

Mahler's First Symphony – A Comparative Survey By Lee Denham

Apparently, some of the most visited web pages on MusicWeb International are of the late Tony Duggan's comprehensive survey of Gustav Mahler's symphonies. Sadly, we lost Tony in 2012 and it says much about his legacy that it is only now, some eight years after, that it has been decided that his work needs to be updated.

When the request came round, I was rather quick to raise my hand to do the First symphony – only to then realise that [the discography on the Mahler Foundation website](#) lists some 250 or so recordings, both live and in the studio, which needed to be considered. I strongly suspect mine was the only hand that went up ! That said, it has been a significant challenge, therefore, to try and be both comprehensive as well as concise, entertaining as well as enlightening, without producing a text rivalling *War and Peace*, but I have done my best and do apologise in advance for what rapidly turned out to be quite a lengthy article.

What follows is not designed to be a replacement of [Tony's work](#), nor can it be a comprehensive review of every issue of Mahler's First Symphony ever made. Instead, it is an article which can broadly be split into three sections: the first deals with the various transcriptions and arrangements the work has received, followed by a brief history of its composition and different editions of the score with an analysis of the recordings made of the "original" score(s), until the main narrative, which is of the very many recordings this work has received I have managed to get my hands on – good, bad, indifferent, in poor sound or otherwise, where I have tried to give the reader an idea of the various merits of each and perhaps to provide guidance on which ones best to seek out for further investigation. As always, all the opinions below are solely mine, and if I have missed out any reader's favourite version, or have slighted one in any way, then I will apologise at the outset and have, in mitigation, offered a second opinion with a link to an original review by a colleague (if available) from MusicWeb's extensive archives – just click on the [review](#) hyperlink by the relevant recording to access this. As with every one of these surveys, the moment it is published new recordings will be released that will add to the narrative of this much loved symphony, plus I will read back my original notes and wonder if there was any wisdom at all in my proclaimed judgements – as such, this will be revised in due course and I would be very grateful to anyone who is kind and patient enough to point out any errors which I (and I alone) have made.

I have also attempted to grade what I consider to be the representative recording of each conductor with a mark out of 10, which I hope will give the reader some kind of guide of my own reaction to the performance. For example, the 9/10 awarded to Bruno Walter's live NBC SO recording from 1939 reflects how impressed I was with the overall performance and playing from that era, as well as the importance of the recording, plus the interpretation – it clearly isn't meant to reflect the fact that the sound is also of SACD quality - which, of course, it isn't. The sound quality of each performance is usually mentioned in the narrative; whether a performance is live or studio, mono or stereo is indicated in brackets after the listed recordings – so clearly if a reader wants state of the art sound with no audience noises, a live mono recording from the 1950's, or earlier, is clearly not going to pass muster, no matter how good the performance may be. I am therefore relying on the reader to exercise his or her judgement in these cases, too. However, as a rough guide, any recording that scores above an 8 is, in my opinion, distinctive and any under 5, poor and to be avoided.

I spent a long time trying to work out a narrative – my cause is both aided and hampered by multiple recordings by the same conductors. I considered having an historical category, recognising that for some people this music demands modern sound, but then wondered how I was to treat some of the

earliest protagonists of the piece, such as Bruno Walter and Jascha Horenstein, who both made historical mono recordings as well as later versions in more than acceptable stereo sound. In the end, I decided on a loose historical narrative, starting with the first recording available (of Bruno Walter's in 1939), but then concentrating on the rest of that conductor's recordings, before continuing with the next conductor to make a recording (i.e. Dimitri Mitropoulos in 1940) and so on, with the aim of attempting to trace how interpretations of Mahler's work have changed (if at all) down the years; likewise, the individual conductor's interpretations. There are some conductors in this survey, such as Seiji Ozawa, Zubin Mehta, Lorin Maazel and Rafael Kubelik, who have recorded the symphony on many occasions. Some, most notably Jascha Horenstein and Carlo Maria Giulini, have barely any differences in interpretation between each recording and in those cases I have highlighted in **bold** the version that in my opinion is the one the reader should seek out, usually with an explanation in the narrative as to why one is preferred over the other(s). Elsewhere, where the interpretation of the conductor changes significantly, as with Bruno Walter who morphed from enfant-terrible in 1939 to genial Uncle Bruno in 1961, I have attempted to reflect this in the review narrative with the result that occasionally, as with both Walter and Kubelik for example, I end up recommending more than one recording by the same conductor.

At the end, there is a brief summary where I list the recordings I would grab if the house were burning – each one of these recordings has a '***' next to it in the main narrative to alert you as I go along. On this occasion, for a bit of fun I've decided to include a 'wildcard' category, too, so that I can also mention those recordings which can never be a central recommendation, but still have something special and unique to say about this marvellous symphony.

I hope you find the following of interest and enjoyment.

Transcriptions

2000 January 22-23rd – Chitose Okashiro (arr for solo piano by C Okashiro) ** [CHATEAU](#)

2003 March 10th – Prague Piano Duo (vers. B Walter Four Hands) PRAGA

2014 February 16th – Tokyo Kosei Wind Ensemble/Kentaro Kawase (vers for Wind Ensemble) LAWO

2018 August 11th – 14th – Ensemble Omnia Hong Kong/Wilson NG (chamber vers. A Riderelli) ARMS

As usual with a work as well-known and as popular as Mahler's First Symphony, there are always different arrangements, including one for chamber orchestra by Klaus Simon which has the work performed by 13 players, one each of strings and woodwind, two horns, one trumpet, timpanist and accordion. I don't think this has been recorded as yet, but it's probably only one for the super-curious. There are also similar arrangements for slightly bigger ensembles of 20 players, by Iain Farrington, as well as another by Andrea Riderelli, which has been recorded – the avoidance of an accordion is merciful, but replacing it with a piano didn't convince me personally, although I'm sure there are many who disagree.

Slightly more conventional is another for wind instruments which is, well, different – and slightly misleading, since there are harps, cellos and double-basses in this arrangement too, which kind of spoils it all for those wondering how the third movement's double-bass solo would be adapted (it isn't, in case you are wondering). Certainly, the dreamy opening loses some of its atmosphere when instead of soft strings the listener is presented with sustained woodwinds, before the opening cello melody is taken by tenor horns. There is a (live) recording of this with the Tokyo Kosei Wind Ensemble which almost persuades, under the able leadership of Kentaro Kawase on the LAWO label, but again, I'd say it's one only for the curious. There are also transcriptions for solo piano, as well as a surprisingly effective one for piano duo by Bruno Walter which is very enjoyable (and has been recorded a number of times, including by Zdeňka Kolářová & Martin Hršel, aka The Prague Piano Duo, for Praga which is, in my opinion, rather good).

Of significantly greater note, perhaps, is a remarkable realisation made by the pianist Chitose Okashiro, who strives to recreate the spirit of the score on a piano, rather than merely transcribe the score by rote in a recording that was most enthusiastically reviewed by my colleague Paul Serotsky on MWI (see [review](#)) who summed it up as “...an interesting idea - transcribing from orchestra to piano in order to improve the impact of the music's message.”

Allied to Ms Okashiro's formidable technique, is a fine intuitive understanding of Mahler's idiom, which combined produce highly convincing, thought-provoking, as well as hugely enjoyable, results. All you need to do is listen to the way Ms Okashiro opens the piece – none of the 56 bars of tremolando A of Bruno Walter's more literal transcription – to realise that if Mahler had written the piece for piano instead of orchestra, then this is what it might have sounded like. Indeed, this is one of those recordings I probably would never have bothered to listen to were it not for this survey, but I am very glad that I have been given that opportunity and as a result it now comes with my pretty strong recommendation.

The Hans Rott Controversy

I make no apologies for including a short section on another composer in this survey, but Hans Rott (1858-1884) was both a friend and one-time student room-mate to Mahler and as a result, his influence on the latter deserves more than a mention. His music, like Mahler's, was received with much misunderstanding (Brahms told him he had “no talent whatsoever”, probably in reference to his Brucknerian influences) and this rejection, along with many others, eventually caused mental illness and depression leading to his death at only 25 old. Mahler (as well as Bruckner) attended his funeral and wrote of his friend that he was “the Founder of the New Symphony as I see it”. Indeed he might have been, since Rott's one Symphony in E, written when he was 19, lay undiscovered and unperformed until the late 1980's, when commentators then noted the remarkable similarities between its third movement and the second movement of Mahler's First Symphony written after it - and if you listen carefully, you can also 'hear' pre-echoes of the third movement of the Resurrection Symphony....

Now, clearly Mahler is, and matured into being, one of the greatest of all composers, so maybe we shouldn't make too much of him 'borrowing uncredited' from the work of his late friend whose music he probably quite reasonably thought would never see the light of day, but I'll leave that for you to decide. To my ears, in this symphony Hans Rott sounds like a kind of Brahmsian-Bruckner hybrid with a generous hint of Wagner and anyone who enjoys the symphonies of Mahler will find much that will both delight and enthuse them here, in addition to the obvious sections Mahler 'borrowed'. Yes, it is a student work and yes, it has longueurs as a result – but the opening of the whole piece is quite stunning and the finale is almost up to the same standard. In my opinion, the best recording by far is one taped by Paavo Jarvi and the Frankfurt Radio SO on RCA – which, ironically, seems to play down the Mahlerian similarities, whereas others seem only too keen to play them up. Either way, I hope by including Hans Rott in this survey that somehow a little bit of justice may have been done here, so do add the above recording to your Amazon Wishlist without delay.

A brief history of its composition & versions

Whatever we may think of the tragic fate of Hans Rott and Mahler's 'borrowings' from him, Mahler also wasn't adverse to 'borrowing' from himself for his First Symphony either, with much taken from his early song cycle *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer), three of the four songs in fact, quoted quite extensively in the first three movements. He also was certainly made of much sterner stuff than Rott, to the extent one can only wonder at his persistence despite all the rejection and ridicule his music received. His own First Symphony was first performed in 1889 in Budapest, with five movements instead of four and subtitled “A Symphonic Poem in Two Parts, in the Form of a Symphony” – it was an unmitigated disaster with, ironically, only the "*Blumine*" movement attracting

any praise. Not discouraged, Mahler revised the orchestration and added the title "Titan – a Poem in Symphonic Form", plus a loose programme to help the audience understand the work better, basing it upon the novel of the same name by the author Jean Paul (Johann Paul Friedrich Richter). In Mahler's scheme, Part I carried the overall title 'From days of youth, flower-, fruit- and thorn-pieces'. Within Part I there were three movements, as follows:

- I. 'Spring that never ends' (*Einleitung und Allegro comodo*)
- II. 'Flowers' (*Andante*)
- III. 'Full sail ahead' (*Scherzo*)

Part II had the overall title 'Human Comedy' and consisted of two movements:

- IV. "Failed!" (*A Funeral march in 'Callot's Manner'*)
- V. 'From Hell' (*Allegro furioso*)

This version was premiered in 1893 at Hamburg, once again without success. The following year, Mahler tried again in Weimar with further amendments to the score, including now quadruple woodwinds and three extra horns, plus the *Blumine* movement section folded over, which *may* (the evidence is not conclusive) mean the intention was not to include it. There is also evidence to suggest an intention to scrap the name and movement titles, although if so, the instructions to do so were received too late with the concert programmes having already gone to press. Once again, it was a flop and so once more it was revised, with the *Blumine* movement cut, the programme notes and title discarded, as well as the orchestration substantially revised and expanded, especially in the final movement – and this score was first presented in 1896, as Symphony No 1. Unfortunately, this edition remains in private hands and it is believed that additional minor amendments followed (although clearly they cannot be substantiated) until the 1899 publication of the full score in Vienna which is, by and large, what we hear today. According to an interview given by Charles Mackerras to Michael McManus in *Gramophone* in 2010: "This symphony was the one to which Mahler attached the greatest importance – he conducted more performances himself of this than he did of any of his other, later works.",

I have included a section for recordings of the "original" *Titan* version following this one and separate from the main Comparative Review below, which I think is sensible as it is essentially a different, if inferior, work. Occasionally, *Blumine* has performed its own 'Resurrection', cropping up either as an 'appendix' on some conductor's recordings of the standard score or even, curiously, reinstated as the second movement in concert of the standard four movement work too*. Zubin Mehta, for example, performs this five movement hybrid these days. I shall not pass comment on the merits of this, but will mention it in a review if the conductor has included *Blumine* in their performance for your reference.

(* There is some historical debate as to whether Mahler wanted the *Blumine* movement placed second or third in the symphony. The discovery of part of the original (five movement) 1889 score intriguingly has the Ländler-Scherzo numbered, in Mahler's handwriting as '2' [movement]; *Blumine* is missing. Moreover, Mahler apparently told his confidante Natalie Bauer-Lechner in 1900 that *after* the scherzo in the First Symphony there was a sentimentally indulgent movement, the love episode – which Mahler jokingly called the 'youthful folly' of his hero. Later he removed it ... [See: *Paul Banks, Crees Lecture March 2008, Royal College of Music*]. Personally, I feel that *Blumine* may work very well coming in between the Ländler and Huntsman's Funeral).

Maybe I am putting my neck on the line here, but it's my understanding '*Titan*' refers to the five movement work, whereas the standard version is merely Symphony No 1. Again, there seems to be some debate around this and indeed, record companies and concert promoters are very keen on

nicknames so don't help the situation, but at the end of the day a great performance is just that, whether it is 'Symphony No 1 – The Titan', or not. However, for this article, I shall only be using the nickname when discussing the earlier versions of the score.

As far as the 'standard' Symphony No 1 is concerned, performances generally last from around 47 to 60 minutes, depending upon the conductor's fondness of the accelerator pedal and their insistence upon repeats, the main one being a small exposition repeat in the first movement where the '*Ging heut' Morgen übers Feld*' section is taken again. Broadly most conductors observe this, less so in the concert hall than in the studio and I only mention it below if I feel it has a bearing on how I am describing the performance. Some conductors even make cuts – I'll save the whodunnits for the main text, but the ones that do and where (no, they're not in the same places either) are identified.

There are also a couple of interpretive anomalies which need to be highlighted for your reference. One of the most important of these occurs earlier on in the first movement where, shortly after the *Ging heut' Morgen über's Feld* theme has started with the cellos, there is a short phrase for both principal flute and oboe (bars 98-99) which is marked *expressivo* in the score and, unsurprisingly, means "expressively". Some conductors take this to mean an indication to linger on the phrase, even if Mahler's copious markings does not indicate any specific slowing down (you can hear and see it for yourself here at 4m28s: [YOUTUBE](#)). In the survey, it is with Leonard Bernstein's first recording of the piece in 1966 that we encounter this for the first time and it is interesting to note that in his subsequent recordings he became much more subtle about it. This is the opposite to Rafael Kubelik, who gives only the gentlest hint of a slowing in his second studio recording with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra the following year, but is far more emphatic with it thereafter. Other conductors who observe this include Kegel, Abbado, Segerstam and Nézet-Séguin, amongst others although (somewhat to my surprise), not Simon Rattle. Personally, I don't like it, as I feel it disrupts the flow of the music, but I will always mention it in the review if a conductor observes it. In the main text, it only influenced my grading of a recording on one occasion.

The other anomaly is less contentious and concerns the final two chords of the whole work. In the score it is marked that the first chord is to be played by the whole orchestra and the second again with the whole orchestra, but *without* percussion. Most conductors ignore this and have the second played again by the whole orchestra. Others, however, like Simon Rattle, compromise and opt to use only the timpani and not the bass drum on the second chord, and some even observe what Mahler wrote in the score. A few even slow the tempo down to give them even more emphasis than perhaps it needs. As a rule of thumb, I don't mention this with every recording, but have done if the conductor does something which doesn't work (such as Vaclav Neumann), but it is something which any listener of the work needs to be aware of.

Slightly more problematic is how the latest edition of the score from the International Gustav Mahler Society in Vienna, now indicates that the double bass solo in the third movement is a misprint and so should be played by the entire bass section. Personally, this strikes me as rather strange – you would have thought that this symphony, conducted more often by Mahler than any of his other works and many times by his protégés, Bruno Walter - of which there are two studio recordings plus other live relays - and Willem Mengelberg, probably in the presence of some of the other conductors in this survey, such as Paul van Kempen, and the Concertgebouw Orchestra, that somebody, somewhere, would have realised the error before the advent of the twenty first century. That said, I'm sure the good folks in Vienna know what they are doing, even if for the life of me I don't understand the 'why'. You can hear and judge for yourself the merits of their decision in several recordings after 2008 and for your reference thereafter in the main narrative I will mention if the performance uses either a soloist or whole section.

'TITAN – A POEM IN SYMPHONIC FORM' COMPARATIVE review

1970 3-14th September – New Philharmonia Orch/Wyn Morris ** (Stereo Studio – PYE)

1989 20th October – Tokyo Metropolitan SO/Hiroshi Wakasugi (Digital Live – Fontec)

1997 24-28th November - Norrköping Symphony Orchestra/ Ole Kristian Ruud, (Digital Studio – Simax)

2004 13-16th September - Pannon Philharmonic Orchestra/ Zolt Hamar (Digital Studio – Hungaroton)

2005 11-12th April – Hagen PO/Anthony Hermus (Digital Live – Acousense Classics)

2009 27-29th May – Netherlands SO/Jan Willem de Vriend ** (Digital Live – Challenge)

2013/2014 – NDR Sinfonieorchester/Thomas Hengelbrock (Digital Studio – Sony)

2018 February – Les Siecles/Francois-Xavier Roth (Digital Studio – Harmonia Mundi)

This proved to be a much more difficult section to write than I had imagined, mainly because there is no 'definitive' *Titan* score and because editors and record sleeve designers are a little too keen with hyperbole. In short, not all of the recordings above are of the same music, which makes comparisons either complex or meaningless, so permit me to explain (and to give thanks to my colleague, John Fowler, for his invaluable help here).

As discussed above, there are four different scores, namely: that of 1889 (Budapest), 1893 (Hamburg), 1894 (Weimar) and 1896/1906 (the standard version).

Of the original 1889 premiere in Budapest, all the original parts now exist, except for *Blumine* and the *Huntsman's Funeral*. By and large, it is very similar to the Hamburg version, except the final 12 minutes of the last movement, which is noticeably different in harmonics and orchestration. To date, this has never been recorded, although it has been performed in concert.

The 1893 'Hamburg' score is the one that appears on most of the covers of the recordings, but in fact, only three of the above recordings use this edition entirely, namely Ole Kristian Ruud on Simax, Zolt Hamar on Hungaroton and Jan Willem de Vriend on Challenge.

The 1894 'Weimar' score has remained unpublished and is in a private collection, so no recording can claim to be of this edition, even if one (almost) does.

The 1896 score is also unpublished and is in a private collection

The remainder then – Morris, Wakasugi, Hengelberg and Roth are 'compilations' of all four scores, whatever their covers may claim.

So, everything clear so far?! The following is a list of differences between the Mahler First Symphony you grew up with and the original version which may, or may not be, incorporated into one of the above recordings:

- 1) There is a fifth movement – *Blumine*;
- 2) The orchestra is smaller, only double-woodwind for example;
- 3) The orchestration is less plush, more Brucknerian, less Mahlerian if you will;
- 4) At the opening there is no three-fold division of cellos and basses;
- 5) The opening fanfares are differently scored;
- 6) There is no exposition repeat in the first movement (some conductors ignore this even in the revised score);
- 7) The second movement is shorter and the opening is differently scored with timpani underpinning the cellos and basses;
- 8) A solo cello is used instead of a solo double-bass for the *Huntsman's Funeral*;
- 9) The final movement is shorter, mainly due to the omission of several transitional passages.

Of all the above recordings, we can eliminate Anthony Hermus on Acousense almost immediately, who is derailed by an acoustic with far too much echo and reverberation, as well as a recording unable to cope with it. The whole point of listening to the *Titan* version is to be able to hear the differences between it and the standard edition of the work, yet it is difficult to discern which version is being used, such is the sound here.

Of the remainder, the waters now get very muddy indeed, largely due to musical politics, the unavailability of certain scores and the craziness of CD sleeve designers.

For those of you who enjoy these kinds of things, the 1893 'Hamburg' score is available to view online, complete with Mahler's own amendments – and this is critical at this point, for it reveals point 7 above. In the final revision, at the reprise of the Ländler music at the end of the second movement Mahler does actually employ the timpani to reinforce the bass line and it was a wise move to save such an effect for the end, rather than playing his whole hand right at the beginning. Of the 8 versions listed above, only de Vriend, Hamar and Ruud observe the timpani being played from bar 1 of this movement – although having said that, you do need to listen carefully on Ole Kristian Ruud's recording to detect this, so apologetic is his timpanist both at this point and elsewhere, a significant negative against his recording. Zolt Hamar is marginally better, but at this point we encounter the machinations of crazy CD sleeve designers. At first glance Hamar's cover is rather striking, a huge white obelisk stretching from a calm blue sea to the skies, its top hidden by dark swirling thunder clouds and lightning, with a huge white staircase wrapped around it – a nod to Titan's journey, from the calm seas of the underworld, to the stormy heavens? Quite mysterious, you may think, as you would about the words "Gustav Mahler: Titan - Weimar Version 1893" – what were Hungaroton thinking? The performance – of the 1893 *Hamburg* score, not the 1894 Weimar one (!) – isn't bad at all and the sound is very good, too, but I think Jan Willem de Vriend's recording on Challenge Classics is marginally better. His timpanist makes his presence very much felt from the first bar in the Ländler music (perhaps anticipating the opening of the third movement in *The Resurrection Symphony*), as well as elsewhere and this is a performance which is very good when the music is propelling itself forward in a blaze of glory, less so in the more introspective and poetic moments. However, in spite of these caveats, overall, de Vriend's recording is probably the closest to what audiences actually heard in Hamburg in 1893 (as well as probably in Weimar the following year) and on that basis alone, gets my endorsement.

However, I do not wish merely to dismiss the other four recordings at this point, not least since they are probably better *performances* than the ones discussed already and ultimately, as we all listen for pleasure, this is an important consideration.

You may have thought at the outset that the most recent recording by Francois-Xavier Roth, which proudly boasts the use of 'original instruments', would have been the most historically informed of all; however, there are many doubts before even a note has been played. Once more, we encounter the craziness of sleeve designers. Now, you might think I am making a big deal about this (and maybe I am), but I believe most people do not have either the time, nor the inclination, to delve into this subject as deeply as I have, so the only thing they have to guide them would be what is written on the front cover of the recording, hence my vexation when I feel this is misleading. So on Roth's Harmonia Mundi recording, we have the cover of the painting *Le Colosse* (1808) by Francisco de Goya, an allegorical work, where the 'Titan' in the picture was supposed to be representative of the Spanish people's resistance to Napoleon – not Mahler's Titan, who is the titular hero of Jean Paul's novel of the same name, describing the tale of the fictional Albano de Cesara from callow youth to ruler of his principality. In my opinion, it's a curious choice for a release purporting to be of historical accuracy. Furthermore, the cover also claims that the recording is of the 1893 Hamburg/1894 Weimar version, which is

unfortunate, since Mahler would not have ever conducted such a version (it would have been either one or the other). Actually, the score being used (as with Hengelbrock below), is that of The New Critical Edition of the International Mahler Society which could indeed be a Hamburg- Weimar hybrid, in which case they have made the curious decision to ignore some of Mahler's scoring, but the fact remains that Mahler conducted one version in Hamburg and another version in Weimar, never a combination of the two. That aside, this is all a pity, for it appears that conductor and orchestra have otherwise gone to great lengths to source genuine German instruments from around the end of the nineteenth century for their recording - although you would be hard-pressed to tell this, oboes apart. More obvious - and perhaps more contentious - is the minimum vibrato applied by the strings, the logic of which seems a little dubious to me. When we have recorded evidence of Beethoven being performed with vibrato in 1913 (the Berlin Philharmonic under Arthur Nikisch), why would a work written some 80 years later with its full score published by the composer some dozen years prior to this Berlin recording, be expected to be performed without vibrato ? Indeed, in Oskar Fried's account of the Eroica in 1920, even twentieth first century listeners may be surprised at how much rubato is employed in the second movement's Funeral March. So Roth's decision is not an argument that convinces me, although his employment of portamento does earn my respect, for this (as the 1913 Berlin Beethoven recording again provides the evidence) probably would have been employed at the time, whereas nowadays it is a little more discreet. As always with this approach, the orchestra sounds smaller than usual (just compare Roth's finale with Wyn Morris's all-guns-blazin' New Philharmonia to hear what I mean), but I suppose there may be some for whom this approach is just what they want/need and to be fair, there is a tremendous conviction and commitment throughout this performance which deserves recognition and respect.

Thomas Hengelbrock has the poetry in his recording of the Hamburg premiere with the NDR Sinfonieorchester of Hamburg, of whom he is the current principal conductor. Like Roth, he uses The New Critical Edition of the International Mahler Society, but his interpretation is less convincing - the three middle movements in particular are very swift and the opening of the final one rather mannered in its phrasing. Similarly, I occasionally felt that the strings were rather backwardly balanced in the sound picture and wondered if Hengelbrock's previous involvement with historically informed ensembles could have been the reason behind this. On more positive notes, Sony provides him with excellent sound and the whole thing is brought home to a rousing conclusion, but this one didn't convince me overall.

Like Roth, Hiroshi Wakasugi has also previously recorded the standard First Symphony (with the Dresden Staatskapelle in 1986). His live remake with the Tokyo Metropolitan Orchestra of the earlier Titan score, enjoys very good sound and a fascination with highlighting the *strangeness* of this new music, before Mahler's later reorchestration added a glossier veneer to the proceedings. Pacing is ideal, plus there is much excitement and as a *performance*, this is certainly one of the best in this group.

Wyn Morris on PYE has the oldest recording and, it has to be said, it sounds like it when compared to all the others. However, his *Blumine* lasts over 8 minutes (most performances breeze through it in around 6 minutes) and is infused with a dream-like rapture that few others have come close to matching, let alone surpassing (even if Kazuo Yamada in 1989 deserves an honourable mention for stretching it out to an impressive - and hypnotic - 10 minutes). The remainder of the performance is also very fine, perhaps making the case for the best performance of the work, rather than attempting to show up its differences from the standard edition.

My conclusions are therefore, by necessity, ruthlessly straightforward – de Vriend is the must-hear, as his is the recording which is probably the best of those closest to what audiences heard at Hamburg in 1893. Wyn Morris's *Blumine* is the best in this survey and so deserves to be nominated to the winners' podium too. Of the others, Wakasugi and Roth deserve honourable mentions.

A HISTORY & COMPARATIVE reviewS OF MAHLER'S FIRST SYMPHONY ON RECORD

1939

The first recording that I know about of the First Symphony is from a live performance under the baton of Bruno Walter, the first of some eight available live and studio accounts from him (ed. – there is also a further one with the BBC SO that I have not included because of its rarity). The sound in 1939 obviously needs some tolerance, but the performance is something else

Bruno Walter

According to MahlerFoundation.org's website, there are some eight extant recordings of Bruno Walter conducting this work, from the earliest in 1939 live with the NBC SO, to the last in 1961 with the Columbia SO, the second of two in the studio. Broadly speaking, these eight recordings can be divided into three distinct groups of interpretations, which I have tried to demonstrate below. Common to all is a rather grand and stately finale and an incomparably melting treatment of the second subject of the third movement, when the music recalls the sleeping under the linden tree of the *Wayfarer* Cycle. Whichever approach Walter takes, they all are hugely convincing and he is, in my opinion, without a shadow of a doubt one of the greatest interpreters of this work, leading me to think you may need (at least) three recordings of this symphony with this conductor alone !

1939 Apl NBC SO (Live Mono - Grammofono) ** [review](#)

Listeners coming to this earliest recording for the first time only familiar with Walter's last, will be amazed at the fire and volatility of the younger Walter, on this occasion live with Toscanini's crack NBC SO. Somewhat predictably, the dreamy haze that opens the whole work is slightly compromised by the snap, crackle 'n pop of the vintage sound, but once it gets going the ears adjust and it's more than listenable. The timing of this performance, at just over 47 minutes, marks it out as one of the fastest of all, but that doesn't tell the whole story, since Walter skips the exposition repeats of the first and second movements and there are some pitching problems in the recording too which inevitably will affect the overall timing. What may surprise some listeners is just how volatile it all is – the close of the second movement is a virtuoso sprint to the finishing line and the opening of the last movement is the wildest of anyone's, the orchestra revelling in their corporate virtuosity in music which may not have been familiar, but clearly excites them – you even get some enthusiastic audience clapping at the end of the first movement, such is the involvement of all in the concert hall that night. And yet, when Walter relaxes into the quiet and dreamy movements of the score, he really does relax, which contrasts massively with the exhilaration felt by all when he puts pedal to metal elsewhere and takes off. It's all a hugely compelling, almost unique, vision of the score, perhaps a bit too wilful by today's standards, but thrilling nonetheless - which leads me to speculate that since this is the oldest recording available * (*according to my research), by an associate of the composer, is this the closest we have to an authentic Mahler First ? 9/10

After this, there are several other live performances captured on disc:

1942 25 Oct New York Philharmonic Symphony Orch (Live Mono - Tahra) [review](#)

1947 16 Oct Concertgebouw Orch (Live Mono - Tahra)

1947 6 Nov London PO (Live - Mono Testament)

1950 2 Oct Bavarian State Opera Orch (Live – Mono Orfeo)

1954 24 Jan New York PO (Live Mono -Urania)

On all these recordings, the interpretation has settled down somewhat, all are still exciting but have less extreme tempos than with the NBC performance. The sound veers between the unlistenable with the London PO on Testament, to the more than acceptable with the Bavarian State Orchestra on Orfeo, which is unfortunate in the restless audience and audibly tiring brass section in the finale. This middle style interpretation is probably best captured in the studio recording in 1954, although the 1942 New York Philharmonic Symphony live performance runs it close, albeit not in such good sound, even if the extra intensity of a live occasion is more evident.

1954 January New York PO (Studio Mono -CBS/Sony) **

The clear, bright mono sound and very fine playing of the New York orchestra are the really distinguishing features of this recording – as is Walter's marvellous interpretation. As ever, the two middle movements are full of character and colour and if the whole thing lacks the honeyed warmth of Walter's later studio recording from Los Angeles, it is compensated for by a tautness of interpretation and this orchestra's power-house brass section in blazing form throughout and, in particular carrying all before them in the coda of the final movement. The difference between this reading and the earlier NBC one, is that everything seems more integrated with less extremes of tempo. Yes, maybe it does marginally lack the electricity of the 1942 performance, also in New York, but it's a great reading by anybody's standard. 9/10

Jan/Feb 1961 Columbia SO (Studio Stereo - CBS/Sony) **

I feel somewhat conflicted by including a "modern" stereo recording so early in an historical narrative, but that said, the warm and superbly balanced stereo sound afforded to Walter here really does his performance justice and is more than acceptable to modern ears. As a performance, this is Walter's 'third way' where I really feel it takes its cue from that special passage in the third movement which quotes from the fourth song from the Wayfarer Cycle, "*Die zwei blauen Augen*", when the conductor tenderly takes the music and rocks it gently and with huge affection, somewhat in the manner of a mother cradling her infant. It's as if the whole symphony is suffused with that love and warmth, which puts me in mind of the magical world of Humperdinck's *Hansel und Gretel*. For sure, the darkness is still there (as with the witch in the gingerbread house), likewise the grandeur, but it is all couched in a kind of homespun affection. Time and time again, phrasing and colourings emerge, naturally and it is without the micro-management of more modern maestros, in a manner that I have not heard elsewhere, as befitting a lifetime of conducting this music, leading you to conclude that this is the only way the work can be performed. Perhaps these details were always there with this conductor, but on this occasion the more modern sounding recording allows the listener to hear them more clearly than before. The only thing missing is a certain fire in the belly of this performance, which may put off some listeners, as it did my younger self when I first encountered this recording, having been thrilled by the fireworks set off by other conductors in this music, or indeed if you have in your mind's ear the magnificent New York PO brass from the studio recording a few years before, sweeping all before them. Still, this is special, unique - a must-have recording of Mahler's First. 9/10

1940

1940 sees the first of Mitropoulos's three available performances, the first of which was the premiere studio recording. All of Mitropoulos's recordings are different and very distinguished

Dimitri Mitropoulos

1940 Nov Minneapolis SO (Studio Mono - CBS/Sony)

This is an important document insofar that it is the only studio recording made by this conductor of a Mahler symphony, as well as being the first one of this work. With a running time of less than 48 minutes indicating a swift reading, as well as this conductor's incendiary reputation, you may be somewhat surprised at the long-drawn out opening, not least since the tempo relaxes even more when the horns make their first entrance. However, as the music livens up, so does the conductor's tempos – the second movement is perhaps more volatile than we are used to today and the third movement's central section is dispatched without any of Walter's loving warmth. Common to both conductors at this time is the explosive opening of the last movement, although the musicians of the Minneapolis Symphony in the studio are no match for Walter's NBC counterparts in the concert hall and the timpanists get lost in the opening salvos. That said the coda of the whole symphony is white hot, swifter than Bruno Walter but not manically fast – interestingly, there is a slight broadening of the tempo at the point the horns are indicated in the score to stand – obviously we the listener will never know if they did actually stand up or not, but Mitropoulos emphasises the importance of the moment quite neatly, I thought. Obviously the 1940 sonics aren't the greatest - a little boomy in fact, but I've heard worse. 8/10

1951 Oct 21st – New York PO – (Live Mono -IDIS).

The sound on this radio relay some 10 years later isn't better than the studio version above, nor is the orchestral playing much better either (surprisingly, given the results Walter obtained from the same band in his various accounts mentioned above); the orchestra gets completely lost for several pages during the opening bird calls. The interpretation is very similar to the Minneapolis studio account, save for a broader, slightly more considered opening to the final movement. Overall, this one is not worth considering. 6/10

1960 Jan 9th – New York PO (Live Mono - Hunt) [review](#)

Recorded at a Mahler Festival in 1960, where most (but not all) of Mahler's symphonies were performed, with duties shared between Mitropoulos, Walter and Bernstein, this is probably the best recorded and played of the three versions. It is interesting to note how the interpretation has changed down the years, most noticeably being some four minutes slower than the first in Minneapolis, most of which is due to a more moderately paced final movement where volatility has been replaced by grandeur. So the horn section mentioned above in the coda is more integrated than it was before, but perhaps, I feel at the expense of a certain fire and excitement. 7/10

This leads me to conclude that none of these three Mitropoulos versions is ideal, but if I were to choose one alone as representative of this conductor it would be the first, complete with tubby sound and some scrappy orchestral playing, but compensated for by a certain questing freshness of approach and excitement that is hard to match.

1949

After a decade dominated by Walter and Mitropoulos, a hugely impressive radio recording by a little-known conductor

Ernest Borsamsky

*1949 March – Berlin RSO (Studio Mono - LYS) ***

Ah, the things I do for my art – as well as for you, fair reader. “Ernest who?”, I hear you cry, “Who?!”. Who indeed, the identity of this conductor prompting some intense debate down the years, not least since Dante-Lys released a two-CD set of “L’Art d’Ernest Borsamsky” containing 1947-49 broadcasts with Berlin and Leipzig radio orchestras of Mahler's First and Shostakovich's Fifth Symphonies,

Stravinsky's Firebird Suite, as well as Debussy's La Mer (Lys 429-430). In spite of poor sound in the Shostakovich, the remainder are in very decent mono and fine performances ("beautifully conceived, full-blooded and soulful, spontaneously flowing between subtle mysticism and surging power. The Mahler is especially magnificent..." opined one review). Such is their excellence, that some have thought them to be a hoax, or the conductor to have been working under a pseudonym (Hermann Abendroth and Ferenc Fricsay, are two suggested names), but further investigation has revealed some clues – specifically that the leader of the Luxembourg Philharmonic Orchestra during the 1940's was one Ern(e)st Eichel, a Polish violinist born in Sambor (Galicia), who had studied in Vienna and Cologne and tried after the war to make a career as a conductor. For that purpose Eichel chose the 'nom de plume' of Ernest Borsamsky, created by inverting the syllables of his birth town (Sambor) and adding a Polish "sky," under which he was invited by Hermann Abendroth to conduct his Leipzig RSO, where his skills were apparently soon noticed and resulted in an engagement with the Berlin Philharmonic in 1949. His name can be traced last in 1956 when he conducted the Dresden Philharmonic, but thereafter

Of course, all this would mean nothing had he not had something important to say about Mahler's First Symphony – and I know you must be wondering if I'm about to tell you of a great undiscovered talent as well as a Mahler First of rare distinction. Well, not quite. First off, the sound is very good indeed for its 1940's vintage, if, of course, it naturally lacks the bloom and air of later stereo recordings. The playing of the Berlin Radio SO is also more than decent, if not flawless, and occasionally there is some poor tuning, which may affect some more than others, but in the context of other more illustrious ensembles around this time, it is much better than expected (just compare them to the New York PO under Mitropoulos, or the Royal PO with Scherchen in 1954 below). As for the interpretation, it is rather fine too - at a shade over 50 minutes, it is on the swift side, but never feels it and certainly is not as volatile as the earlier Walter and Mitropoulos. There are one of two slightly jolting gear changes in the first movement, mainly due to the conductor going to great lengths to convey mystery and create tremendous atmosphere for his bird calls, but mostly everything is very well judged. The final movement is perhaps noticeably faster than usual, the opening not as cataclysmic as some, the central reflective sections flowing but always passionate, with the coda more intent on excitement rather than grandeur. It all adds up to a rather impressive experience – I daresay if you encountered this in the concert hall today, you'd count yourself extremely fortunate. Indeed, I sent blind copies of this to three well-informed friends to seek out their opinions, all of which were positive and one, who is also a well-respected contributor to MusicWeb, actually 'guessed' that it may have been Bruno Walter with the New York PO. Of course, it wasn't – but that is quite some compliment. To conclude, this recording by Ernest Borsamsky is by no means overshadowed by anyone in this survey – and that is a huge surprise, all things considered. 8/10

1950

Two recordings, both of live performances, were set down in 1950, both from Germany – one featuring Bruno Walter in Bavaria (see above, 1939), plus this one with Joseph Keilberth. Most readers will know of Keilberth for that astonishing Ring Cycle on Testament, but he was also a keen Mahlerian and there exists a live recording of him conducting the massive Eighth Symphony as well

Joseph Keilberth

1950 4th February – Dresden Staatskapelle ** (Live Mono – Tahra)

Like the symphony itself, this performance also sounds as if it was waking up from a deep slumber – the background hiss during the opening pages is disconcerting, but soon disappears while the first opening woodwind chord isn't together either and the trumpet fanfares are anything but *"In sehr*

weiter Entfernung aufgestellt" (At a very far distance), as marked in the score. However, as the Mahlerian sun rises, so too does the orchestra warm up and the odd split notes from horns and trumpets recede into memory, as the performance takes wing. Herbert von Karajan once said that the sound of the Dresden Staatskapelle shone like old gold and you can certainly hear what he means with this performance, even from a 1950 radio relay, which glows with a certain genial joy at discovering what must have been fairly new music to these players. At around 52 minutes, this is a reading on the swift side, but never feels it. Keilberth reveals himself to be a quite fine Mahler conductor and paces the work to perfection. Ensemble isn't always flawless, although still pretty impressive at the opening of the final movement, at which point the performance really catches fire and the remainder of the movement is magnificently despatched by both conductor and players. Had you told before me before the start of this survey just how good this performance would be (or indeed, after the first minute of listening to it), I probably wouldn't have believed you, yet, in spite of the split notes returning occasionally in the white heat of the finale, I do have to say this performance puts a number of more high-profile Mahler conductor efforts from around this time in the shade and is a real wildcard recommendation, even if some allowance needs to be made for the sound and orchestral playing. 8/10

1951

Two live recordings this year, the second of Dimitri Mitropoulos (see 1940), plus the first of a famous conductor little known in Mahler

Antal Dorati

1951 August 31st – Resident Orkest den Haag (Live Mono – Antal Dorati Society) [review](#)

1979 November 19th – Detroit Symphony Orchestra (Live Stereo – Antal Dorati Society)

1982 March 18th – Yomiuri Nippon Orchestra (Live Stereo – YNSO Archives)

It's curious that a conductor with such a large and varied recorded legacy who frequently performed Mahler, should have left no commercial recordings by this composer, but such is the case with Antal Dorati. There are, though, many live recordings available, through the indefatigable work of the Antal Dorati Society, who have indeed issued two of the above live recordings.

It is unfortunate, though, that all the above recordings do not enjoy the best of sonics, even if inevitably any live broadcast from 1951 is hardly going to sound state-of-the-art in the twenty-first century. This is a pity, for Dorati leads a very confident and very competently played performance in 1951 – comparisons between the Hague musicians and the other live recording from the same year under Mitropoulos, do his New Yorkers no favours whatsoever. Indeed, what is remarkable about this early reading is just how well played it actually is – the opening with its trumpet fanfares from afar and wistful horns is very tidily done indeed, even if the usual audience noises (and on this occasion, loud bumps!) accompanies. Broadly speaking, Dorati leads fresh, no-nonsense readings for all three performances, the first movement exposition repeat ignored in 1951, but observed elsewhere, whilst the finale of all three seeks grandeur rather than excitement, which means in comparison with others they all sound a little earthbound. In 1951, the timpani also sound clattery and there are one or two fade-outs which need to be noted. The sound is somewhat better for the March 1982 concert in Japan, but not as much as you may think, it still being very dry and lacking bloom (possibly in part due to the acoustic), whilst the playing of the orchestra isn't flawless either, with sundry split brass notes. Perhaps the pick of the bunch then is the 1979 Detroit Symphony performance, taken as part of the orchestra's first European tour (and therefore not from 1969, as mistakenly printed in the booklet notes), but unfortunately captured in the ungrateful acoustics of the pre-refurbished Royal Festival Hall in London. You would have thought that there may have been a sense of occasion with this performance as a result and while the crowd does cheer at the end, on record at least, it all sounds merely like a very

professional performance. Again, Dorati's rather grand and stately treatment of the final movement doesn't help and it does also sound as if the orchestra needs a little while to 'warm up' too. Nor is the sound wonderful either – the trumpet fanfares at the opening sound strangely like toy ones, as if Dorati (such a fine ballet conductor) has suddenly slipped into the world of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*. To be honest, I was expecting to be a little more enthusiastic about this and whilst I think that the 1951 is a remarkable achievement and possibly the best *performance* of the three, Dorati is probably heard at his best in London, but even that ultimately falls short, such is the competition elsewhere. 6.5/10

1952

1951 saw only live performances; 1952 centres on Vienna and sees one live recording from a long-forgotten, but doughty Mahlerian, plus the first of two studio recordings from Jascha Horenstein

F. Charles Adler

1952 6th March – Vienna Symphony Orchestra (Live Mono – Tahra)

I think F(rederick) Charles Adler more than deserves a bit of an introduction. Born in London to an English-German banking family, he served a number of musical roles in Europe, including being a chorus master at the premiere of Mahler's Eighth Symphony, before emigrating to the United States in 1933 where he settled and married a wealthy heiress. In the early 1950's, he started recording and issuing important and (then) rare works on his own record label SPA (aka The Society of Participating Artists), including Bruckner Masses, Liszt's Dante Symphony, as well as Mahler's Third and Sixth Symphonies. According to the discography on the Mahlerfoundation.org, Adler's 1953 version was the only studio recording of the Sixth until Leinsdorf's for RCA in 1965; incredible really.

Maybe because of Mitropolous's recording from Minneapolis, plus Horenstein's planned one with the same orchestra also in 1952, Adler felt that he did not need to take the First into the studio, so what we have here instead is a live recording, complete with occasional strange balances (especially the harp) plus the usual audience noises, which is otherwise more than listenable. On the whole, Adler leads a most enjoyable performance – the Vienna Symphony is certainly convinced by his leadership and they play reasonably well if perhaps understandably since it is live, not perfectly. Of particular note are the performances here of the middle two movements, Adler finding much humour in the central section of the Second, as well as persuading his solo double bass player to play as simply as possible in the Third. I found the outer movements somewhat less successful, the First in particular, which at times comes dangerously close to being ponderous – this is mainly due to the conductor's slightly cautious (i.e. slow) approach when the music 'heats-up' and would explain the performance's overall timing at over 59 minutes. At the end of the day, this would have been a tremendous achievement at the concert hall in 1952, but for today's listeners I would contend it is no more than an historical document. 6/10

Jascha Horenstein

1952 – Vienna SO (Studio Mono - Vox) [review](#)

1969 – London SO (Studio Stereo - Unicorn) [review](#)

Jascha Horenstein needs little introduction to most Mahler aficionados, having played an important role in the 'Mahler Revolution' in the immediate post-war years in Europe and, in particular, the UK. What is remarkable about the two recordings listed, is how consistent they are, with the third movement taken at just a slightly more flowing tempo in London, than the earlier Vienna recording. That said, it is amazing the difference in the mere seventeen years between the two recordings in terms of recorded sound and orchestral virtuosity, Mahler's First Symphony probably being a repertory piece for the LSO in 1969, whereas it would almost certainly have been "new(ish)" music for the Vienna

Symphony in 1952, that orchestra's brass section audibly tiring in the final movement. There are also some old-fashioned string portamenti employed in 1952 that would never have occurred in the beginning of the 1960's, let alone the end. It is the later recording that is the representative version for this conductor.

There are many who consider Horenstein's LSO recording to be one of the finest of all. It is certainly a distinguished account, noticeably slower than both Walter and Mitropoulos (both of Horenstein's recordings last around 57 minutes) and his reading is notable for being perhaps darker and more melancholic than either the more extrovert Mitropoulos, or the glowing warmth of late Walter. This is noticeable right from the very beginning, the opening measures containing a darker undercurrent than usual, almost sinister. This builds up to the first movement's recapitulation which is very slow and ominous, then contrasting remarkably with the release of trumpet fanfares and horn calls. In the final movement, this pattern is repeated with the central lyrical sections which are considerably more desolate than usual, as if this were Mahler viewed through the prism of the later symphonies, rather than of the exuberant youth. I can imagine that this approach may not appeal to everyone, but it is certainly a valid view and of its kind, it is very good. 8/10

1953

A sole studio recording made in the USA, notable for some astonishing orchestral virtuosity

William Steinberg

1953 February – Pittsburgh SO (Studio Mono EMI)

Before auditioning this recording, I had previously come across Steinberg's Mahler with an absolutely terrific Resurrection Symphony with the Cologne RSO on ICA. At times, the pace could be blistering on that account and indeed, at a few seconds short of 49 minutes, similar qualities inform this First Symphony too, the first movement giddy and headlong in its exuberance. It comes as something of a surprise then how steady the second movement starts, but a marked contrast is certainly made, even if it does speed up for a superbly virtuosic denouement. Indeed, at this conductor's dizzying speeds, the playing of the Pittsburgh Orchestra is something to behold, so kudos to both conductor and orchestra for the opening of the third movement, whose double-bass solo is so deliberately simple and crude, a far cry from the uber-beautiful solos of some modern accounts. The final movement explodes to life like a whirlwind, its lyrical sections swift and passionate, with only the return of first movement material offering a reflective interlude, before the whole thing blazes home. One slight anomaly are the final two chords, taken noticeably slower and with greater emphasis than usual, which doesn't really convince. The sound is slightly 'boxy' and there is a little more portamenti than perhaps you'd expect, but it's all fast 'n furious, very exciting, although perhaps lacking a little in poetry 7/10

1954

If 1953 was a quiet year, 1954 more than makes up for it with the first of Bruno Walter's, Rafael Kubelik's and Paul Kletzki's studio recordings, a live version with the ailing Furtwängler's Berlin Philharmonic, plus a hair-raising one with the 'Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra of London'

Paul Kletzki

1954 Apl/May – Israel PO (Studio Mono – EMI) [review](#)

1961 Jan – Vienna PO (Studio Stereo – EMI)

Kletzki may well be known to many Mahlerians for his very fine account of the same composer's Fourth Symphony, made with the Philharmonia Orchestra for EMI and likewise, his two recordings of the First

Symphony also show a fine Mahler interpreter at work. There's very little difference between his two accounts, the later Vienna version clearly enjoying better sonics perhaps giving it the edge, even if neither ensemble plays as well as Steinberg's Pittsburgh players in 1953. In particular, I liked the dreamy atmosphere evoked by Kletzki in the first movement, the tension slowly being turned up until the climax of the recapitulation, after which it is a giddy ride home. The second movement is similarly spirited and I was especially impressed with the lead up to the coda of the final movement, which he starts off very slowly, cellos and basses very dark and ominous and then affects an unmarked, but hugely effective accelerando into the climax, which erupts exuberantly and all seems set for an exciting ride home to the finishing line. Except for some reason, the conductor decided to then cut 20 consecutive bars (in both recordings) in the coda, starting at the section just before the score instructs the horn section to stand and proudly play their music (from fig. 57 to one bar before fig. 59 in the score). It is a tragic, catastrophic hole beneath the waterline on what otherwise could have been quite a distinctive recording on both occasions. I can only describe it as being a bit like performing Beethoven's Ninth, but leaving out the choral sections. A pity, but both are non-starters as a result. 4/10

Hermann Scherchen

1954, September – Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra of London (Studio Mono – Westminster)

Hermann Scherchen was always a fine, yet unsung, champion of this composer and there are more recordings by him, both live and in studio, conducting Mahler than you may think. All of them are highly individual, engaging and worth a listen – including this slightly dimly recorded and, at times, scrappily played account of the First, the Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra of London reputedly being the Royal Philharmonic in disguise. Not for the first time, the total timing of just over 50 minutes does not prepare the listener for the dreamy awakening of the symphony in this performance, the orchestra seemingly 'sighing' contentedly as birdcalls signal the start of a warm summer's day at an extremely relaxed tempo that imperceptibly goes through the gears to reach a more flowing speed. At the start of the recapitulation, announced by the horns and trumpet calls Scherchen suddenly broadens the pace, the music taking on a darker and more troubled hue until the climax bursts into brilliant sunlight and its pedal to the metal all the way home. The second movement is equally taken at a fair lick, whilst the Third is more sinister than you may usually encounter. The final movement flies out of the blocks with everyone in the orchestra seemingly hanging on for dear life, with only the central lyrical sections giving them respite - it is of course, hugely exciting, but I think overall the poor sound and at times very approximate ensemble probably reduces the attraction of this release for all but the most hardcore Mahler First enthusiasts, who will find much to enjoy and of interest here. 6/10

Rafael Kubelik

1954, 27th June – Vienna PO (Studio Mono – Decca) ** [review](#)

1956, May – Turin Radio SO (Live Mono – Tahra)

1967, 20-23 October – Bavarian RSO (Studio Stereo – DG) **

1975, 16 October – London SO (Live Stereo – Live Supreme)

1979, 2 November – Bavarian RSO (Live Stereo – Audite)

1980 – Bavarian RSO (DVD – Dreamlife)

Kubelik is a famous and noteworthy conductor of Mahler, especially of the First Symphony and in 1954 he set down what was to be his first recording of this work, on that occasion with the Vienna Philharmonic for Decca. What is remarkable about Kubelik is the consistency of all six performances, which all last around 50 minutes, the only difference being perhaps slightly more liberal use of rubato as he got older. Generally, his performances are characterised by a sunny disposition, plus a sense of rightness and naturalness. Personally – and perhaps going against accepted wisdom – my own

favourite is his first in Vienna, which was actually his debut with the orchestra. The playing he elicits from this group of players, not always the most sympathetic to Mahler, is quite extraordinary in terms of just how idiomatic they sound and enthusiastically they respond to their youthful conductor, who celebrated his 40th birthday during the sessions. On the latest issue of this recording, on the Retrospective label, there is a bonus track of the finale, performed by the orchestra as a surprise birthday present for the conductor, probably far too enthusiastic and devil-may-care to make the final cut, but which sums up the happiness of the recording as a whole. True, the sonics will never be as good as the later versions, but Decca in 1954 were still pretty good, even in mono. I recommend this recording very highly: 9.5/10

Strangely enough, the least convincing performance of the above selection is the live concert with the London Symphony in 1975 – this may have been a red-letter day in London concert halls that year, but listening to it now reveals a restless audience and surprisingly scrappy orchestral playing (the horns are not quite at the top of their game); indeed, even the playing of the less illustrious Turin Radio orchestra in 1956, live as well, is better, but both are for Kubelik completists only.

For many years though, the 1967 studio recording on DG was one of the reference recordings of the work and for some, it still is, the one major criticism perhaps being the sound. For those weaned on the (then) sonic spectacular which was the Solti-LSO recording from 1964, Kubelik could have come across as slightly tame, maybe slightly less exciting – but only on a superficial level. In this regard, the later live Audite recording from 1979, with its fuller and richer sound, could be the answer, except Kubelik's reading has also changed slightly. In particular, over the years his use of rubato in this symphony became more liberal and pronounced which may bother some listeners (such as I) more than others. In particular, by 1979 he lingers excessively over those *expressivo* marked bars (98-99 in the score) of the first movement, plus he no longer observes its exposition repeat. Now you could argue that in the context of a live performance, the interpretation would have been a little "freer" than it may have been within the more controlled environment of the recording studio – except the following year there is a film of Kubelik and his Bavarians performing the same piece, again with the *expressivo* rubato as well as skipping the first movement repeat. If none of this is a problem, then undoubtedly the later recording is the one for you, but given the *choice*, I prefer the earlier studio account from Vienna. All three recordings enshrine what was very evident in that first recording, which is a warmth and naturalness in the reading, so similar to late Bruno Walter but still very different and uniquely Rafael Kubelik. The film is interesting as you get to see him conducting the orchestra with whom he was most associated over his career, a very tanned-looking Bavarian Radio Symphony, but in spite of them all being in full concert regalia, there is no audience and it all comes across a little sterile as a consequence. However, for me, I would always want at least one version of Rafael Kubelik conducting this work and for the reasons I have outlined above, I would be choosing the Vienna Philharmonic and then the studio Bavarian Radio readings, the latter to my mind is: 9/10

Hans Rosbaud

1954 8th November - Berlin Philharmonic (Live Mono – Tahra)

1961 13th September - South West German Radio Orchestra, Baden-Baden (Live Mono – Stradivarius)

There are many who consider the Austrian, Hans Rosbaud (1895-1962) to be one of the great unsung heroes of the podium. Part of this may be attributed to the quiet dignity with which he went about his music-making, working assiduously throughout his career with German radio orchestras and keeping his head down and out of trouble during the years of the Third Reich and the war – whilst he may have kept out of trouble, he may also have escaped notice of the wider musical world too. His rise to prominence was sudden and unexpected, taking over with just eight days notice in 1954 the premiere

of Schoenberg's opera *Moses und Aron*, a concert performance from Hamburg which was broadcast throughout Europe to much acclaim. His services were thereafter in much demand internationally, with him leading concert series with the New York Philharmonic, as well as the Concertgebouw and Chicago Symphony Orchestras; he performed Mahler's Ninth Symphony with the latter in a performance still spoken about to this day in Windy City. His manner was quiet and authoritative, so quiet in fact that his instructions had to be relayed to the orchestra by the front desk players, the only people who could actually hear them! There are currently two accounts by him conducting Mahler's First Symphony, both remarkably similar insofar as they last around 52 minutes with no repeats taken, whilst the third movement's *Frère Jacques* round is taken a little faster than usual. Unfortunately, as perhaps befitting someone so good with *Moses und Aron*, Rosbaud takes a rather unsentimental and objective approach to this work, which I'm not sure quite does the music justice – listening to these pair of performances, you can understand why Pierre Boulez was such an admirer and would describe Rosbaud as a 'model' of what a conductor should be: a 'very great conductor' who was 'not specialised', but was 'very involved in contemporary music'. My own view is that his approach results in a slight loss of excitement in the outer movements, while the inner ones lack charm and warmth.

That said, the two performances do offer much that's of historical interest. The Berlin performance, in particular, took place in the same month of Furtwängler's premature death and does not show the orchestra in particularly good form, the brass especially sounding underpowered. Their cause is not helped much by the sound afforded to them by the radio engineers, which is somewhat distant and distorts at climaxes. It is fanciful to wonder what was going through the Berliners' collective mind at this point – their chief, Wilhelm Furtwängler, was once again seriously ill with the pneumonia which he contracted in 1952 and, tragically, the drugs being used to treat him were also making him lose his hearing. The long lyrical interludes in the fourth movement are despatched by them with such genuine heartfelt warmth that one wonders if they were in homage to Furtwängler, who was dead three weeks later, especially since the same passages in the later performance are far more dry-eyed. However, it is the later performance from Baden-Baden, in better sound and better played, that is the pick of the two if you want an especially objective and dry-eyed approach to the score and are keen to explore Rosbaud's legacy in Mahler - but it is not for me. 5/10

1955

One live recording this year from the almost-forgotten Paul van Kempen in Turin, less than 6 months before his untimely death ...

Paul van Kempen

1955 20th May – Turin Radio SO (Live Mono – Tahra) [review](#)

I think the career and subsequent legacy of Paul van Kempen has been considerably impacted by his decision to remain in Germany during the Second World War. Born in the Netherlands, he took German citizenship in 1932 after several years of working in that country, believing it would help transition his career from orchestral violinist to conductor and continued working there during the Third Reich often, apparently, conducting concerts for the Wehrmacht too. When the war finished, he was never able to quite shake off the whiff of having been a 'collaborator', particularly in the Netherlands, even though he was never a member of the Nazi Party and was cleared of any wrong-doing by the post-war tribunals. He died in Amsterdam comparatively young at 62, like Erich Kleiber who also died the month after at virtually the same age, both unwitting casualties of the terrible events that gripped Europe during the 1930's and 1940's, embittered, misunderstood and unfulfilled.

Leaving that all to one side, he was from all accounts a very good conductor in an era of considerable podium excellence. You only have to listen to the handful of Beethoven Symphonies he set down with

the Berlin Philharmonic for Philips, in particular, a quite electrifying (if slightly wilful) Eroica, to realise that he certainly knew his craft. Added to that is the knowledge that van Kempen started his career as a violinist in Mengelberg's Concertgebouw Orchestra, making his Mahlerian pedigree would have been pretty strong, so this is actually a more important release than you might expect. In many respects, such expectations are fulfilled.

First, he gets very fine playing from the Turin Radio orchestra (as did Kubelik the year before). Occasionally in the heat of the moment, such as at the climax of the recapitulation of the first movement, or the lead up to the finale in the final movement, ensemble sounds a little blurred and the horns don't attempt their trills at the end of the first movement either, but that aside I have no complaints. To be fair, the music is pretty wild at those moments, too, and the sound - of an otherwise very decent, mid-1950's radio broadcast - is perhaps a little congested at those points as well. However, it is the interpretation that is of interest, especially with van Kempen's Mahlerian lineage. At 54 minutes, it is a middle-of-the-road reading time-wise and the conducting is notable for not accelerating into the climaxes as was the wont of many of his colleagues at this time where, instead, he holds the pulse steady. I really liked the way he opened the symphony, the sifting colours of Mahler's orchestra are marvellously delineated, even when allowing for the limitations of the 1950's radio sound and the transition to the first subject where the cellos first take the melody *Ging heut' Morgen über's Feld* is masterly. Intriguingly, he takes the mini horn fanfares that herald the start of the second part of the first movement noticeably faster than most (bars 209-220, around the 9-10 minute mark), and I wonder if that was the result of Mengelberg's influence, as there's no indication in the score at this point for any quickening. His third movement is more a world-weary trudge than most, perhaps mindful of the music's origins from the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, but comment must be made of the care taken at the end, where the tam tam strokes register in a way that would put many modern recordings and performances to shame.

The finale opens as spectacularly as 1955 sonics will allow, but as the music winds down towards the strings D-flat major threnody, van Kempen ignores the rests and fermatas indicated in the score (around bar 153, figure 13) which, to be fair, sounds convincing, but ... Likewise, as this first lyrical section ends, there is a stormy development which resolves itself (bars 297, figure 26) when muted trumpets and horns herald what in the event turns out to be a false dawn. The conductor takes this passage very slowly creating a tremendous sense of mystery and anticipation - again, even if there is absolutely no justification in the score! The remainder of the movement is taken conventionally, masterfully, even, leading to a coda full of excitement. Frustratingly, the recording, like the beginning, is then cut short even before the echo has faded - an attempt, I would imagine, to cut out audience noise, but if ever cheers were warranted at the end of a recording, then this is one of them.

One of the curious things about doing this survey has been discovering excellent recordings you would otherwise have passed over - Ernest Borsamsky, Joseph Keilberth, Chitose Okashiro are all examples of this so far, as is this live air-check from Paul van Kempen. The deficiencies of the recording and the occasional wilfulness of the conducting all mean that this version will never be a central recommendation, but it is nonetheless very enjoyable and thought-provoking. 7/10

1957

A vintage year - the first of Georg Solti's accounts of this work, plus an exceptional one from Glorious John and an unforgettable one, for all the wrong reasons, from Buffalo

Sir John Barbirolli

1957, June 11 & 12 – Hallé Orchestra (Studio Stereo – PYE) **

1959, Jan 10th – New York PO (Live Mono – NYP Edition) [review](#)

May 1960 – Czech PO (Live Mono - Barbirolli Society) [review](#)

I sometimes wonder if the recorded legacy of John Barbirolli in Mahler really does him justice, the First Symphony under consideration here being a case in point. Of the three performances, the Hallé version may look the least glamorous, but in fact it is one of the very best you are ever likely to hear. There is little difference between the interpretation in Manchester and either New York or Prague, except neither of the later performances are in particularly good sound, the audience in New York all sound as if they have coughs and the Czech Philharmonic's playing is at times scrappy, with the solo double bass player coming in a bar too early for his star-turn in the third movement. Neither of the later performances do anything to add to Sir John's reputation and are only of interest to Mahler First, or Barbirolli completists, I would contend. The Hallé version is a very different proposition, however.

The first thing to mention that this recording has been remastered by one Michael Dutton and whilst there are occasions when instruments come bizarrely into the foreground of the sound picture (the solo flute during the funeral march third movement, for example), most of the time the sound is very good indeed with the bass drum captured extremely well. Barbirolli's warm, open-hearted approach is so well suited to this symphony and his orchestra plays exceptionally for him. The opening of the first movement sounds like dawn on a summer's day; everything is genial and relaxed, reminiscent of Bruno Walter in his last recording in Los Angeles, yet exciting when it needs to be. The opening of the second movement Ländler is taken slowly, but with much gusto, the strings taking their upwards glissandos with tremendous relish (something that didn't happen with the Czech Philharmonic, for some reason), before accelerating into a whirlwind conclusion. Glorious John is anything but as the fourth movement opens with huge drama and fire – Beelzebub Barbirolli, more like! He paces the remainder of the movement extremely well with slightly more portamenti than you might expect, whilst the coda is as grand and exciting as anyone's. It's all hugely impressive, so forget the olde-worlde charm of Prague, plus the glitz and razzmatazz of New York – it's Manchester grit that rules here! 9/10

Sir Georg Solti

1957 June 17th – Cologne Radio Symphony Orchestra (Mono Live – Archipel) [review](#)

1964 Jan/Feb – London Symphony Orchestra (Stereo Studio – Decca) ** [review](#)

1964 August 16th – Vienna Philharmonic (Mono Live -Orfeo)

1983 October – Chicago Symphony Orchestra (Digital Studio – Decca)

I think it is occasionally forgotten just what an important role Georg Solti played in the 'Mahler Revolution' with his recordings for Decca. Whatever you may think of Solti, he usually got all his orchestras to play with tremendous discipline and precision which, allied to Decca's usual stunning sound, presented these scores in a manner which, at the time, blew listeners away. Personally, I do think his colourful and extrovert style suited some symphonies better than others and that perhaps his recordings of the middle symphonies have not worn as well as some of the others – but I do also think he is very good in the First Symphony.

I find it ironic, then, that Solti has found himself in this survey sandwiched between John Barbirolli and Josef Krips, who both have much warmth and geniality in their readings if also, on occasion, scrappy orchestral playing. Instead, Solti's Mahler is etched in brilliant primary colours, the sound gleaming and exhilarating, all superbly executed with muscular brass and glittering percussion – not for him the home-spun charm of Bruno Walter in Los Angeles for some, it may all be a bit too much.

If, on the other hand, Solti's direct and unfussy approach is one you can enjoy, there is an awful lot to enjoy from these recordings. Solti's interpretation and style did not change much down the years, his

performances, both live and in the studio, all clocking in at around 54 minutes. The digital remake in Chicago is the longest of the group at 56 minutes – each movement is around 30 seconds more than the London Symphony recording, but feels much longer. This remake cannot be judged to be of any improvement over the earlier one, either by performance or sound, the early digital glare no match for the bloom of Kingsway Hall as captured by Decca's predecessors in 1964. The earliest, with the Cologne Radio Symphony Orchestra, looks interesting with a total timing of 48 minutes, but that can largely be explained by the conductor skipping the first movement's exposition repeat, as well as adopting a faster basic pulse in the final movement, rather than any significant differences in interpretation. The sound in 1957, decent radio mono, probably doesn't do Solti's technicolour glory approach justice so, in my opinion, this one is for completists only. Somewhat predictably, the two recordings from 1964, from the studio in London and from the concert hall in Salzburg are virtually identical, but it's hard to understand why anyone would prefer the live recording over the studio one, with its restricted mono sound, as well as intendant audience noises and split brass notes, even if there is perhaps slightly more excitement arising from the thrills 'n spills of a live occasion. So, it's the London Symphony Orchestra at the fabled Kingsway Hall, that's the pick of this bunch for me.

For many, this studio account, with its original bright orange LP sleeve, would have been their introduction to the symphony and I have to say, it wears its years very well, combining tremendous authority and a freshness, simply unmatched by Solti's Chicago remake. True, charm and innocence are in short supply in Georg's world – indeed, there are some very dark shadows during the central section of the first movement – and instead of a peasants' Ländler in the second, we the listeners are treated instead to a magician's glitter. Yet, one cannot help but be persuaded by the heartfelt playing Solti elicits from the LSO's strings during the lyrical sections of the fourth movement and the way he builds up the tension all throughout the finale is absolutely second to none, combining both the grandeur missing in the earlier Cologne account, as well as plenty of excitement - at the moment when the score instructs the horns to stand in the coda, their melody then positively leaps out of the speakers. To be frank, I don't care whether this was achieved by the players actually standing in the studio, or by some Decca technical wizardry, for its effect is to send tingles down the spine – which is surely what Mahler intended. Yes, you may be sacrificing home-spun charm for a gleaming twentieth century skyscraper here but, make no mistake, if that's how you want your Mahler to be, it doesn't come much better than this. 8.5/10

Josef Krips

1957 November 11th – Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra (Stereo Live – NK)

Josef Krips is not perhaps the first name that springs to mind with Mahler, but from all accounts he conducted the early Wunderhorn symphonies quite often. I have included this recording of the First for no other reason than completeness – its provenance is of some mystery since it is in stereo, which have led some to speculate that it was maybe the original broadcast tape of what would then have been a mono radio broadcast. I have it on a rip sent to me by a friend, so apologies but I am not able to give you the name of the label, but I note that it is on Youtube so it must be out there somewhere. The performance is, as you may have expected from the genial Krips, just that – bright and sunny, until the final movement where, uncharacteristically, the conductor lets rip and it's quite an exciting ride to the finishing line, aided and abetted by the timpani being balanced a little too close for comfort. Ensemble is not always flawless - and that includes a hilarious horn fluff at the reprise of the Ländler in the second movement, plus the timpanist getting lost and thus comically improvising his own riff in the lead up to the finale's coda. There is also a tiny, but unconvincing, cut in the last movement, far less ruinous than the one excised by Kletzki, however, it's there, nonetheless. Of course, it's all a curate's egg, but its overall enthusiasm and comedic improvisations may put a smile on the face of

even the most jaded Mahler Firstian. One for Mahler First completists and/or horn fluff fanatics only, I would contend. 5/10

1958

John Barbirolli is often the English conductor remembered for his Mahler interpretations during the immediate post-war years, but Adrian Boult was also surprisingly good too

Sir Adrian Boult

1958, 28th July – London Philharmonic Orchestra (Stereo Studio – Everest) [review](#)

For many reasons, Sir Adrian Boult is regarded as principally an exponent of English music, but his few forays into Mahler also show him to be excellent with this composer too. This First Symphony is no exception and lasting a fraction over 46 minutes you will need to hold onto your hats with this one, for Sir Adrian is in the fast lane here ! Throw in a very good Everest recording from 1958 and this is a very worthwhile listen with the LPO on electrifying form, ensemble being much, much better than you would have thought. In the first movement, Boult's "stiff upper-lip" means there's no hanging around as the mists rise, but there's genial good humour here that's most affecting. The second movement's Ländler is despatched at a pace to test the fittest of dancers, yet this isn't glib or slick; instead, it is characterised by rollicking good humour and, at the end especially, real brilliance. There's no hanging about in the third movement either, Boult clearly not feeling that sympathetic to the Huntsman whose funeral it is, nor in the final one, the central string lament despatched slightly tersely maybe. But there is tremendous excitement, too, and the performance generates much white heat in the final pages, with the final bass drum roll astonishingly caught for 1958. 7.5/10

1960

Live recordings with John Barbirolli (see above, 1957) and Mitropoulos (see 1940), as well as the first of many by the (then) 30 year old Lorin Maazel

Lorin Maazel

1960 11th September – Orchestra del Teatro La Fenice di Venezia (Mono Live – Archipel)

1979 22nd March – Orchestre Nationale de France (Studio Stereo- CBS Sony)

1986 3-4th October – Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra (Studio Digital – CBS Sony)

2005 22-27th September – New York Philharmonic Orchestra (Live Digital – NYPO Label)

2011 12th April – Philharmonia Orchestra (Live Digital – Philharmonia Label) [review](#)

Lorin Maazel's recorded and concert hall legacy is hugely variable - dull and uninteresting one night, could be followed by the next by brilliant, breath-taking music-making. His legacy in Mahler is no different, with four of the five recordings listed above being really sub-par.

The earliest recording from Venice can be dispensed with quite quickly. Its sound is decent for 1960, no more, there are the usual attendant audience noises, and the playing is often scrappy, getting completely lost at the end of the first movement, whilst the opening trumpet fanfares are anything but 'from afar'. The interpretation is pretty straightforward by Maazel's standards, although the Trio of the second movement is exceptionally wilful and mannered and doesn't work as a consequence, but it must be said the Funeral March and final movements both go well enough. It's nothing special though.

The first studio recording actually comes from Paris. A friend and colleague from MWI pointed out to me just how rare it was for French orchestras to play and perform Mahler and indeed, I struggle to think of a complete Mahler Symphony cycle on record with a French orchestra, whilst the only time you will encounter another ensemble from France in this survey is with Les Siècles with the original 'Titan' tone poem of the score (see above). The irony here is just how "un-French" the orchestra then sounds under Maazel, with nary a trace of Francophone wobble in the horns's opening melody in the first movement. Indeed, the playing of the ONdF is very fine and accurate, which is sadly the only positive thing I can really say about this recording, along with the impressive sound afforded to the performers by the CBS engineers. As for the performance, at just under 52 minutes with all repeats included, you would hope for something a little more fiery than the uber-cool offering here. The opening of the last moment is about as uncommitted as you can make it and basically sums up the performance – all the notes are in the right place, just without any of the music.

Unfortunately, Maazel's remake in Vienna some seven years later is not really much different and certainly not an improvement – indeed, given that it is some five minutes longer than in Paris, you wouldn't get me arguing against the assertion that the agony is merely prolonged. A significant disappointment.

Some 20 odd years later, there are two further live recordings, with the Philharmonia in 2011 and the New York Philharmonic in 2005. Once more, the only positive thing I can say about the later performance from London is that the Philharmonia follow their leader devotedly and dogmatically, through what can only be described as a wilful and indulgent display from the podium – with so much lingering and pulling the phrases of the music around, the mind boggles at how well they play really and I don't know whether I'm praising either the orchestra or the conductor by saying that. But Maazel being Maazel, typically, the New York account is actually not bad at all even, miraculously, in light of the above, bordering on the very good. Live and in front of an orchestra with a great Mahlerian pedigree, you even get a sense in the first movement that Maazel has actually grown to like this music and in front of the New York players, he is also on his best behaviour, with none of the later lingerings and Maazelerisms as with the Philharmonia. In fact – and somewhat to my surprise – I enjoyed this performance very much indeed, both the interpretation, as well as the powerhouse playing of the orchestra, all captured in very fine 24 bit sound on the orchestra's own label. So in summary with Maazel, all his Mahler First recordings should carry public health warnings and ought to be avoided, with the honourable exception of his New York concert which is, I feel, a very decent 7/10.

1962

Another good year for Mahler Firsts with a first commercial recording with the Dresden Staatskapelle, a best-seller from Boston, the first of Bernard Haitink's, plus one from another Dutchman, long-forgotten

Willem van Otterloo

1962, May 27th – Vienna Festival Orchestra (Stereo Studio – Concert Hall)

The Dutch conductor Willem van Otterloo (1907-1978) is perhaps only familiar to the most diligent of aficionados, his decision to make a career in the last dozen or so years of his life in Australia as principal conductor of the Melbourne Symphony and thereafter the Sydney Symphony Orchestras, at a time when Australia really couldn't have been much further away from the centre of recording activity, no doubt being a contributing factor. Prior to this, he had quite a successful European career, making records with ensembles as illustrious as the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics, as well as the Concertgebouw Orchestra.

This Mahler First, with the Vienna Symphony cunningly disguised as the 'Vienna Festival Orchestra', does not seem to have ever appeared on compact disc, but is probably available from all good (second hand) record shops. From the limited information I have, it appears to have been set down on a single day, which yields both positive and negatives, the latter including the horns audibly tiring in the finale and being outplayed by their colleagues in the trumpet section. The reading, at just over 47 minutes, with repeats omitted, is more 'flowing' than fast or volatile, although perhaps a bit too flowing for the central sections of the third movement, which loses a certain warmth and poignancy as a result. That said, the fourth movement is absolutely terrific, the sparks really flying in the central development section, as van Otterloo whips up some considerable heat, no doubt aided at this point by the short time available for making this recording. Overall, this was very enjoyable – everyone sounds hugely involved and as a result it is indeed involving, although I suspect that any current sources for this recording (i.e. ancient old LP's) may not show it in its best light. 7/10

Bernard Haitink

1962 18-20 September – Concertgebouw Orchestra (Stereo Studio – Philips)

1972 18-20 May – Concertgebouw Orchestra (Stereo Studio – Philips)

1977 25 December – Concertgebouw Orchestra (DVD Live – Philips)

If Willem van Otterloo is a somewhat forgotten Dutch conductor, Bernard Haitink most certainly is not and, like Zubin Mehta and Lorin Maazel, again we have recordings documenting his way with the work for nearly 50 years, from Amsterdam to Chicago, with a mid-flight stopover in Berlin. I do not need to point out just what an important role Haitink played in the 'Mahler Revolution' - once there were only a few cycles of all the symphonies to choose from on record, by Solti, Bernstein, Kubelik and Haitink. If Solti's set contained sonic blockbusters, Bernstein's huge excitability and Kubelik's much pastoral warmth and local colour, Haitink was the 'straight man' of the group, exercising good taste and restrained judgement, which some listeners, with justification, appreciated whereas others felt it lacked a certain 'zip' and 'fire'. His various accounts of the First Symphony perfectly encapsulates both of these opinions.

In fact, they are all remarkably similar. If the earliest in 1962 seems the fastest, lasting around 52 minutes, this was largely due to his missing out the first movement's exposition repeat (which he seemed to observe thereafter), whilst only taking a handful of seconds longer in all the other movements. It's a curious performance and Philips allowed him to re-record the same symphony some ten years later when he had finished recording all the other symphonies, with the later recording included in the box set of the complete canon as the 'representative' reading. In 1962 though, in particular, you get a sense of a great orchestra well-versed in the Mahler tradition, with a great, but very young (33 years old) Mahlerian on the podium. There are many characterful solos largely, I would say, as a result of the Concertgebouw's pedigree, allied to this conductor's ever-sane and tasteful conducting, but not everything comes off. In particular, in the third movement the klezmer music sounds very self-conscious as does the first appearance of the 'cross' or 'victory' motif (bar 305) in the final movement. Couple this with a recorded sound that is slightly bass light and this is a good effort rather than a good Mahler First.

Ten years later, the second studio recording has a greater sense of authority and those moments which didn't work in the earlier recording now do, although unfortunately, the recording still fails to capture the lower bass adequately, meaning the bass drum in particular lacks impact. However, on Christmas Day in 1977, in one of the famous Kerstmatinee concerts presented by Haitink and the Concertgebouw Orchestra, everything did come together. This is essentially the same interpretation as in 1972 – but with the added frisson of a one-off live occasion and with the bass drum happily captured too. Of course, Haitink's interpretation may still disappoint those weaned on the more turbo-charged Solti-

LSO and/or with more thrill seeking Bernstein, but it is the best of Haitink. It has been released on CD but may be hard to find now, so perhaps the DVD of the performance would be the easier way to acquire it. There you will be privy to a fine performance of the symphony, well directed, with the horns standing (and then sitting down) in the finale, given by Haitink in his prime. And yet, I still think it's very good rather than great – there is no doubt in my mind that Haitink is a very fine Mahler conductor and he has at his disposal in the above recordings, one of the greatest of Mahler orchestras, but rip-roaring excitement is not quite Haitink's 'thing' and, I think, that is what's missing from all his performances of the First Symphony, which may not be so prevalent with the other symphonies of Mahler. I struggled for a while to articulate my conclusions here, but then I heard and watched Bernstein's film with the Vienna Philharmonic, in worse sound and with an orchestra that needed much coaxing to perform this music to anywhere near the standard that Bernstein wanted, let alone that effortlessly delivered by the Concertgebouw (just watch Bernstein's frustration in the rehearsal sequences); this was the least impressive of all the Bernsteins – but it was still better than the best of Haitink. That said, the Kerstmatinee is a respectable 7.5/10.

1987 1-2 April – Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Studio – Philips)

1994 30-31 January – Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (DVD Live – Philips)

2007 1-3 May – Chicago Symphony Orchestra (Digital Live – CSO Resound) [review](#)

In 1987, Haitink embarked on a new cycle of the symphonies, once more with Philips, but this time with the Berlin Philharmonic during the dying days of the Karajan Empire, a cycle which ground to a halt before concluding with the Eighth and Ninth Symphonies. Whether it was due to a change of emphasis in his approach to the symphonies, or simply because he was no longer in front of an orchestra so well-versed in the music as was the Concertgebouw at the time, there was a marked change in approach. Of principle difference, perhaps inevitably, was the sound of the orchestra – gone were all the 'characterful' solos and intuitive Mahlerian soundworld of Amsterdam, to be replaced by the big, gleaming, almost huge monolithic grandeur of Karajan's Berlin. In some respects, the Berlin recording of the First *sounds* magnificent – the sheer 'sonic boom' that this orchestra could command at the time was simply jaw-dropping and, in its own way it's a thrilling listen, at long last wonderfully captured for Haitink by the Philips engineers. However, it is also rather stolid and lacks the heat and excitement which you will find in many other alternatives plus, whisper it quietly, the ensemble can be surprisingly shaky at certain moments too. This studio recording must not be confused with the film made a few years later, at the time when the Philharmonie roof was being refurbished. Readers may remember at one point during the renovations, the roof actually caught fire, but it wouldn't have been from the heat from this performance, for largely the same reasons as from the one in the studio – if you must have a film of Haitink conducting the Mahler First, he's at his best on Christmas Day - but then, aren't we all ?

It is ironic, then, that Haitink's final recording, made at the time of his brief stewardship of the Chicago Symphony, is the one which has both very good sound as well as impeccable orchestral playing – and yet the emotional temperature has been turned down from *inspired* to *business-like*. Make no mistake, a business-like Bernard in Mahler with the Chicago Symphony is still much, much better than many others and, indeed, it is still enjoyable and contains nothing to offend or disappoint, although an eyebrow may certainly be raised that he adopted the latest 'scholarship' that the double-bass solo in the Huntsman's Funeral should be taken by the whole section rather than by a soloist – open-minded thinking, or being blindly led up the garden path, I'll let you decide. As with the earlier Berlin performances, Haitink's approach is big and monolithic, characteristic of his later style, but one which I don't think fully does justice to Mahler's youthful inspiration as I've tried to explain above.

So, I don't think this is the right symphony to showcase Haitink's way with Mahler – however, he is never less than good and at his best, the 1977 live performance is still exceptionally fine and the one

to have, but if you insist upon digital sound, then the Berlin studio account would be the one I'd recommend from the later accounts and that is a 7/10

Otmar Suitner

1962 22nd-24th May – Dresden Staatskapelle (Stereo Studio – Berlin Classics)

Curiously, the Austrian Otmar Suitner (1922 -2010) spent most of his career in East Germany, being at various times principal conductor of the [East] Berlin State Opera as well as Dresden Staatskapelle. He is probably best remembered amongst some collectors as being the first (and, for longer than you'd think, the only) conductor to have a Beethoven Symphony Cycle released on CD. Stolid and dependable without being especially flashy, his musicianship was always appreciated even if sometimes it was a little earthbound, resulting in him being somewhat overlooked. This Mahler First is no exception, made when he was the Staatskapelle's chief conductor, in sound that is decent early stereo, if a little dull too. As it is, the performance lasts around 51 minutes, but feels a fair bit longer, in spite of being conventionally paced. No complaints about the quality of the playing from the Dresdeners, but there are times when the music gets stormy that a bit more panache would have been welcome from the podium, in which case the performance would have had far more impact. 4/10

Erich Leinsdorf

1962 20-21st October – Boston Symphony Orchestra (Stereo Studio – RCA)

1962 4th December – Boston Symphony Orchestra (Mono Live DVD -ICA) [review](#)

1971 19-20th April – Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (Stereo Studio – Decca) [review](#)

Born in Vienna, the same city where Mahler had died some eight months previously, with one of his first jobs as assistant to Bruno Walter, Erich Leinsdorf's Mahlerian credentials are second to none. During his tenure in Boston (1962 – 1969), he programmed nearly all the symphonies and recorded the 1st, 3rd, 5th and 6th for RCA with what is, in my opinion, varying degrees of success. This recording of the First actually turned out to be a best seller when initially released, but does not get off to a very auspicious start – a less atmospheric opening would be very hard to find in this survey, the tempo swift and the rather close and dry sound furnished by RCA not helping the situation much either. However, the mood very quickly changes when the cellos enter with the "*Ging heut' Morgen über's Feld*" theme, which is virtually caressed by the harps - for me, this sums up the reading, which is far more Romantic than usual, almost Straussian at times. This is particularly evident in the third movement – the pace is slightly slower than usual, and the round is introduced by a very noble sounding double-bass solo which sets the tone for the rest of the movement, one of the most beautiful and sensitive the Huntsman is ever likely to receive and undoubtedly didn't deserve. Not all of it works – aside from the very opening, parts of the second movement are a little staid, whilst in the final movement, undoubtedly exciting and dramatic though it is, cannot totally avoid the charge of lacking some imagination at some points, mainly due to Leinsdorf being unwilling to vary the tempo in accordance with the score's instructions. That said, he is rescued on these occasions by his magnificent orchestra who do both him as well as their legacy proud, with the result that the sum of all the parts of this recording is surprisingly very good indeed. 7.5/10

A few weeks later, Leinsdorf and the Bostonians performed the symphony for a telecast in sharp black and white visuals, albeit in mono sound. Unsurprisingly, there is little difference between the studio and live performance versions as far as interpretation is concerned, although the performers do receive a rousing seal of approval from the audience at the end and, seeing that it's December, a rousing salvo from the coughers throughout the rest of the performance, too. It is, however, interesting to see Leinsdorf conducting, without a baton, in a manner that none of the conservatoires would allow today, wild and characterful and overall, the whole thing does pack quite a punch, even

if, as a filmed version, more recent versions would give greater pleasure by virtue of better sound, visuals and camera-work.

When Leinsdorf's second recording was released in 1972, the distinguished British Mahler critic Deryck Cooke, writing in *Gramophone Magazine*, actually preferred it to the early Boston account. The cynic in me evily suggests this could have been because the newer recording featured a British orchestra on a British label, but a more prosaic one could have been the far better sound granted by the Decca engineers, probably the only thing in my own opinion that is an improvement on the earlier recording. Granted, Leinsdorf does command very fine playing from the RPO and the very opening of the symphony is slightly less rushed than before, but the whole thing is somewhat studio-bound, lacking the freshness of the earlier recording as well as the flair of the Boston front-desk players.

In summary, Leinsdorf's Boston bestseller undoubtedly is very good and fully deserving of its top sales, but I'd give the others a miss.

1963

A sole release, the first of many from a very young Zubin Mehta

Zubin Mehta

1963 21st September – Montreal Symphony Orchestra (Mono Live – Place des Arts)

1974 December – Israel PO (Stereo Studio – Decca) [review](#)

1980 10/25th November – New York PO (Digital Studio – CBS-Sony)

1986 21-24th July – Israel PO (Digital Studio – EMI)

2013 4th October – Mehta with three Australian World Orch (Digital Live – LABC Classics) [review](#)

It does seem strange to me that Zubin Mehta, who has some five recordings of the First Symphony in the catalogue, in addition to sundry other unofficial releases, plus what is widely considered to be one of the greatest Resurrection Symphonies ever recorded (for Decca with the Vienna PO), should never have recorded a complete official Mahler Symphony cycle.

The earliest of his recordings is from 1963 is perhaps more interesting as a document of the very young - 27-year-old - Mehta at the helm of his first appointment with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra (1960 -67), not least since the source is of a black and white television broadcast, which can still be sourced via specialist dealers. One cannot help but admire the young maestro here, conducting without a score, dark and glowering, with already a hugely confident and flamboyant podium style, inspiring exceptionally disciplined playing from his band in what is otherwise a slightly cautious reading of the score. Perhaps even more astonishing is being able to see the same conductor some half a century later, this time conducting the Australian World Orchestra – of course, the quality of the sound and picture have improved immeasurably, but in addition there is now the inclusion of 'Blumine' and the horns stand up at the end, whilst the (usual) second movement Ländler and third movement funeral march are taken slightly more deliberately than before. Mehta at 73 is still a youthful and flamboyant presence on the podium, but his reading is also still rather cautious and slightly staid.

It seems as if Mehta started including 'Blumine' in his Mahler First performances from around the mid-1980's onwards, placing it second as in the original order, rather than as a stand-alone piece as with some other conductors. It is tempting to be cynical that he did this only to make his reading 'fresh' and maybe 'relevant' for he certainly seemed to slow down a little as he got older and became more self-conscious (especially in the final recording on EMI, which as a result isn't recommendable at all). This means that the finest of the three commercial recordings, by quite a fair margin, is actually the first with the Israel Philharmonic, which is fresh, straight-forward and exuberant, without any particular

insights, nor anything that would cause offense. It almost goes without saying that it is also captured in very fine Decca sound – I am only disappointed that it wasn't with the New York PO, not least since they provide some spectacular playing on the 1980 recording (fabulous trumpets in the finale), even if on that occasion Mehta decided not to observe the first movement repeat which he does in Tel Aviv. So Mehta on Decca is the pick of the bunch here - very good, if not sensational. 7.5/10.

1964

A vintage year sees the release of the classic Solti-LSO on Decca plus a live recording with the same conductor in Salzburg (see 1957), plus a very different recording proposition from the Czech PO

Karel Ancerl

1964 December 19-21st – Czech Philharmonic Orchestra (Stereo Studio – Supraphon)

For many years, this recording enjoyed a cult following, mainly due to the unique and colourful way the Czech Philharmonic players went about their music-making with this composer, maybe also since it was difficult to obtain in the beginning and, possibly, as an antidote for those for whom the glossy and high-octane Solti on Decca was just a bit too much. Personally, I have to say it hasn't worn its years as well as it might – the sound was never as good as Decca's for Solti and is merely acceptable in its latest incarnation on Supraphon's Ancerl Gold Edition on CD, whereas previous issues on the silver disc were seemingly not transferred with much care, had much background hiss, plus climaxes that didn't expand as well as they might and sound which could be a little shrill too. That said, the performance is not without its considerable merits and the opening horns in the first movement have a slight Eastern European wobble, even if they do break their opening phrases, which was a slight surprise given the excellence of the players. Ancerl is a little dry eyed with this music, not as affectionate with the *Wayfarer* music as some, likewise with the linden tree music in the third movement, taken more swiftly than usual. Best of all is the local colour Ancerl and his players bring to the Ländler second movement, even if its Trio is a little 'strait-laced'. The final movement is exciting, but doesn't storm the heavens as others do, which leaves the impression of it being somewhat underplayed. Strangely enough, the climax of the second lyrical section in this movement, just before the symphony's coda, is played very fast and passionately – I wasn't convinced by this, but this passage is interpreted in the same way with recordings by this orchestra given by Neumann in 1979, as well as Ken'ichiro Kobayashi in 1998, which is food for thought. Overall, though, I think that Ancerl is better represented in Mahler in his recording of the Ninth Symphony, while the Czech Philharmonic are at their best in the First Symphony in that remarkable aforementioned recording with Kobayashi in 1998. This one, though, is 7/10.

1965

Just the one live performance this year from Rudolf Kempe, a great Wagnerian and Straussian so surely a fine Mahlerian too ?

Rudolf Kempe

1965 22 May – BBC Symphony Orchestra (Mono Live – BBC Legends)

You may have expected Rudolf Kempe, such a fine Wagnerian and Straussian, to have conducted and recorded more Mahler than he eventually ended up doing. Perhaps his early training, with the Dresden Staatskapelle and Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestras in the 1930's, along with being conscripted into the German army during the Second World War, meant that he was not as exposed to the composer's work as much as you may have thought, Mahler's music being considered 'degenerate' and banned in Germany during the Nazi years. That and dying at the comparative young age of 66, meant that we

have very little of his art in this repertoire, the First Symphony being represented by this mid-1960's radio recording, played in front of a studio audience in a radio studio complete with polite applause, with the BBC SO. One cannot help but register a certain amount of surprise and disappointment that this studio recording from 1965 is therefore in mono, as well as being somewhat distantly recorded. Likewise, the performance does not capture the orchestra at its best, ensemble being occasionally untidy. All this militates against what could have otherwise been a reasonable interpretation, genial and sunny in the first movement, a little mannered in phrasing during the second and third movements, but with a fine and fiery final movement. In the end though, this is just a release for completists, either of Kempe and/or Mahler. 5.5/10

1966

The first of Lenny's ...

Leonard Bernstein

1966 4 & 22 October – New York PO (Stereo Live – CBS Sony) [review](#)

1974 October – Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra (Stereo Live – DVD DG) **

1984 Not given – Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Live – Sardana)*

1987 8-10th October – Concertgebouw Orchestra (Digital Live – DG) ** [review](#)

1987 9th October – Concertgebouw Orchestra (Digital Live – RCO Live)

1987 25th October – Concertgebouw Orchestra (Digital Live – Sardana)

Whether you choose to believe Leonard Bernstein when he proclaimed that he believed he became Mahler himself when he conducted his music, or you just dismiss it as mere egotistical hyperbole, there is no doubting the sincerity of his championing of Mahler's music and that his three (nearly) cycles of Mahler's Symphonies are hugely impressive achievements by anyone's standards. Not all of it worked of course – using a boy soprano in the later recording of the Fourth was not a successful idea and the Concertgebouw Ninth could, with much justification, be judged as 'overcooked'. But all of his recordings of the First Symphony are exceptionally fine and worth investigating by anyone – all that is, except the 1984 Vienna Philharmonic account*. This is a 'ghost recording' – the orchestra's archives reveal that they did not perform the work with Bernstein at any point in 1984 (although they did perform the Fourth together), so this is most likely to be the filmed recording that's mislabelled (my thanks to a good friend and colleague for supplying me with this information). Of the others, they offer us the opportunity to trace the trajectory of this conductor's interpretation of the piece over the course of three different decades and orchestras. On the face of it, it would be easy to conclude that Bernstein's way with the work just got slower as he got older, having taken some 52 minutes in New York, 54 minutes in Vienna and 56 in Amsterdam – but this would be wrong. Indeed, the interpretation(s) are all remarkably similar, almost identical in the two middle movements. However, what it did become, as the reading matured, was a little grander – and much more subtle.

One wag, in describing Bernstein's way with Mahler (which could, in my opinion, be applied to any other composer he conducted too), opined that the conductor took the score, highlighted every single one of the composer's copious instructions therein and then presented each one in performance in block capitals, triple underlined and with quadruple exclamation marks. Of course this is a huge exaggeration, but with all of these things there is also an element of truth, even with this conductor's way in Mahler's First Symphony - an example of this could be the second movement's *Trio*, which is annotated *recht gemächlich* (meaning, 'quite leisurely'). In all three of his various interpretations above, Bernstein is *extremely* leisurely, to the point of it almost becoming mannered - other conductors have tried something similar, but mostly in other hands the music becomes static and boring. With Bernstein, either through his podium charisma, black magic, or simply because it's 'Lenny

conducting Mahler', it somehow doesn't – although it is undoubtedly slow and the *sehr zehrt aber ausdrucksvoll* (very tender but expressive) marking is milked to within an inch of its life. For some, this may all be a bit too much, but there is no doubting that if the music is to be done this way, Bernstein pulls it off better than anyone.

All this may be leading you to think that the earliest recording from New York is going to be dismissed at this point – except it isn't and is, in my opinion, an extremely fine account of the score which, in some parts, has rarely been matched, let alone surpassed. In particular, the very opening is masterful: not only does Bernstein create a tremendous sense of anticipation from his strings, as well as getting his trumpet fanfares to really sound from afar, he also gets his horns on their first entry to observe the instruction *sehr weich gesungen* (very softly sung) like no other. A few bars later (bar 37), there are three pizzicato notes for violins and violas, marked fortissimo, at which point Bernstein's hard work pays off as combined, this all creates an extraordinary sound picture – the trumpets from afar, the horns softly from the centre of the orchestra, with fortissimo pizzicatos from the strings right at the front, like a frightened animal scampering away in the early morning light; it's beyond magical and Bernstein was unable to repeat this effect as effectively in any other of his recordings. In fact, the whole of the first movement in this New York account is very good indeed – as is it in all his accounts, but where the earlier recording differs from the later Amsterdam reading is in its less subtle execution of several instructions in the score. As an example, in the first movement at bars 98-99, shortly after the *Ging heut' Morgen über's Feld* theme has started with the cellos, there is a short phrase for both principal flute and oboe marked *expressivo* in the score that Bernstein interprets with a noticeable slowing in the pace. It is there, virtually imperceptibly in the later Vienna and Amsterdam readings, but in New York it is very present. (As an aside, a few other conductors adopted this idea after 1966, the most notable being Rafael Kubelik – except he became less subtle and more pronounced about it in his later readings, the opposite to Bernstein). Similarly, in the *Trio* of the second movement discussed above, the New York reading is right up to the red line in terms of what could be got away with, whereas in the later reading from Amsterdam it is far more 'integrated' and subtly done. In the final movement, Bernstein is predictably dramatic and exciting in New York, as he is in Amsterdam too, the main difference being that in the later reading the fanfares are slower, more declamatory and dramatic, as opposed to the urgency and velocity of New York.

In the end, if I do end up marginally preferring the later Concertgebouw reading from DG, it is on the smallest of points – an orchestra in 1987 that is perhaps marginally more familiar with the music than the New Yorkers were in 1966, a more subtle interpretation, as well as (of course) better and more impactful recorded sound. Indeed, there are many who consider that recording of the First Symphony to be one of the high points of the later cycle on DG, where the combination of years conducting the music came together with an orchestra whose Mahlerian pedigree was second to none, to produce the only trump card to overcome the ace from New York – and I wouldn't disagree.

As noted above, the later Amsterdam recording comes in three different variants. The "official" Deutsche Grammophon recording was taken from two live concerts on the 8th and 9th of October, with a follow-up session in the studio on the 10th – which would explain the absence of applause in what is presented as a "live" recording by DG. On the Concertgebouw's own label, there is the whole concert from the 9th October – this time with applause and with a slightly different sound picture, a little more distant than the closer and punchier DG sound, revealing much of the bloom of Amsterdam's famous concert hall, with orchestral playing that is pretty sensational and virtually flawless. Bernstein and the Concertgebouw then took the piece on a short European tour and the concert from Berlin on the 25th October was broadcast on the radio. If you thought that having played the work several times over the month and at the end of a tiring tour that somehow things may have got a little stale, you would be very wrong. Once again, the playing is astonishingly good (not least since Bernstein's way with the

score is pretty individual still) and live in Berlin you could argue that there's even more electricity running through the performance than on the DG taping, although any marginal gains there need to be offset against a recording that's a little dryer than on the DG issue, perhaps reflecting the two venues, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam possessing a wonderful bloom to the sound, where the more visually pleasing layout of the Berlin Philharmonie has a slightly dryer acoustic. At the end of the day, you can barely fit a fag paper between these two versions, but the DG account is of course much easier to acquire.

In between New York and Amsterdam, Bernstein also filmed and recorded the work once more, this time in Vienna with the VPO. The sound and picture are decent, the directing by Humphrey Burton masterful, the performance subtler than in New York but without the sense of occasion in Amsterdam and not quite as good as either - but it still comes a long way ahead of many others. It's good to be able to watch a conductor as charismatic and unique as Bernstein was in his prime conduct the music with which they are most closely associated. Technically, it is easy to find better quality performances on DVD than here, but none of them is better as a performance.

In summary, these are all superb achievements, but Bernstein might not be everyone's cup of tea and he is a little naughty in asking his bass drum player to add an additional whack on the very last note in the finale. That said, this is a larger than life reading, a far cry from the genial warmth of late Bruno Walter, or the bright-eyed and bushy-tailed Maris Jansons, to name two who seem to be in favour at the moment. However, what Bernstein has that those two versions (as well as practically every other recording in this survey) can only hint at, is a tremendous sense of occasion, allied to a performance of crackling energy, power and conviction – and I think any Mahler performance should have a sense of occasion, rather than just appease the orchestra's and concert promoter's accountants. My pick of the bunch here would be the DG Amsterdam recording, but you wouldn't go too far wrong with any of the others. 9.5/10

1967

Two highly individual releases from Igor Markevitch, plus the classic Kubelik DG recording (see 1954)...

Igor Markevitch

1967 10th March – Turin Radio Orchestra (Mono Live – Stradivarius) [review](#)

1967 21st June – Orchestra of Radio France (Stereo Live – Montaigne)

1982 5th March – Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra (Stereo Live – Tahra)

Igor Markevitch was well-known for his championing of modern music and so it is no surprise to find him conducting Mahler, although the surprise is that the timings in both Turin and Paris are just under and over the 45 minute mark respectively, suggesting that the conductor was intent on breaking the land-speed record in this symphony. Indeed, some tempos do raise eyebrows, for example the first movement's second subject "*Ging heut' Morgen über's Feld*" theme is taken much faster than anywhere else that I can remember. More troublesome and contributing to the timing as well is the conductor's trimming of the score, a few bars here and there, as is his somewhat idiosyncratic rubato. Add an audible and restless audience in both live concerts, scrappy playing and not especially attractive sound (especially in Turin) and neither of these is particularly distinguished entries to the discography.

It is something of a surprise, then, to find the conductor reappearing some 15 years later for a concert of the same work with the Leipzig Gewandhaus in 1982, the year before his death. The sound is vastly improved, if somewhat distant and boomy, and the orchestral execution is much improved, even if the audience is just as bronchial as before. The interpretation hasn't changed much, again with Markevitch's unique rubato although, significantly, the cuts are restored bringing the running time up

to just under 50 minutes, without repeats and with the same fast tempo for the first movement. That said, the whole thing still remains somewhat earthbound and is overall a disappointment in light of this conductor's achievements elsewhere. 4/10

1969

A year which saw the classic Horenstein/LSO recorded (see 1952), as well as one of the first appearances of Blumine, plus the first of Kirill Kondrashin's and of many from Hamburg

Eugene Ormandy

1969 21st May – Philadelphia Orchestra (Stereo Studio – RCA)

As always with Ormandy, this is a wonderfully played and decently interpreted account of the score. Its distinction was the inclusion of *Blumine*, something of a rarity at the time, although the sound both on vinyl as well as CD never really did the performance justice (you will need to seek out the Japanese RCA issue to hear it at its best). The performance of *Blumine* actually sums up the performance – it's good, but Wyn Morris with the New Philharmonia the following year did it much better, as did Kazuo Yamada in 1989. A decent performance with no particular insights then, magnificently played by the Philadelphians but no match for other versions before or since 6/10

Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt

1969 6 January – NDR Orchestra (Stereo Live – Tahra)

Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt was one of those master conductors who were happy to quietly spend their career with German radio orchestras, rather than jetting across the world chasing the glitz and glamour of an international maestro. Occasionally when pushed into the spotlight, he shone very brightly indeed, not least in his recordings of the nine Beethoven symphonies made with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra for Decca. This Mahler First isn't quite as good as those Beethovens, but isn't bad by any other standard – it is very well played, not least since it is live (you will hear occasional audience noises throughout the performance, but there is no applause at the end, for some reason) and the sound is very good for its vintage, if a little over-bright in places. There are a couple of miscalculations – the second movement *Ländler* is far too slow and stately and offers no contrast with the that movement's *Trio*, plus the finale of the whole thing is a little too intent on grandeur, a bit too 'Brucknerian' maybe, for its own good. That aside, it is solid and enjoyable, but no more than that. 5/10

Kirill Kondrashin

1969 11th April – Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra (Studio Stereo – Melodiya) [review](#)

1981 7th March – NDR Symphony Orchestra (Live Digital – EMI)

On 7th March 1981, Klaus Tennstedt withdrew at the last moment from a performance of Mahler's First Symphony to be given by the NDR Symphony Orchestra at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. Kirill Kondrashin, who had previously led and recorded all of Mahler's (non-choral) symphonies with his Moscow PO, stepped in and conducted the concert with an hour's rehearsal, in a challenging programme which also included Prokofiev's Classical Symphony and Schoenberg's Five Pieces for Orchestra. From all accounts, it was a resounding success, but tragedy was to strike when, just two hours later, Kondrashin suffered the heart attack in his hotel room which was to end his life that very evening at the age of 67.

It is often overlooked these days that Kirill Kondrashin virtually led the Mahler-revolution single-handedly in the Soviet Union in the 1960's, the composer's music having previously been frowned

upon by the authorities. Whether or not he did actually have an hour to rehearse the orchestra before his final ever concert or not, it is quite remarkable how similar it is to the earlier Moscow Philharmonic recording, as well as being different to Tennstedt's own interpretation – Tennstedt usually took 52 minutes to perform Mahler's First Symphony, whereas with both the Moscow PO and NDR Orchestras, Kondrashin takes a little over 48 minutes. It therefore becomes fairly straightforward to prefer the later recording, with its better sound and superior, if not flawless, orchestral playing (in comparison, the Moscow recording sounds a little rough and ready), even if there are one or two audience noises in the later performance although, curiously, again, no applause at the end. It is a flowing, bright-eyed and fresh interpretation, that skips all repeats and is grand and exciting when it needs to be. The opening of the last movement in particular is quite cosmic and whilst clearly no-one could have predicted the sad events that were to follow a few hours after the concert, as a swan-song it is pretty impressive, even if perhaps it does also yield to the very best. 8/10

1970

A year that saw the first appearance of the 'Hamburg' version of the score from Wyn Morris (see above), plus the only appearance of Jean Martinon in this survey ..

Jean Martinon

1970 24th November – Japan Philharmonic Orchestra (Live DVD – Exton)

These days, Jean Martinon is mostly associated with the music from the land of his birth, France, but he was in fact an exceptional Mahler conductor – amongst other achievements, he led the premiere of the Third Symphony with the Chicago Symphony which has been recently released by the orchestra on its own label to near-universal adulatory [reviews](#). I don't know whether the Japan Philharmonic had played Mahler's First Symphony much, if at all, before this performance in 1970, but their playing for Martinon is exceptionally fine and dedicated, as captured here in sharp black and white picture, albeit in dim and dry stereo sound. Martinon's interpretation is very fine, although I didn't think he quite carried off his Bernstein-esque phrasing in the Ländler. At around 50 minutes, it is swifter than some, but he skips repeats and is fast and furious during the dramatic moments of the final movement. The only issue really is the dry sound, which sucks the life out of the bass and means there is no bloom to the orchestra's timbre, something that I suspect would have been very different from what the audience heard in the hall that night and takes an awful lot away from the ability to enjoy this performance. For me it's more a memento of the conductor, as well as an early example of the excellence of Japanese orchestras in this repertoire – I just wish it could have been as enjoyable to listen to as it is to watch. 5/10

1971

The first of two with Carlo Maria Giulini, plus the second of Erich Leinsdorf's (see 1962) ...

Carlo Maria Giulini

*1971 30th March – Chicago Symphony Orchestra (Stereo Studio – EMI) ** [review](#)*

1976 28th February – Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (Stereo Live – Testament)

Elegance and poise, refinement and good taste are all the hallmarks of the remarkable Carlo Maria Giulini's interpretation of this symphony – and indeed it is astonishing that we have two versions with him, one in the studio, the other live, separated by a mere handful of years, with what could quite justifiably argued were the two best orchestras in the world at the time. In the end, both interpretations are remarkably similar with little to separate the two ensembles, each movement is

almost identical in timing, separated by a couple of seconds here or there, but I have to say that the slightly bass-light sound as captured by the otherwise excellent radio engineers in Berlin, plus audience rustles and noises, tips the balance for me in favour of the Chicago studio account, which yields nothing for not being live, even if the cheers of the Berlin audience which greet the end of the later performance give the usual thrill.

Furthermore, this Chicago studio version is at once one of the most beautifully played and realised accounts of the score, warmly captured in superb EMI sound. Indeed, 'beautiful' is the operative word here, in a leisurely reading lasting some 57 minutes where the inner-details of Mahler's score are lovingly realised and exposed for the listener's delight. Rarely will you hear each strand of the clarinets' gurglings at the opening of the first movement, nor every strand of the trumpet fanfares in the last movement, so clearly as under Giulini's remarkable guidance. The huntsman's funeral is sombrelly beautiful (even if the Berlin bass player makes a more valiant attempt than his Chicago counterpart to make his solo sound simpler and uglier), whilst the lyrical sections of the final movement have a nobility that are only matched by Adrian Boult in his otherwise very different interpretation from many years earlier.

The analogy which kept coming to my mind here was that of a garden – with Giulini, the lawns are perfectly manicured, the borders well defined, the flowers (best in show) blooming exuberantly and symmetrical in their arrangement. However, to my mind, Mahler's garden is full of wildflowers, the borders are indistinguishable and the roses are slowly being strangled by the overgrown ivy

That said, for many, a grand, noble and beautiful account of this score could be the ideal if they otherwise think its excesses too noisy and vulgar. Personally, I am conflicted, as on the one hand I'm not quite sure this is what Mahler wanted, but on the other I recognise the unique qualities Giulini, aided and abetted by the Chicago Symphony players (sounding so different to Solti's band), bring to this recording, so this gets a wildcard nomination from me with 8.5/10

1974

After a quiet few years which only saw the release of Haitink's second recording with the Concertgebouw (see 1962), 1974 was a vintage year which saw Bernstein filming the symphony in Vienna (see 1966), Mehta setting down his best version in Israel (see 1963), the young James Levine recording the work in London, as well as Maurice Abravanel's version from his complete cycle from Utah....

Maurice Abravanel

1974 27th May-11th June – Utah Symphony Orchestra (Studio Stereo – Vanguard) [review](#)

The Greek born Maurice Abravanel (1903 – 1993) had an interesting upbringing, moving to Switzerland with his family as a youth and sharing a house with Ernest Ansermet who had just been appointed principal conductor of l'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, before spending time in Paris working with Bruno Walter. Eventually events in Europe and his Jewish ancestry forced him to relocate in the US where for a while he worked at The Met in New York, before being appointed Principal Conductor of the Utah Symphony Orchestra in 1947, a post he held until 1980. It is hard to appreciate just how unusual a complete Mahler symphony from Utah would have been viewed in the 1970's when nowadays practically every ensemble plays this music, but it is testimony to the conductor that somehow he pulls it off with quite distinctive results.

Listening to this recording of the First Symphony certainly shows that the conductor knew his craft as well as this music, with the orchestra playing well and the symphony's unwieldy structure nicely

balanced. Whether through necessity or design, Abravanel's approach is characterised by a certain lightness and charm and indeed, there is much joy and sparkle in the first movement, whilst the Klezmer music in the Third is more elegant, than colourful. It is also exciting when it needs to be too, but undoubtedly the orchestra also sounds somewhat lightweight when compared to some of their bigger gunned rivals. Their cause is not helped by the acoustic, which is cavernous and sometimes blurs the inner detail, such as in the central sections of the first movement which in any case, are taken a little too fast for clean articulation. However, there is a certain bright-eyed wonder about the music-making here that's quite distinctive and enjoyable, even if in the last analysis it cannot compete with the best. 6.5/10

James Levine

1974 24th-25th August – London Symphony Orchestra (Studio Stereo – RCA)

James Levine's almost-complete Mahler Cycle has always, in my opinion, been somewhat unfairly overlooked in the catalogue. Maybe this is because it was made with multiple orchestras as well as missing the choral symphonies of the 2nd and 8th, I don't know, but there is much that I truly admire. It is of course a 'young man's' view of Mahler, red in tooth and claw – but better than cerebral boredom.

He did the Sixth as well as the First Symphonies in London with the LSO, both very well in my opinion. In Levine's hands, the opening of the First is full of warmth and anticipation and he is almost as masterly as Bernstein in New York in the way he is able to suggest perspectives when the horns enter with their melody. The second movement is swift and rumbustious, the tuba rudely making its presence felt and the third movement is also superbly characterised. At around 55 minutes, this is a middle-of-the-road performance time-wise and my only grumble would be the slightly bass-light sound which only becomes a problem in the last movement, which lacks a bit of 'heft'. I certainly felt the finale lacked a certain lift, possibly as a consequence of the sound, when compared with the very best of others (such as Solti with the same orchestra, or Bernstein in Amsterdam), which is a real shame for everything that came before it was very good indeed. One day though, another Levine performance may see the light of a more mainstream release as in the following year, he and Boulez led a Mahler cycle with the New York Philharmonic, with the Fifth conducted by Erich Leinsdorf. The Third Symphony in this cycle (under Boulez) has already been issued on the orchestra's own label, but the broadcast performance of First Symphony on 10th November 1976, led by Levine, is the stuff of legends, white hot from first note to last. Until then though, this one is 8/10

1976

After 1975 saw just the one recording, a live recording released many years later with Kubelik and the LSO (see 1954), 1976 sees the first by the great Klaus Tennstedt, plus a bargain priced issue on Classics for Pleasure, Giulini performing it live with the Berlin Philharmonic (see 1971), as well as another by a conductor who had a label formed just for his recordings

Gaetano Delogu

1976 February 1-3rd – London Philharmonic Orchestra (Stereo Studio – Cfp[EMI])

There will be many readers on here who will remember EMI's super-bargain priced label, Classics for Pleasure with much affection. At a price which makes Naxos releases nowadays look prohibitively expensive, they could line-up on their roster back-catalogue jewels such as André Cluytens's Beethoven Symphony Cycle with the Berlin Philharmonic, as well as Karajan's first recording of Bruckner's Eighth Symphony with the same orchestra. Of more recent provenance, they could also

boast of Sir Charles Mackerras conducting late Mozart Symphonies, plus this Mahler First Symphony, both with the London Philharmonic Orchestra. Indeed, you could argue that it was some bargain in 1976 to have the latter work in modern sound with a major London orchestra under an up-and-coming conductor at such an advantageous price-point. However, the question is, how does it all hold up some half a century later ?

Not that badly actually. Gaetano Delogu (b.1934) certainly coaxes efficient playing from the LPO, although the sonics aren't quite state of the art, even for the mid-1970's and are quite restricted. Actually, there is very little here that would offend most listeners and on the whole, it is another middle-of-the-road decent performance – however, Delogu's inexperience shows in the final movement, as during the two long lyrical interludes the tension is allowed to drop markedly, with the result that the movement appears disjointed and, at times, static. Everywhere else, it's not bad at all, but you can do so much better elsewhere. 6/10

Klaus Tennstedt

1976 July 31 – Boston Symphony Orchestra (Stereo Live – YSL)

1977 October 4-5th – London Philharmonic Orchestra (Stereo Studio – EMI) [review](#)

1977 November 14th – NDR Symphony Orchestra, Hamburg (Stereo Live – YSL) **

1985 February 12th – London Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Live – LPO Live)

1990 January 28th – London Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Live – BBC Legends) [review](#)

1990 May 31st & June 2nd – Chicago Symphony Orchestra (Digital Live – EMI/EMI DVD) [review](#)

I do have to declare at the outset a certain fondness for Klaus Tennstedt, as it was he who led the first (of the many) professional concerts I have been privileged to experience in my time. I do remember well that it was a cold and dark winter's night, a Sunday, where the Royal Festival Hall was sold out to witness the conductor and the London Philharmonic strut their stuff with Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, followed by *Carmina Burana* after the interval. After that, I saw Tennstedt conduct often, in a much broader repertoire than history would credit him for and tried to work out how he achieved the results that he did. A good friend once roguishly commented at one of these concerts that he looked like a stick insect and indeed he did, being improbably tall with even longer arms and legs that flailed around in the air whilst he conducted as if he was being pestered by a couple of angry wasps. However, he was also an incredibly modest and humble man, qualities which endeared him to orchestras who habitually gave him their all, tolerated his erratic conducting technique and forgave his frequent cancellations. His music-making – and his Mahler – was characterised by a big warm-hearted approach, plus a sense of daring, the latter possibly in part due to nobody knowing whether he would actually turn up on the night or which way his arms would go if he did. In some respects, Tennstedt is actually the ideal conductor for Mahler's First Symphony, but perhaps true to form, not all of the above listed recordings are ideal for the listener.

In fact, you can split the above list into two groups, separated by the conductor's life-threatening illness during 1986 and 1987, after which Tennstedt's readings took on a much darker edge than before. Indeed, the last with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, is over 7 minutes slower than his earlier readings and at a shade just below the 60 minute mark, is one of the longest in the whole survey. That it doesn't sound so slow is in part to the concentrated playing of the orchestra as well as the magnetism of the conductor with this composer, the whole reading having taken on an almost Horenstein-esque darkness, Tennstedt viewing the symphony seemingly likewise through the prism of Mahler's later works. It's an absorbing listen on CD, or an absorbing watch on a well-directed DVD, but I would argue that it's Tennstedt at his most *interesting* rather than best, whereas the coupling on the DVD (a live recording of the *Symphony of a Thousand* with the LPO from the Royal Festival Hall) does show

Tennstedt at his greatest and most inspired, directing one of the truly great renditions of that mighty symphony. In short, the Eighth is mandatory, this First isn't.

Nor is the same symphony performed earlier in the year, this time with the London Philharmonic Orchestra in a reading a couple of minutes faster than in Chicago. This has been released on BBC Legends and purports to be a BBC Radio 3 broadcast, but I cannot believe that with the sound reproduced on this disc, which is so poor that it leads credence to the conspiracy theory that what is on the CD is actually a private recording taken from the radio broadcast – and a very poor one at that. It's not a bad performance, but in my opinion, if you want to hear Tennstedt at his best in this work, then the earlier recordings are the ones you must seek out.

Remarkably too, they are all very similar, lasting around the 54 minute mark and also surprisingly, in light of the conductor's later readings of Mahler, surprisingly 'straight'. However, there is a magic about Tennstedt's treatment of this score in these earlier readings that is almost unique, combining an almost Kubelikian sense of 'rightness', coupled to an air of unaffected joy and childlike rapture which is quite remarkable – in short, it is the polar opposite of the approach of Tennstedt's predecessor at the helm of the London Philharmonic, Georg Solti. That said, you could equally argue that Tennstedt's approach lacks the sense of apocalyptic fury that Solti is able to unleash at the beginning of the final movement, or the pile-driving excitement at the end of the same movement, to cite a couple of examples and this may be a drawback for some, as it was to myself the first time I listened to the earlier studio recording, too many years ago to declare in public. Likewise, Tennstedt is also unable to tease out the local colour in the music of the central movements in the way that Bruno Walter and Kubelik were always almost effortlessly able to do, as well as many of the Eastern European bands in this survey. Nevertheless, I don't want to make too much of this – a Tennstedt-led Mahler First with the Czech Philharmonic in great sound could well have been my most favourite version of all and so in spite of the abovementioned caveats, there is so much magic elsewhere here that I have no qualms in nominating Tennstedt as being one of the "must hears" of this survey. To really reinforce this point, all you need to do is to take the London Philharmonic's recording of this work with Delogu in 1976 above, where the reading is essentially very similar and then compare it to their recording with Tennstedt the following year – one is 'keenly professional', the other 'totally inspired' in every bar; Tennstedt's is truly a special achievement.

Of the listed recordings then, two can be moved to one side quite quickly – the live Boston Symphony recording is an interesting example of the conductor's success in the US, but the dry-ish sound, plus the occasional moments when for a split-second, conductor and orchestra seem to momentarily stop to ensure everyone is at the same place in the score (an example of Tennstedt's unusual conducting technique, maybe?), relegates it below the others. Likewise, the 1985 live recording has to contend with the ungrateful acoustics of London's Royal Festival Hall and in any case, is not significantly different, or better, than either the studio recording or the live NDR reading. The latter is in very good sound indeed and as a result, you would struggle to separate its merits from the studio recording, the former's occasional (otherwise very quiet and non-applauding) audience noises needing to be weighed up against the extra sense of excitement of a live occasion, just tips it in favour for me. That said, if it proves too hard to find, or too expensive, the studio account is an equal substitute, but for me, I am very happy to be nominating an example of Tennstedt's work with the orchestra he led with distinction prior to the London Philharmonic, the NDR Symphony of Hamburg, to be the pick of this bunch: 8.5/10

Carlos Paita

1976 November – Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (Stereo Studio – Lodia)

There cannot be many conductors who have their own record label formed just for them, as well as getting it paid for by other people too, but that is just what happened to Carlos Paita thus allowing him

to preserve his own, often very individual, interpretations for posterity on the Lodia label. Some of his interpretations were very individual indeed, including a Bruckner 8th Symphony where the usual powerhouse Panzer tank reading was dismantled and reassembled in the form of a zippy n' nippy 2 seater sports car, which impressed some listeners, but not all (I include myself in the latter group). This Mahler First, originally issued by Decca on their Phase 4 label before the rights were bought out by Lodia, is not quite so radical, but it is at times very wilful.

If you were to venture onto Lodia's website, you will notice much play has been made comparing Carlos Paita with Furtwangler, which is usually a warning to the battle-hardened listener that the other conductor in question is one who feels free to take huge liberties with the score – and, in this respect, Paita doesn't disappoint even if, in my opinion, he isn't able to pull everything off convincingly.

Indeed, Paita makes his intention clear very early on when, after a very impressive opening few bars, the horns enter and the conductor lingers at the end of the phrases, like Furtwangler seemingly unable to let go. Now, please don't get me wrong – I am all for individuality, especially in a work such as the Mahler First which has an ocean of politically correct recordings that all sound the same, but it needs to be done with a degree of imagination that is in keeping with the spirit of the music. So, I actually liked these slight lingerings, as I also liked the very slow tempo adopted for the build up to the same movement's final climax at the end, the cellos and basses really chugging away to create a tremendous sense of darkness before the climax arrives in a blaze of light – actually, Horenstein and Kletkzi do pretty much the same to equally good effect. Less so, was the application to the brakes that seem to wrong-foot the otherwise excellent Royal Philharmonic a few bars later (bars 408-410, about a minute from the end) to make the melody even more expressive than it needs to be. Worse is to follow in the second movement where, after a decently trenchant opening, the *Trio* arrives and is heralded by a solo horn. Now, we have discussed with Leonard Bernstein (see 1966) how he takes the indications in the score here of *recht gemächlich* (meaning, 'quite leisurely') and *sehr zehrt aber ausdrucksvoll* (very tender but expressive) right up to the red-line, but in comparison with Paita, Lenny sounds like an innocent parish priest. So Paita makes his solo horn play their phrases not just *quite leisurely*, but some five or six times slower than the tempo before - so slowly in fact that the adjective 'leisurely' is all but a mockery. Bizarrely, the strings then immediately pick up their melody at the same speed as the *Ländler* before, only to then slow down to a grinding halt a few bars later, before carrying on again at the original tempo and then slowing down ... you get the picture, which is more than I think the Royal Philharmonic string players did, as you can virtually hear their uncertainty at what the conductor is doing and will/might do next.

This is all the more frustrating as, elsewhere, Paita is actually very good indeed, often bordering on being superb. The close of his Huntsman's Funeral is wonderfully dark etched and evocative (who would have thought anyone would find 50 shades of grey in the music here?), whilst the opening of the final movement is superbly dramatic with the wind-down into the first lyrical section very sensitively and imaginatively handled. As this movement progressed, I became increasingly impressed at the skill displayed by the conductor in dovetailing all the various sections together into one mighty whole, while at the same time allowing real individuality and imagination to take wing - his fanfares are slow and declamatory but convincing, while the long lyrical passages are as hushed and heartfelt as any. Pity that the whole thing is allowed to build up a tremendous head of steam, which is then undone in the coda that's pulled around mercilessly.

A real mixed bag of curate's eggs this one then, presented in true Decca Phase 4 house style with an extremely wide dynamic range which occasionally distorts during the heaviest climaxes. Unfortunately, the occasional flashes of brilliance here are undone by the conducting eccentricities elsewhere, so I'm going to sit on the fence with this one with: 5/10

1977

A remarkable year that saw Tennstedt set down the First Symphony as the initial instalment of his cycle with the London Philharmonic for EMI (see 1976), the first of Seiji Ozawa's, plus Bernard Haitink performing it live in Amsterdam on Christmas Day (see 1962)

Seiji Ozawa

1977 October 3 – 17th – Boston Symphony Orchestra (Stereo Studio – Deutsche Grammophon)

1987 October – Boston Symphony Orchestra (Digital Live – Philips)

2008 September 6-9th – Saito Kinen Orchestra (Digital Live – Decca/NHK DVD)

There is a well-known New York based music critic who is of the opinion that Mahler's First Symphony more or less "plays itself" and that problems only begin when conductors start trying to impose their own ideas on the piece and then get in the way. He is right, of course, but the problem of trying to perform this symphony 'straight', as it were, is that unless you are a magician like Kubelik or early Tennstedt, it runs the risk of everything sounding a little bland. Perhaps this is why he rates Seiji Ozawa's Boston recordings of the Mahler First very highly, whereas I find them ... well, a little bland. That may be a tad unkind of my part, not least since elsewhere I am critical of other conductors who do try and impose their own ideas upon the music, but the point is there is a very fine line between blandness and parody with Mahler, with too many conductors unable to find that elusive middle-way. That I think Ozawa just a touch bland will therefore tell you that he does nothing that will raise any eyebrows, with always very fine orchestral playing and decent sounding recordings. There is in fact very little difference between the three readings listed above, all of which clock in around the 54 minute mark. Maybe the earlier Boston recording for Deutsche Grammophon is marginally fresher than the remake for Philips, plus has a breezily conducted *Blumine* as a convenient makeweight, however I do think that on both recordings the orchestra lacks a bit of 'heft' which results in the music sounding a little lightweight in the heaviest climaxes, even if the clarity achieved is impressive.

No such problems beset the final recording from 2008 with the Saito Kinen Orchestra. This orchestra was originally formed in 1984 and was made up of former pupils of Hideo Saito, who co-founded the Toho Gakuen School Music which played such a prominent part in introducing Western classical music to Japan as well as launching the career of these musicians. Over the years, whether due to these pupils retiring or otherwise, the composition of the ensemble seemed to resemble more 'Seiji and Friends', a kind of Japanese festival orchestra to rival Claudio's in Lucerne and indeed, if you watch the DVD you will spot members of both the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics, as well as other musicians, who could not possibly have been pupils of Mr Saito. Humbly, the orchestra also has a *blind* violinist who is a regular member as well, to which the entire organisation and Ozawa deserve huge credit. The symphony is available on different formats, the CD issue comes coupled with the first half of the concert that featured Mozart's *32nd Symphony*, spiritedly played and decidedly un-HiP, whereas the (well directed) DVD features a performance of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* from the previous year. Both capture a 'festival' sense of occasion which is the shot in the arm Ozawa's (same as in Boston) interpretation needed to elevate it from blandness to riveting, plus the orchestra plays with more power and panache than the Boston Symphony as well. If I have a grumble it is that, unfortunately, the acoustics in the hall are a little dry and results in a lack of bloom to the sound which detracts somewhat from the overall satisfaction of listening to the symphony. For me then, with Seiji, you can do better elsewhere than the Boston accounts, but the Saito Kinen performance is very good and would have been even more so in better sound: 8/10

1978

The first of two 'sleepers' from behind the Iron Curtain

Herbert Kegel

1978 May 9th – Leipzig Radio Symphony Orchestra (Stereo Live – Weitblick)

*1979 November 5th – 8th – Dresden Philharmonic Orchestra (Stereo Studio – Eterna) ***

The Dresden born Herbert Kegel (1920-1990) was another of those conductors who seemed content to go about their careers quietly with East German ensembles, in his case leading the Leipzig Radio Symphony and Dresden Philharmonic Orchestras, both which feature on recordings by him above of Mahler's First Symphony. However, he was married to the striking-looking Italian soprano, Celestina Casapietra, a frequent collaborator of Franco Corelli; she and Kegel became something of a 'glamour couple' in East Germany during his lifetime, which probably helped stifle his ambitions to further his career elsewhere. As a consequence, his work and recordings are little known in the West, which is ironic as he seems awfully familiar with the 1966 recording of Mahler's First Symphony by a certain American conductor, namely Leonard Bernstein. Examples where Kegel is clearly influenced by that recording are too numerous to be coincidental, but they include the same slowing at the expressive marking at bars 98-99 in the first movement (only Bernstein – on record – had done that by this point), the very deliberate opening of the second movement with the almost unique and very obvious observation of the rest between the second and third notes of the violins' first entry, plus the sprint finish at the end of the coda of the last movement. Perhaps this doesn't really matter for, as Simon Rattle once cheerfully admitted in an interview with Richard Osborne: "All conducting is plagiarism" and if you add what Kegel brings to the party, namely better sound than the 1966 CBS engineers could muster, plus an orchestra with a more authentic "eastern European" timbre than the New York Philharmonic for Bernstein (brilliant though the latter are), then it all adds up to something very considerable indeed.

Indeed, there are a couple of reasons why Kegel's Mahler First is truly top notch and, in my opinion, deserving of the highest praise and currency. First is his treatment of the *Trio* of the second movement – most of the conductors in this survey play this 'straight' in which case it can sometimes become boring, or they try and make something of it, at which point they overplay their hand and the music becomes mannered; fewer than you would think get it right. Yet somehow Kegel pilots a middle course, the music becoming at once arch, playful and sardonic, while at the same time not becoming exaggerated – it's truly brilliantly done - as is the final movement, which is white hot from first note to last; nobody is more exciting in this movement than Kegel, not even Bernstein. All the more surprising then is the hesitant and polite applause which greets the end of live relay with the Leipzig Radio orchestra, as if members of the Stasi were in the audience that night and nobody wanted to draw attention to themselves. That said, there is very little to choose between that radio relay and the studio account from the following year – at certain moments, the live broadcast is fractionally faster, for example, at the stormy central development section of the final movement, but the studio account without the audience noises or occasional orchestral mistake, in better sound and with just as high a voltage flowing through the proceedings, is easily the better proposition of the two, although the Leipzig broadcast is no mean achievement either.

In Tony Duggan's survey, he awarded Kegel his 'wildcard' nomination - I can understand this, as Kegel is occasionally slightly wilful – if always convincing - in his approach, as outlined above. However, in my opinion, these 'negatives' are vastly outweighed by the huge positives elsewhere and so I have no hesitate in 'promoting' Kegel to a full mainstream, must-have recommendation: 8.5/10

1979

An end-of-the-decade flurry – a rare account of the work from Paris with Maazel (see 1960), a live one from Bavaria with Kubelik (see 1954), the Detroit Symphony captured live in London with Dorati (see 1951), as well as the second of Herbert Kegel's accounts this time in the studio (see 1978), the start of a long-forgotten nearly-cycle from London, plus another from Prague

Vaclav Neumann

1979 October 3-8th - Czech Philharmonic Orchestra (Studio Stereo – Supraphon)

1992 September 10-12th – Czech Philharmonic Orchestra (Live Digital – Exton)

Recorded as part of Neumann's cycle of the nine symphonies, plus the Adagio of the 10th and captured in warm natural sound by Supraphon's engineers, the 1979 studio recording is a decent First Symphony. Somewhat predictably, the highlights are the famous Czech Philharmonic woodwinds who add a colour and piquancy to the music making, especially in the central movements as only they can. With a running time of around 52 minutes, Neumann's is a direct and unfussy interpretation, that misses out the first movement's exposition repeat. However, I did find his second movement somewhat deliberate and four-square (even though I appreciated his horns, rude and assertive), the opening of the finale not as dramatic and cataclysmic as many others, plus the final two orchestral chords are curiously interpreted, slowly and with the second deliberately softer than the first, as if Mahler's Titan hero has been felled and had fallen to the ground dead. That was not convincing. Those final chords are re-enacted in exactly the same way in the later 'live' recording (in front of a very quiet, non-applauding audience), very well captured by the Exton engineers, but as with Bernard Haitink, I'm not sure that the volatile and exciting First Symphony shows Neumann at his best in Mahler. If you want to hear the Czech Philharmonic in this symphony – and they do bring so much local character and colour to the music – then the later recording with Ken-Ichiro Kobayashi, although not perfect, is by far the best one to have (see 1998). However, for me, Neumann is: 7/10

Harold Farberman

1979 November 19th – London Symphony Orchestra (Stereo Studio – Vox)

If you are anything like me, you probably haven't heard of Harold Farberman (1929-2018) before – he was a US-born percussionist, conductor and composer who began his career as the youngest member of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, before leaving to become a conductor. Marin Alsop was one of his pupils for a while. His Mahler symphony cycle for Vox was eventually abandoned mid-flight and was notable at the time for his comments claiming that Mahler was generally played "too fast" and true to his word, this 59 minute interpretation of the First Symphony is indeed one of the longest you will encounter in this survey – only Charles Adler in 1952, Leif Segerstam and Adam Fischer in 1989 are as slow.

Unlike Adler though, Farberman has at his disposal the expert Mahler Firstians in the form of the 1979 model London Symphony Orchestra which helps his cause immensely, not least in maintaining intensity when the music gets very quiet and slow, where by comparison Adler's hard working Vienna Symphony sounds merely cautious. That said, it is hard to work out the *why* of Farberman's approach – there are no Celibidachian textural insights at these slowish tempos, nor any interpretative revelations of an Adam Fischer variety with the Kassel Festival Orchestra in 1989. To be fair, much of the performance is conventionally paced – the two central movements, as well as when the music gets stormy and loud in the outer ones, will not raise any eyebrows at all. It's only when it all dies down that the conductor applies the brake pedal, not always to positive effect. For example, Farberman's opening bird calls are very "un-bird" like indeed, so slow are they - and when this passage of music

returns in the development sections of the First and fourth movements, the music becomes dangerously becalmed and just about survives only due to the concentrated playing of the LSO. Mahler wrote that this music was supposed to depict the awakening of Nature after a long winter and to be frank, it sounds in Farberman's hands like waking up with a huge hangover too and, as with all hangovers, I was pleased when it (eventually) came to an end. 4/10

1980

Two key recordings this year, Zubin Mehta's second studio recording this time in New York (see 1963), plus a film of Kubelik with his Bavarians (see 1954).

1981

1981 witnessed the final concert of Kirill Kondrashin's distinguished career, which just so happened to finish with Mahler's First Symphony (see 1969), as well as the first of Claudio Abbado's and the only one of Leonard Slatkin's

Leonard Slatkin

1981 27-29 March – St Louis Symphony Orchestra (Digital Studio – Telarc)

Leonard Slatkin is another of those conductors who can be maddeningly inconsistent. This writer remembers the time of auditioning his complete symphonies of Vaughan Williams on RCA with the Philharmonia Orchestra, professional and uninspired, no more, but containing therein a performance of the Third Symphony of such rare nobility and grandeur that it was worth listening to the other eight just to get to it.

So I'm sure, likewise, some of Slatkin's Mahler recordings are very good indeed, but this First Symphony is not one of them. Actually, to be fair, it isn't bad – the sound is very good (although none of Telarc's traditional "health warnings" for your speakers are needed this time), the playing decent and dedicated and nothing is unusual or wrong with the direction from the podium. This relaxed, genial approach actually yields quite good dividends in the first three movements, but the final one is just, well, 'professional and uninspired': 6.5/10

Claudio Abbado

1981 21-23 February – Chicago Symphony Orchestra (Digital Studio – Deutsche Grammophon) [review](#)

1983 17 May – London Symphony Orchestra ((Digital Live – Lucky Ball)

1989 19 December – Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Live – Deutsche Grammophon)

1991 17th February – Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Live – Pandora's Box)

2009 11th August – Lucerne Festival Orchestra (Digital Live – EuroArts DVD) ** [review](#)

There is no doubt that Claudio Abbado is one of the most important interpreters of Mahler in history, although his three "nearly" cycles split between Chicago-Vienna- Berlin for DG, until finally with the Lucerne Festival Orchestra in his final years, do tend to split opinion, perhaps due to his priorities of clarity and transparency of texture, with everything always tastefully done, which does not always sit easily with some of the excesses of Mahler's scores. For me, I have to confess to enjoying some of his recordings of Mahler much more than others, too many of which I feel fall into the "worthy but dull" category, but it had been a while since I heard him in the First Symphony, so I was curious to hear how he fared

As with every conductor in this survey, I listened to his five listed recordings in chronological order with most interesting results. Almost uniquely in this survey, is Abbado's observation of the virtually

impossible Mahler's *ppp* marking at two points in the score, specifically at the point when the cellos and basses start chugging away in the lead up to the climax at the end of the first movement, as well as when the same passage is repeated in the last movement during the lead up to the coda (bars 337 and 607 respectively – where the score is marked *langames crescendo*) – only Andrew Litton (see 1986) attempts anything similar, with most other conductors content to allow a more general *piano* attempt by the orchestra. There's much logic to the latter approach, as it certainly sucks a lot of momentum out of the proceedings, as it does with Abbado's first recording in Chicago, which sounds as if the effect has been enhanced from the control room, too. In the middle recordings from London, Berlin and Vienna, it is not as extreme, but in the final recording from Lucerne it is attempted again and almost convinces. The Chicago recording lasts around 54 minutes and is, unsurprisingly, superbly played by the orchestra and captured in fine digital sound with a very wide dynamic range which perhaps exaggerates the point above. That aside, it is a straightforward reading, simple and direct albeit with a superb opening, but with the remainder a little ordinary, a good middle-of-the-road recording, all things considered.

Fast forwarding to London in 1983 is quite an experience ! This concert was part of the International Webern Festival in 1983 and finds Abbado the Younger in more fiery form than in later years captured in surprisingly good sound for the Barbican in London. This reading at 53 minutes is the swiftest of the group and features the least impressive orchestral playing too, the odd split brass note here and there revealing music-making being made in the heat of the moment, which sees the tuba at the close of the second movement hanging on for dear life. However, it is also the most exciting of Abbado's readings and reveals, for the first time, another facet of the conductor's evolving interpretation where, at the beginning of the second movement, he observes Mahler's change in tempo indication in the fifth bar. Indeed, in London this is executed superbly (rather less so in Berlin and Vienna, but curiously ignored in Lucerne) and, whether by design or radio microphone placement, the stormy central development section of the final moment has the tam tam making its presence felt excitingly to the proceedings, too. All in all, this would have been a great night at the concert hall, with an attentive, if not totally quiet audience, who show much appreciation at the end – as did I, for this proved to be a hugely involving listen, for all of its flaws.

Comparing the London performance to Abbado's Berlin recording proved most revealing. This performance marked the occasion when Abbado succeeded Herbert von Karajan as principal conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic and garnered much praise and attention at the time of its release. As a reading, it is very similar to the London account but also introduces an additional interpretive decision that will remain in the following readings in Vienna and Lucerne, where the expressive marking for the flute and oboe in the first movement (at bars 98-99, shortly after the *Ging heut' Morgen über's Feld* theme has started with the cellos) sees the tempo lingering at the end of the phrase, an idea first adopted by Bernstein with his New York reading in 1966 and taken up by a few other conductors (but not all) as discussed elsewhere. With a super-quiet audience (you can hear rustles between movements, as well as of course, huge cheers at the end) and very good sound, plus the Berlin Philharmonic in imperious form, you would think this would be a standout recording. However, comparisons with the early London performance does not do it any favours – there is no doubt that the Berlin PO was the better orchestra at the time and they do play better than the LSO, but the overall conclusions are that they merely sound better rehearsed and less involved which, I have to confess, came as a surprise to me.

Some eighteen months later, there's another live recording which finds Abbado in front of the Vienna Philharmonic in a concert that opened with an extremely fine Mozart Symphony 29. If the sound of this radio relay promised much during the Mozart, it rather lets the listener down in the Mahler after the interval with the brass somewhat to the fore in the sound picture, exciting if mercilessly exposing

a bad night at the office for the first horn. As a performance, it is a notch below the previous Berlin account in effectiveness, so I daresay this is one is for completists only.

The final recording from Lucerne some eighteen years later in 2009, encounters Abbado the Elder. If he always looked impossibly young and stylish up until his mid sixties, after his near-death encounter with stomach cancer in 2000 at the age of 67, he thereafter always looked impossibly gaunt and skeletal. Partly as a consequence of his illness, he resigned from the BPO in 2002, only to reform the Lucerne Festival Orchestra the following year, with players hand-picked by Abbado himself with almost optimal rehearsal conditions (sections rehearse separately before the combining to form the full orchestra). Abbado's concerts with the Lucerne orchestra were always red-letter days in the musical calendar, the performances often broadcast on television and filmed for posterity. Some critics have made the point that the sound of this 'super-league' orchestra lacked the distinction which marks out the more established ensembles in the world and while with composers such as Bruckner, they may have a point, personally I am less worried with the almost kaleidoscopic sound-world of Mahler. What is more relevant perhaps, is the sense that every single player is totally at one with their conductor's vision of the score, something that I felt only happens with one other recording in this survey (Airpad Joo's in 1983). Likewise with this survey, I have always auditioned the DVDs by listening to an audio-only version of the recording first, as it is the performance I am most interested in, rather than the vision of the director. That said for the technophobes, the DVD is of Video: 1080i 16:9 with sound of DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 – for the mere mortals (myself included), I can confirm the sound is rich and full, with unobtrusive and natural camera work that focuses as much on the conductor (who conducts without a baton on this occasion) as on the orchestra, with a first half performance of the Prokofiev Third Piano Concerto featuring Yuja Wang as the soloist. With regards to the actual performance itself, to my ears it seems to be the culmination of many years conducting Mahler, realised in virtually ideal conditions. Time and time again, my ear caught incidental details of Mahler's orchestration that you simply do not hear in other performances, all perfectly inter-woven within the perfectly balanced musical fabric, with absolutely perfect clarity of layer upon layer of phrases all neatly dovetailed and tucked into the wider musical picture. Nothing is ever underlined or highlighted, as is the wont of many other conductors, everything is naturally and tastefully executed by a collection of musicians with a unified vision of just the kind of performance they are aiming to deliver. This is a different kind of Mahler to the thrills 'n spills of the younger Abbado with the London Symphony Orchestra in 1983 and one which rewards careful listening, rather than fast-forwarding to favourite moments. In short, it is page after page of perfectly executed, gloriously balanced music making, whether at the softest pianissimos or at the loudest climaxes, the likes of which you hear only very rarely. Now please don't misunderstand me – Osmo Vänskä tried something similar with his recording in 2018 on BIS, but that performance merely became a mundane exercise in clarity whereas with Abbado, drawing upon his experiences leading La Scala and the Vienna State Opera, there is also a tremendous sense of drama to the proceedings as well. In short, this Mahler First with the Lucerne Festival Orchestra conducted by Abbado may not be the most exciting in this survey, nor the most intense, nor even the most colourful or characterful, but it is possibly the most *perfect* – and for that, it deserves huge respect and admiration: 9/10

1982

A rare outing with Antal Dorati in Mahler from Japan (see 1951), plus the final of Igor Markevitch's (see 1969)

1983

A quiet year saw the release of the second of Georg Solti's studio recordings (see 1957), a live recording from London with Abbado (see 1981), plus a 'sleeper' from Amsterdam ...

Airpad Joo

*1983 July – Amsterdam Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Studio – ARTS) ***

The Hungarian born, but US naturalised citizen, Airpad Joo (1948-2014) is another name who I was not very familiar with before this survey, but the diligent collectors amongst you out there may well have his 5 CD set of the complete works of Liszt on Hungaroton with the Budapest Symphony Orchestra – and very good that is too - as is this Mahler First Symphony. If you pressed me as to what makes it so good, I may struggle to explain, as merely saying 'everything sounds right' sometimes doesn't quite cut it. Except, due to some mysterious alchemy, everything does here. Indeed, there is a case for saying this is one of the finest conducted accounts in the whole survey, inasmuch whilst every bar of the interpretation not only sounds right, but every member of the Amsterdam Philharmonic Orchestra seems to agree and is totally at one with their conductor too. Captured in bright and clear sound in an open acoustic that has a very slight reverberation, this sounds to me to be like one of those performances where absolutely everything goes right during its 54 minutes duration and if the klezmer music has a certain Hungarian spiciness in its colour and rhythms, no doubt reflecting Joo's own childhood upbringing, it is despatched with such winning conviction that it also sounds hugely appropriate too. If there is a slight grumble, then maybe it's that the orchestra's string choir doesn't quite the heft and depth of their more illustrious rivals from the same city – in the first movement this means the music sparkles rather than caresses the ear, which isn't a bad trade off, but during the long lyrical sections of the final movement, the lack of heft does rather mean the emotional impact of the music is slightly compromised. To my mind, this is a relevant, if not ultimately a significant, criticism. However, that aside, this is a super performance of the work and if you were to give this recording to someone to listen to the symphony for the first time, you would be doing them a huge favour – and perhaps, all things considered, no higher compliment can be given than that. 8.5/10

1984

Another "quiet" year, but one with an oft-overlooked account from Riccardo Muti in Philadelphia ...

Riccardo Muti

1984 February 18-24th – Philadelphia Orchestra (Digital Studio – EMI)

If I had reason to grumble about the lack of string tone from the otherwise excellent Airpad Joo account from Amsterdam in 1983, there is of course no such grumbles about the string tone from the fabulous Philadelphians, this time under the baton of Riccardo Muti in 1984. They were of course magnificent as well under Ormandy in 1969, although the sound afforded to them by the CBS engineers for that recording never did them justice – unlike here, where EMI capture them in all their glory. That said, whilst Muti does occasionally conduct Mahler (the First crops up quite often in his programmes, plus I'm aware of him conducting – rather well – the Fourth and Ninth Symphonies too), there are moments in this recording where his conducting, whilst correct, is a little unidiomatic. Examples of this would include his treatment of the *Ging heut' Morgen über's Feld* theme in the first movement which is a little detached, or the *Trio* of the second movement likewise somewhat po-faced, as well as the klezmer music in the third movement – even if they are all despatched most

beautifully by the orchestra. On the other hand, the final movement is terrific – fiery, passionate, grand and exciting, it's one of the best in this survey. Ultimately, this one was slightly hard to judge – at their best for example, Haitink and Mehta both offer more idiomatic Mahlerian experiences, but the combination here of a great orchestra firing on all cylinders for their conductor, captured in super sound by EMI, all adds up to a more compelling listening experience than the best those two other Mahlerians can offer – and maybe ultimately, that is what really matters. 8/10

1985

Bertini in Berlin, Tennstedt in London (see 1976), plus Inbal on Denon

Gary Bertini

1985 7th February – Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Live – Fachmann)

1991 21-23rd November – Cologne Radio Symphony Orchestra (Digital Live -EMI) [review](#)

If the opening of this symphony is supposed to depict the awakening of spring after a long dark winter, what better work for the Berlin Philharmonic to be playing in February 1985 after they too emerged from a long and bitter cold war with their then chief conductor Herbert von Karajan ? And from the mists the Berliners seemingly appear as well, the recording being a little distant with a slight echo and not ideally clear ...

That Gary Bertini led a relatively 'quiet' career during his lifetime is often forgotten about, since his posthumous reputation has blossomed mainly due to his recordings of Mahler's Symphonies 1-9 and *Das Lied von der Erde* for EMI, a set you could comfortably nominate as being one of the most consistent, if not the most consistent, so far recorded. For me, I would happily buy the whole box just for his electrifying account of the Eighth, but all the others are extremely good too and if it is possible to find better recordings of each of them, there are certainly no weak links. As it is with the First Symphony – both of the above recordings are very good rather than outstanding with, somewhat inevitably, very similar interpretations, the Berlin account being a minute slower in the outer movements mainly due to passages depicting bird calls being taken more leisurely. It is immensely interesting to compare Bertini's Berlin account with the recording made with Bernard Haitink with the same orchestra a couple of years later (see 1962) – the later studio account sees Haitink commandeering what sounds like a bright and shiny steamroller, crushing all before it, whereas under Bertini the orchestra sounds infinitely more flexible and alive to the ebb and flow of the music and the performance is more successful as a result. It's a pity, then, that the sonics are distant, not ideally clear and reveal a slight echo – it is not bad, but the sound afforded to the later Cologne account is so much fuller and richer, with much more incidental detail to enjoy. So this is the best of the two and reveals Bertini to be a fresh and direct interpreter, typified by the second movement *Ländler*, swift and exuberant with the middle *Trio* affectionate and characterful, without being OTT. Both final movements are fine and if you will find more excitement elsewhere, there's no denying the satisfying results Bertini obtains overall. In Berlin, the audience cheers at the end are left in, but by some magic, the appreciation of the Cologne crowd has somehow been scrubbed out by the recording engineers, although you do hear the old rustle from them at the beginning of the whole work. For me, the Cologne account is an extremely good, if not great, Mahler First – if you can find the box of the whole symphonies, once available on a EMI super-budget priced box set, then grab it, but you can do better with the First Symphony elsewhere, even if not by much: 7.5/10

Eliahu Inbal

1985 28th February & 1st March – Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra (Digital Studio – Denon)

2011 November 3 – 4th – Czech Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Live – Exton)

2012 15th September – Tokyo Metropolitan Orchestra (Digital Live – Exton)

Between 1985 and 1988, Eliahu Inbal recorded the first digital cycle of the complete Mahler Symphonies (excluding the completed Tenth, that was eventually recorded in 1992), a cycle noteworthy for two particular reasons the first of which, uniquely as far as I'm aware, was to record each symphony in chronological order. The second, perhaps more pertinent, reason concerns the recording process which involved Denon, who prided themselves on the use of a minimal number of microphones (often only two), with a small number of auxiliary mics reserved for pieces with larger or more complex forces. In Mahler, aided and abetted by Inbal's preferred orchestral seating of the first and second violins in opposition to each other, with basses to the right and cellos in the middle, they achieved remarkable inner-voice detail, as well as clarity of counterpoint and orchestral textures, without the need for spotlighting or highlighting as was the norm elsewhere at the time. Occasionally, the trade-off was a certain lack of sonic fire power that a microphone hovering above the bass drum would happily provide, although of course then there was also no need for health warnings to be printed on the booklet notes to preserve the life of listeners's speakers *à la* Telarc.

Indeed, a sense of naturalness is invested in nearly every bar of Inbal's 54 minute recording with the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra – nothing sounds forced, underlined, or out of place and the symphony unfolds with a spontaneity that is hugely attractive. The irony is that when Inbal does try and do something a little more interventionist, such as with the *Trio* in the second movement, it sounds mannered and stiff, out of place with the naturalness elsewhere, even if he is hardly doing anything that isn't notated in the score or that other conductors have done similarly, or with even more exaggeration, elsewhere. Overall, it is a satisfying, rather than revelatory listen.

Over a quarter of a century later, Inbal can be found performing the symphony on record again, this time live (albeit in "live and patch" sessions, according to the label, which would explain the absence of audience applause), but again with a recording company renowned for its high fidelity, Exton. Indeed, readers need to be aware that there are two issues of the Czech Philharmonic recording, one standard with the other being a "one point microphone" version, perhaps a nod to the former recording from Frankfurt. Except it is a disaster, probably due to the microphone being in the wrong place, which means the woodwind and brass dominate the sound-picture – it reminded me of my penniless student days when all I could afford was the "cheap seats" behind the orchestra. This issue is super-expensive too, but I cannot in all good conscience recommend it at all.

The standard issue also has problems. Somewhat predictably, since they were taped within a year of each other, there are very little differences between the readings in Prague and Tokyo, but both are different from the earlier Frankfurt version, with tauter openings and marginally faster finishes to the first and fourth movements culminating in knocking some two to three minutes off of the playing time from the earlier recording (all three readings include the first movement's exposition repeat). Clearly Inbal, having lived and conducted the music extensively since 1985, had rethought the music with the result that instead of allowing everything to unfold naturally as before, he now knew when to apply pressure to the musical pulse as well. So now the second movement's *Trio* doesn't sound out of place with Inbal's interpretation of it and the whole thing also feels not only natural, but also very exciting when it needs to be too. In this regard – and somewhat to my surprise – it was the second reading from Tokyo that I preferred, as it is fractionally more exciting at key moments and the orchestra yields little to their illustrious counterparts from the Czech Republic, maybe only the odd local colouring here and there in the second movement. Using conventional methods, the Exton engineers achieve

exceptionally fine sound too and I found myself enjoying both these recordings very much indeed - except, as I hinted earlier, there is a problem – and the problem is Inbal himself. Readers will doubtlessly know that on occasion, some conductors are prone to various vocalisations – singing, shouting, grunts, shouts and stamps are all in their repertoire, the worst offenders being Colin Davis and Ken-ichiro Kobayashi. However, if you add those two's vocal contributions together and then double it, you will equal Eliahu Inbal in Prague and Tokyo. For me this is a real pity, as the later recording could have been really good, but there are times when listening to it that it starts to resemble the final movement of the Fourth Symphony such are the conductor's vocalisations. For me then, it gets a very cautious recommendation – I want to nudge it into the higher 8 plus recommended bracket, but readers do need to be aware of the negative contribution of the conductor which, combined with the high price point that Exton issues command outside of Japan, probably means that you should try and sample this one first before purchasing: 8/10

1986

A year of re-recordings, with Lorin Maazel's second with the Vienna Philharmonic (see 1961), plus Zubin Mehta's third (see 1963), this time once more in Israel, plus Wakasugi's first recording with the Dresden Staatskapelle ...

Hiroshi Wakasugi

1986 23-29 August – Dresden Staatskapelle (Digital Studio – Eterna)

Hiroshi Wakasugi (1935 – 2009) has the distinction of being only one of two conductors in this survey to have recorded both the five movement *Titan* tone-poem version of the score (see the introduction above), as well as the standard four movement First Symphony (the other is Francois-Xavier Roth). I thought his account of the *Titan* was very impressive as a performance and was looking forward to hearing how he navigated the later version of the score with the Dresden Staatskapelle, a recording that is only available now in Japan. What was immediately apparent from the opening pages was the sound of the horns, retaining their Eastern European vulnerability and wobble, that heralds a lively and sprightly first movement. Indeed, the colour and personality the orchestra brings to the music is remarkable and fully exploited by the conductor, especially during the inner movements which are neat and characterful. In fact, the performance of the first three movements are very impressive indeed, so it is a pity, then, that the priority in the final movement appears to be clarity over power, which means the music-making consistently remains earthbound. Even when some momentum is generated as the finale takes wing, there is an unmarked 'Luftpause' just before the final page which momentarily, but critically, brings everything to a standstill – bad edit, or bad interpretive decision, I cannot say, but it does the performance no favours: 6/10

1987

Lenny's classic account with the Concertgebouw, in more than one version (see 1966), Haitink's third recording of the symphony for Philips (see 1962), Ozawa's second with the Boston Symphony (see 1977), plus one from a very young Andrew Litton in London ...

Andrew Litton

1987 July & August – Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Studio – Virgin)

Andrew Litton has given some very fine Mahler over the years, not least on the Delos label with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. This recording is of a much earlier vintage, set down when he was still in his twenties. As such, there is much to commend it, from the bright and clear recorded sound, plus the

committed playing of the RPO. Even at this early age, Litton shows himself to be a master of Mahlerian rubato, not least in the *Wayfarer* music in the first movement, as well as the long lyrical paragraphs of the final movement, which are delivered with a hushed intensity. He also observes, as few do, the *ppp* marking at the lead up to the climax of the first movement (see bar 337 – where the score is marked *langames crescendo*) and does it more convincingly than Abbado does in Lucerne, for example. In short, this is a very fine account, perhaps lacking something in the 'X factor' of others, but is by no means bad at all. 7/10

1988

A rare outing for Colin Davis in Mahler, plus another from Slovakia

Colin Davis

1988 April – Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra (Digital Studio – Novalis)

Colin Davis isn't perhaps the first name that springs to mind with Mahler, but he could occasionally be depended upon to be a reliable guide with this composer. This 1988 release of the First features first class orchestral playing, as you would expect from the Bavarians, plus very good sound and at 56 minutes, is a relaxed and sunny reading – perhaps a bit too relaxed at certain places with some very inauthentic rubato on the part of the conductor too. This is one of those solid, middle-of-the-road performances which will neither lead you astray, but (as a certain Mr Wilcox liked to inform me) likewise won't blow your proverbial socks off either. 7/10

Zdenek Kosler

1988 March 19-22nd – Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Studio – Naxos)

Zdenek Kosler (1928-1998) should have had impeccable Mahlerian credentials, having been born in Czechoslovakia and being for a while assistant to Leonard Bernstein during the latter's tenure at the New York PO. If Mahler was from Bohemia, which is now the Czech Republic, Kosler's orchestra for this 53 minute interpretation of the First Symphony on the budget Naxos label is from neighbouring Slovakia, and can almost claim some authenticity too; indeed, I especially liked the colour they brought to the interpretation, particularly the clarinets and horns, even if the string section is a little lightweight. The sound provided by Naxos is decent, no more, occasionally a little shrill, but also with some unnatural spotlighting, especially the tuba in the final movement. All in all, this isn't bad - however, in the first movement Kosler indulges himself by slowing certain passages down before accelerating back to the original tempo for reasons I found hard to fathom musically and for which there are no indications to justify doing so in the score. Try bars 409-412 in the first movement, which really spoil the whole performance. Even at 'bargain' price, this one isn't a bargain: 4/10

1989

The decade ends with a flurry of releases – two real wildcards, one from Japan, another from Mahler's former home-town of Kassel, which are definitely worth investigating. One of two from Giuseppe Sinopoli, Wakasugi's second recording, this time of the original version (see above in introduction), with another from a pupil of both Leonard Bernstein and Bernard Haitink. A rare appearance by the Cleveland Orchestra in this symphony under Christoph von Dohnanyi is counterbalanced by yet another appearance by the London Symphony Orchestra, plus in December Claudio Abbado marked the beginning of his tenure with the Berlin Philharmonic with concerts of the First Symphony too (see 1986)

....

Kazuo Yamada

1989 – Yomiuri Nippon Symphony Orchestra (Live Digital – Exton)

Kazuo Yamada (1912 – 1991) – not to be confused with his younger namesake, Kazuki Yamada - was a Japanese conductor and composer, too little known in the West, but was from all accounts a fine Mahlerian. This live account from 1989 has only recently been issued by Exton and is interesting for many reasons, not least the inclusion of *Blumine* as the second movement, which most conductors take around six minutes over, but Yamada stretches out to an incredible, record-breaking ten minutes (the remainder of the symphony lasts a more conventional 55 minutes). That he succeeds is testimony to the dedication he inspires from his orchestra which, while it isn't the New York PO, plays very well and like demons possessed in the final movement (during which the conductor had to remove his glasses and toss them onto the floor, such was his own involvement!). In between, there is much humour, both sly and sardonic, during the standard second and third movements in a performance that must have been fantastic live in the concert hall. My only grumble would be the final two notes, taken slowly and emphatically, but at that point I am prepared to forgive Maestro Yamada anything. A terrific performance. 8/10

Adam Fischer

*1989 July 8th - Gustav Mahler Fest Kassel Festival Orchester (Live ARS) ***

2017 Feb 10-12th – Dusseldorf SO – (Live AVI) [review](#)

Some three decades separate these two performances from Adam Fischer, brother of Ivan, no relation to Thierry, as well as an astonishing five minutes. The later Düsseldorf performance has been well received by my colleagues on MWI, as well as winning BBC Music Magazine's orchestral recording of the year for 1989 – however, I am less convinced. At 53 minutes, it is more conventional than earlier recordings, but to my mind it was no more than a very good modern performance, with no special insights or highlights. Indeed, there is an unmarked *Luftpause* just before the final movement's coda which basically sums up the performance for me, destroying any momentum previously built up and then struggling to get going again.

The earlier recording, however, is a completely different matter. The performance(s) – a composite of two in one day, although there's no applause – are from the now abandoned Mahler Festival from Kassel, a German city where Mahler briefly found work as a conductor in 1883 made with a festival orchestra with players from all the major central European orchestras. They aren't faultless in their execution, but they are certainly enthusiastic. The performance, captured in superb SACD sound in its latest incarnation, is lengthy at over 58 minutes, but it is only in three sections of the score where the reading really piles on the minutes, the first of which occurs in the second movement's *Trio*. After this movement has opened with a conventionally paced and spiritedly played *Ländler*, Fischer then plays the central *Trio* very slowly and in doing so, considerably alters the character of the music, making it more haunted and wistful than usual – certainly, it is very beautifully played by the orchestra with much inward concentration and whilst I'm not sure Mahler was actually looking for quite such a level of intensity at this point in the symphony, I suppose it is a valid view-point. Likewise, the long lyrical sections of the last movement are also delivered extremely slowly, very hushed, almost in the manner of the opening of the final movement of the Third Symphony. Most remarkable of all though is the third movement – here the listener encounters Mahler juxtaposing the ridiculous with the sublime, taking a children's rhyme of Frère Jacques (or rather the German equivalent, Bruder Jakob, which Mahler mistakenly names Bruder Martin) before introducing music that evokes a klezmer band, which then segues into the final song of The Wayfarer, where Mahler's weary traveller contemplates eternal sleep under the linden tree. Mahler's original notes for the work describes this movement as depicting a hunter's funeral, the cortege winding its way through the forest followed by all the woodland

creatures and Fischer's interpretation here, especially with its daringly slow treatment of the music after a somberly beautiful double-bass solo has introduced the Bruder Jakob canon, evokes more the stark beauty of a funeral mass, rather than a darkly humorous funeral procession; I have to say that there are many Mahler Firsts in this survey, but none quite like this. Being objective, I am sure the composer had in mind something *cruder*, perhaps even *schmaltzier* than the more rarefied atmosphere that Fischer and his players evoke here, but there is no doubting the originality of the conductor's vision, something he did not repeat with the later, more conventional remake with the Dusseldorf Symphony Orchestra. This one is definitely a 'wildcard'. 8.5/10

Jacek Kaspszyk

1989 October – London Symphony Orchestra (Digital Studio – Collins)

In 1989 Collins Classics was formed and went on to release 130 albums, one of which included this Mahler First Symphony with the London Symphony Orchestra under the Polish conductor Jacek Kaspszyk (b.1952) who, a couple of years later, went on to record *Blumine*, albeit with the Philharmonia Orchestra, that's now placed as a 'coupling' on the most recent releases. All in all this isn't a bad recording at all – the orchestra respond expertly, the sound is very good, the interpretation likewise doesn't put a foot wrong over its 55 minutes, even the eerie central section of the first movement lacks a little intensity, but elsewhere there is very little to find fault with even if, likewise, there is very little to be impressed with either 6.5/10

Edo de Waart

1989 April – Minnesota Orchestra (Digital Studio – Virgin)

1993 October 16th – Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra, Amsterdam (Digital Live -RCA)

2012 June 27th – Royal Flemish Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Studio – Royal Flemish PO) [review](#)

That Edo de Waart (b.1941) not only won the Dimitri Mitropoulos Conducting Competition at the age of 23, then served as Leonard Bernstein's assistant at the New York Philharmonic, before returning to his homeland to be Bernard Haitink's assistant at the Concertgebouw, bodes well for him being a fine Mahlerian. Less so, perhaps, was his assertion, in an interview given around the time of the release of the first of the above recordings, that with Mahler there was "the Bernstein way" and his own way, the "way of understatement".

Indeed, all three of his recordings are quite fine and if de Waart does indeed eschew the grand theatrics and drama of a Bernstein, he instead delights in the nuances of the score, negotiating the tempo shifts subtly and gently, rather than underlining them as many others are wont to do, which I find most distinctive – in short, a true Mahlerian, even if some may find moments such as the second movement's *Trio* or the klezmer music of the third movement a little underplayed. The three recordings all offer a different slant to this approach – the early Minnesota recording is fresh and full of wonder, indeed very fine, a real vote of confidence by Virgin's part on behalf of the conductor, re-recording the same work they had only done a couple of years previously with Litton and the Royal Philharmonic. The later Netherlands Philharmonic recording was taken live from a one off performance is perhaps the most muscular of the three, a neat compromise I guess between de Waart's subtlety and Bernstein's grandeur – the later Flemish recording is a little small-scale in comparison, in spite of a very wide dynamic range and not wholly blemish free in ensemble. You cannot put a fag paper between the merits of all three and if my heart says Minnesota, my head says Netherlands PO, and I'd contend you wouldn't go far wrong with either. 8/10

Christoph von Dohnanyi

1989 March 19th – Cleveland Orchestra (Digital Studio – Decca)

This is probably the best recording in the survey – but only if you wanted to follow the work using a score! Everything is beautifully articulated by the Clevelanders and perfectly captured in warm Decca digital sound, whilst Dohnanyi's interpretation lasts a medium length 55 minutes, includes all repeats and does nothing which will cause any eyebrows to be raised even if, likewise, he doesn't do much to prevent any eyelids from closing either. Here, the whole does not equal the sum of its considerable parts and whilst I don't want to imply that Dohnanyi doesn't inspire his players to perform for him – and, to be fair, they sound positively possessed when compared to the ONdF under Maazel in 1979, for example – everything is all just a bit too perfect, polished and professional, but simply lacking in passion and intensity. In Christoph's Cleveland, this Mahler is constructed in chromium and clear crystal – it's brilliant and gleaming, signifying nothing and if that is how you want your Mahler First to be, then this is the recording for you. 6.5/10

Giuseppe Sinopoli

1989 February – Philharmonia Orchestra (Digital Studio – Deutsche Grammophon)

1992 March 9th – Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Live – NHK DVD*/Pandora's Box CD)*

That Dr Giuseppe Sinopoli also had a degree in medicine is not particularly relevant to his conducting Mahler, but do indulge me here, for whenever I listen to Sinopoli in Mahler, the image which comes to mind is of a Dr Beppe in his laboratory, black curly hair all standing on end and tiny specs balanced on his nose, surrounded by test tubes containing multiple combinations of Mahler's notes from his scores, all revealing colours and textures never seen or heard before, or since. And so it proves, too, with the opening of Mahler's First Symphony where, after the horns have finished sighing their opening phrases, there is a short passage of music before the cellos take up the *Ging heut' Morgen über's Feld* theme. Few conductors pay any attention to this, some (such as Neeme Jarvi on Chandos 1993) even hurry it along, impatient to get to the next melody. Except Sinopoli isn't impatient at all – in his hands (or test tubes), the music takes on a dark and troubled hue, as if threatening clouds have suddenly appeared upon the horizon on this warm summer's dawn, a reminder that with Mahler not everything is all things bright and beautiful, which (of course) is exactly right. So it proves with his reading of the First Symphony, which is brimful of lovely sounds and colours, all executed faithfully by the Philharmonia Orchestra and captured in fine, wide-ranging sound by the DG engineers.

This is Mahler for those folks who are familiar with the music, perhaps even over-familiar or maybe possibly bored with the music (it can happen – try listening to 150 Mahler First recordings over three months!), where you are able to listen to the music intently, maybe even stop the recording and rewind to listen to a passage again, to pause and think about how Sinopoli's unique alchemy makes it all sound and go - except that can sometimes be the problem, with the conductor occasionally stopping to admire the unique combination of sounds he has conjured up from his orchestra, which can result in rather stop-start performances. Actually, in the case of the First Symphony, he isn't too bad although, crucially, he's at his worst in the finale's coda, where the admirable head of steam built up is constantly allowed to escape with the conductor applying the brakes to point out another 'colourful moment' he wants to share with us.

Sinopoli, famously, had a fractious relationship with the Vienna Philharmonic they, allegedly, losing patience with him once as they were convinced he had lost his place in the score mid-performance, so it was interesting to encounter him conducting them in this symphony, live on tour in Japan, a concert that appears to be available both on DVD and CD, the latter in stereo sound which suggests it's a copy from the (much better sounding and digital) DVD. In a concert which opens with a *Don Juan* in which

the central love episodes are so slow you begin to wonder if the good doctor is actually intent on killing the Vienna Philharmonic, the Mahler is (unsurprisingly) very similar in interpretation and design to the Philharmonia studio account, the only difference being that the outer movements are fractionally faster in concert. However, I think it is the studio account which is the pick of the bunch – in my opinion, an interesting listen for those familiar with the music, rather than a mainstream recommendation: 6.5/10

1990

A disappointing start to the decade – a couple of tired sounding renditions, one from the place of one of Mahler's first appointments and yet another from the indefatigable London Symphony Orchestra, plus two from Tennstedt (albeit not his best – see 1976)

Yondani Butt

1990 May 23-24th – London Symphony Orchestra (Digital Studio – IMP)

Another year and another LSO Mahler First for yet another short-lived, now defunct, classical music label, this time being the Innovative Music Productions Ltd, aka IMP. Amongst another hundred or so releases, they included a Beethoven Cycle with Wyn Morris, who the press euphemistically dubbed 'the Celtic Furtwängler' for reasons that have never been entirely clear to me, plus this Mahler First with the Chinese conductor, Yondani Butt (1945-2014).

At around the time this recording was made, a very well-known and vocal UK classical music "critic" was busy proclaiming the "death of recorded classical music" – intriguingly, some 30 years later his 'prophecy' has still not come true, although it is certainly under threat in 2020 for very different reasons. That said, when considering this recording of the Mahler First, dutifully if not dazzlingly played and conducted, captured in somewhat distant, dull and boxy sound that negates any sparkle or drama the performance may, or may not, have had, then perhaps that critic had a point, even if his conclusions were (as always) wrong. Symptomatic of this performance are those opening trumpet fanfares from the first few minutes for which no effort has been made to sound distant or from afar. A routine, run-through of a performance which does the symphony's recorded history no service whatsoever. 4/10

Anton Nanut

1990 (not given) – RSO Ljubljana, Slovenia (Digital Studio – Stradivari)

You may not know this, but in 1881, Mahler was engaged for six months (September to April) at the Landestheater in Laibach (now Ljubljana, in Slovenia), where he conducted, amongst other works, his first opera, *Il Trovatore*. It seems appropriate therefore that a recording by the main orchestra from this city should feature in this survey given by their then chief conductor, Anton Nanut (1932-2017).

This is a very decent, straightforward, if nothing special, performance, the most noticeable feature being that the woodwind have much to say and the front desk players of this orchestra are very fine indeed. Surprisingly, there is not so much local colour as with the Czech PO or indeed the other Slovenian orchestra in this survey under Zdenek Kosler on Naxos (see 1988), although Nanut does avoid the indulgences which so blighted the earlier recording. That said, it's all rather workaday here with full, if not ideally clear, sound and even at an attractive price-point, I'm not really sure if I can happily recommend it: 6/10

1991

1991 sees the first of Simon Rattle's recordings of the symphony at the helm of the orchestra of arguably his greatest successes, whilst a little further north in the United Kingdom, Sir Charles Mackerras set down his only recording in Liverpool. Meantime, over in Germany, Gary Bertini was recording it live for EMI (see 1985)

Sir Simon Rattle

1991 December 16-19th – City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (Digital Live – EMI)

2010 November 5th – Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Live – BPO DVD) **

2010 November 22-23rd – Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Live – Euroarts) [review](#)

2013 August 11th – National Children's Symphony Orch of Venezuela (Digital Live – Unitel) [review](#)

There is no doubt in my mind that Simon Rattle is one of the foremost conductors of Mahler before the public today. You may not always enjoy the results, but his influence is significant, resulting in (amongst others) the general adoption of the *hinaufziehen* (glissando) instruction for the oboe in the Third Symphony's central "Oh Mensch" movement, as well as the andante-scherzo ordering of the middle movements of the Sixth Symphony which he followed from the early 1980's onwards, a time when scherzo-andante was practically de rigueur (n.b. I appreciate John Barbirolli also deserves some credit for this, but his cause was not helped by EMI who insisted upon issuing his recording at the time with the Andante placed on the third LP side). Mahler has also played a key part in Rattle's career – most will know the story of how *The Resurrection Symphony* was the work that persuaded him to become a conductor, but taking just his relationship with the Berlin Philharmonic, it was the Sixth Symphony that featured in his debut, as well as his farewell concert as principal conductor with them, plus it was a performance of the Seventh Symphony which persuaded the orchestra that Rattle was the right person to succeed Claudio Abbado. The only surprise then is that there are no studio recordings of him conducting the First Symphony and only the one official release, early in his career.

The other surprises are just how consistent he is (usually around 56-57 minutes, with one notable exception, see below), with few of those moments of underlinings that Rattle is rather fond of, which can sometimes be illuminating in a one-off concert hall experience, but irritating for repeated home listening. Broadly speaking, Rattle likes to take a fairly relaxed and leisurely view of the first three movements, with the final movement taken with considerably more intensity and fire, exploding to life just as the Huntsman's Funeral dies away as instructed in the score (something Rattle insisted upon EMI following on their recording).

This early 1991 performance (coupled with *Blumine*, programmed separately) has caused some consternation down the years, mainly from people who were present at the recorded concert who readily concede that the overwhelming experience they had in the concert hall has singularly not transferred itself to the recording itself, even if the cheers at the end have. Indeed, looking at my own notes I felt that while there were many positives that include a super-quiet audience, an appreciable amount of inner detail, plus superbly dedicated playing from the orchestra (some real efforts are made to make the opening bird calls as realistic as possible), I also felt that the opening movement especially was a little becalmed, with the whole listening experience somewhat earthbound. Whether this is the fault of the recording engineers, or even the orchestra, I'm not sure, but turning to the two performances with the Berlin Philharmonic in 2010 (only available on DVD) was hugely revealing ...

The first thing to note is that there are very little differences between the interpretations in Birmingham and Berlin, the exception being at the close of the first movement, where Rattle opts to emphasise the melody at bars 408-410 about a minute before the end to try and make it even more expressive than it needs to be. To be fair, he is not the only conductor to do this – Carlos Paita tries

something similar in his 1977 recording, but where there he seems to wrong-foot the (otherwise excellent) Royal Philharmonic, here the Berliners are at one with their conductor. I cannot pretend that I like this interpretative idea, however Rattle just about convinces me of its validity. Everywhere else though, just what was missing in Birmingham is made evident by the Berliners greater tonal élan and depth, transforming what was a relatively disappointing earlier recording, to one that is extremely good indeed. There are so many moments and details that are worthy of comment, but the ones that stick in my mind would be the superbly characterised *Trio* from the second movement, the colours at the close of The Huntsman's Funeral (the tam tam player deserves special mention), plus the opening of the final movement where the intensity of the BPO's strings produce a unique alchemy of clarity and electricity. In fact, we are treated to two concerts with the Berliners from November 2010, both on different DVD releases, one from their own concert-hall, the Philharmonie, as well as later on in the month when they took the same work on tour to Singapore with great success. This gives the reader an interesting choice – the early performance is available on a double DVD on the BPO's own label and is coupled with Mahler's Symphonies 4 & 7, whereas the Singapore concert is on a single DVD containing Rachmaninov's Symphonic Dances as the first half. To make matters even more complicated, I thought the earlier concert from Berlin to be the better performance, mainly due to the superb sound obtained by the experienced sound engineers from the orchestra's own Digital Concert Hall, although the picture quality in Singapore was slightly brighter – and available in 3-D, if that's what floats your boat. For me, based purely on the *performance* of the Mahler, my vote goes to the Berlin concert, but if it proves elusive or too expensive, the later Singapore one is not a bad substitute.

Three years later, the first thing to note about the concert from the Salzburg Festival with the National Children's Orchestra of Venezuela, is that it's a *children's* orchestra, not a youth orchestra. Watching the concert, you'd be hard pressed to spot any player over the age of 11 and some seem impossibly young to be playing Mahler – let alone playing the music as well as they do. In this respect, Rattle is probably the best of all international maestros to be conducting this concert – anyone who doubts this only needs to watch him rehearsing Grieg's Hall of the Mountain King with an orchestra made up of Berlin school-children (available on Youtube), to see him leading them with much kindness and self-deprecating humour, putting them all at ease and inspiring them to give him their very best and more. There are no rehearsal sequences on this DVD, but instead we are treated to a first half of the usual El Sistema specialities by Bernstein, Gershwin and Ginastera, led by a conductor who makes The Dude look like an old man Instead, Rattle is there for the Mahler and he pays his orchestra the compliment of conducting them no differently than if he had been standing in front of the Berlin Philharmonic – indeed, for the opening measures of the symphony he even has his eyes closed. In return, his players reward him with dedicated and disciplined playing that is, quite frankly, astonishing for an ensemble not only so young in age and maturity, but also since there are so many of them! I think each part must have been at least doubled except, mercifully, the double bass solo in the Huntsman's Funeral, who Rattle sensibly always retains as a solo in spite of other conductors adopting the latest "thinking" that this part needs to be given to the entire double-bass section. The sheer size of the orchestra must have given the film crew some interesting challenges, which they seem to have overcome too often by taking a lazy option of many shots from the back of the hall showing the whole orchestra – perhaps that was the only way they could have got them all in the picture, but for the home viewer the results are all a bit vague and hazy unless, of course, you have one of those televisions pinned to your sitting room wall resembling a cinema screen. That said, elsewhere the film does also capture the battalions of strings, woodwinds, brass and percussion quite well, plus the musicians evident enjoyment of the occasion, even if the sound is a little 'boomy', as is usually the case in the cavernous Grosses Festspielhaus. As for the performance, the only concession I think Rattle makes to his young players is to take those opening bars depicting nature awakening at a quicker tempo than he did in the earlier recordings in Birmingham and Berlin, which results in a performance slightly tauter and faster than any of the above. Overall though, even if this isn't a major recommendation, the viewer

cannot help but smile as the symphony draws to its triumphant conclusion, at the sense of enjoyment and panache these young players bring to their music making – it's truly heart-warming viewing.

To conclude, Rattle's two Berlin concerts of the Mahler First are top recommendations, with the first one from the Philharmonie my choice: 9/10

Sir Charles Mackerras

1991 July 1 -2nd – Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Studio – EMI)

If Charles Mackerras will always be chiefly remembered for his expertise in Czech music, then we too must remember that Mahler was just as much as Czech as he was Austrian, having been born in Bohemia. As such, Mackerras' Mahler has that same whiff of authenticity that he brought to his recordings of Janáček, Dvořák and Suk, amongst others. Indeed, listening to this 54-55 minute recording of the Mahler First, I was often reminded of Kubelik in this work, where everything seems just "right" with the music breathes with complete naturalness and nothing is vulgar or overstated.

I do have some grumbles though which, ironically, aren't really much to do with Charles Mackerras and are more to do with EMI and principally concern the quality of the orchestra, as well as recording. Now please don't get me wrong, I have much regard for the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and while they do give their all for Mackerras, they would be the first to admit that they are not either the Concertgebouw or Vienna Philharmonics, nor even the best orchestra in the United Kingdom and there is just no getting away from the fact the strings sound undernourished and the brass strained, especially in the final movement. Now there is another recording in this survey, with Airpad Joo (in 1983), where a superb interpretation and performance is somewhat compromised by the participation of a less than first-rate orchestra, but while I have an awful lot of time of Maestro Joo, he is hardly a Charles Mackerras and one can only wonder how much better this recording could have been if EMI had treated this release with more respect than merely issuing it at the time in their budget EMI Eminence series, with an orchestra and sonics not of the first rank, where everything sounds distant and so the distant trumpet fanfares of the opening are just too far back in the sound picture.

Rant over, this recording still turns out to be one of the most satisfying of all in this survey, with Mackerras keen to present a coherent picture of the entire symphony, rather than a series of movements strung together, like the symphonic poem Mahler initially thought the work should be. He is as adept at projecting the youthful high spirits of the opening movement, as he is teasing out the local colours of the inner movements and finding excitement in the finale, correctly observing the orchestration of the final two chords and proving, if ever it needed to be, that Mahler knew what he was doing all along. In 1976, EMI taped and released a Mahler First Symphony for their budget label with a major London orchestra and a young, unknown conductor which was a disappointment – fast-forward some 15 years, here they have released another recording of the same piece with an orchestra of the second rank plus a great conductor and this time it is a resounding success. In spite of my rants, it is still an: 8/10

1992

An interesting year that features several conductors who only recorded this symphony once – Kurt Masur, Evgeni Svetlanov, as well as Armin Jordan, whilst Sinopoli conducted the piece in Japan with the Vienna Philharmonic (see 1989)

Kurt Masur

1992 April 23-25th – New York Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Live – Teldec)

Although Kurt Masur may not be primarily remembered for his interpretations of Mahler, the fact that he was chief conductor of the New York Philharmonic between 1991-2002 with their proud Mahler tradition makes it understandable that he may have wished to perform and record some of Mahler's symphonies with them. It's curious though, that like Mehta's recording with the same orchestra from 1980, there is very little that is wrong with this recording sound-wise or interpretatively, plus the playing of the orchestra is very good – and yet it is all rather ordinary, another very good Mahler First amongst the aeons of other very good, but not great, Mahler Firsts. It's all very curious that the very best recordings of this symphony given by the NYPO should be those in the studio by Bernstein and Bruno Walter, although if you are very diligent and happy to cross a pirate's hand with silver, a live one from the mid-1970's with Levine is one of the greatest recordings of any Mahler symphony you are ever likely to hear. This one from Masur though is: 6.5/10.

Evgeni Svetlanov

1992 – no date given – Russian State Symphony Orchestra (Digital Studio – Warner) [review](#)

One very high profile US critic has been extremely vocal in his distaste of Svetlanov's Mahler Symphony recordings recently, labelling it 'The Worst Ever Mahler Cycle'. I think that is perhaps a little harsh, although I would have less of a quarrel if he relabelled it as 'The Craziest Ever Mahler Cycle'! Certainly there are Mahlerian moments in Svetlanov's hands that are uniquely his own and if one could debate their authenticity, they are hugely entertaining in their own way, although I'm not wholly sure if the conductor quite intended them to be so. For example, in the same team's recording of the Sixth Symphony, the final movement contains some of the puniest hammer blows you are ever likely to encounter, plus a couple of what sound like nuclear explosions elsewhere that may not even be marked in the score! This First Symphony likewise contains much that is also the good, the bad and the plain crazy

I have to say, it doesn't get off to a very good start – the first movement operates at a very low setting on the thermostat, with the playing a little untidy at times, as if the music or idiom are unfamiliar to the players; likewise the second movement, where the central *Trio* almost grinds to a halt at one point. However, the Huntsman's Funeral is hugely unique and sounds like no other, almost as if composed by Shostakovich in ultra-ironic mode, writing for the passing of a Soviet Head of State whom he despised – you can almost feel the icy blast of the Russian winter as the funeral march begins here, whilst the trumpets at the return of the Klezmer music at the end are virtually dripping in sarcasm. It's either very characterful, very wrong, or just very entertaining – I'll let you decide. Curiously, after the low key first two movements, the final one opens fast and exciting and the performance slowly gathers momentum until, in the end and at the end, it suddenly comes together for a coda that is able to stand toe-to-toe with the very best. In sound which is more than acceptable, rather than being exceptional, this one is to be avoided by US critics on Youtube and is for fans of Russian funerals and/or the curious only: 5.5/10

1993

A time of plenty, with two recordings both including 'Blumine' from Chandos, another from Florida, as well as the second from Edo de Waart's cycle with the Netherlands Philharmonic (see 1989)....

Leif Segerstam

1993 January 8,9,11 & June 2-3rd – Danish National RSO (Digital Studio – Chandos)

With the release of Leif Segerstam's recording, the total timing for a performance of the (four movement) First Symphony broke the one hour mark for the first time – as one wag pointed out at the

time, it was no wonder they needed five days to record the whole thing plus *'Blumine'*, in a more standard six and a half minutes! Actually, what is curious about this release, is that nearly all the extra time is taken up by the 18 minute first movement ...

It is rather strange to report then that this first movement is actually the most persuasive of the whole performance. The opening is paced conventionally enough, but it is the *Wayfarer* music that is taken very gently and slowly which, with the exposition repeat observed, really starts to stretch the timing. Actually, Segerstam just about gets away with such a daringly slow speed, mainly due to the sprightly playing of the very excellent Danish musicians and curiously he (like only Kegel, early Bernstein and late Kubelik) slows down for the flute and oboe expressivo phrase at bar 98. Perhaps predictably, he also takes the eerie central section very slowly, too, and allows the bass to growl darkly and ominously, like some huge Scandinavian cloud glowering on the horizon. This brooding atmosphere is allowed to continue to build up all the way through to the climax at the end – it is quite remarkable the sense of implacable massiveness that Segerstam generates leading into this climax, which then explodes into a blaze of light before the whole thing gallops home at a more usual tempo.

I have to confess that at this point I was beginning to wonder if Segerstam was going to be a surprise nomination for a top performance in the 'wild card' category. In larger than life sound that seems to match the personality of the conductor, this Nordic and quasi-Sibelian interpretation of the first movement is highly individual, persuasive and distinctive. Alas, though, too much of the remainder is also highly individual, but also very mannered and indulgent, phrases and tempos being pulled about illogically and without much musical sense. This is a pity, for in the long lyrical sections of the final moment the brass lines, instead of being in the background underpinning the strings, are brought to the fore and glower once more with an almost Sibelian splendour. Quite rightly on this occasion, the inclusion of *Blumine* is treated as a separate track, right at the end of the performance – a 'coupling' rather than an integral part of what is a unique performance, in which it just wouldn't fit. Like Carlos Paita in 1976, I am left conflicted – both are a mixed bag of distinctiveness and disaster which may impress some, but would surely mystify many others, so once more I am sitting on the fence here with: 5/10.

Neeme Järvi

1993 November 15-16th – Royal Scottish National Orchestra (Digital Studio – Chandos)

2017 September 27th – Estonian National Symphony Orchestra (Digital Live – VAI Audio/DVD)

I suppose since Segerstam's effort from earlier in the year was so different from the norm that Chandos felt they could justifiably record the same work twice in twelve months, repeating it in Scotland with Neeme Järvi who at the time was threatening to record everything anyway. If, however, they thought they were merely going to get a nice run through *à la Järvi*, fresh and straightforward to offset the beast from the east that they unleashed in Denmark, they were very wrong.

I was not really aware of Järvi Père conducting much Mahler until I did this survey – whether that is because none of his recordings made much impression when they were released or (more likely) my general ignorance, I couldn't say, but it appears he has recorded nearly all the symphonies with various orchestras for Chandos, plus I'm aware that there is also a live Eighth buried away on a bargain box somewhere. From what I can tell, he hasn't recorded either the Second or Ninth yet, but I'm sure someone will kindly correct me if that's wrong (n.b. there is a reason for all of this, so do bear with me). So I wasn't really sure what to expect before auditioning these pair of Firsts. Actually, the opening of the RSNO recording is very good indeed – aided and abetted by typical 'widescreen' Chandos sound, Nature does indeed awake with considerable warmth and excellent perspectives, sighing horns and distant trumpet fanfares are excellently 'placed' in the sound-picture and the opening *Ging heut'*

Morgen über's Feld melody is quite ravishingly done by cellos and harps, with the following bird calls cheerfully sounded by the orchestra's woodwinds. Yet, a sign of things to come, is when we arrive at Figure 8 in the score (bar 117 - just before the whole orchestra comes together to play the opening theme) and Järvi suddenly slams on the brakes to give that short phrase for lower violins and cellos, underpinned by timpani, an air of a deliberate peasant dance. It's an interesting and unique moment (as well as not being indicated in the score), but somehow typifies Järvi's approach, which appears to revel in incidental detail at the expense of the whole and, in spite of the many other recorded evidence of his work with this composer, somehow presents these 'ideas' in an *unMahlerian* way. To be fair, in the earlier recording, these moments aren't too ruinous – admittedly, he is somewhat mannered in the second movement's *Trio*, but then so are many others. However, the Bruder Jakob round is taken at a pace which makes you wonder if the woodland creatures cannot wait for the funeral procession to end so they can hear the echo of earth falling onto the coffin of their former nemesis. Järvi is similarly fast, as well as fiery in the final movement too, but this is all to the good when he contrasts the stormier moments with the lyrical sections so well. In these stormy and dramatic moments, the Chandos sound is spectacular and allied to the Scottish orchestra giving their all, this final movement, whilst still occasionally wilful, is also very exciting too.

I was therefore very much looking forward to hearing and seeing Järvi's remake some quarter of a century later, fondly thinking that having recorded and performed many of Mahler's works frequently in the interim years that Järvi's interpretation would have matured, with all those *unMahlerian* idiosyncrasies now nicely dovetailed into the bigger picture of the musical flow. In fact, the recording from Estonia comes in two guises, one on DVD of the full concert which features a first half of the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* with a slightly over-the-hill Thomas Hampson, plus a standalone concert performance of *Blumine*, that was also included as an appendix on the Chandos release and which Järvi treats with much care on both occasions. The First Symphony is played in the second half. This is actually a very neat idea, presenting all the works associated with the First Symphony together, although I'm sure many of you reading this may feel all three pieces could have also fitted onto the CD release too, which somewhat stingily only has the symphony. On DVD, the sound and picture quality are very fine indeed, complete with some vertigo-inducing aerial shots of the orchestra too, but the big problem with the later release is that, contrary to my hopes and expectations, Järvi's interpretation has not matured at all – in fact, it's still a similar 53 minutes, but whereas before it was a little eccentric, now (and especially in the first three movements) it has become wildly eccentric. This is a pity since, when he plays it relatively straight, as in the final movement, the results are impressive – like with the Royal National Scottish Orchestra before, he gets the Estonian ensemble playing out of their skins and the sound, with spectacularly caught bass drum, all adds up to a very exciting experience. This was one of the last recordings I auditioned for this survey, so it would be no surprise for you to learn, fair reader, that at this point I had listened to far more Mahler Firsts than the number recommended for human consumption by government guidelines, but even I was scratching my head trying to fathom out the 'why' of Järvi's many indulgences here, so the later release comes with my own government health warning and is to be avoided by all except for self-harmers. If you must have Neeme, then the Chandos disc is the safer bet of the two – in short, it's well recorded, well played, comes with a nice *Blumine*, is weird at times, very exciting in others : 7/10

James Judd

September 15-17th – Florida Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Studio – Harmonia Mundi)

From Glasgow to Florida next, but keeping the British connection with the English conductor, James Judd (b.1949), who leads the Florida Philharmonic in a 56 minute performance, plus a leisurely 8 minute *Blumine*, once again tagged on the end as a 'coupling' rather than being part of the performance. What is distinctive about this recording is the amount of inner detail that Judd is able to

draw from the score, although whether this is through design or necessity I'm not so sure, for the strings of his orchestra do sound very lightweight and not just in comparison to more illustrious rivals. This is especially evident in the opening of the final movement where in an attempt to balance everything, the results sound spick and span rather than apocalyptic. To be fair, the coda of the whole symphony is excitingly done, with the bass drum thwacks satisfyingly powerful enough to make your neighbours even from two doors along complain. Elsewhere, Judd isn't afraid to apply some interesting ideas and rubato, an example being the second movement which opens deliberately and then subtly speeds up in the most convincing way. Likewise in the fourth movement, he creates a real sense of sadness and longing in the first lyrical section which is very distinctive. However, in spite of the subtleties of the performance, the lightweight sounding orchestra in the end detracts from the overall enjoyment. If you want subtle Mahler, de Waart is your man (see 1989) and whilst Judd is by no means disappointing, he's simply outgunned by others: 6.5/10

1994

An interesting year with Haitink's second film of the work, this time with the Berlin Philharmonic (see 1962), plus a couple of 'sleepers' with Gunther Neuhold and Yuri Simonov

Günter Neuhold

1994 September 12 -13th – Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe (Digital Live – Antes)

Günter Neuhold was born in Graz, Austria, in 1947 and has spent the majority of his career in the opera house, mainly in Italy. This Mahler First was set down in 1994, when he was the General Music Director at the Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe (from 1989 to 1995). It has the distinction of being nicely played and straightforwardly conducted with much gentle affection, the focus being on a sense of natural flow, although the dramatic moments also have plenty of panache too – the lead up to the climax at the end of the first movement really sees conductor and orchestra summoning up swirling dark clouds out of which climax bursts like brilliant sunlight. Similarly, the final movement opens with much drama and ends, like in the first, with those dark swirling clouds out of which the coda erupts exuberantly. With such a naturally flowing reading, taken from live concerts, I do have to say that the inclusion of *Blumine* placed second seemed somewhat jarring, proving beyond doubt that Mahler was correct to remove it. The audience here are commendably quiet, but erupt at the end and the orchestra cover themselves in glory, by no means sounding out-gunned by their more illustrious and heavy-weight rivals. It all adds up to a pretty compelling experience that can hold its head high in this survey: 7.5/10

Yuri Simonov

1994 June – Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Studio – Tring)

Yuri Simonov (b.1941) is currently the chief conductor of the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra and, from all accounts, is very highly regarded in Russia – and on the evidence of this Mahler First recording with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, quite rightly, too, as he gets them playing out of their skins. I very much enjoyed this account of the symphony – the introduction had much ear-catching detail, superbly captured by the engineers, whilst the conductor goes to great lengths to make the central section of the first movement sound very mysterious indeed, that contrasts well with the high spirits elsewhere. In fact, Simonov goes all out to create maximum contrasts wherever and whenever he can to, usually, great effect – the final movement opens very dramatically indeed and Simonov is very good at the stormy as well as grand moments, which he then contrasts superbly with the more lyrical moments which are taken gently and sweetly. His attention to detail and colour are also very much in evidence in the inner movements which are again done very well, but it's the coda of the last

movement that is ever so slightly controversial. Up until that point, Simonov had been a faithful and obedient servant of the score, with little of the exaggerations or rhetoric you will find with some of his colleagues elsewhere. In the finale though, right at the end, the horns stand and proudly play their great tune, underpinned by trumpets, a moment that is repeated before the final page and it is on this second reprise that Simonov puts pedal to metal and races home to the finishing line – in this survey, only Marin Alsop does anything similar, and both are noteworthy for their white-hot endings. So if you can forgive such an indulgence, his is a much-better-than-you'd-expect recording: 8/10

1995

Riccardo Chailly

1995 May 3rd – Concertgebouw Orchestra Amsterdam (Digital Live – RCO)

1995 May 20-21st – Concertgebouw Orchestra Amsterdam (Digital Studio – Decca)

2015 January – Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra (Digital Live – Accentus DVD)

A Mahler specialist on the podium, with one of the world's great orchestras steeped in the history of the Mahler tradition in one of the world's great concert-halls, plus magnificent Decca sound – what could there be to possibly not like with Riccardo Chailly's Mahler's First Symphony on Decca with the Concertgebouw? Actually, not much. You will not be surprised to know that all the expectations raised are fulfilled in Chailly's leisurely 57 minute reading, but at the same time, I was also slightly unfulfilled. To my mind this reading, played 'straight' with no undue rhetorical emphasis, seems to be caught between two minds, as to whether it is a grand and sophisticated rendition, or one alive to folk elements and youthful impetuosity and, as a consequence, does not add up to the sum of its (very) considerable parts, whether in the studio, or in a practically identical interpretation in concert a couple of weeks prior, captured in decent sound which inevitably was never going to be able to match that of Decca's. Please don't misunderstand me, this is (along with Charles Mackerras') the best recording from the first few years of the 1990's, but it could have been much better. Comparison with Bernstein's with the same orchestra less than eight years prior is instructive, not least since in the second movement's *Trio*, which both conductors take slowly, Bernstein makes the music sound arch and playful, whereas the same passage under Chailly just comes across as rather cool.

It was interesting then to compare Chailly's Concertgebouw reading with that of his filmed recording of the work with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra some 20 years later in their magnificent home hall. Actually, differences are minimal, but telling, with the abovementioned *Trio* now taken at a more flowing pace, as well as the final movement taken fractionally faster, both becoming more persuasive and exciting as a consequence. Elsewhere, the lighter timbre of the Leipzig Orchestra when compared with the Concertgebouw, means that Chailly's interpretation comes across as more settled, thus avoiding any charges of being too 'grand' as it was previously. In this single DVD issue, the symphony is presented on its own, which some may regard as a little stingy and so to compensate those folks, they are treated to a 25 minute interview with the conductor talking about his relationship with the work. Intriguingly, he references Bruno Walter as being his ideal interpreter of the First Symphony and whose timings he feels are optimal, although clearly allowing for Walter's habitual ignoring of both the first and second movements' repeats. I strongly suspect he was referring to Walter's final recording of the piece with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra here, so clearly I need to send Maestro Chailly a copy of this survey just to point out to him that Walter changed his mind over timings in Mahler's First Symphony more than any other conductor in this survey (and you can read about it yourself above, under 1939). To be honest, when listening to this performance I was not put in mind of the warmth and geniality of late Walter at all – and that is as much as a compliment to Maestro Chailly too, who is clearly his own man. Nor, somewhat thankfully, did I detect any influence of the arch-hypnotist that was Willem Mengelberg either, Chailly explaining in the same interview that he copied out the

instructions the Dutch conductor took down from Mahler in a Concertgebouw rehearsal of the First Symphony in green ink into his own score, a task which took him a whole day to complete ! Either way, the ease and naturalness of Chailly's own reading is very enjoyable and there is a certain satisfaction in watching a conductor like Chailly in his prime conduct music, that he clearly admires and loves, with considerable authority – at the end, even the audience hold their applause until after he has lowered his arms. Along with Daniele Gatti, this is the best filmed version of the Mahler First Symphony after those recommended below in the Conclusion and the reader can choose between either of them with complete confidence, with perhaps the couplings being the deciding factor: 8/10

1997

The first of Christoph Eschenbach's ..

Christoph Eschenbach

1997 March 2nd – Houston Symphony Orchestra (Digital Live – Koch)
 2008 November 22-26th – Deutsches Symphonie Orchester, Berlin (Digital Studio – Capriccio)

It's a curious thing that after Christoph Eschenbach's tenure as principal conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra came to an abrupt end in 2007 after only four years (a decision that was probably as much non-musical as it was musical, his appointment being made by the Philadelphia Orchestra committee, rather than the orchestra themselves, a point that angered many of the players before even a note of music had been played), his profile has remained somewhat low-key. Be that as it may, he has always struck me as a fine and committed Mahlerian, as the above two recordings more than prove.

As so often with re-recordings in this survey, there is virtually no difference between the two performances above, with the Houston version being taped live whilst on tour at Vienna's Musikverein. It is actually a hugely impressive performance – as a rule of thumb, Eschenbach is a very straight interpreter, albeit with one noticeable exception, plus he is very good at creating the sense of high spirits in the first movement, the exotic Eastern European colourings of the klezmer music, as well as the drama in the final movement. Indeed the emotional tug of the second lyrical section of the fourth movement is quite overwhelming in this performance and the concluding chorale is very fine too. The Viennese certainly show their appreciation and the bloom of the Musikverein has been well captured by the sound engineers, giving the sound a nice lustre.

The issue with this performance though is Eschenbach's heavy-handed treatment of the second movement Ländler, probably a misguided attempt at creating a Viennese lilt to outdo even the Viennese and, as a consequence, just sounds mannered and false. It's a pity since the central *Trio* is then nicely pointed and everything else in this 55 minute reading is very good. It's some irony then that the best thing about Eschenbach's remake with the Deutsches Symphonie Orchester, is that those second movement mannerisms have been ironed out and are now more subtly incorporated into the musical flow. However, the Berlin studio remake does not quite have the frisson of the concert from Vienna, in spite of a better Ländler, better sonics and no audience coughs or rustles, Curiously then, it is the Houston Symphony that is my pick of the two Eschenbachs which, in spite of my caveat, is still very good: 8/10

1998

After a quiet couple of years, two great performances, one from Prague, another from Chicago, plus the first from Manfred Honeck ...

Manfred Honeck

1998 February 11 – BBC Symphony Orchestra (Digital Live – BBC Music Magazine)

2008 September 26-28th – Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (Digital Live – Exton)

I cannot emphasise enough how impressed I have been recently with some of Manfred Honeck's recordings – whether it is Beethoven, Dvorak, Strauss, or even modern composers like Jonathan Leshnoff, he is nearly always incredibly interesting and his orchestra, the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra of which he has been principal conductor since 2008, sound absolutely magnificent under him. Of all the ensembles in the US at the moment, only the Chicago Symphony Orchestra comes anywhere near matching them, in my opinion. That said, I do have to confess to not being totally bowled over by his Mahler First in Pittsburgh the first time I heard it some years ago, so was looking forward to revisiting it again as part of this survey.

But first, I listened to the earlier recording, a live performance from London's Royal Festival Hall in 1998 with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, right from the beginning of Honeck's career as a conductor. The first thing to note is that the sound is pretty good considering the venue (Simon Rattle always used to say the sound in this hall "died" as soon as it reached the front row) but, as ever, the London audience are a bronchial bunch in February and they are also superbly caught by the microphones. Actually, you could argue that the dynamic range is a bit too wide for home listening if you wish to be able to hear the quietest moments of the score, without prompting the neighbours to be standing up at the end along with the horn section. That said, it is definitely a performance of two halves, the first couple of movements are very good indeed, the second very spirited, which is all the more curious as to why the tension drops so markedly in *The Huntsman's Funeral* and only really recovers at the very end of the symphony. This recording was originally released as the cover CD for the BBC Music Magazine and as such, second-hand copies are still available often at very low price points, but even allowing for that you can do better elsewhere for a similar outlay.

As expected, the Pittsburgh account is both much better, as well as much more expensive too, recorded by the very excellent Exton label which you may only be able to get hold of via a Japanese import. According to the booklet, this recording was made over three consecutive evening concerts which marked the inauguration of Manfred Honeck as the orchestra's principal conductor, although local news reports state it was only at the start of the third concert that an orchestral representative requested the audience to acknowledge that a recording was being made so it was important that they were especially quiet, only to then suffer the indignity of his mobile phone ringing mid-speech! To be fair, his request (as evidenced on the recording) was heeded, as you would never guess an audience was present until the cheers at the end. Considering it was recorded live too, the orchestral playing is very good, if not totally flawless (there are some coordination problems in the second movement), nor did I think their collective sound was as impressive as it has since become. As for the interpretation, there was much that is quite splendid – at the very opening of the symphony, only Bernstein (and only with the NYPO in 1966) gets his horns to play their opening phrases as softly as Honeck does here (as indicated in the score) with equally special results. Indeed the first movement is very good indeed, Honeck charting a neat passage between the music's charm and sense of wonder, with the very powerful instrument he has at his disposal at Pittsburgh – the build up to that movement's climax at the end sees Horenstein-esque darkness swirling around his cellos and basses as they ominously chug away, before the climax is reached in a blaze of light and exultation. Similar qualities inform the inner movements – as is his wont, Honeck writes in the booklet: "that an important property of the second movement *Ländler* is an emphasis on the second beat of the triple metre, which Mahler expected his players to know and therefore did not notate" and it has to be said he is very successful in characterising this movement, without it descending into exaggeration. Likewise in the third movement, where the central *Wayfarer* episode is done as exquisitely as anyone's in this survey.

However, as so often with super performances of the first three movements, I wasn't totally taken by the finale – it is still good, but I have that nagging feeling that there could have had slightly more adrenaline and, interestingly, those local reviews from the Pittsburgh press seemed to suggest the first concert (which wasn't recorded) was indeed the most exciting of the three. Still, as far as modern accounts go, this finely detailed 57 minute account is still very fine: 8/10

Ken-Ichiro Kobayashi

1998 13-15th March – Czech Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Live – Canyon Classics) **
2005 27-28th January – Japan Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Live – Exton)

Ken-ichiro Kobayashi (b.1940) is too little known in the West, but in his homeland of Japan he is famous enough to be known by his nickname of 'Kobaken'. A student of Kazuo Yamada, whose Mahler First Symphony so impressed me (see 1989), he is also a fine Mahler conductor, although curiously like many other Japanese conductors (such as Takashi Asahina, Mlchiyoshi Inoue, Tadaaki Otaka, as well as Kazuo Yamada, to name a handful of high profile others) he is very selective as to which Mahler symphonies he conducts and there is no complete cycle as yet, although there are these two very fine Mahler Firsts.

The first thing to mention about the earlier, live recording in Prague is the sound – and, my goodness, it is so good, capturing the Czech Philharmonic in all their glory at their 'home hall' of the Rudolfinum in a manner which frankly puts the earlier accounts from Ancerl (see 1965) and Neumann (see 1979) completely in the shade. There is a slight echo, as there would be in the hall itself, but the dynamic range is wide and full, thrillingly so when the orchestra lets rip at the work's great climaxes, plus it captures the all important inner-detail of which this orchestra is so good at with Mahler, as well as practically eliminating any audience noises. The 54 minute performance is something else too, Kobayashi clearly having some very interesting ideas about how the piece should go and inspiring his orchestra to perform wonderfully for him. Some highlights for me was the transition between at the end of the eerie central section of the first movement to the return of the *Wayfarer* music which is quite wonderful, like the sun breaking through the clouds. In the third movement klezmer music there is also great imagination at play, with a slight *accelerando* each time the music begins, as if the animals following the Huntsman's coffin can no longer contain their straight faces and start to dance in glee. One aspect of the earlier Czech Philharmonic recordings under Ancerl and Neumann that I found wanting, was a certain lack of heft from the orchestra in the stormier sections of the symphony – not so here, as the final movement explodes into life with all the sound and fury you could wish for. Curiously, the second lyrical section is taken quite swiftly – as it is by both Ancerl and Neumann, which leads me to wonder if it is a Czech Philharmonic performance 'tradition' rather than a Kobaken instruction from the podium.

Is there a 'but' ? Well, of course there is – Mahler wouldn't have wanted it any other way ! It is that Kobayashi is a bit of "grunter" and this can be slightly off-putting for those of a more sensitive disposition than this writer. However, if you are able to filter them out, then this is, in my opinion, unquestionably one of the great Mahler Firsts – I listened to it quite early on when doing this survey, then came back to it at the end, straight after reviewing Manfred Honeck's highly rated Pittsburgh account and felt this to be better on virtually every level and without doubt it is the best Mahler First with the Czech Philharmonic. It's 'live' apparently, but there are no cheers at the end, although no doubt there may be some from yourself.

It would be useful to pause for a moment at this point to consider the importance of orchestras in this survey, particularly one focusing on Mahler. Of Lorin Maazel's five recordings of the piece, for example, it is the one with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, with their proud Mahler tradition, which is by far and away the best of that group – it's as if the orchestra's collective knowledge and experience of

playing this music brought out the best in that maestro and prevented him from indulging in any Maazelerisms which so blighted the other recordings. So it is hugely interesting to note Kobayashi, some seven years after his recording with the Czech PO, re-recording the work with the Japan PO – and he *is* different. In particular, he is much more wilful and interventionist in the later recording, even if the broad outline of the earlier interpretation remains, plus he is even noisier too – sometimes it seems as if the engineers have miked the podium as well as individual members of the orchestra, such is the brilliance at which they have captured the conductor's groans, shouts and stamping. Of course, since they are working in the Japan Philharmonic's home of the Sumida Triphony Hall, the sound inevitably does not have the bloom of the Rudolfinum, but then the latter is one of the world's great concert halls - that aside, it is still very good. As is the performance – Kobayashi's opening is a bit tauter in this later reading and he misses out that movement's exposition repeat too, but the subtle accelerandos are still there in the Huntsman's Funeral, as well as the fast and passionate final lyrical section of the final movement. True, he is a bit more wilful in parts than previously which may bother some, but nothing sounds excessive or out of place and his coda is as white hot as any.

In short, both of these recordings are very good – however, the Czech Philharmonic version is special and for me is a: 9/10

Pierre Boulez

1999 May – Chicago Symphony Orchestra (Digital Studio – Deutsche Grammophon)

The thing about Boulez conducting Mahler is that you never quite know what you are going to get. In his always interesting, if uneven, cycle on DG, there is a Seventh with the Cleveland Orchestra where the conductor sucks every drop of life out of the music, yet also a Sixth with the Vienna Philharmonic that's a thrilling white-knuckle ride into the abyss and beyond. Then there is this recording of the First Symphony from Chicago.

Who would have thought that the composer of *Notations* could have found so much warmth and poetry in the opening measures of this symphony? That the soft awakening of nature, with its miniature trumpet fanfares could evoke the magical world of *Le jardin féerique* of Ravel's *Mother Goose* and will have you checking the disc in your player to check that yes, it is indeed being conducted by Pierre Boulez, the former *enfant terrible* who had in the past terrorised our ears and senses with his own music, yet is still able to revel in Mahler's youthful inspiration. A child-like world, where droplets of harp and isolated bird calls are floated almost literally on the still early morning air, before the Wayfarer's music ambles along with as much unaffected good humour that a beaming Monsieur Boulez can provide for us. It is all a big surprise, as is likewise the orchestra, the Chicago Symphony, who are persuaded to play with as much transparency and charm that anyone could want, reserving their usual turbo-charged selves for use only in the more dramatic moments of the final movement when, at last, their conductor happily opens up the throttle and lets the engine roar. Captured in fine, wide-ranging and detailed sound by DG, this recording has much going for it – however, there is a 'but'...

The 'but' is that Boulez is a bit too clever. This is particularly evident in the middle two movements, where the elegance of the *Trio* in the second movement, as well as the Klezmer Music of the Huntsman's Funeral suffer from too much French chic, with the whiff of the Opera Ballroom at Le Grand Hôtel in Paris not far away, adding a veneer of sophistication to the proceedings which is out of place in that youthful inspiration. This is a pity, for that aside, this is one of the special Mahler Firsts and it is indeed special enough to be worthy of your attention, if not quite worthy of my shortlist at the end: 8/10

1999

An end of the century flurry – another recording from Telarc, this time in Atlanta, the first of Maris Jansons, plus Michiyoshi Inoue from Japan (see 2000)

Yoel Levi

1999 September 25-26 – Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (Digital Stereo – Telarc)

I always felt it curious that Levi's generally fine Mahler cycle on Telarc ground to a halt at the Seventh Symphony, thus leaving out symphonies 8 & 9 (just like Haitink's own cycle for Philips recorded with the Berlin PO around the same time) – I'm sure one day somebody will let me know why. In the meantime, if this Mahler First is anything to go by, the clues are pretty obvious, as this is a beautifully recorded, very well played and extremely well interpreted recording – except that everything is a little cool for its entire 55 minute duration, with the temperature only rising slightly for the final movement. It's a pity, but with a shot of adrenaline this recording could have been very good indeed, but for me, whilst there is nothing wrong about it, there is also nothing especially noteworthy about it either. In fact, the most exciting thing about it is that Telarc has seen fit to include *Blumine* on this release and to programme it as the second movement, whether at the behest of Levi or otherwise, I couldn't say, although the booklet notes contains an essay from the Mahler scholar Jack Diether arguing for the restoration of the five-movement work. You can always programme that track out of your listening experience or, perhaps better still, listen to a better recording: 6/10

Maris Jansons

1999 October 27-28th – Oslo Philharmonic Orch (Digital Live – Simax/Warner DVD)

2006 August 28th – Concertgebouw Orchestra (Digital Live – RCO)

2007 March 1 -2nd – Bavarian Radio SO (Digital Live – BR Klassik)

I have to confess to not being familiar with all of Maris Jansons's Mahler recordings, but that live Sixth Symphony he performed with the London Symphony Orchestra from 2002 (available on the orchestra's own label) is one of those concerts when everything went right on the night, where it just so happened that Mahler was also on the programme – it's worth anyone investigating. Likewise are these three Mahler Firsts, all of which are very good in their kind of bright-eyed and bushy tailed way. Jansons' approach is astonishingly consistent over the years these recordings cover, not least since they are all live and two are with orchestras with their own proud Mahlerian traditions, all of them clocking in around the 55 minute mark. On all three, I felt the klezmer music of the Huntsman's Funeral was a little stiff – to my mind, it seemed to resemble Soviet military marching music* (*not a genre I'm over familiar with, mind you), perhaps a legacy of the conductor's Soviet-Latvian upbringing – the clunking gear change in the middle of that section being a uniquely Jansonesque touch that isn't convincing either. Of the above performances, the Concertgebouw enjoys marginally better sound and perhaps the slightly better performance – the bass drum is caught every well in the lead up to the coda in Amsterdam, lending an ominous air to the proceedings before the exultation of the final pages where the extra cymbal crashes can be heard better too, of which you may/may not approve. Cheers at the end of all three, plus a cough in the opening seconds of the Oslo account which has recently been issued on DVD in a big Warner Classics box of all of Jansons's recording with the Oslo PO for EMI – amazing how young he looked back then, captured in a very decent picture quality (4:3 aspect ratio, if that is important to you) even if you can do better on DVD elsewhere and without a 'coupling' of forty-odd other CDs. For me, these are all very good readings, just falling short of the very best, but if I had to pick one, it would be the Amsterdam version that would get my vote: 8/10

2000

A quiet start to the century

Michiyoshi Inoue

1999 30th Sep & 2000 29th July – New Japan PO (Digital Live – Exton)

Superbly played, not least that it's live, in wonderful sound with an interpretation that gets nearly everything spot on, this is one of those recordings that makes a reviewer's life very difficult, since there is absolutely nothing wrong with any of it and yet there is also nothing particularly noteworthy or special either. At 54 minutes and including the first movement exposition repeat, it is nicely paced, there is a decent amount of generalised excitement in the finale and the crowd all cheer at the end. A typical modern recording that is very good, but has nothing special about it though. 7/10

2001

MTT in SF, plus EPS in Bavaria

Esa-Pekka Salonen

*2001 April 27th – Bavarian Radio SO (Digital Live - En Larmes) ***

There will be many reading this who would know of the story of Esa-Pekka Salonen's "breakthrough" concert in London, 1983 and it is either through sheer coincidence, or the brilliance of this writer (you choose), that the aforementioned concert just so happened to be of a Mahler Symphony which was supposed to have been conducted by the next conductor in this survey, Michael Tilson Thomas, who was suddenly taken ill and was replaced by a fresh-faced Finn, who had just turned 25, at very short notice. Unfortunately for my brilliance, the concert was not of the First Symphony and even more unfortunately for that fresh-faced Finn, Esa-Pekka Salonen, it was instead of the Third Symphony, the longest in the main repertoire and a score he had not studied before. The concert was a major success and helped launch the career of the striking-looking blond with piercing blue eyes, who could count Osmo Vänskä, Jukka-Pekka Saraste and Magnus Lindberg amongst his classmates. As if my writing brilliance was not enough for you all, MusicWeb International also had a representative at that Mahler Third concert too, in the form of a friend of this writer, who tells me that the Mahler wasn't actually that good! At the end of this 100 minute behemoth as the orchestra crescendos onto the final page, there are noble chords played by the whole orchestra underpinned by timpani strokes. In the score Mahler instructs his timpani players to play these notes *Nicht mit roher Kraft*, which basically means "not with brute force" – in other words nobly, rather than dramatically and yet in that Philharmonia Mahler Third, Salonen had his timpanists hammering away for all the world as if it was the opening of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. Curiously, Salonen has gone on to have a fine conducting career, albeit one not as dominated by Mahler as you may have initially thought. So I was curious to hear this one-off live Mahler First with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, even if I wasn't expecting it to end up being a front-runner in the survey – and as always, I was in for a surprise.

The first thing to note is that the orchestra is balanced very closely in this recording, which has the advantage of filtering out some of the inevitable audience coughs and noises, but does mean the sound is a bit "in-yer-face" – however, the fact that the orchestra is the Bavarian Radio is all to the good, since we get to hear their expert exposure of the inner-workings of the score, even if sometimes certain instruments seem to stand-out from the sound picture a little more than they should. However, the performance is something else – live yes, but very alive too. Having seen Salonen conduct in London

recently, I can report that he is a slightly wilful podium presence, happy to bend the pulse of the music on the whim of a moment. As he is too on this recording, but in conjunction with an orchestra so well-schooled in Mahler as are the Bavarian Radio Symphony, the results instead of sounding mannered, are filtered through this orchestra's collective experience to instead become hugely exciting, increasing the heat and voltage of the performance as a whole. Perhaps he is not the only one who slows down at the start of the crescendo that leads into the climax at the end of the first movement, but in the height of the stormy central section of the final one, when Mahler astonishingly instructs the whole orchestra to first effect a huge diminuendo to be immediately followed by a huge crescendo over the space of two bars (bars 340-341), Salonen audaciously slams on the brakes to create what can only be described as a huge orchestral tsunami. It's undoubtedly very naughty, but equally so, thrilling beyond words! For me, it kind of sums up the performance where it sounds as if everyone is on the edge of their seats and enjoying themselves, whether it is in the genial high spirits of the first movement, the trenchant and then elegance of the dances of the second, the exotic colours of the klezmer music in the third movement, or the finale which commences like a bolt of lightning, with a terrific crash and an ensuing sonic tornado of the utmost violence and intensity before resolving itself in the final pages of great excitement and grandeur, with the audience roaring their approval at the end. It's all perhaps too wilful to get a straight recommendation, but for all its faults I will be keeping it on my shelves and so it gets a wild-card nomination from me with: 8/10

Michael Tilson Thomas

2002 September 19-23rd – San Francisco Symphony Orchestra (Digital Live – SFS Media)

Once upon a time, a Mahler concert was so rare that any performance of one of his works became an event in itself – these days, however, he is so commonplace that there is no guarantee of a great night in the concert hall just because one of his works features on the programme. I can vouch for this – of the truly great Mahler concerts I've been privileged to witness (and I've seen all the symphonies several times), there have only been two blistering accounts of the Sixth Symphony under Klaus Tennstedt with the London Philharmonic, plus a Fourth with the London Symphony Orchestra under MTT in 2012 that was also magical in, of course, very different ways.

Tilson Thomas's cycle of the Mahler symphonies with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, who he led after leaving the LSO is, in my opinion, variable to put it mildly, veering from a performance of the Fourth Symphony that is one of the greatest ever recorded, to a Lilliputian Eighth that's the polar opposite. Part of the problem is MTT's somewhat interventionist approach, a trait he shares with Simon Rattle, where both conductors's fondness of incidental detail can sometimes impede the flow of the whole. Fortunately a work as quixotic as the First Symphony can, by and large, respond to such an approach and this recording has much going for it, superbly played for the entire 56 minutes from live concerts, warmly recorded and sounding especially spectacularly so its SACD issue. I didn't feel all of it worked though – I've heard more subtle accelerandos in the klezmer music (Kobayashi, for example, with the Czech PO in 1998) and I wondered where the music was going in the lead up to the first movement's final climax, such was the conductor's use of the brake and accelerator pedals. Likewise, the section after the final lyrical section in the last movement all the way to the end of the work, is pulled around mercilessly. Some may be more forgiving of this than I, so in spite of many good qualities elsewhere, the sum of the whole did not add equal its very good individual parts with this one for me: 7/10

2002

A remarkable realisation for solo piano by Chitose Okashiro (see Transcriptions in Introduction), plus Michael Gielen's from Baden Baden

Michael Gielen

2002 June 11-13th – SWR Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg (Digital Live – Hanssler)

I've always regarded Michael Gielen as a kind of German Pierre Boulez – both were composers and both revelled in the most knottiest of scores, Gielen finding success during his career especially amongst the thorniest of modern works by Ligetti, Reimann, Zimmermann, Nono, as well as those from the Second Viennese School. Born in pre-war Dresden to a musical family (his mother was an opera soprano, his father an opera producer who was responsible for the premiere of Richard Strauss's *Arabella*, amongst others), he was baptised a Catholic, but due to his Jewish ancestry, his family were hounded out of Europe by the Nazis, but not before the young Michael had absorbed some of the local music of the time. This is important as it all comes together in his reading of the Mahler First Symphony – forensically detailed and clear-eyed, you will hear layers of the score as in few other readings, as the symphony unfolds in a no-nonsense and unsentimental manner, while the klezmer music of the third movement has a whiff of authenticity only borne from exposure to the real thing. Tempos are swift for the recording's 52 minute duration, the orchestral execution impressive for being live, all of which is captured very well by Hanssler's engineers. This recording though is not for those who are seeking either the child-like wonder of early Tennstedt, the genial warmth of late Walter, the fireworks of Solti in London, or the life or death struggles of Bernstein. It is the sort of reading you'd expect Pierre Boulez to have done if wasn't clearly in such a good mood when he made his own recording in 1998 with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra – or Christoph von Dohnanyi in Cleveland, had everyone not been so bored when they recorded it for Decca in 1989. Billed as "live", I couldn't detect any noises from the audience in Baden-Baden and there was no applause at the end, so clearly a follow-up session was used too, but this is a very interesting recording if not, perhaps, the most spell-binding performance: 7/10

2004

Another Telarc, this time from London, plus the first assault on the symphony from a knight of the period instrument brigade ...

Benjamin Zander

2004 June 12-14th – Philharmonia Orchestra (Digital Studio – Telarc) [review](#)

I think this was actually the last release of Zander's nearly-cycle for Telarc and the Philharmonia, one that was distinguished by each release being coupled by an extra disc containing a discussion of each symphony by Zander himself, with musical illustrations. To be blunt, whether that is something someone would listen to more than once in their lifetime, I'm not so sure, but since I have, I can now let you all know that a cuckoo-call in nature is a falling third, whereas in Mahler-land it's a perfect fourth. To be fair, Zander is a genial guide in his talk and goes to great lengths to point out the many connections between the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* with the symphony, complete with musical illustrations from both his recording of the piece and from the piano. This release then neatly (and generously) couples the symphony with a performance of that early song cycle, bringing the total playing time up to nearly two and a half hours which, being marketed as a single full-priced CD, makes this the very recording for those of you for who like to get the most bang for their buck. However, for me, it is the performance of the symphony that I'm most interested in....

On the evidence of the First Symphony, Zander's Mahler is one of deep care and sincerity, with divided violins and nothing exaggerated or unduly underlined, although with that in mind, I was slightly surprised at his omission of the first movement's exposition repeat. That said, what really stood out for me in this performance were the Philharmonia's woodwinds who, in line with the conductor's intentions, are brought to the fore, revealing much inner detail, especially in the two middle movements. In particular, their contribution in the *Trio* of the Ländler movement elevates it to one of the very best in this survey, worthy to stand alongside those by the Czech Philharmonic and Bavarian Radio Symphony orchestras, whose players are experts in bringing out the inner lines here. Elsewhere, the first three movements are very good, but the final one seemed to me to remain stubbornly earthbound, whether in the emotional lyrical moments, the fire of the central development section, or even the exaltation of the final pages. Don't get me wrong, it isn't bad - it just won't blow your socks off, as an old friend always used to say me, after recommending a "must hear" recording: 7/10

Roger Norrington

2004 Sep 30 – Oct 1 – Stuttgart Radio SO (Digital Studio – Hänssler)

It seems to me that Roger Norrington's work, especially of late Romantic and early twentieth century pieces, divides opinion like no-one else – but then if you are going to perform everything from the Monteverdi Vespers to the Mahler IX strictly without vibrato, I suppose you are opening yourself up to criticism. My own views on rubato in Mahler have been explained already in the recording by Les Siècles and Francois-Xavier Roth (see Introduction, above) so I will not repeat them here, but suffice to say that Norrington performs the whole of this symphony without any rubato at all and that alone will be enough to rule it out completely for many. So, for the remainder of you more battle-hardened souls, I will now try and describe the other qualities of the performance here.

It is different. To be fair, it is unlikely that most listeners would detect much difference in the opening measures whether they are played with, or without, vibrato and, as such, Norrington and his players open the work atmospherically. However, his intentions become clearer when the cellos start the *Ging heut' Morgen übers feld* melody, at the end of which there are three bars where they ascend all the way up to a high d (dah da-da dah, dah da-da dah, dah da-da [ppp] dah, before flute and clarinet softly murmur and the trumpet then takes on the Wayfarer theme. In those three ascending bars (starting at bar 68 in the score), Mahler annotates each of those four note sections with a *slur* above each part (a *slur* indicates a musical phrase – if you were singing, you'd be expected to sing those marked notes in one breath). Every conductor in this survey takes this as being one endless melody upwards to be greeted by the harps at the top, the slurs gently acknowledged – except Roger Norrington, who insists upon the cellos taking a short, unmarked rest after each one of those four note groups, in other words, three breaks in the phrase (ie dah da-da dah – pause – dah da-da dah -pause etc). A few bars further on, as woodwind and violins take the melody, he unduly highlights the pizzicato cellos, even though they are marked *pianissimo* in the score and the woodwind are marked *piano* – in other words, the pizzicatos are to *accompany* the melody not to be *part* of it, an instruction observed by every other conductor in the survey – except Roger Norrington. Perhaps he was hoping to create a more bucolic or light-hearted atmosphere by doing this and maybe for some, he does – although for others he may equally be irritating. So apologies for the forensic detail here, but I wanted to give a flavour of the performance which for some may be refreshingly different, but for others the fast-track route to madness. Elsewhere, there is a surprisingly more passionate *Blumine* than you'd think placed second in the performance, a swifter Bruder Jakob than usual which, with Norrington's clipped phrasing, doesn't really work, plus some well-played and exciting climaxes in the final movement, even if the final bass drum roll is taken as an unmarked and unconvincing crescendo. Hänssler Classics provide super sound and the live audience are remarkably quiet until the end when they are effusive in their cheers and applause. Overall though, there were too many negatives with this recording for it to be

recommendable to all but the most die-hard Mahler or Roger Norrington fanatics and furthermore, I would say if you curious about an "historically-informed" Mahler First Symphony, the aforementioned effort with François-Xavier Roth and Les Siècles (which is by no means without its own criticism) is probably a more suitable recommendation – this one from Sir Roger for me is: 4/10

2005

Ken-Ichiro Kobayashi's second recording (see 1998), plus Jonathan Nott in Hamburg

Jonathan Nott

2005 December 19-21st – Bamberg Symphony Orchestra (Digital Studio – Tudor) [review](#)

Jonathan Nott's Mahler Symphony Cycle drew a mixed response on its release, some very complimentary, others far less so. This was my first encounter with his cycle and I have to say I hope the remainder is a bit better. For while Tudor treat Nott to a full SACD issue with impressive sound, their efforts only serve to highlight the dryish acoustic, as well as exposing the Bamberg Symphony as not quite being an orchestra of the first rank either, possessing neither the heft or gloss of some of their competitors in this music, nor it has to be said, perfect intonation at times. However, all of this may not have mattered had the interpretation and resulting performance been better, but too often it is bogged down by the conductor's fussiness. This is in evidence right from the beginning – the trumpet fanfares are balanced too far back to register properly, while the phrasing for the cellos's *Ging heut' Morgen über's Feld* is precious and means the movement fails to get going and remains earthbound until the end. To be fair, the Ländler then does go quite well, although Nott's decision to ask his cellos and basses to play all of their opening four notes pizzicato (instead of just the final two) is contrary to what is written in the score. The opening of the third movement features an appropriately crude double bass solo, as well as a few bars later, an inappropriately crude tuba who, in one puff, obliterates all the previous good work of his double bass and bassoon colleagues. Somewhat to my surprise, the final movement opens with tremendous fire and focus, which continues all the way through to the end – even the horn fanfares are decently balanced this time. If only the whole performance had been on this level, then maybe this would have been more recommendable. As it is, the dry acoustic, coupled with an underpowered orchestra and a poor first three movements, does not make this very recommendable at all: 4.5/10

2006

Lorin Maazel's best (by far) account (see 1960), Jansons from Amsterdam (see 1998), plus David Zinman

David Zinman

February 27- 28th – Tonhalle Orchestra Zurich (Digital Studio – RCA)

On SACD this 55 minute reading of the Mahler First, with a swift and breezy *Blumine* included as an encore at the end, has much to commend it, not least the very fine sound provided by RCA. Zinman is one of those straightforward and unfussy conductors who plays everything in Mahler 'straight' – indeed, it then comes as something of a surprise when he then takes the final bass drum roll as a crescendo, as only Norrington does before him. Before this everything is pretty good – except you will hear more good-humoured first movements elsewhere, likewise more character in the inner ones, plus

more fire and panache in the final movement too. In short, it's all very worthy, if a trifle dull and only really has the SACD sound to differentiate it from the crowd, even with *Blumine*: 6.5/10

2007

Another year and another Maris Jansons recording with another orchestra (see 1998), Haitink's last recording from Chicago (see 1962)

2008

The year of Valery Gergiev's London Mahler cycle was a good one for other reasons and saw Seiji Ozawa's final recording (see 1977), another Eschenbach, a blockbuster from Pittsburgh (see 1998), a sleeper from the Czech Republic, plus the first maestra in the survey ...

Libor Pešek

2008 January 18-19th – Czech National Symphony Orchestra (Digital Studio – Victor Entertainment)

I had first become aware of Libor Pešek's Mahler credentials with his exceptionally fine account of the Ninth Symphony he recorded for Virgin Classics and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra in 1990, so I was interested to audition his First Symphony set down as part of a complete Mahler Symphony Cycle with the Czech National Symphony Orchestra, fondly thinking a fine Mahler conductor combined with an ensemble well versed in the more exotic local colours of Eastern Europe would be a winning combination. In the event this turned out to be a bit of a mixed bag – this orchestra clearly has an excellent woodwind section and they shine throughout this recording, lending detail and colours to the music-making which is more than noteworthy, especially in those opening pages when Nature seemingly awakes. Yet for some reason, the reading didn't really take wing – you know something is wrong with lyrical episodes of the final movement sound perfunctory, all sound with no meaning. Overall, this was a little disappointing: 6/10

Valery Gergiev

2008 January 13th – London Symphony Orchestra (Digital Live – LSO Live)

Valery Gergiev's London Mahler Cycle in 2008 was a high profile event in that city, with all of the concerts broadcast by BBC Radio and subsequently released on the orchestra's budget-priced own label. It was, though, a typical Gergiev rush job, all the symphonies performed in only a few weeks, with *rush* being the operative word with their performance of the Fourth Symphony where the final movement's soloist made it to the concert platform by the skin of her teeth, having been held up on a train – clearly the route to Mahler's heaven in the twenty-first century can be a tricky one if you need to rely on London's Underground to get there. This recording of the First Symphony is typical of all the strengths and the many weaknesses of that cycle.

I was actually at the concert when this recording was (allegedly) made and still have the broadcast on my hard-drive, not that I have ever played it more than once for reasons that will become apparent. A few pages before this I explained how living in London does make me privileged to experience many of the world's great orchestras, as well as London's home bands, perform Mahler, but it is a surprise just how few truly great performances rather than just "professional run-throughs" of Mahler there have been (see Michael Tilson Thomas in 2001) – and this one was truly awful. It was January and I seem to remember the coughers were out in force, including one who felt the need to bark within 20 seconds of the work beginning, in only the fifth bar ! They were so bad that the normally super-efficient London Symphony Orchestra were unnerved with the opening cuckoo calls going wrong, the final one squawking seemingly in exasperation at the rudeness of the audience that night. That all of this is still

on my radio broadcast, but has been edited out of my CD suggests a patch-up, or rehearsal session was also used with this live recording too – not that it was really worth saving. Gergiev's opening tempo is too fast, presumably to aid coordination with the clarinet and trumpet fanfares, a practical decision no doubt based upon the general rush and lack of proper rehearsal time. The remainder of the movement is also taken at a tempo that can best be described as 'lively', which rather creates an atmosphere more of faux jollity rather than genial high spirits. Conversely, the second movement's *Trio* is far too slow and as a result becomes boring. In the Huntsman's Funeral, the entire double bass section are used for the opening solo and while the klezmer music is done well, Gergiev could have made it even better by asking his trumpets to have played just a little quieter so to blend in better with their colleagues. The Barbican acoustic is not the most flattering in the world and the recording engineers are seemingly unable to do much on this occasion (they were much better in the same team's Seventh Symphony a few weeks later), meaning the timpani sound 'clattery' in climaxes with the result the opening drama of the final movement is somewhat muted, as it's coda. The crowd erupted at the end (which has been edited out) in such a way that you wonder what on earth they would have done if Bernstein was on the podium instead. Not recommended (unless you were there): 4/10

Marin Alsop

2008 September 26 – 28th – Baltimore Symphony Orchestra (Digital Live – Naxos) [review](#)

Before listening to Marin Alsop's recording as part of this survey, I wondered if her interpretation would have been in any way influenced by her teacher and mentor, Leonard Bernstein, not least since he had such a unique way with the music. I needn't have worried – Marin is very much her own woman and this performance has an awful lot going for it and is worth anyone's consideration.

Although again it is listed as 'live', you will still struggle to hear any audience noises and there is no applause at the end. Compared to Lenny, Ms Alsop is a fairly 'straight' interpreter and is very successful in creating a sense of genial high spirits in the first movement, although she is a bit too straight-laced in the second. However, there is something wrong with the third movement – not so much in the interpretation, but with the recording. While I will note here that she, like too many others these days, opts to have the double-bass solo to be played by the whole section, what is problematic is that the engineers for some reason change the perspective of the sound. Some have suggested that maybe Naxos used a take from a different performance or the rehearsals, others that the engineers changed the sound levels, but whatever the reason may be, the effect is to either mute the whirling end of the Ländler and the sound and fury at the start of the fourth movement, or to make the Huntsman's Funeral sound too loud. It is a curious – and amateurish – blot on the recording, which is a pity since Ms Alsop otherwise leads a very decent reading. The final movement is fast and furious, very exciting at the end as Ms Alsop takes the repeat of the horn theme a fair bit faster than the first time around – only Yuri Simonov does the same thing in this survey (see 1994) and it is to be noted that both of their recordings have very successful codas. For me, this is overall a very good recording and even allowing for the recording issues, is still a worthy: 7.5/10

2009

The usual end of decade flurry sees the last of Abbado's in Lucerne (see 1981), the first of The Dude's in LA, the first of Daniel Harding's in Amsterdam, plus a startling version of the 'Hamburg' score with de Vriend (see the Introduction)

Gustavo Dudamel

2009 October 10th – Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Live – DG Download/ DVD)

It is easy to forget just what a stir Gustavo Dudamel was making at around this time of this concert with the *wider* musical public, not least after his appearance at the London Proms in 2007 with the Simon Bolivar (then Youth) Orchestra. I certainly enjoyed that concert very much and whilst I also admired the rhythmic elan and youthful panache Dudamel and his young players brought to the scores of *West Side Story* and other South American dances, I also (along with some other experienced listeners) noted that it was hardly Beethoven or Mahler. His appointment some two years later as principal conductor of one of the world's major orchestras, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, was headline news with the inaugural concert televised worldwide, even in the UK where, outside of The Proms, a classical music television broadcast of anything is virtually non-existent, with the exception of the obligatory Christmas Nutcracker and the Vienna New Year's Day concert. Even the fast-food vendor outside of LAPO's Walt Disney Concert Hall had a hotdog named after the new maestro ("The Dude" apparently – please don't ask me for the recipe). For his inaugural concert, Dudamel, as did Abbado in Berlin and Honeck in Pittsburgh, chose Mahler's First Symphony and this live concert can still be enjoyed from Deutsche Grammophon either as a digital download, or as a DVD of the whole concert which featured a premiere of a new work by John Adams for its first half – *City Noir*, a symphonic poem paying homage to LA's film industry connections, which Dudamel conducts with a score, unlike in the Mahler. However, it is the Mahler symphony that we are primarily interested in.

The first thing to say about this reading is that the orchestra plays beautifully and dedicatedly for their new young maestro and DG treats us all to very fine sound and decent camera work, which focuses as much on the orchestra as on Dudamel. However, this is a slow, 58 minute reading – and sounds it. Elsewhere in this survey, there are similarly leisurely readings, not all successful – in his last recording with the Chicago Symphony, Tennstedt (see 1976) led a very intense and dark 60 minute reading which seemed to be fascinated by the symphony's more haunted shadows, whilst in 1993 Leif Segerstam led a 20 minute first movement which was as bleak and unforgiving as the most desolate Sibelian landscape – in comparison, Dudamel sounds merely cautious. As the *Ging heut' Morgen über's Feld* melody begins in the first movement, the listener is reminded of its origins, as Mahler's Wayfarer from the early song-cycle, that tells us that this young man is full of the joys of life and youth, walking through dew-kissed morning fields and being merrily greeted by birds. However, with Dudamel here, it all sounds as if Mahler's hero is an ancient fellow wearily ploughing through the fields on his mobility scooter in the pouring rain. You will listen in vain for the rhythmic elan and panache that was there in spades during the Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story* in that (hugely enjoyable) Proms concert – in short, those youthful high-spirits, which would have been wonderfully apt in this symphony, have instead been replaced with flat-footed caution. The second movement likewise begins with a clumsily executed accelerando (listen to Abbado with the LSO in 1983 to hear it done with real style [see 1981]) which never recovers and the third movement is just dull. Admittedly, the final movement is much better, but it's a little bit too little too late. The commendably quiet audience erupt at the end, but in truth, you wonder why: 4/10

Daniel Harding

2009 September 30 – Concertgebouw Amsterdam (*Digital Live – RCO DVD*) [review](#)

It was interesting to turn to yet another 'young lion' in this work, Daniel Harding being only 33 when this concert took place, with the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. Available only on DVD as part of a box set of all the Mahler symphonies played by the Concertgebouw under many conductors, again this is a leisurely 58 minute reading conducted by Harding, this time with a score, but curiously without a baton (he seems to use one more often than not, in my experience). Perhaps aided by being a little older, or by having such an expert Mahler band as the Concertgebouw in front of him, plus maybe without the pressure of having his inaugural concert televised worldwide, Harding comes across as more confident and sure-footed than Dudamel, although his style of conducting is much more

elaborate than his younger colleague, unnecessarily, you could conclude, since (probably as a consequence) ensemble is not totally immaculate – and when you think this is the Concertgebouw in Mahler, that's quite something to achieve. As for the interpretation, it is a straightforward and fresh reading with only the adoption of using the whole of the double bass section instead of just a soloist for the Huntsman's Funeral likely to cause any offense, even if here it is still no more convincing than I've heard elsewhere. In the end, the performance proves the adage, discussed elsewhere, that the symphony plays itself if only the conductor keeps out of the way – and the Concertgebouw always plays it very professionally: 7/10

2010

Ashkenazy Down Under, a couple of Rattles (see 1991), Chung on DG, plus Jurowski live in London

Vladimir Ashkenazy

2010 February 10th- 15th – Sydney Symphony Orchestra (Digital Live – SSO Live)

When Vladimir Ashkenazy, for so long one of the world's great piano virtuosos, started to conduct as well in the 1980's, he announced his presence with some spectacularly fine recordings of symphonies by Tchaikovsky, Sibelius and Rachmaninov. I have to say I'm not totally sure if that early flush of success has subsequently been fulfilled over the ensuing years, but his Mahler cycle from Sydney has been captured for posterity and, if nothing else, this First Symphony comes coupled with the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* as well as *Blumine*, which is not only handy, generous (74 minutes), but surprisingly unique on CD in this survey. If when he was a pianist, Ashkenazy could be relied upon to produce superbly played readings, with little in his interpretations that would cause offense, captured in superb Decca sound (until the digital era – they took ages get the piano sound right digitally), you may have expected more of the same with this Mahler First. Except you would be wrong. Actually, to be fair, the orchestra do play very well, especially since this is a live performance(s), the odd split brass note notwithstanding. The sound too, is full and rich, possibly a bit too full and rich as well since the hall (which I presume is the Sydney Opera House concert hall) has some reverberation, which adds to the sense of a larger than life performance. And a larger than life performance it is, red bloodied and red hot – not for Ashkenazy the super-refinement of Abbado in Lucerne, or the poetic delicacy of Lintu in Helsinki. Rather, this is a rip-roaring, no-taking-prisoners performance from first to last that must have been thrilling in the concert hall. One small anomaly (for which marks have been deducted) is that the reprise of the Bruder Jakob music in the third movement, is taken noticeably quicker the second time round than the first, lending it an angry and defiant air, perhaps reflecting the hatred the animals had for their old tormentor. That aside, this is a terrific performance, reminiscent of the young James Levine (see 1974), who was equally full-blooded in his early Mahler performances for RCA. So, a generously filled disc with a slightly tubbily recorded, red-hot reading, with an added spice of interpretative controversy – how would you grade that? I would give it: 8/10

Myung Whun Chung

2010 November 2 – 3rd – Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Live – Deutsche Grammophon)

Sophistication is the key word for this recording – whether it is referring to the sound provided by the Deutsche Grammophon engineers, the playing of the orchestra, or the audience who barely make a sound until the rapturous reception at the end. I wasn't really sure what to expect with this version, having found Chung a little cool on record in the past (some Dvořák Symphonies with the Vienna Philharmonic from many years ago, notwithstanding), especially in opera, but this is a very engaging account of the Mahler First. On the whole, his is a swift reading, the total time of 55 minutes somewhat deceptive since he takes the lyrical sections of the final movement very slowly with, of course, great

sophistication. In the first movement, there is a slight loss of warmth and geniality which is replaced instead by ear-catching flashing colours and inner details that are presented by conductor and orchestra naturally and without any undue underlining or emphasis. The second movement also opens much more trenchantly than you may have thought and while the *Trio* has a certain urbane sophistication about it, you will hear much worse. That said, the musicians in the klezmer band of the third movement sound as if they are all wearing designer gear, such is their suavité, but in context of this performance, perhaps they can be forgiven for apparently having gone up in the world, as can the super-smooth double bass solo – at least it is a solo. The final movement opens dramatically and at some heat, something Chung maintains all the way through to the end. This is some of the best work I have heard the conductor do and while I do have some reservations about this performance which I have mentioned above, all in all I was very impressed: 8/10

Vladimir Jurowski

2010 December 4th – London Philharmonic Orchestra (Digital Live – LPO Live) [review](#)

London has been very lucky to have had Vladimir Jurowski as a principal conductor of one of their orchestras for so long, not least since under his stewardship the London Philharmonic Orchestra's standards have improved tremendously. Even more so though, I would argue, was his choice of repertoire which was both wide-ranging and bold – large-scale symphonies by Enescu, Zemlinsky, Marx and Myaskovsky, amongst others frequented his generous programmes, as did symphony cycles of Bruckner and Mahler (usually with one or two programmed a season rather than the whole lot in one go as with Gergiev), Ring Cycles and other concert performances of operas. We will all miss him when he goes to Berlin in 2021.

I didn't see this live taping of the Mahler First Symphony, having opted instead to attend a very fine Third Symphony a couple of months previously, but it does sound a lot better than the last one I saw with the LPO, under Rattle in the late-1980's. There are a couple of anomalies that need to be stated at this point – firstly, the sound from the refurbished, but still unforgiving Royal Festival Hall, is not of the very top drawer, although still perfectly acceptable. Secondly, this is a performance which integrates a bright and breezily played *Blumine* and places it second in the symphony, plus is another that uses the entire double bass section for the Huntsman's Funeral. That said, it must be stated that Jurowski gets an awful lot right with this 54 minute performance (plus *Blumine*) and does very little other than play the music 'straight'. The first movement, complete with exposition repeat is paced to perfection and while the *Ländler* may start a little deliberately, the orchestra clearly relishes their upsides, whilst the colours in the klezmer music are almost as authentic as under Walter and Kubelik. The final movement opens dramatically, its impact somewhat muted on record due to the dry-ish sound, I thought, but the lead into the finale was masterfully done, as was the concluding peroration. Curiously, the bass drum player seems to be caught off guard at the end and seemed in two minds as to whether they were to execute an unmarked crescendo in their final drum roll, or not – either way they didn't do it very well. In spite of these positives, the recording is then cut off amateurishly the split second after the performance finishes, presumably to avoid any applause, but if ever an ending deserved an ovation, this was one of them. So, overall, very good, but not the best: 7.5/10

2011

A final recording from Lorin Maazel (see 1960) from London, firsts from Francois-Xavier Roth and Markus Stenz from Baden-Baden and Cologne, a second from Prague with Inbal (see 1985), plus fireworks from Budapest

Markus Stenz

2011 July 3 – 5th - Gürzenich-Orchester Köln (Digital Live – Oehms) [review](#)

I think Markus Stenz is a Mahlerian to watch, rather than one to rely on at present – some of his Mahler recordings (such as a Fifth Symphony with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra) are exceptionally good, others (such as the Fifth Symphony remake in Cologne), less so. There is, though, much going for this well recorded and played Mahler First, part of the complete cycle set down from live concerts in Cologne and captured in very fine, clear sound by the Oehms recording engineers. However, it also highlights where Stenz is at the moment in his development as a Mahler interpreter too. This is clearly evidenced in the symphony's opening pages – the hushed expectancy of the opening is a little too brightly lit thus robbing it of some atmosphere, yet the start of the *Ging heut' Morgen übers Feld* melody is gorgeous, the harps ravishing in their contribution. Further on, at the end of the movement in the lead-up to the great climax at the end, Stenz executes an unmarked rallentando, then accelerando, before another rallentando which merely sounds self-conscious and is poorly executed. In the inner movements, Stenz is quite characterful, if perhaps hardly special (although he resists the urge to use the whole double-bass sections in the third movement and sticks with the more traditional solo), likewise in the finale where there's generalised, rather than white hot excitement. It's a decent effort, decently played and decently recorded, but no more: 7/10

Ivan Fischer

2011 September – Budapest Festival Orchestra (Digital Studio – Channel Classics)

It seems to me that Ivan Fischer's (brother of Adam, no relation to Thierry) slowly evolving Mahler Symphony Cycle will, on its completion, be one of the more interesting we have had for many a year – and likewise, this First Symphony is full of interesting ideas too, most of which work, some of which inevitably don't. That this is a studio recording is something to note, since these days most recordings seem to be taken from live concerts and there will be many for whom this is a significant bonus with no audience rustles in the background – indeed, such is Fischer's keenness on transparency of texture which, allied to the spectacular and super-detailed sound of this SACD, having no audience distractions allows the listener to appreciate his achievements all the more.

In general, this Mahler First has been very well received by music critics, but I do have some reservations, the first of which occurs very early on in the performance when the cellos start their *Ging heut' Morgen übers feld* melody. They are, of course, joined first by the bassoon and then by the bass clarinet and most conductors are adept at allowing the listener to hear the perkier sounding bassoon line, less so the softer bass clarinet. That Fischer allows us to hear all three clearly, particularly the latter) is achieved only by asking the cellos to play their melody in a very restrained manner, which some may feel makes them come across rather 'cool' – after all, the Lied from which the melody is taken tells us that this is a youth striding forth through the fields, full of the joys of spring and being greeted merrily by the birds; in Fischer's hands Mahler's youthful hero sounds a bit miserable, as if still mourning the loss of the girl he loves who has married someone else. If though, you are a bass clarinet fan, you are better off I would say seeking out Abbado with the Lucerne Festival Orchestra (see 1981), who also allows you to hear the player, but not at the expense of the high-spirits being dampened by subdued cellos. Further on, in the lead up to the first movement's climax, Fischer is slow – very slow indeed. Actually, he is not the only conductor who likes to take that passage with chugging basses and cellos like this, but only Leif Segerstam in 1993 is as slow as Fischer – however, in Segerstam's hands, the music sound like a massive glacier, slowly but inexorably crushing all before it, whereas with Fischer merely sounds earthbound and drags. It's the same when this passage is repeated again for the lead up to the coda in the final movement. Of course, Fischer's aim was to create the maximum contrast between an uncertain and darkly ominous build-up, with the exultation of the release when the

climax(es) arrive, but I think he rather overplays his hand and others (such as Jascha Horenstein) have done something similar, but much more successfully.

That said, elsewhere there is an awful lot to enjoy and admire. Fischer's Huntsman's Funeral is superb – he really makes his solo double-bass player take his opening melody as simply as possible (contrast this with Chung's Gucci-wearing player in 2010!), with the following round and klezmer music as evocative and engaging as any. Likewise, if I thought he was a little cool and restrained in the first movement, the final one explodes into life magnificently, his Budapest Festival Orchestra playing like demons possessed – and there's better to come. At the centre of this movement, there is a stormy development section – initially, I thought Fischer underplayed the beginning of this section slightly, as I have heard more sound and fury, as well as roaring tam tams on other recordings. However, Fischer is aiming for the resolution immediately after this, the false victory, as it were, where trumpets and trombones play out the finale's main theme, underpinned by the second timpanist hammering out a three-note galloping theme – most conductors play this somewhat perfunctorily, as a passage just to get through. However, in Fischer's hands, his brass are strong and proud and he really makes it sound special. For him, it is more than just a glimpse of the jubilation of the finale – it is also a nod to the future, when in the third movement of his Ninth Symphony, Mahler suddenly cuts short the chaos of the *Rondo-Burleske*, to allow the listener to hear a glimpse what is to come in the comparative tranquility of the final movement. So when the coda begins in Fischer's hands, it is then played in exactly the same way and tempo as it had done earlier on – it's a brilliant, simple and superbly executed piece of musicianship and serves as a launchpad to bring the whole symphony home triumphantly. Ultimately, in spite of some reservations, I do think this is one of the finest Mahler Firsts, certainly of recent years and is more than worthy of the highest accolades: 8.5/10

Francois-Xavier Roth

*2011 October 29th – November 2 – 3rd - SWR SO Baden-Baden (Digital Live – Hanssler)***

Francois-Xavier Roth has the distinction of being one of only two conductors in this whole survey who have both performed and recorded an original version of this symphony (see introduction), as well as the more conventional, standard four-movement version. Initially, I was compelled to compare the timings of his two recordings, but then remembered that the music is different in both, so that exercise would have been meaningless as I wouldn't be comparing like with like (n.b. the *Les Siècles* reading is marginally quicker in the first two movements).

Instead, I would have been far better off comparing it with the previous recording of the Mahler First Symphony made with the SWR Symphony Orchestra of Baden-Baden under their former principal conductor, Michael Gielen (see 2002). Gielen was, of course, a great conductor and also a great Mahler interpreter, even if I felt his recording of the First Symphony was perhaps more thought-provoking than involving. This was actually Roth's recording debut with the SWR Symphony Orchestra of whom he became principal conductor the same year aged 42 and, unsurprisingly, he sounds much more youthful than Gielen on his recording and probably ever was, even at the same age. In fact, comparing the two readings brought to my mind a Master and his Apprentice. With Gielen, the score is subjected to a forensic examination under the microscope, clear-sighted and cerebral, while under Roth, the apprentice, the score is celebrated as being "one of the most astonishing first symphonies in the history of music" (to quote Michael Steinberg) and given a performance that celebrates it as such in every bar. In fact, it is the youthful high spirits, dynamism and excitement that are all hallmarks of this remarkable recording. In this survey, there are many versions (usually in the 5-7.5/10 brackets) that one of my wise old friends used to like to term "worthy, but dull" – in other words, they make all the right noises and do all the right things very well, but no more. This recording by Francois-Xavier Roth does all of those "right things", except they are turbo-charged. The youthful high spirits of the first

movement are as infectious as any, the dances in the Second go with a real swing, the slow movement is gently humorous, whilst there is real and sustained excitement in the finale. Roth opens the final movement with some verve, the cymbal clash and timpani entry being taken slightly closer together than the score indicates, more a thunderbolt, rather than a flash of lightning and a thunderclap, but it is hugely effective and seems to put his players right onto the edge of their seats straight from the beginning, a position he keeps them at all the way through to the end. As the ensuing musical tornado rips through the symphony, the sparks are really flying in this performance until the music dies down to the first lyrical section where Roth observes the fermatas* on the rests with huge dramatic pauses, which creates the effect of not of a storm blowing itself out, but more of the devastation and sense of unease you would feel when entering the eye of a hurricane, the false hope of knowing more is to come. It is an imaginative and hugely effective moment, the likes of which the Master (Michael Gielen) would just never have countenanced, but his apprentice embraces and thrills us with the sheer panache of how he pulls it off.

The label tells me this is a 'live' recording, but the sound and playing are terrific and you won't hear a thing from the audience, not even a cheer at the end – perhaps they were as surprised as I was, for this is easily one of the best in the survey and the most fitting homage to the orchestra's previous music directors who did so much for Mahler's music, Michael Gielen and before him, Hans Rosbaud: 9.5/10

(*a fermata is a musical notation designed to give the interpreter liberty as to how long they wish to sustain either a note or rest value)

2012

Another Inbal, this time from Tokyo (see 1985), de Waart again from Belgium (see 1989), Järvi fils from Frankfurt, Luisi in Vienna, plus another Rattle from Salzburg (see 1991)

Paavo Järvi

2012 August 23rd – Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra (Digital Live – UNITEL DVD) [review](#)

In 1985 under their principal conductor at the time, Eliahu Inbal, the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra started what was to become the first complete digital Mahler cycle with the First Symphony and here, some thirty odd years later, we have the same orchestra with their (then) current principal conductor performing the same work in what was to become the first complete Mahler cycle on Blu-ray/DVD. On the technical side, things are very impressive with extremely good sound and video quality, while the surroundings of the concert hall in Kurhaus Wiesbaden look magnificent. The sound also comes with two-channel PCM or multichannel DTS-HD 5.1. too, if you like that kind of thing, while the 'coupling' is a complete performance of the *Resurrection Symphony*.

I have to admit to being a little wary of how Paavo Järvi would approach the music, not least since Neeme Järvi has recorded the First Symphony twice in versions that could politely be described as "eccentric" (see 1993). Somewhat to my surprise then, Järvi fils is the polar opposite of his dad – his 55 minute First Symphony is unlikely to cause offense to anyone. It is very well played and very capably conducted. He performs everything 'straight' with only the stormy central development section of the final movement taken perhaps at a faster pace than the initial pulse would suggest. He even uses a double-bass solo in the third movement, not the whole section. This is probably the DVD version for those who just want things to be straightforward with none of Bernstein's angst or the super-refinement of Abbado in Lucerne. It's thoroughly decent, but perhaps too, slightly ordinary, but still a worthy: 7.5/10

Fabio Luisi

2012 May 30 – 31st – Wiener Symphoniker (Digital Studio – SOLO Musica)

This release will be of significant interest to the older of our readers with fond memories of LPs, being not only available on vinyl, but a double album too, with one movement per side – apparently the records are heavy grade 180 gram vinyl, with premium quality jackets and a sturdy gatefold sleeve, so clearly a release for those of you who enjoy bathing records and brushing their needles. That said, the sound reproduced here is quite something, with a warmth and depth to the music that the CD issue (or indeed CDs in general) still have not come close to matching. It's a slight pity to report then that the actual music-making isn't quite on this level – it's not bad and the orchestra acquit themselves well, especially in the last movement, even if they aren't a powerhouse band in this music like the New York PO, or Concertgebouw orchestras. Luisi is a relatively straight-forward interpreter, albeit one not adverse to making a heavy-handed rhetorical point at times, which, at its worst such as in the second movement's *Trio*, just doesn't work and the music instead grinds to a halt. He uses the entire bass section for the solo in the Huntsman's Funeral, which may displease some, but that is not really an issue as the rest of the movement is somewhat flat and dull anyway. The final movement is probably the most successful and Luisi brings everything home excitingly, but this is a recording for the vinylistas only: 6/10

2013

Zubin Mehta in Australia (see 1963) and Thomas Hengelbrock conducting the Hamburg version in Hamburg (see Introduction)

2014

Hannu Lintu in Helsinki, YNS in Bavaria, plus Thierry Fischer in Utah

Hannu Lintu

2014 May & December – Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra (Digital Live – Ondine)** [review](#)

Listening to Hannu Lintu's remarkable recording of this symphony so soon after Ashkenazy's red-bloodied reading, was like dunking one's head into a bucket of freezing cold water. Where under Ashkenazy there was panache and passion, under Lintu instead there is a crystal-clear transparency and delicacy to the music that is quite remarkable - and different. Apparently, Lintu takes his cue from a letter Mahler wrote to the conductor Schalk about conducting the First Symphony, in which the composer says: "*In the first movement the greatest delicacy throughout*". There is no doubt that Lintu achieves this, but make no mistake, he doesn't shy away from the climaxes either which instead come across as lean and sinewy. Moreover, there is also a sense of proportion in the sound which is remarkable too. A wise old friend once said to me that the litmus test of a great Mahler First is the first sixty seconds of the final movement. He's right of course (*and also contributes to MWI: Ed*), as those opening salvos and the tempest that follows are very difficult to balance – you are either able either to hear all the lines of the furious string sections at the expense of the percussion, or the latter simply drowns everyone out. Only Simon Rattle – and only with the powerhouse string section of the Berlin Philharmonic at his disposal – seems to be able to achieve the ideal balance here, but Lintu and his Finnish players come close, although for very different reasons. It's a curious alchemy – I'm tempted to call it "chamber-music Mahler", except it isn't that as the orchestra is too large and too loud, but hopefully it will give you an idea of the type of performance on offer here which is probably the perfect antidote for those who find Bernstein too overheated. Elsewhere, Lintu is a very 'straight' interpreter of the music, with no rhetorical point-making or anything to raise eyebrows (i.e. solo double bass used

for the Huntsman's Funeral), just remarkable clarity and purity. In this survey, there are only two other conductors who attempt anything similar and they are Claudio Abbado with the Lucerne Festival Orchestra (see 1981) and Osmo Vänskä and the Minnesota Orchestra (see 2018). The (big) problem with Vänskä's performance is that he appears to just focus on clarity for clarity's sake and, as a consequence, the performance merely becomes bogged-down, unable to establish a clear sense of direction, something both the more dramatically aware Abbado and Lintu avoid. As such, choice between the two for the reader then becomes straight-forward, as Abbado achieves his aims with the plush and deep-pile sound of his crack festival band, whereas Lintu achieves his own with the bracing and icy purity of the freezing Finnish air. Both are remarkable achievements and Lintu is also treated to terrific sound on SACD by Ondine, plus has a bonus in the form of *Blumine*, tracked separately from the symphony as an appendix. Perhaps his is just a bit controversial for a full main-stream recommendation (for that, see the next recording immediately below), but he certainly is worthy of a 'wild-card' nomination: 8.5/10

Yannick Nezet-Seguin

2014 June 23 – 27th - Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra (Digital Live – BR Klassik) ** [review](#)

One of the very best concerts I have been privileged to attend at London in recent years was given by YNS (aka Yannick Nezet-Seguin) with his Philadelphia Orchestra performing Rachmaninov – it was truly superb. Yet one of the most disappointing discs I have had to review over the past few years has been the same team's live taping of the Mahler VIII symphony, so I was looking forward to auditioning this live Mahler First with YNS, albeit on guest-conducting duties with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, not least since it had been so well received by my other colleagues at MWI.

It all opens very auspiciously – curiously, it was at the sounding of the trumpet fanfares from afar which really alerted me that there was a special alchemy taking place on those nights in the concert hall in June 2014. YNS leads a swift reading, some 53 minutes with all repeats and is not adverse to occasionally bending the pulse to make a point, examples early on being a slight slowing just after the cellos have started their *Ging heut' Morgen übers Feld* melody so that they 'melt' into the harps' arpeggios, on the lingering on the *expressivo* marking for flute and oboe a few bars later, while further on he has much fun with the klezmer music in the third movement. In the first movement, he is very good at creating a tremendous sense of disquiet in the eery central section which then contrasts superbly with the high-spirits elsewhere. In the second movement I especially enjoyed hearing the way the double-basses dug into the Ländler with such relish, while the *Trio* is nicely pointed, but not overdone. In the Huntsman's Funeral, YNS is very adept at bringing out all the different strands of the round, making it a more fascinating listen than usual plus, aided and abetted by the superb Bavarians on top form, the colours and spiciness of the klezmer music are fully realised – at the end of the movement, the gentle thud of the bass drum brought to my mind the awful finality of the shutting of a coffin's lid. The last movement tears out of the blocks as if possessed, the sparks positively flying – you can practically smell the resin on the bows of the string sections smoking and the white heat is maintained all the way through to the triumphant conclusion. Sometimes when you read other critics' rave reviews, you are disappointed when you finally hear the recording yourself and wonder about their sanity (I'm sure this feeling is mutual), but on this occasion, I must concur – this recording is a triumph: 9.5/10

Thierry Fischer

2014 September 12 – 13th – Utah Symphony Orchestra (Digital Live – Reference) [review](#)

It was nice to note in the booklet for this recording a dedication to Maurice Abravanel, the former Principal Conductor of the Utah Symphony Orchestra who, astonishingly, recorded an entire Mahler

Symphony Cycle with them in the early 1970's, a time when such things were just not done. This live recording, some 40 years after the Utah Symphony Orchestra taped a charming and wide-eyed version under Abravanel, finds the orchestra in fine fettle under their principal conductor, Thierry Fischer. True, they still lack the fire-power of their more heavy-weight rivals, but their playing is engaging and under Fischer they deliver a spontaneous and winning reading with little that would cause offense or raise any eyebrows (even a solo bass is used for The Huntsman's funeral). The sound delivered by Reference Recordings is very good, with the orchestra sounding quite closely miked which has the benefit of eliminating any audience noises as well as making the orchestra sound perhaps a bit more muscular than I suspect they really are. All in all, this is very enjoyable, albeit there is nothing that sets it apart from the formidably competitive crowd: 7/10

2015

Chailly, live in Leipzig (see 1995)

2017

An award winning recording from Dusseldorf with Adam Fischer (see 1989), Neeme Järvi's second (see 1993), plus a live recording from the Concertgebouw with a short-lived music director

Daniele Gatti

2017 January & May 2018- Concertgebouw Orchestra (Digital Live – RCO CD/ DVD)

It was interesting to come across this filmed performance of yet another Mahler First with the Concertgebouw Orchestra under their then principal conductor, Daniele Gatti, less than 10 years after their previous filmed effort under Daniel Harding. Compared to his younger colleague, Gatti is a dull, even dour, podium presence, his gestures simple and straight-forward. However, whereas with Harding I felt that the Concertgebouw delivered a thoroughly professional performance in spite of Harding's rather excessive and florid arm waving from the podium, their performance under Gatti was very different, full of subtleties of interpretation born of Mahlerian *inspiration*, rather than *aspiration*. My notes have many examples of these and include the clever accelerando leading into the *Trio* of the second movement, which is repeated at the end of that movement too. Or how in the third movement, the gentle central section when Mahler quotes from the final song from his *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, the care at which Gatti subtly brings the woodwind solos to the fore (and when you have the front desk players of the Concertgebouw available to you, why wouldn't you?), or in the final movement, the hushed tenderness of the lyrical interludes. It all adds up to a very compelling experience, my only complaint (on a personal level) being the use of the whole bass section for the solo at the start of the third movement.

This performance is available either on DVD/Blu-ray, coupled with the Mahler's Fourth Symphony, or as a standalone download of each symphony – either way, sound and picture are of the highest quality. Gatti's tenure as Principal Conductor of the Concertgebouw was a short one and was terminated, suddenly and unexpectedly, even if it was for the right reasons. However, this fine Mahler First Symphony is a glimpse of what could have been and is certainly one of the best DVD performances in this survey along with Chailly with the Gewandhaus Orchestra (see 1995), both just falling marginally short of Bernstein with the VPO, Rattle and the BPO, as well as Abbado with the Lucerne Festival Orchestra – however, if the coupling suits, it would be a worthy choice: 8/10

2018

We end at the beginning, with Roth in a recording of one of the original scores (see Introduction) and Vänskä back at the scene of the first recording

Osmo Vänskä

2018 March- Minnesota Orchestra (Digital Studio – BIS) [review](#)

It is of neat poetic harmony that the last recording in this survey should also be from the place of its first commercial recording, with Dmitri Mitropoulos in 1940. That said, the contrasts between these two recordings could hardly be more different – even the name of the orchestra has changed from the Minneapolis Symphony to Minnesota Symphony (in 1968)! However, whereas on the early recording the sound was boxy, the playing scrappy, the interpretation hugely volatile with playing often at white heat, what is on offer here is virtually the complete opposite – the sound is pristine, the playing is superb, the interpretation one-dimensional and the performance enervating beyond belief. Vänskä and his players cause are not helped by the slightly disappointing sound provided by the (usually super-reliable) BIS engineers which makes everything somewhat distant, especially the strings (even on the SACD), but I'm not so sure if even state of the art blockbuster sound would have changed much. Everything here seems to be in 'soft focus', as if Vänskä is making muzak rather than music, a point reinforced by taking the option to use all the double basses at the start of the third movement, rather than the usual soloist – as if nothing grotesque can be allowed in this performance where only clarity matters and everyone sounds bored throughout most of the 56 minutes duration. Including me (who listened to it twice over as many months just to make sure). What a way to end - sorry! 3/10

Summary

I have to confess that it has been a far longer journey than I thought to get to this point, but it has been quite an eye-opening one and I am grateful to the many friends along the way who pointed out recordings I may not have considered, sent me out-of-print ones to audition and even patiently ripped those from LPs which haven't yet reached the medium of CD, let alone downloads.

If there has been any overriding trend, it is that (much to my surprise) the older recordings, with their fallible sound and sometimes even more fallible orchestral playing, possess a sense of discovery and joy in the music which hasn't always been replicated in more modern recordings, in spite of often superb sound and superior orchestral playing. As I said to a wise old friend: "Give me van Kempen, wilful but hugely interesting, in dry 1956 mono sound over the pristine boredom of Vänskä any day" That said, after the glut of "worthy but dull" recordings during the 1980's and 1990's, it has equally been a surprise to note how many fine modern recordings have appeared over the past ten years or so, with either something new to say about the piece, or just damn fine performances – those by Honeck, Ivan Fischer, Chung, Lintu, Gatti, Roth and Nezet-Seguin are not only all extremely fine and would grace any collection, but also prove that the next ten years of Mahler performances and recordings should hopefully yield yet more treasures, as do those by the more comparative elder statesmen Ashkenazy and Chailly.

This is intended as the first of many surveys (I have been asked to do *The Resurrection Symphony* next) so a thread will be started on the Messageboard for you all to give feedback – whether the format or the conclusions are wrong, the idea behind this is to entertain as well as inform, so any suggestions on how we can make it better would be most welcome as are, as always, your own thoughts and comments on the recordings I have reviewed.

When the late Tony Duggan drew his own shortlist of recommendations, he concluded with: *“To sum up, Kubelik on Audite, Barbirolli on Dutton, Horenstein on Unicorn, Walter on Sony, and Bernstein on DG, with Kegel as a “wild-card”* and it's quite surprising how much we are in agreement if not, of course, about everything. My own list below is indecently long, I concede, but then there's an absurdly large number of very fine Mahler Firsts in the discography nowadays. There is also a huge number of very good recordings too, very few of which are duds – it seems the final movement and coda is able to bring out the best in everyone, something that made my life immeasurably harder and enjoyable at the same time when trying to work out the ones I considered to be the best. Ultimately, the ones I have chosen below are those which gave me the greatest pleasure when doing the survey and, I hope, give the same to you.

Titan – Netherlands SO/Jan Willem de Vriend; Wyn Morris/New Philharmonia

Mono Live – Walter/NBC 1939; Keilberth/Dresden Staatskapelle

Mono Studio – Walter/NYPO 1954; Kubelik/Vienna PO

Stereo Studio – Walter/Columbia SO 1961; Barbirolli/Hallé; Solti/LSO; Kubelik/BRSO; Kegel/DresPO

Stereo Live – Tennstedt/NDR SO

Digital Studio – Joo/Amsterdam PO; Ivan Fischer/Budapest Festival Orch

Digital Live – Bernstein/Concertgebouw (DG); Kobayashi/Czech PO; Nezet-Seguin/Bav RSO; Roth/SWR Orch Baden-Baden

DVD – Bernstein/VPO; Abbado/Lucerne Festival Orchestra; Rattle/Berlin PO (BPO DVD)

Wildcards – Ernest Borsamsky/Berlin RSO 1949 (Mono); Guilini/Chicago SO; Adam Fischer/Mahler Festival Orchestra Kassel; Salonen/Bavarian RSO; Lintu/Finnish RSO; Chitose Okashiro (piano realisation)