

## Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* - A survey of the main post-WW2 recordings

by Ralph Moore

There are probably at least a hundred and fifty post-WW2 recordings of *Das Lied von der Erde*; I have selected thirty-five of those here, of which the majority are studio recordings and fourteen are live. This is a work that can get under the skin and aficionados can find themselves obsessively collecting multiple versions - of which there are many worthy to feed their obsession. My chosen recordings feature only the full orchestral version with a mezzo-soprano/contralto and tenor soloist, as I find the tenor and baritone combination to be lacking in tonal contrast and variety, and contrary to the spirit of Mahler's work - even if he did sanction it if the preferred contralto is unavailable. That hardly applies today, but we occasionally see the deliberate choice of a male duo. I see little artistic excuse or aesthetic rationale behind that option, still less for Jonas Kaufmann's self-aggrandising - and not very successful - exercise of singing both the tenor and baritone parts. Nor have I included recordings of the chamber arrangement. Some sixty recordings of the full orchestral version have been made over the last forty years; over half of those are live, as are the majority of the more recent versions, as the age of studio recordings is now essentially over just as the work itself is becoming increasingly popular and more frequently scheduled in concert programmes. Finally, my decision to treat only of post-war recordings is based simply on the criterion of wanting decent sound, but also absolves me from the necessity of discussing the live performance in Amsterdam featuring the infamous "Deutschland über alles, Herr Schuricht" incident.

The work is often regarded as another of Mahler's symphonies; indeed, it was published as such - despite being a succession of six vocal movements of disproportionate length. The sixth movement is only marginally shorter than the preceding five movements combined and is a prolonged, funereal meditation upon parting and death concluding with a consolatory mantra dwelling on the imperishability of Nature. A better designation is thus perhaps "song symphony". The songs are yearning ruminations upon the permanence of earthly beauty compared with transient, human mortality, and were composed to freely translated and embellished ancient Chinese poems at one of the lowest ebbs in Mahler's life. They are only loosely connected rather than being a true cycle, like Berlioz' *Nuits d'été*.

The premiere was conducted by Bruno Walter in November 1911; it was posthumous as Mahler had died six months previously, so never heard it in performance. Even though much of the time textures are transparent and chamber-like, garnished with exotic little touches of pentatonic chinoiserie, occasionally the orchestration is also heavy and the tenor in particular must have sufficient heroic power to pierce through it in his songs, especially the first, while the female voice must have superb legato and dusky, melting warmth of tone. The large orchestra features a sizeable battery of percussion, including a proper, dark-coloured tam-tam almost playing a solo role alongside the singer in *Der Abschied*, but there are some oddities: the third trumpet plays only in the first song and timpani and tambourine are required only for the eruption in the fourth. It is conceivable that he might have made some adjustments to the orchestration as a result of hearing it performed, but by and large it works well as it is.

Some of the reviews below have previously been posted on Amazon on MusicWeb and have been adapted for the purposes of this survey. The late Tony Duggan also posted [a survey](#) on this site but that was as long ago as 1999 and while it embraced considerably fewer recordings than do I, it also considered several tenor-baritone partnerships which I ignore, so I hope my own here will not be superfluous in comparison with his conspectus which is, of course, deeply perceptive and knowledgeable, but necessarily more limited in scope, having been written over twenty years ago.

**1948 Bruno WALTER** - Live mono; NYP EDITIONS; PRISTINE AUDIO  
Kathleen FERRIER, Set SVANHOLM, New York Philharmonic

(See [my review](#))

This live recording was made four years before the famous Decca studio version, by which time Kathleen Ferrier had already undergone treatment for the cancer which so cruelly ended her life prematurely. Thus, despite the beauty of that later recording, she is in fact in richer, more secure voice here in 1948, with a considerably stronger top G and even more effulgence in her tone. She is wrongly described as a mezzo-soprano in the lukewarm *New York Times* review of the first concert - and Ferrier's New York debut - three days earlier, but the depth and mellowness of her timbre here refutes that categorisation; she was a true contralto and sings majestically, the voice often coming across as really large and powerful, despite the fragile delicacy of her quiet singing in passages such as "Mein Herz ist müde". The magical "ewig...ewig" of the extended concluding movement is so steadily intoned and her singing is demonstrably superior to the recording four years later, good as that is.

Bruno Walter is of course of impeccable pedigree as the conductor of the 1911 premiere of this work. He made three commercial recordings and tended towards increasingly relaxed tempi as time went on; this is just as grand as the Decca recording but a tauter, brighter, more driven performance – and it must be said that the New York Philharmonic plays rather more confidently and securely than the VPO; the strings are fuller and the horns are especially good despite the odd blip.

Set Svanholm is more of an echter Heldentenor than Julius Patzak and has all the notes, although even this Tristan is taxed and audibly strained by his very demanding music. Given that Patzak was already 56 years old when he recorded for Walter and Svanholm is here only 43, one may all the more admire the astuteness with which Patzak husbands his resources, compared with Svanholm's effortfulness, but both make much of the text and manage to prevail against big orchestras, which Walter made no effort to rein in.

The sound is really very good for its vintage and provenance on acetates; there is very little audience noise and despite the inevitable presence of some hiss and papery crackle, I found it to be rather more immediate than the later studio recording.

This performance has been previously briefly available on both the Naxos "Immortal Performances" and the "Documents" labels, but I have little doubt that this Pristine remastering is the one to have now – and indeed I think I favour it over the celebrated 1952 studio account for the energy of Walter's conducting and the youthful vigour of Ferrier's singing.

**1952 Bruno WALTER** – Studio mono; DECCA; PRISTINE AUDIO  
Kathleen FERRIER, Julius PATZAK, Wiener Philharmoniker

(See [my review](#))

Most collectors will already be familiar with this famous *Das Lied von der Erde*. Bruno Walter was a huge admirer of Kathleen Ferrier and that respect was reciprocated. There are technical weaknesses and vocal frailties alongside the beauty of that deep-pile velvet voice, perhaps exacerbated by her already failing health but her interpretation is mesmerising. Her dark contralto and Walter's authentic Mahlerian sensibility make a perfect marriage. It is noticeable here how Ferrier's linguistic command has matured under Walter's tutelage, even if her German is still not entirely idiomatic.

Tenor Julius Patzak is commendably intense and involved, but there is no denying that his distinctive tenor is a little past its best and somewhat strained by the demands of the louder passages. The playing

of the VPO is wonderfully warm and impassioned. This remains a classic account and every lover of these elegiac songs should know it.

However, this is now best heard not in Decca's remastering but in Pristine's usual splendid refurbishment.

**1956 Eduard van BEINUM** – Studio mono; EPIC; PRISTINE AUDIO  
Nan MERRIMAN, Ernst HAEFLIGER, Koninklijk Concertgebouworkest, Amsterdam

(See [my review](#))

Nan Merriman is partnered here by the distinguished Swiss tenor Ernst Haefliger, who was a student of Julius Patzak and of course sang with Kathleen Ferrier in their famous 1952 studio recording under Bruno Walter. His secure, attractive voice rides the orchestral textures successfully, rather in the manner of Fritz Wunderlich, another ostensibly lighter voice with surprisingly heroic, penetrative qualities. You can hear that he is just about coping with the cruelly exposed and demandingly high tessitura of the "Ein Affe ist es!" passage, but cope he does. He also captures the lightness of *Von der Jugend* which often escapes the heavier tenors who tackle it.

Merriman will inevitably be compared with Ferrier, who also features in the equally recommendable live recording from 1948 with Swedish Heldentenor Set Svanholm, again conducted by Walter and previously released on Pristine (see my review above). Her lovely voice lacks something of the plangent richness of Ferrier's but she is fully up to the vocal demands of the score and invests the texts with great pathos. Of course, *Der Abschied* is the big test. Van Beinum certainly does not rush his singer, here or anywhere else in this cycle, but he follows Walter's lead in directing one of the swiftest accounts on record; only Ormandy is faster. The intensity and sonority of the orchestral playing from the Concertgebouw are mesmerising Merriman's fluttering vibrato might irritate some listeners but it is regular and controlled, and she can fine it away as necessary. The final four minutes are ecstatic, Merriman's rapt concentration aptly enhanced by the sweep of the strings.

The Pristine remastering is now by far the better option to buy.

**1959 Fritz REINER** – Studio stereo; RCA; SONY/BMG  
Maureen FORRESTER, Richard LEWIS, Chicago Symphony Orchestra

The first thing that strikes you about this recording is the virtuosity of the orchestra and Reiner's ability to promote various strands of instrumental lines in turn so that details are constantly emerging through the luscious depth of sound. The exultant horns, snarling trumpets and flickering flutes in the opening song make you sit up and listen, yet they do not overwhelm Richard Lewis' voice. He manages to produce a surprising degree of heft for an essentially light and grainy tenor who specialised in Elgar, Mozart and Handel. He is both very expressive and sufficiently penetrating to negotiate the exceptionally demanding passages in these songs without sounding either strained or weedy - which cannot always be said for tenors in this killer music. He also succeeds in sounding both drunk and musical as *Der Trunkene* with some lovely fading diminuendi on a top A which suggest he is gently sliding to the floor.

In truth this recording is something of a sleeper. I postponed getting to know it, being already content with Kubelik, Klemperer, Tennstedt and Walter - but this is worthy to sit alongside them and sports possibly the best orchestral playing of all. Most reviewers seem, like me, despite one or two dissident voices, to be very content with the remastered sound which is extraordinary for 1959.

In many ways, Maureen Forrester's contralto is the closest in timbre and vibrancy to many people's first and ideal exponent of this music: Kathleen Ferrier. She doesn't quite have that beloved artist's

refulgence in the lower register but there is the same, merest hint of mortal tremulousness in her tone which can be so moving. Her melancholy restraint in *Der Abschied* is very effective, especially as she very carefully gauges how she gradually expands her voice over the great arcing span of half an hour of music until she opens up in the final, ecstatic hymn before the rapt repetition of "Ewig". Her interpretation is not quite on the same level as that of Janet Baker who in all her versions achieves a kind of desolate, aching beauty that threatens to reduce Forrester's account to mere generalised pathos, but Reiner's accompaniment is so exquisitely detailed and shaded as to convince me that this is still a great performance.

The remastered Living Stereo SACD version has further enhanced this recording alive but it is indeed parsimonious of Sony/BMG not to provide texts. I have them in my other versions, but it's nonetheless irritating for a first-time collector not to have the crucial words. But oh, that orchestra!

**1960 Bruno WALTER** – Studio stereo; SONY; PRISTINE AUDIO  
Mildred MILLER, Ernst HAEFLIGER, New York Philharmonic

Having recorded the classic account with the mortally ill Ferrier, Walter, like Mahler, was here conscious of his own heart defects when he recorded this which perhaps adds an extra intensity to his conducting. Certainly the playing and conducting are still sharp and incisive, even though Walter's tempi are more leisurely than in his previous recordings – but more pertinently, Haefliger's tenor, in comparison with his earlier recording for van Beinum, is here rather softer-grained and windier; he does not really have the heft and penetration required and his top notes are weak. Mildred Miller had a silvery, slightly tremulous mezzo-soprano which for me lacks the tonal depth and richness of the finest exponents of these songs; there is little of the sensuous or smoky about her voice, making me think she was more a soprano than a mezzo and I do not hear any great emotional involvement in her inflection of the text.

The stereo sound on Sony is harsh, narrow and somewhat hissy but my MWI colleague John Quinn has [reviewed](#) both the Sony and Pristine remasterings of this recording and praised the latter's revitalisation of the sound while expressing reservations similar to mine about the lack of heroism in Haefliger's singing, some coolness in Miller's, and a diminution in the intensity of Walter's conducting. This recording has classic, cult status among some devotees but beyond the clarity of Walter's direction, its magic eludes me somewhat.

**1963 Eugen JOCHUM** - Studio stereo; DG  
Nan MERRIMAN, Ernst HAEFLIGER, Koninklijk Concertgebouworkest, Amsterdam

Interestingly, although I noted what I thought was a diminution in Haefliger's tenor when he sang *Das Lied* for Walter four years after his recording with van Beinum, here for Jochum he again sounds much richer, firmer and louder; perhaps he it was the recording quality or he was having an off-day in 1960. He overcomes the fearsome demands of volume and tessitura in the opening song magnificently, with a minimum of strain, even if he hasn't quite the heroic timbre intrinsic to bigger voices. He reminds me most of Kmentt for Kubelik, in that he combines some of Wunderlich's lyricism – without, it must be said, his purity of tone - with considerable heft.

Similarly, while I have never been much impressed by anything Jochum conducted, I have to climb down and admit that he is terrific here – no hint of the Kapellmeister and the flexibility which in Bruckner for me translates as jerkiness is here wholly apt for Mahler. He is really driven in the fast, central passage of the third song – the Concertgebouw have to be very much on their toes - but alternately languorous, melancholy and affectionate as necessary. *Der Abschied* is dark and brooding – beautifully gauged over its long span.

Nan Merriman has a fast vibrato which can border on a flutter but often comes across merely as vibrancy. Even if she hasn't the deep, chocolatey tone of some favourite mezzos in this music, she is intense and concentrated, as she was seven years before under van Beinum, again partnered with Haefliger and the Concertgebouw. She darkens the colour of her mezzo accordingly for that last song, in sympathy with Jochum's profundity but her tremolo will be bothersome to some ears and she does not delve as acutely into the text as the greatest interpreters.

The soloists' performances here are very similar to that earlier recording but Haefliger is if anything more secure and I prefer Jochum's more varied and sensitive approach. Furthermore, the stereo sound here is far superior. This is still not my absolute top choice but remains a very satisfying account, the better sung, better conducted and better recorded of those two singers' recordings with the same great orchestra.

**1964/6 Otto KLEMPERER** - Studio stereo; EMI

Christa LUDWIG, Fritz WUNDERLICH, Philharmonia/New Philharmonia Orchestra

I have it on good authority that despite my suspicions that the amplitude of his voice in this recording had been artificially boosted by the EMI engineers, he was in fact apparently able to be heard live above Mahlerian orchestration; no wonder that some have speculated that he could ultimately have sung much heavier roles. Be that as it may, even if he is placed well forward in the aural spectrum, there is no greater performance of the tenor part; Wunderlich's tenor is lithe, agile, powerful and always marked with that special note of plangency which flecks his voice. One could observe that *Von der Jugend* is taken a tad too steadily but that lends it a kind of ironically rueful mock-sententiousness and also allows us to savour the both the beauty of Wunderlich's phrasing and the sonorousness of the orchestral playing.

Ludwig rivals Janet Baker for richness of tone and depth of expression; she made a further two recordings for Bernstein and Karajan but is here found in the best voice of all. She is wonderfully free of voice in *Von der Schönheit*, dipping into her secure lower register then soaring both forcefully and delicately into the upper regions of her voice. The sheer amplitude of her voice in the ecstatic sections *Der Abschied* is thrilling, and its hushed steadiness at the close profoundly moving.

Klemperer is always at his best in profound, melancholy music and although his progress is quite stately there is nothing stolid or "granitic" about it; the music flows naturally without affectation but passage after passage sounds newly minted and its progress is enlivened by much careful elucidation of orchestral detail and artfully crafted touches, such as the way Klemperer concludes *Der Abschied*, more with assurance than resignation.

The sound is still magnificent after fifty-five years as is the Philharmonia – an orchestra then replete with virtuosic instrumentalists. This is just as EMI have designated it: a "Great Performance of the Century" indeed.

**1966 Eugene ORMANDY** - Studio stereo; SONY

Lily CHOOKASIAN, Richard LEWIS, Philadelphia Orchestra

Despite his reputation amongst some critics for sleep-walking through some performances and churning out too many "mass-market" recordings, it is my impression that Ormandy's reputation continues to grow amongst collectors and I increasingly add his recordings to the number crowding my shelves. He had such a great orchestra that much of the time he had only to make sure everything went as it should – as it does here.

Not that Ormandy lacked imagination or talent, but his talent for absorbing and memorising scores was so great that he could seem facile in the fecundity of his output. He certainly had a special affinity

for late Romantic music even though he was responsible for only a couple of great Mahler recordings, including the justly celebrated premiere recording of Derek Cooke's completed Tenth. This is another, wholly recommendable, bargain, on Sony Classics, recorded in 1966 and helpfully coupled with a lovely performance of the Rückert Lieder from the delectable Frederica von Stade made in 1978, when she was in freshest voice.

There is an obvious comparison to be made with Reiner's recording made seven years earlier and also with Richard Lewis, whose light yet penetrating tenor proved to be remarkably and rather unpredictably successful in encompassing the disparate demands of his three songs. The Philadelphia was always a superb Mahler orchestra, able to draw upon a glittering array of instrumental colours and really play as one under Ormandy's flexible and subtle direction. He is rather more delicate than Reiner and although the sound might not be as immediate as the "Living Stereo" re-mastering, it more than suffices. Lili Chookasian seems to be unjustly forgotten these days but she had an important career as a result of possessing a rich, even contralto very reminiscent of equally eminent singers such as Helen Watts and Maureen Forrester (who sang for Reiner). She is not perhaps the most expressive of singers, tending to sing the text straight through without any particular inflectional acuity but simply having a beautiful voice is no disadvantage. Furthermore, she has no trouble declaiming forcefully and audibly the awkward lower-register passage in *Von der Schönheit* which presents other singers with difficulties. As ever, Ormandy's gifts as an accompanist mean that both singers are ideally supported and the orchestral playing is vivid energised.

As is often the case with Ormandy, this might not be the last word in individuality but it is thoroughly enjoyable.

**1970 Rafael KUBELIK** – Live stereo; AUDITE

Janet BAKER, Waldemar KMENTT, Symphonie-Orchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Many consider this the finest example of Janet Baker's art ever committed to disc and I'm not sure that I would argue with that verdict: everything she does is miraculously judged and controlled, her mezza voce is meltingly beautiful, the voice opens up thrillingly when required and she inflects the text with her usual sensitivity. By all accounts and in combination with my own listening experience, this is certainly the finest of her several recordings of this work, even without the benefit of re-takes, this being a wondrous live performance of extraordinary intensity. Combine her artistry with the subtlety of that great Mahlerian Rafael Kubelik and you are bound to have a winner, particularly as the playing of the Bayerischen Rundfunks is miraculous: they sing out as one great voice with beautiful tuning, responding with unfailing subtlety to Kubelik's gradations and nuances. I have rarely heard a more rapt conclusion to that magical final movement - and the audience is virtually silent throughout.

While I might have hoped for and even expected this level of achievement from two such distinguished artists, the pleasant surprise for me is the performance of Waldemar Kmentt. I knew him to be an accomplished tenor but had not realised how suited was his voice to this music. Any strain is within the tolerance you would permit for such demanding songs and he makes the most of the resonance of his light, bright sound - whereas, as much as I love the Klemperer recording, Fritz Wunderlich must surely have had a little help from the recording engineers to ensure that his voice prevailed over the denser moments of Mahler's orchestration (see above in the Klemperer review for a brief discussion of that question). Anyway, Kmentt is clearly able to do this live and in one take.

So this goes to the top of my favourite accounts, alongside Klemperer and Walter (although I care less for the latter's tenor, Julius Patzak). Fans of both Baker and Kubelik must not hesitate; this is a wonderful recording, in excellent sound given its age and provenance.

**1972 Jascha HORENSTEIN** – Live stereo; BBC Legends

Alfreda HODGSON, John MITCHINSON, BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra

This recording took me by surprise; from the first hearing, I really liked it. There is something tremendously intense, measured and detailed about Horenstein's direction of this music and you can hear a kind of freshness and dedication in what should not sound like a first rank symphony orchestra but in fact the BBC Northern plays out of its skin for him. He tells us in the three-minute spoken bonus track that he was given plenty of rehearsal and it shows: nothing is rushed or approximate and some of the playing puts finer orchestras to shame. I especially like the tongued flute trills and the weight of Horenstein's phrasing in the strings; furthermore, he has two soloist singers on top form: Heldentenor John Mitchinson providing unwavering heft of tone where it's needed, undaunted by the murderous tessitura of the opening song but also refining his sound to provide passages of delicacy and out-singing more celebrated exponents of this music such as Kollo or James King.

Alfreda Hodgson demonstrates while she was always spoken of in the same breath as Janet Baker: she has the rich alto tones and the sometimes gleaming, sometimes floated mezzo top, plus a beauty of sound which is like a felicitous amalgam of Baker and Yvonne Minton to put her in the same league as those great artists.

Despite the deliberateness of Horenstein's tempi, matters never drag and the spaciousness of his beat permits his singers to articulate and accentuate nuances of text which permits the listener to hear it afresh. The recorded sound is very naturalistic and spacious, avoiding the over-miking which makes some recordings sound overtly over-engineered. There is such intensity and musicianship in this account that I can understand this being some people's first recommendation, even over more famous recordings by Kubelik, Klemperer and Karajan. Nothing is ever rushed or perfunctory and the final *Der Abschied* movement gains cumulative power being performed in such a lovingly measured manner.

The conducting cannot be faulted and if it were not for the existence of recordings with even better sound and soloists – excellent though they are here – this could easily be a prime recommendation.

We have it on excellent authority from Misha Horenstein, cousin of the conductor, that this recording is "live" only in the sense that the songs were recorded one at a time, complete and in the correct order, without retakes, but there was no audience present

**1972 Sir Georg SOLTI** – Studio stereo; DECCA  
Yvonne MINTON, René KOLLO, Chicago Symphony Orchestra

(See [my review](#))

This recording fields an impressive team of performers. Kollo made admired recordings of the same music with both Karajan and Bernstein in the 70s; his voice was never the most tonally ingratiating, tending to grittiness, but he is more youthful here, with the heft and stamina to encompass the fearsome demands of his allotted songs but also capable of softening and attenuating his Heldentenor sound without crooning. His vocal strength makes him an especially successful interpreter of the Drunkard's song, where many a tenor falters.

Minton's mezzo-soprano was always one to caress the ear: the combination of her flickering vibrato, velvety timbre and innate musicality makes her an ideal Mahler interpreter. She often sings gently but always has reserves of power, as in the crescendo on "willst du nie mehr scheinen" in her first song. She freely admitted to having used the famous recording by Kathleen Ferrier and Bruno Walter as her model when learning *Das Lied von der Erde* but her reading is less autumnal and more robust than Ferrier's, matching Solti's more direct approach. She herself is restrained in her use of the text, never resorting to too declamatory a style; in *Der Abschied*, for example, she rather sustains such a beautiful legato and a stream of refined tone to achieve exactly the kind of mesmeric intensity this dream-like song requires. Her concluding "Ewig, ewig" is as steady and poised as one could wish. Solti was always

the most considerate of accompanists to singers and the rapport between him, Minton and the orchestra is effortless.

Solti-bashing became an habitual pastime for some critics as his career advanced; the accusation was always that he was brash, crude and rushed. Certainly both the recorded and orchestral sound here is bright and his approach seems brisker than Karajan, for example – although their timings for the last great song are virtually identical. He gives the Chicago brass their head and doesn't linger unnecessarily, but he is in fact considerably more leisurely than Walter in both his studio and live recordings with Ferrier and several celebrated interpreters of this remarkable song cycle. The orchestral interlude half way through *Der Abschied* in particular is characterised by some lovely playing from individual instrumental contributors.

**1972 Leonard BERNSTEIN** – Live composite stereo; Sony; DG  
Christa LUDWIG, René KOLLO, Israel Philharmonic Orchestra

The occasional faint cough and extraneous noise betray the fact that this recording is a composite made from three live performances, so evidently the best sections were spliced together. The rather thin, dry recorded sound here perhaps exacerbates the rather thin, scrappy sound of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. Bernstein exhorts them via audible grunts and growls to play with some exuberance but there is no disguising that the woodwind solos are a bit sour and tonal string homogeneity is not as impressive as the BPO or the LSO. On the other hand, the double bass passage exactly half way through the movement, fifteen minutes in, is dark, menacing and chilling in its melancholy utterance.

There are compensations in that the clarity of sound reveals the details of Bernstein's interpretation. He is unafraid to employ overt rubato and swift, emphatic rhythmic changes without trespassing too far into mannerism or self-consciousness and as a result the music is lent real impact. Both Ludwig and Kollo made three recordings of this work and are here in finest voice, although Kollo is never ideal in that there is always some harshness in his tone but he negotiates the music adeptly enough with sufficient penetration. Once again, Ludwig's singing in the finale is mesmerising, abetted by the special intensity Bernstein brings to the performance, referred to above.

The provision of a quadrilingual libretto is welcome and it is good to hear Bernstein's expressive way with this music; after all, he was one of the great Mahler conductors. Only the fact that you can have superior recorded sound and hear both soloists elsewhere with better bands makes this somewhat less desirable than other recordings.

**1973/4 Herbert von KARAJAN** – Live stereo; DG  
Christa LUDWIG, René KOLLO, Berliner Philharmoniker

I am happy to admit to a change of heart over this recording. Despite my appreciation for the sensuous beauty of the BPO under Karajan's infinitely varied and sensitive conducting I had always previously been repelled by the clumsiness of Kollo's tenor - but I have to admit that his heft and commitment carry the day. He was never a subtle artist and his voice is frankly crude at times but the wobble is under control and he has the heft to sound brash and tipsy in the first horrendously demanding song.

If you want refinement, Christa Ludwig provides it again as she did for Klemperer. She sings with the golden warmth of tone to rival Janet Baker and lovely diction, of course. Sure, Kollo's no Wunderlich - or, for that matter Kmentt for Kubelik in the wonderful recording with Baker - but he is distinctly preferable to King for Haitink and sundry others because he can hit the notes with less strain.

There are many recommendable versions of this extraordinary song cycle but none where the orchestra plays more alluringly or with a greater range of colour and few with such successful soloists.



You can in any case argue that the differentiation in style and subject matter across the songs splits them very neatly and clearly into the soulful, contemplative category sung by the mezzo and the more rumbustious type given to the tenor; as such, the two voices here are wholly suited to their respective tasks by timbre and natural Fach. In addition, Kollo manages to lighten his manner for the gentlest of his three, *Von der Jugend*, although he comes perilously close to crooning.

Some collectors find themselves unable to stop amassing versions of this work and it's true that the range of its interpretative possibilities is fascinating. If you wanted only one account, you could do much worse than this. However, see, too, Karajan's live recording, below...

**1974 Alexander GIBSON** – Studio stereo; CLASSICS for PLEASURE  
Alfreda HODGSON, John MITCHINSON, Scottish National Orchestra

This is the same pairing of soloists who impress in the live Horenstein recording four years earlier, exhibiting the same virtues but in better sound as this was a studio recording. The conducting is as good, too; Gibson was always under-rated, his reputation outside of the British Isles perhaps suffering from his dying relatively young for a conductor at 68 and spending so much time and effort in Scotland, but he matches Horenstein for élan. His intendency as the longest serving principal conductor of the (Royal) Scottish National Orchestra permitted him to train and refine them into becoming a great international band.

Mitchinson is if anything better here than for Horenstein and certainly superior to his performance for Leppard three years later. He can encompass both the lightness and heft demanded of the tenor in his emotionally wide-ranging songs and evinces no strain in the most demanding passages.

The top half of Hodgson's voice has a slightly lighter, purer tone than some of the warmer, darker-voiced singers here in this survey but she was a true contralto, steady, with seamless legato, and the bottom of her voice is firm and satisfying. She is not quite as distinctive tonally or verbally acute as Baker or Ludwig but she makes such a beautiful sound is certainly not inexpressive. She sings *Der Abschied* with dreamy, rapt concentration and complete control.

This is the recording to have if you want those two artists and no compromise needs to be made in any other aspect.

**1975 Bernard HAITINK** - Studio stereo; PHILIPS  
Janet BAKER, James KING, Koninklijk Concertgebouworkest, Amsterdam

I concede that, as has long been acknowledged, this is a great recording in terms of singing, conducting and orchestral playing but would balance that by making the following points: first, as good as Janet Baker is here, she is even better in her live recording for Kubelik five years earlier when she was in marginally fresher voice; secondly, Kmentt for Kubelik copes more easily with the diverse demands of the tenor role than the stressed James King, who wasn't in best voice for Haitink here; finally, Kubelik is surely as subtle and skilled as Haitink and he also had an orchestra in the Bavarian Rundfunk on finest form; they do not yield to the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra for virtuosity.

Hence, if I want to hear Baker in one of her finest roles, I prefer that Kubelik to this Haitink recording, celebrated and oft-recommended though this is.

**1975 Rudolf KEMPE** – Live stereo; BBC Legends  
Janet BAKER, Ludovic SPIESS, BBC Symphony Orchestra

Janet Baker was rightly ubiquitous in this piece through the 70's and is here teamed with a great conductor and a tenor who sang this in concert for Karajan, too. Unfortunately, both soloists are set

so far back in the aural perspective that it sounds like more like an excellent orchestral concert with singers in the background. The horns dominate and the sound is hissy, blaring and indistinct with some prominent audience coughing; there are live recordings from the same era of considerably superior technical quality. Spiess is clearly up to the demands but he is a bit strenuous, injecting sobs and bleats, his vibrato is rather pronounced and he occasionally sings a bit flat. This is a pity, as of course Kempe was a great conductor whose direction is elegant, pointed and sensitive but a lot of his nuanced colouring gets lost in the muddy sound. Janet Baker is as fine as ever; but the recording puts some glare on her mezzo and of her four recordings reviewed here this is the least desirable; go to either of the other two live recordings with Kubelik or Leppard for better sound and superior tenor partners unless you are a Kempe completist.

**1977 Raymond LEPPARD** – Live stereo; IMP/BBC Radio Classics  
Janet BAKER, John MITCHINSON, BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra

Tony Duggan is effusive about this recording in his own survey (see the end of my introduction above). I largely agree but have one or two slightly more pronounced reservations.

First, who would have thought that Raymond Leppard would emerge as a convincing Mahler conductor? However, he does; this is a really energised, dramatic live performance; the horns and clarinets of the BBC Northern SO set out their stall with some magnificent playing right from the start in *Der Trinklied* and there is no lack of grunt in the bass section. Leppard is bright, flexible, happy to give the orchestra a vocal quality in terms of rhythm and colour which means they provide especially happy accompaniment to the excellent soloists. A particularly impressive example of that sensitivity is apparent in their shadowing of Janet Baker in the third song, which is as sparkling and joyful as any under review here. However, he decidedly misses the requisite gravitas and melancholy in the orchestral introduction to *Der Abschied*, which is too perfunctory by half, but Janet Baker soon helps reset the mood to profound and ethereal. The six-minute-long orchestral prelude to the fourth verse section beginning “Er stieg vom Pferd” is impressively dark and weighty.

John Mitchinson, in the third of his recordings featured in this survey, is again a dark, strong-voiced soloist, projecting his words vividly and coping admirably with a tessitura set high for a Heldentenor; I only wish his vibrato were less prominent under stress and sometimes his timbre turns too nasal to give much pleasure – especially, for example, in *Von der Jugend*.

This is also the third of three great recordings here by the supreme exponent of these songs, Janet Baker. As with Mitchinson and Leppard and with Kubelik in the recordings above, the extra atmosphere a live recording provides galvanises her into singing with extra intensity and expressivity – but also a bit of glare in her tone which I don't hear in that Kubelik recording.

The sound is decent analogue, a bit harsh and hissy and punctuated by some coughs inevitable in a live recording – but at least they quieten down as the audience falls under Baker's spell as she and Leppard hymn their way inexorably towards the concluding mantra “Ewig”. I continue to prefer marginally the live Kubelik recording for its greater consistency but this still affords enormous pleasure.

**1978 Herbert von KARAJAN** – Live stereo; FACHMANN; SARDANA  
Agnes BAL TSA, Hermann WINKLER, Berliner Philharmoniker

This was the Mahler work Karajan most frequently performed. The frequent accusation is that he prized beauty of sound over profundity of expression but this live account could hardly more pointed, animated and even aggressive in the rumbustious passages – considerably more so than Karajan's studio account four years earlier and all the better for it. A second pleasant surprise is the tenor Hermann Winkler, a true Heldentenor who enjoyed a prominent international career but is not well known even by aficionados as he didn't record that much. He made a point of singing lyric parts

alongside Richard Strauss and Wagner roles such as Parsifal and Lohengrin, so he has the agility and lightness – rather like Wunderlich – to make a pleasing job of *Von der Jugend* without “tearing a passion to tatters”.

Agnes Baltsa needs no introduction and is in best voice here: vibrant, expressive and trenchant. She may be heard in Tennstedt's studio recording but she is if anything finer here and more rapt and “inward”; in fact, everyone involved seems inspired by singing live. Her beautiful voice floats along on the surging, swelling wave provided by the BPO and the final few minutes are as ecstatic and ethereal as any recording in the catalogue.

Recorded in the Berlin Philharmonie, the sound here is a bit brittle and hissy but very immediate; audience noise is minimal – they are virtually silent throughout *Der Abschied*, apart from a few minor coughs, which matters if concentration is not to be disturbed.

This is something of a surprise and a sleeper – and I prefer it to Karajan's studio recording. The main problem is that it's not readily available on any major label. However, you can listen to it on [Youtube](#).

**1981 Colin DAVIS** – Studio digital; PHILIPS

Jessye NORMAN, Jon VICKERS, London Symphony Orchestra

Before I encountered this recording, I had read uncomplimentary comments regarding the performers' lack of involvement here and their unsuitability to the repertoire. I can only assume these proceed from things like a lack of taste for Vickers' idiosyncratic and inimitable Heldentenor; to my ears he is still close to his best, even if this is somewhat later in his career: powerful, intense and certainly involved. He always was rough-toned and hard-edged and his tenor turns nasal for emphasis but that adds fervour to his singing and he occasionally employs that mesmeric “Tristan” half-voice, as when the drunkard talks to the bird. He is rather similar in manner to his contemporary James King on the famous Haitink recording but is somewhat less strained; I find him preferable.

Norman is oddly cool and restrained and the charge of lack of involvement is more applicable here; she often makes little of the words despite her good German, but she sings beautifully and she has the low notes, despite not being a true mezzo-soprano (let alone a contralto). Her voice swells appropriately on the word “schwellen” in *Der Abschied* and we catch a glimpse of the reserves of power always there but seldom unleashed. The final mantra is suffused with the golden glow of the orchestral playing and her warm, steady timbre. Davis' conducting is often light, and transparent but not without heft when required, and he has at his command a fine orchestra whose solo instruments are very expressive. I have never had him pegged as a Mahler conductor but think he does a fine job here.

This was a very pleasant surprise.

**1982/84 Klaus TENNSTEDT** - Studio digital; EMI

Agnes BAL TSA, Klaus KÖNIG, London Philharmonic Orchestra

This was another surprise to me; I had not previously heard it before [my 2011 review](#) and rather assumed it to be inferior to the established classic versions, but this is not the case. Tennstedt called the London Philharmonic Orchestra “the best orchestra for Mahler in the world” and when listening to certain passages, such as those featuring the flutes and oboes in the *Der Abschied*, I can only concur; there is a great deal of wonderful solo artistry, especially from the woodwind and horns, and invariably a gorgeous sheen on the sound of the orchestra as a whole.

Klaus König has been judged by some to be the weakness in the set but I find him to be in very good voice: heroic if slightly throaty of tone but with plenty of heft and ringing top notes. Any slight strain is hardly inappropriate in such demanding music. Agnes Baltsa's smoky, vibrant mezzo is not really

inward and other-worldly enough in comparison to her earlier live recording with Karajan or the poise of Janet Baker and Christa Ludwig who have more nobility of timbre than Baltsa's more earthy sound but her more overt melancholy works in the longest *Der Abschied* on record; she floats some beautiful top G's and her repeated "ewig" as she fades away is hypnotic. Tennstedt's phrase-shaping is immaculate; his ability to sustain the requisite tension is enormously helped by the lustrous playing of the LPO, whose shimmering strings allow him to bridge the long, drawn-out lines.

**1984 Carlo Maria GIULINI** - Studio digital; DG

Brigitte FASSBAENDER, Francisco ARAIZA, Berliner Philharmoniker

My usual gripe with any performance of this work is often with the tenor and so it proves here. It is hard to find one who can encompass both the jaunty lyricism of *Von der Jugend* and yet also cope with the cruel tessitura and declamatory heft required for *Das Trinklied*. While I have never much enjoyed Araiza's reedy tone, many consider him to have been one of the best tenors to have essayed these songs. I still don't much warm to his basic sound which I hear as constricted in the same mode as Schreier, but his performance is artistically and technically very satisfying, if only within the limitations of his voice as I hear them – and he is still overwhelmed by the orchestra in the first song during the "Ein Aff' ist's!" episode.

On the other hand, I have always responded to Fassbaender's tangy, expressive mezzo despite its occasional looseness of vibrato. She has delicacy but also great intensity in her lower register - and it is a joy to hear two singers declaim the German text so tellingly; this was always one of her greatest strengths and Araiza's German is excellent. The valedictory *Der Abschied* is haunting and melancholy, building to a suitably otherworldly climax, the repeated "Ewig" both gorgeously played and sung.

Giulini seems to find the exactly the right tempo for each song and of course it is such an advantage to have the greatest Mahler orchestra playing with such energy and range of colours. Their wistful, gawky lyricism at the end of *Von der Schönheit* is a delight.

**1987 Carlo Maria GIULINI** – Live digital; ORFEO

Brigitte FASSBAENDER, Francisco ARAIZA, Wiener Philharmoniker

My response to Araiza's tenor is detailed in the review immediately above, so I won't elaborate but it is in fact the case that his voice sounds stronger and more robust here than in both of his earlier two versions with Giulini; he sings out more here and is surprisingly more audible than in the studio recording. Fassbaender is again typically intense and still in finest form in 1987. The virtues of this and the commercial recording are, hardly surprisingly, virtually identical and the advantages and disadvantages here over the above with the same forces are typical of live versus studio accounts. The extra tension and excitement inherent here in the live performance are apparent but we must also endure the conductor's moans and grunts punctuating the rhythms. However, they are not in the late Colin Davis league of distraction and audience noise is very limited; the sound is otherwise superb: warm, detailed and full.

If you want these artists, I think this live performance is marginally preferable but there's not much in it. Personally, I still want a more heroic, pharyngeally resonant tenor.

**1991 Daniel BARENBOIM** – Live digital; ERATO

Waltraud MEIER, Siegfried JERUSALEM, Chicago Symphony Orchestra

Barenboim makes the most of a great orchestra, grunting and groaning as he exhorts them to provide conducting an alert, powerful account with singing strings and gleaming brass, although occasionally he does seem to be pulling the music about too much.

My main reservations are over the soloists. Jerusalem is very competent but I do not find his cloudy tenor very exciting or distinctive; there is a lack of bite and resonance in his top notes and he is somewhat overshadowed at climaxes by those Chicago brass. Waltraud Meier's hooty, somewhat blowsy timbre just sounds wrong to me for this music – too bright and soprano-biased - so the centre of her voice is not apt for its tessitura and the lower-lying passages don't carry enough weight. Her intonation is suspect and neither soloist inflects the texts with the same insight and pathos as their best rivals.

The live sound isn't very rich or present, rather casting a veil over proceedings. My MWI colleague Simon Thompson presented his own reasons for not especially warming to this recording in [his review](#) back in 2009. We can do better than this, especially given how many highly recommendable versions are on the market.

**1993 Philippe HERREWEGHE** - Studio digital; HARMONIA MUNDI  
Birgit REMMERT, Hans Peter BLOCHWITZ, Ensemble Musique Oblique

While I certainly endorse previous reviewers' observations that the reduced orchestration of this arrangement permits the listener to savour the subtle textures of the music, I feel the need to temper their enthusiasm by pointing out that the grander moments are decidedly diminished by the smaller scale of the sound. This is, after all, profoundly melancholy music which rages against life's disappointments and vicissitudes and is given to futile, despaired outbursts of resistance; a full orchestra underpins that desperation more emphatically than a dozen musicians accompanied by piano and harmonium.

Furthermore, I cannot agree that Hans Peter Blochwitz is precisely the kind of tenor Mahler would have heard in Vienna in the 1900's and envisaged performing this sung symphony. Blochwitz has a pronounced vibrato and a rather bleaty production; his small voice is drowned out even by a chamber orchestra in the first song at "eine wildgespenstische Gestalt - Ein Aff ist's!" and he frequently resorts to a kind of weedy, mixed-falsetto crooning when something more robust is required.

Birgit Rennert is a different case altogether; her rich, vibrant alto does justice to the long lines, filling them with solid tone and shading back to a mezza-voce without losing tonal centre.

I do like the pungent woodwind interjections, the immediacy of the fluttering flutes and the gutsy rawness of the bassoon's commentary. This arrangement makes you listen afresh and although the big moments are somewhat muted, the plaintiveness of existence is soulfully underlined by the succession of individual instrumental voices each reflecting on our sad lot. It is also true that the judicious addition of percussion effects lends both real weight and a disturbing eeriness to that last, desolate farewell. Rennert is superb here without erasing memories of the most famous exponents like Janet Baker and Christa Ludwig; she expands magnificently in the last, soaring section and the repetitions of "ewig" are aptly haunting.

Herreweghe continues to surprise and delight me by his common sense and good taste in applying HIP principles to Romantic music; he always understands the spirit of the music he is conducting and remains faithful to its essence.

I value this as a thought-provoking addition to the large discography of this piece; I only wish a more robust tenor had been chosen.

**1996 Dietrich FISCHER-DIESKAU** - Live digital; ORFEO  
Yvi JÄNICKE, Christian ELSNER, Radio-Sinfonieorchester Stuttgart

This live recording will be slightly off the beaten track for collectors in that it does not immediately shout "buy me" when considered alongside the dozen or more highly recommendable versions of a work increasingly popular but in danger of becoming over-recorded.

It's not on a big-name label, the soloists will probably not be known to the casual listener, the Stuttgart Radio Symphony is an excellent but second-rank outfit and the conductor here is a retired baritone far better known in his guise as a singer - so why should we abandon our recordings by Kubelik, Reiner, Klemperer, Walter et al?

Well, just listen to it and you might decide that this is just your kind of interpretation. No big, bawling, over-stretched tenors but a lighter-voiced singer with impeccable intonation, crystalline diction and an attractive, if slightly "white", tone; Elsner is occasionally too inclined to take refuge in his sweet falsetto to dodge some of the more challenging moments. No fruity, swooping gestures from our contralto, but a very tight, well-schooled voice with depth but the ability to float and lighten her sound, equally good diction and a complete absence of the dreaded wobble. The singers' restraint matches that of DFD's conducting and the orchestral playing: there is much fine shading, judiciously applied rubato, some ravishing, resinous woodwind playing and lovely flutes. Tempi are conventional but there is a poise and delicacy about this reading which is sincere and moving - no grandstanding or cheap effects. This is one of the most peaceful, pastoral accounts I have heard but *Der Abschied*, while not as monumental or indeed relentlessly funereal as some, still carries dignified weight.

The sound is excellent: very little audience noise and a perfect balance between voices and instruments.

In truth, I would like just a little more theatricality and overt emotionalism in the interpretation but I recognise that this is a connoisseur's performance and I'm a vulgar canary-fancier. Sadly, no texts are provided.

**1996 Giuseppe SINOPOLI** – Studio digital; DG  
Iris VERMILLION, Keith LEWIS, Staatskapelle Dresden

My first thoughts on seeing this recording were: great conductor, great orchestra...but would the soloists be up to the challenge? And in my second wave, of speculation: would Sinopoli be in one of his wilful moods?

The answers are: no and kind of – but not in the way I would have expected.

Lewis has a slight, light tenor which has a touch of the constriction which I dislike in tenors such as Araiza and he is stretched to produce anything like the heroic weight required in the first song. Some primarily lyric tenors – Wunderlich being a prime example, but there are others, such as Richard Lewis and Ernst Haefliger – can summon sufficient penetration and heft to get away with it but Lewis cannot. A second disappointment comes with Iris Vermillion's rather weak, plaintive mezzo. She has insufficient lower register heft and tonal richness to carry the burden of the long, sinuous lines of her songs. She chooses to sing straight without vibrato much of the time and just sounds as though she is in pain. Ultimately, she is dull. Sinopoli doesn't really help his soloists because he asks the Staatskapelle to play cleanly and directly but without the heart and Schwung of orchestras which have this music in their blood. Half the time they could be playing Bach. Moving on...

**1999 Eiji OUE** – Studio digital; R & R  
Michelle DeYOUNG, Jon VILLARS, Minnesota Orchestra

I like everything recorded by Eiji Oue who was a controversial but prominent conductor of the Minnesota Orchestra, and who produced a string of recordings whose engineering has become

something of a byword for audiophiles. This disc is no exception; it sounds wonderful – rich, full, immediate with individual orchestral lines clearly differentiated. The playing itself is flawless, bolstering the orchestra's reputation built under a succession of famous conductors. Oue's conducting is very detailed and careful; nothing is rushed and indeed, occasionally I could wish for more momentum but instead we luxuriate in the voluptuous beauty of sound.

Michele DeYoung has a warm, expressive mezzo without the individuality of expression or distinction of tone we encounter in the very best. She does not sustain my interest in the final, long song and her vibrato can become obtrusive. Tenor Jon Villars sings gamely but has a rather nasal, constricted tone which doesn't really expand gratefully on loud, high notes and he lacks colourific variety; he, too, sounds much the same whatever he's singing and I simply do not like the sound he makes.

From a sonic point of view this might be the best recording available and the conducting and playing are superb but I need soloists who are more characterful and beguile the ear more completely.

**1999 Pierre BOULEZ** - Studio digital; DG

Violeta URMANA, Michael SCHADE, Wiener Philharmoniker

This is in many ways a companion piece to the Sinopoli recording of three years earlier; parallels are many: same label, same orchestra, same "clean", modernist minimalism, an unidiomatic, under-powered tenor and a rather bland mezzo-soprano. The difference is that the orchestra has Mahler in its blood – the composer was its conductor, albeit briefly and fractiously; however, Boulez keeps them on a short leash, imposing rigour and objectivity on the melodic lines and eschewing anything approaching. As a result, Urmana, sings neatly and correctly - and remains unmemorable; nor does she have the alto richness and depth of voice we hear in mezzo exponents such as Baker, Ludwig, Baltsa - although oddly, at times and at its best around its centre her tone reminds me of Fassbaender – and I mean that as a compliment. It's not that Urmana does not have a beautiful voice but more that Boulez makes *Der Abschied*, is fairly swift and dry-eyed affair and Urmana's own attempt at engagement cannot rescue it. Exposition of detail is no substitute for emotional involvement and at no point does this recording set the pulse racing.

**1999/2000 Lorin MAAZEL** - Studio digital; RCA

Waltraud MEIER, Ben HEPPNER, Symphonie-Orchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks

If, as I did, you came to this having just previously listened to Boulez's cool, detached recording, the comparative vigour of Maazel's attack and the virile heft of Heppner's tenor first come as a relief – indeed, Heppner's contribution is one of the best things about it, his big, clear sound working in conjunction with some effective textual colouring in a recording made when he was in best voice. He doesn't have to growl or grunt for emphasis – just apply more volume, even if occasionally he shows signs of strain. I admire, too, the virtuosity and sumptuousness of the Bavarian Radio Orchestra – as I almost invariably do anything they record.

Nonetheless, after a while and taking a broader historical perspective, one comes to acknowledge that Maazel is not really as engaged as conductors who are really steeped in Mahlerian tradition and more inclined to indulge in overt expression rather than play it safe, as per here. Waltraud Meier, as in her previous recording for Barenboim has neither the right voice for nor anything special to say about this music, and, if anything, her timbre is now more "bottled", which is unattractive.

Tony Duggan wrote [a lukewarm review](#) of this back in the year 2000. Like me, he found Heppner to be the best thing about it and was otherwise underwhelmed by its blandness. I can only endorse his judgement.

**2008 Donald RUNNICLES** – Live digital; BBC MUSIC

Karen CARGILL, Johan BOTHA, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra

Of all the many recordings on my shelves this one has earned a special place: it is one of the slowest performances on record, especially in that last movement, but sustained by the rapt concentration of the performers and the beautiful playing of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra under the spirited yet supremely sensitive direction of Donald Runnicles. He applies rubato without letting the music drag, sustaining a momentum which is helped by the legato of the BBC Scottish strings.

Johan Botha is excellent, a proper Heldentenor with full, clean tone if a little stentorian and unyielding in the tenor items and a vibrato only just this side of too wide – but still fine. He easily surmounts the more strenuous sections of the opening song but is charming in the tripping measures of *Von der Jugend*.

However, it is the singing of the young mezzo-soprano Karen Cargill which crowns this version. Hers remains one of the most, even, voluptuous and ample mezzos in the world today. She is vibrant and expressive in *Der Abschied*, able to sing quietly but rising magnificently to the big moments. She and Runnicles achieve a kind of dreamy, hypnotic intensity in the fading repetitions of "Ewig" which bring the work to a close and hold the audience mutely spellbound.

Mention, too, must be made of the solo oboe and flute playing, so important to establishing the right mood; whoever the Scottish soloists are, they deserve kudos. The sound is excellent, with a good balance between the voices and the orchestra and very little extraneous noise.

This live, Proms recording from 2008 is worth acquiring by anyone who loves this extraordinary and very original work.

**2009 Hans GRAF** - Studio digital; NAXOS

Jane HENSCHEL, Gregory KUNDE, Houston Symphony Orchestra

A performance of *Das Lied von der Erde* stands or falls by whether a perfect balance between the quality of the conductor, the two soloists and the orchestra prevails; there must be no weaknesses in any of those four components. The work also now has such a rich and successful recording history that even a decent, unexceptionable performance such as this one stands in danger of appearing colourless by comparison.

Thus two competent singers can sound very ordinary indeed in comparison with singers of the calibre of mezzos Janet Baker, Christa Ludwig and Agnes Baltsa and tenors Fritz Wunderlich, Waldemar Kmentt or Richard Lewis, who are all near-ideal exponents of this music. Henschel sounds decidedly scratchy and old-lady-ish in tone; a bit tremulous, with a slightly acidic top which does not sound of a piece with her hollow lower register. She barks the declamatory sections of *Von der Schönheit* and both loses resonance and gains a wobble in the quieter passages. Kunde, like too many previous tenor exponents, sounds stretched, somewhat harsh and dry of tone with a tendency to bleat; there is no doubt that his voice is nowhere near as sappy as when he recorded *Benvenuto Cellini* previously. He attempts expressiveness by injecting some messa di voce and falsetto effects which do not quite come off and end up sounding clumsy and monotone. He is in fact closest in timbre to Karajan's Kollo, who for me compromises that otherwise estimable recording.

The playing of the Houston Symphony is warm and expressive but there is no bloom on their sound; they are skilled but nowhere near as sumptuous-toned as their rival big-name orchestras and Hans Graf's conducting generates no sparks. His tempi are moderate, indeed barely different from any of my half dozen favourite versions but his phrasing is dull. He generates no great meditateness in *Der Einsame im Herbst* and little sense of mystery or tension in *Der Abschied*. Only Tennstedt takes



substantially longer over that last song but he was a master of sustaining the long-breathed line. For comparison, I played several rival versions and was especially struck by how much more interesting Klemperer, Reiner and Kubelik made those yearning opening bars before the mezzo enters - and struck again by how distinctive and arresting their singers are when measured against Henschel. In fact, once I had put another version on, I was reluctant to go back to this Naxos recording, I was so immediately absorbed by its superior predecessors.

The sound is adequate but, like the live performance itself, somewhat under-stated and lacking immediacy. The usual excellent notes by Keith Anderson and biographies are provided, but no libretto.

This is not a bad recording, but suffers from being a perfect illustration of how the best is the enemy of the good - or at least, the satisfactory.

**2011 Yannick NÉZET-SÉGUIN** – Live digital; LPO

Sarah CONNOLLY, Toby SPENCE, London Philharmonic Orchestra

There is every reason to celebrate the LPO as perhaps the best orchestra in London these days; pre-lockdown, I heard them regularly in the renovated Royal Festival Hall and can attest to their form under Leader Pieter Schoeman. Their conductor here might not be quite so dependably and consistently praiseworthy but I have heard him deliver some stupendous performances.

It is also good to hear the elegant British tenor Toby Spence a year before he was diagnosed with thyroid cancer from which, thankfully, he staged a recovery. He has an intrinsically beautiful voice and even if he is pushed to his limits in this music, it is a pleasure to hear him singing so well rather than having to endure another Heldentenor barking his way in ungainly fashion through *Das Trinklied*. He is more in the Wunderlich mode than the style of James King or Kollo; a lighter, more youthful sound but with just enough heft to cope and no throatiness. He is matched by the equally lovely full and rich voice of Sarah Connolly; she has more of a soprano quality to her voice than the usual mezzo and does not perhaps probe the meaning of the texts as deeply as some predecessors but it is nonetheless a delight to hear such steady, pure-toned singing. She is rapturous in the *Der Abschied*.

The live sound is excellent: very few coughs and the perfect balance between orchestra and voice. I find Nézet-Séguin's tempi and phrasing ideal. Some find this performance under-stated; I must say that I really enjoy its fresh, unpretentious directness.

**2012 Marc ALBRECHT** - Studio digital; PENTATONE

Alice COOTE, Burkhard FRITZ, Nederlands Philharmonisch Orkest

Recorded so closely, such that one can hear the conductor's grunts and the sniffs and intakes of breath of the performers on the upbeats, there is a disconcertingly forensic quality to this – or, if you prefer, a pleasing clarity and freshness; instrumental lines are thus crystal clear. The playing of the young Dutch orchestra is often beautiful but in a lean, transparent manner; Marc Albrecht's accompaniment is skilled but sometimes unable to suggest much emotional depth, so it is not always especially moving. However, there is something purposeful and concentrated about the opening of *Der Abschied* which promises much and is indeed sustained throughout; its conclusion always a key passage of course – is most successfully accomplished, with exquisitely gauged diminuendo from Albrecht and great poise and control from Coote. The music fades into the ether as it should.

I have never much warmed to Alice Coote's mezzo-soprano previously but am aware that others rave; I have found her voice to be lacking warmth and tonally centred too high to sound authentic within the tessitura of that voice category but she sings most intelligently and expressively here, reflecting, perhaps, her sometime tutelage under Dame Janet. Others, welcome a vocal character lighter than the fruitier, contralto timbre typified by such as Ferrier, so it is a question of taste. She is a bit lost during

the fast, declamatory passage of *Von der Schönheit* where her lower register lacks penetration, but the acuteness of her verbal colouring certainly compensates for the lack of sumptuousness in her tone and despite my reservations, I find this by far the best thing of hers I have heard.

Burkhard Fritz is up to the job here and can encompass the wide range of his three songs, but his tenor is not especially attractive or distinctive, being a tad nasal and there is a certain "bottled" quality to his tone which prevents his voice ringing out at climaxes. He is not as accomplished as Coote here and I cannot help but wish his voice had a glamour to match hers; nonetheless he doesn't let the side down.

This is clearly one of the best more recent accounts, alongside Nézet-Séguin's and Runnicles', especially for its sparkling sonics and Coote's artistry.

**2012 David ZINMAN** - Studio digital; RCA  
Susan GRAHAM, Christian ELSNER, Tonhalle Orchester Zürich

I almost invariably unimpressed by anything David Zinman conducts but my main problem here is once more with the typically "Germanic", constricted tone of the tenor, whose voice has deteriorated since his recording of this work for Fischer-Dieskau and since I last heard him on disc in the Wagner version of Gluck's opera, *Iphigenia in Aulis*; it really is not a pleasant sound.

My experience of hearing Susan Graham live rather surprised me, as I found her voice considerably smaller than I had expected and once again here, despite its beauty of tone, the impression she creates is one of rather small-scale, very soprano-biased singing without much heft in its lower regions. She is a sensitive, refined singer but makes little of the moments of drama. The "handsome boys on their spirited steeds" episode, in *Von der Schönheit* goes for little, as she does not have the vocal resources to inject passion into proceedings. Essentially, she is boring - nothing much she does excites me.

The sound here is excellent, the playing of the Tonhalle orchestra is, as you might expect, elegant and precise if rather lacking in velour, and Zinman's conducting is in fact quite good, if "correct", so I am happy to have my expectations there somewhat confounded, but that does not compensate for the obstacle of two underwhelming soloists. A review from the Australian Limelight arts magazine in 2014 states that "The initial reviews of this final instalment in David Zinman's Mahler cycle with the Tonhalle Orchestra haven't exactly been effusive, but they are wrong." I beg to differ. The old default position Zinman adopts with Mahler of claiming that "the music should be left to speak for itself" is often a cover for a lack of imagination or involvement in its realisation, as per here.

**2018 Sir Simon RATTLE** – Live digital; BR KLASSIK  
Magdalena KOŽENÁ, Stuart SKELTON, Symphonie-Orchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Continuing the Grinch-mode I adopted for the previous review, I never have any great expectations for any Rattle recording but tried to approach this open-mindedly. Let me first acknowledge the invariable excellence of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra; their playing is superlative – but I do wish I could listen to them without being constantly aware of Rattle's grunting and groaning – a rebarbative habit also acquired by Colin Davis as he aged; at least Rattle doesn't sing along, too.

I do not like Stuart Skelton's tenor much more than I do Elsner's. Although it has more body and heft, it still has a strange, unvaried, bellowing quality which is wearing and makes one long for an artist who can employ his lyric Heldentenor (such exists) to shade dynamics and inflect text sensitively, like Wunderlich, Patzak and – yes – even Vickers. He certainly lacks the delicacy required for the third song, the lightest and most cheerful of the six.

The lightness of Kožená's voice was always going to pose a problem for those who like a dark, contralto-type of voice She is recorded very closely, perhaps to compensate for a lack of weight, but there is no

denying that her tone is lovely and that includes some surprisingly hefty excursions into her lower register, so there my fears are confounded. She also makes a real emotional connection to the texts; all in all, this an interpretation I admire and it reminds me somewhat of Alice Coote's for Albrecht.

The sound in the grateful acoustic of the Herkulessaal is first-rate. If you like the tenor here more than I – and he has many admirers – enjoy a lighter mezzo-soprano and can ignore Rattle's chimp-noises, this is a contender.

### **Recommendations**

It is difficult, given the plethora of good versions available, to single out any one. On the other hand, relatively few are lemons; perhaps only half a dozen here are underwhelming or even downright disappointing, so the prospective purchaser is likely to be satisfied with any number. I have therefore made a lot of recommendations, as there are so many superlative versions vying for attention. One thing I observe however, is that the general standard begins to drop from the mid-80's onwards until today a great performance is rare – as you may see from the recording dates of those I recommend below; I make an honourable exception for Albrecht's on Pentatone.

Even though the presence of two great singers is obviously desirable, the contribution of the female singer to this work is more important to me than that of the tenor, and I must have at least recording featuring the greatest of them all, Janet Baker, in a role which ideally suits the colour and timbre of her voice and which she specialised in performing. Only Christa Ludwig – and with a nod toward Alfreda Hodgson – rivals her for the combination of vocal beauty and emotional expressivity. On the other hand, if we turn to the tenor contribution as a criterion, Fritz Wunderlich's performance spoils the listener for almost anyone else, no matter how good they are.

Thus, my recommendations are hardly surprising: the best of Baker's four recordings is with Kubelik and the best of Ludwig's three is her first with Klemperer; happily, both of those recordings see them partnered with the best of their tenors and conductors, too, making their endorsement easy.

Live mono: 1948 Bruno WALTER

Live stereo: 1970 Rafael KUBELIK; 1978 Herbert von KARAJAN

Studio mono: 1952 Bruno WALTER; 1956 Eduard van BEINUM

Studio stereo: 1964/6 Otto KLEMPERER\*; 1974 Alexander GIBSON

Studio digital: 1981 Colin DAVIS

Live digital: 2009 Donald RUNNICLES

\*First recommendation

### ***Ralph Moore***