The price of 28/6 would equate to at least £40 in today's values, mitigating my criticism of the cost of the download. Edward Greenfield, whose reviews tended to be as unassailable as Dicky Bird's umpiring, thought it an ideal example of Szell's art at its most inspired – and I'm not about to disagree.

I do like Szell's way with Mahler, not just in the Fourth, but the Sixth (Sony 88697008132 – [review](#), now download only) and *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, with Schwarzkopf and Fischer-Dieskau (Warner Original Jacket 9029573984, around £7.50 – [review](#) of earlier reissue).

Generally regarded as a martinet conductor, Szell nevertheless captures the spirit of No.4; he's well served by Judith Raskin in the finale and, of course, his own Cleveland Orchestra offer model playing. There's a hi-definition version of Szell's Fourth from [HDTT](#) but, paradoxically, sharpening up the sound has made it sound rather more shrill than my copy of the Sony CD; it's a long time since I felt the need to roll off some treble. I listened to the 24/96, which costs \$15; other versions go up to DSD124 and DXD 24/352.8 PCM, both at \$22.

**Bruno Walter's** earlier NYPO recording of Nos. 4 and 5 – [review](#) – has disappeared, but his New York Fourth, with Desi Halban, and excerpts from *Lieder und Gesänge*, can be streamed from [Naxos Music Library](#). The very inexpensive Alto recording which I mentioned in the original version of this update actually contains the Reiner Four and the Walter Nine and the number is ALC1604, 2 CDs, around £8.

Several alternatives are available for the Concertgebouw/**Eduard van Beinum** recording, which TD thought not a 'front line choice [but] it must be in the pantheon of Mahler Fourths'. Not so easy to come by in 2006, that's now available on Decca Eloquence (4828147, with *Das Lied von der Erde* and *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* – [review](#)) and Magdalen METCD2004 – [review](#). The Eloquence is the better buy – 2 CDs at budget piece as against the Magdalen at full price. Or there's a Beulah download, with *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (2PD17 – from [Amazon UK](#) – not, unfortunately, one of the Beulah recordings available in better sound on Qobuz.)

As for the **Michael Tilson Thomas** Mahler 4, the most notable feature is the very slow tempo adopted for the third movement, but MTT brings it off. Despite listening only to an mp3 download, I thought it one of the best, and a strong challenge to Szell – [DL Roundup August 2010](#). (SFS Media SFS0004). It's paradoxical that TD found Welser-Möst's 25-minutes for the third movement 'mind boggling', but made MTT, at 25:27, his top choice. The answer is that some conductors can work with a tempo that just isn't right in the hands of another. In any case, Welser-Möst's budget-price offering has disappeared, though some dealers have it as a much more expensive Warner CD.

Mahler asks for this movement to be *Ruhevoll* (restful), *poco adagio*, which usually means an overall timing of around 23 minutes, sometimes as short as 21 minutes, for example from **Iván Fischer** with the Budapest Festival Orchestra (Channel CCSSA26109, SACD). That's one of the recordings which has appeared since TD's survey (in 2009). Leslie Wright thought it the version to beat (Recording of the Month – [review](#)).

I had something of a change of heart between reviewing the Fischer in mp3, in 2010, and in better, 24-bit, sound in [DL Roundup November 2011/1](#). Having originally found myself swimming against the critical tide, I've come to think of this as among the best recent recordings. No doubt hearing it in better sound made the difference – a warning that one should always choose the best quality available, even though it costs a little more and takes longer to download. With fibre broadband now on offer at an attractive price, download speeds are much faster; an album in 24-bit typically can be yours in four or five minutes.

The other **Fischer**, brother **Adám**, whose Mahler First I made Recording of the Month – [Spring 2018/2](#) – has also recorded the Mahler 4, for C-AVI (8553642). Dan Morgan thought that 'Not a giant-killer, but not a pygmy either; a most enjoyable Mahler Fourth' – [review](#). For him, the Klemperer recording remains a classic, for the very reason that TD rejected it, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf's singing in the finale.

You either like it for the sheer quality of Schwarzkopf's voice, or reject it because it's far too knowing to be 'a child's view of Heaven'.

**Otto Klemperer's** Mahler – Symphonies Nos. 2, 4, 7, 9 and *Das Lied von der Erde*, is a force of nature that has to be heard at least once. It's excellent value as part of the Klemperer Legacy, 6 CDs for around £22 (2483982 – [review](#)). I wouldn't want to be without it, even if only for the sake of Wunderlich in *Das Lied von der Erde*, though that's also available separately on Warner 2564607598, mid-price – [Late Autumn 2016](#). Don't pay more for the download than for the CD.

One recording for which TD had no time, from **Simon Rattle** and the CBSO, with Amanda Roocroft in the finale, is now available only in the complete set (9029586917). Others have thought (very) highly of it – three stars in the final edition of the Penguin Guide and multiple awards – but the symphony in his hands becomes too cosy and the *rubato* is often laid on unnaturally.

Recorded in 2006, so too late for TD's survey, **Jonathan Nott** set down his interpretation of the Fourth as one of a series of Mahler symphony recordings for the Tudor label with the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra and Mojca Erdmann the soloist (7151, SACD). Terry Barfoot, who placed this recording near the top of the list, made that a Recording of the Month – [review](#). I thought the box set, which also contains this and the other eight symphonies (Tudor 1671), good but not outstanding value – [Independent Labels, Jan-Feb 2017](#). In fact, at around £70, it's now considerably more expensive than the BR-Klassik set (below), though it has the advantage of SACD sound.

Also too late for TD's article – recorded live in 2006, the year that the article was completed – **Sir Charles Mackerras** is a surprise entrant; he's not usually regarded as a Mahler specialist, but his Signum recording with the Philharmonia Orchestra and Sarah Fox is well worth considering (SIGCD219). John Quinn made it a Recording of the Month – [review](#). I thought the performance excellent, but had problems with the mp3 download – [DL Roundup January 2011](#). Heard in lossless sound from [hyperion-records.co.uk](#), I found it much more to my liking – another reminder of the importance of listening to the best possible version; in this case, that's not too expensive, at £6.99, with a pdf copy of the booklet, and without any of the noises-off which marred my original mp3.

There's a very fine line between natural and artificial *rubato*, for example in the opening movement. I originally thought Iván Fischer's performance on the wrong side of that line, but came round to it with repeated listening and better sound. With Mackerras there's no problem – he certainly leans on the music in places, but with the same just-right results which mark out his Dvořák recordings.

There's another Signum recording, again from the Philharmonia and Sarah Fox, to be noted: Symphonies Nos. 4-6 with **Lorin Maazel** (SIGCD361). Stephen Francis Vasta was less than over the moon – [review](#) – but John Quinn was rather more impressed, though he preferred Mackerras in the Fourth – [review](#). I found myself liking many aspects of this set and loathing others; I recommend trying it for yourself from [Naxos Music Library](#) – [Spring 2018/2](#).

TD thought Maazel's earlier recording with the Vienna Philharmonic and Kathleen Battle (Sony) 'superbly played and recorded', but ruled it out of the final reckoning. Others have been more effusive: the BBC Music Magazine awarded a rare five stars.

Another recording available from [Hyperion](#) as a download comes from the LSO on their in-house label, with **Valery Gergiev** (LSO0662). That comes in 16- and 24-bit format, but the SACD is on sale for less than either, for around £6. Gergiev's Mahler with the LSO has produced some very varied responses, as from me in his recordings of Nos. 6 and 7 – [review](#). I might react a little more positively now to both those recordings if heard in better quality than the low-grade mp3 that I had available in 2008.

Gergiev recorded the Fourth again (2017, live) with the Munich Philharmonic and Genia Kühmeier, a Recording of the Month which Michael Cookson thought one of the finest in the catalogue – [review](#) – and Ralph Moore found wholly satisfying in its own terms – [review](#). Lightness and charm are not qualities that I normally associate with Gergiev's Mahler, at least with the LSO, but they are to be found in his Munich Fourth.

We seem not to have caught up with Gergiev's LSO Fourth, and I was tempted not to bother, having read some dire reviews – and one which, on the contrary, thought it bright and sparkling. I've learned not to take anything on trust with Gergiev; despite his reputation for going over the top, some of his recordings have seemed too restrained, such as his Berlioz *Harold in Italy*. I'm inclined to place his use of *rubato* slightly on the wrong side of the divide between natural and unnatural, and, overall, this is not a version that I would place in the top rank – there just doesn't quite seem to be the commitment that the music requires – but it's far from being as awful as some have suggested and the climaxes, unsurprisingly, are impressive. The recording, in 24-bit, is very good, if a little recessed; no sign of the Barbican acoustic gremlins.

There's also a Unitel DVD/blu-ray recording of a Promenade Concert in 2010 on which Gergiev conducts Mahler's Fourth and Fifth symphonies; for Tim Perry, that favours clarity and thrilling execution above deep emotion – [review](#).

Another live performance, from the LPO and **Vladimir Jurowski**, earned a Recommendation from Ralph Moore (LPO-0113 – [review](#)).

**Mark Albrecht** with the Netherland Philharmonic turns in an SACD recording for Pentatone which Dan Morgan described as 'life-sapping' – [review](#). I couldn't get much farther than the first movement, which sounds as if it's conducted and performed on auto-pilot, and the recording, rather distant, even heard via the 24/96 download from [eclassical.com](#), doesn't help at all. I remember wondering as I edited Dan's review if he was being unduly harsh – he wasn't.

On another SACD, **Manfred Honeck** recorded the Mahler 4 live with the Pittsburgh Symphony and Sunhae Im (Exton EXCL-00048). Gavin Dixon's view that the performance and recording are compromised with a lack of subtlety – [review](#) – is slightly at odds with a generally more positive view elsewhere. I couldn't check it out because it's out of stock in the UK, possibly *en route* for deletion.

Arnold Schönberg – as his name was then spelled – had Mahler's Fourth arranged by Erwin Stein for a chamber ensemble, for performance at his private Musical Society. It's one of a number of such works that have been recorded by Linn with the Royal Academy of Music Soloists Ensemble and **Trevor Pinnock**: flute, oboe, clarinet, piano, harmonium, two percussionists, string quartet and bass, with Sónia Grané as soloist. (CKD438 SACD, with Debussy *Faune*). John Sheppard thought it very enlightening and enjoyable – [review](#) – and, while I had some reservations, I thought that the Debussy in particular worked well – [DL News 2013/12](#).

There's another recording of this chamber-size reduction from the Manchester Camerata and **Douglas Boyd** on Avie (AV2069). Colin Clarke, recommending it, thought that it was 'more than a curio [with] an appeal and an impact all of its own' – [review](#) – but TD, though disliking the arrangement, approved of this recording in his survey.

I'm loth to rule out **Rudolph Kempe** with the BBC, but the off-air recording was made in 1957, long before the Third Programme began to broadcast in stereo, and I have to agree with Ralph Moore that

the sound is rather muddy, even for the period. (ICA ICAC5117, with Wagner *Parsifal* Prelude and Mendelssohn *Ruy Blas* – [review](#)).

**Roger Norrington** has recorded the Mahler Fourth, not with his own period-instrument orchestra, but with the Stuttgart Radio Orchestra and Anu Komsí (SWR19524CD). That seems to be a less expensive reissue (around £8 on CD) of a controversial earlier Haenssler release. Reviewing the Zinman recording (below), Dan Morgan ruled Norrington out as cavalier and relentless.

Those looking for a box set always need to be aware that there may be an Achilles heel. Reviewing the BR-Klassik set of recordings made with the Bavarian Radio Orchestra between 1996 and 2016, Michael Cookson had reservations about No.6, conducted by Daniel Harding, but was much happier with **Bernard Haitink** in Nos. 3 and 4, with Juliane Banse in the Fourth (900714, 11 CDs, target price £29 – [review](#)).

Juliane Banse is also the soloist on **Giuseppe Sinopoli's** recording with the Dresden Staatskapelle, recently reissued as part of a 5-CD Profil Medien box set (PH19055, with Mahler Ninth and music by Weber, Richard Strauss, Wagner, Liszt, Schumann and Sinopoli himself). The single release of the Fourth, with an introduction from the conductor, in German, with an English translation in the booklet, recorded in 1999 and released in 2008, remains available to download in mp3 and lossless sound (PH07047). If there's a more thoughtful and restful account of the first movement, I haven't heard it, but I think it's a little too restful, and Banse doesn't capture the child's view of heaven for me. But, just to show how tastes can differ, **David Zinman**, whose own recording with the Zurich Tonhalle hits the spot for many, nominated this as his ideal recording in 2010. (The Zinman, with Luba Orgonášová, is now an expensive download only, RCA G0100013329367: Recording of the Month in its earlier incarnation – [review](#)).

Sinopoli's earlier DG Collectors Edition box set of his Mahler recordings is now download only – and very expensive in lossless sound, at around £118 or more. Presto offer the DG Fourth, with the Philharmonia and Edita Gruberova, as one of their CDR specials ([4375272](#)).

Michael Wilkinson, [reviewing](#) the recent **Osmo Vänskä** recording with the Minnesota Orchestra (BIS-2356 SACD), thought that it ranked with the very best. Despite that, listening in 24-bit stereo from [eclassical.com](#), my own expectations were less than optimistic; I found some good things in Vänskä's recording of Symphony No.5, but, overall, thought it not my ideal version, for which I still turn to Bernstein (DG). John Quinn – [review](#) – and Dan Morgan – [review](#) – also had reservations, principally concerning Vänskä's very slow timing in the *adagietto*. What we all agreed on was the quality of the recording, whether on SACD or as a 24/96 download; that's equally true in the Fourth. In Vänskä's Sixth, disappointment set in even earlier for me; it's beautifully played, but the performance outstays its welcome – [Spring 2018/2](#).

Broad tempos in general are again in evidence in Vänskä's Fourth, but with none of the extremes of the Fifth's *adagietto*. He seems much more attuned to the world of this last of the *Wunderhorn* symphonies than to its successor. Tilson Thomas has demonstrated that a very slow tempo works for the third movement and it works well for Vänskä, too. All in all, I enjoyed the Vänskä Fourth – and, incidentally, his Seventh – much more than I had expected, but the Klimt-inspired cover is hardly appropriate for this symphony.

That brings us finally to the latest recording, from **Leif Segerstam** with Essi Luttinen (mezzo) and the Turku Philharmonic Orchestra, recorded in 2019 (Alba ABCD454). His earlier recording of the Fourth, on Chandos CHAN9836 (now special CDR or download), earned a degree of praise from Tony Duggan as a persuasive alternative to the mainstream views of Kletzki, Szell, Horenstein and Kubelík – [review](#).

I'm reviewing that separately but, in brief, I had some reservations about his use of rubato – less natural than that of Mackerras, for example, or Iván Fischer, now that I've warmed to the latter. The Turku orchestra serve him better than the Danish Radio Orchestra on Chandos, but his wish to extract every ounce of drama still impedes the flow of the music and the effect still sounds mannered at times.

The third movement is not as slow as before, but still deeply expressive – I find myself continually using TD's words – and Essi Luttinen offers the right balance between sounding child-like and childish in the finale. That leaves me with a good feeling, and the recording, which I streamed in 24-bit, is very good. All in all, however, though you wouldn't go too far wrong with this new recording, there is better to be had. Even after this lengthy excursion through the world of Mahler's Fourth, I find myself returning to Szell, Tilson Thomas and Iván Fischer, and with no sense of reviewer fatigue.