

Special Report

Mahler in Berlin: Spring 2007

by Mark Berry

In April 2007, the Staatskapelle Berlin presented a complete cycle of Mahler's symphonies, with the controversial exception of the incomplete or completed Tenth, conducted by Daniel Barenboim and Pierre Boulez. Boulez has devoted a considerable proportion of his more recent conducting career to Mahler, a pivotal figure – for Boulez, perhaps *the* pivotal figure – between the music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Barenboim has been a more recent and partial convert to Mahler's music, and despite his lengthy association with Boulez, which dates back to their 1964 performance of Bartók's First Piano Concerto, may be said essentially to hail from a different tradition. Where Boulez came backwards to Mahler, from the perspective of conducting the music of his own generation and the Second Viennese School, Barenboim is a pianist-conductor steeped in the German Classical-Romantic tradition, who has tended to approach twentieth-century music as a continuation of that tradition. Moreover, as a member of the Staatskapelle revealed following the final performance, the idea of the cycle came from Boulez. Barenboim had demurred, saying that he liked only some of Mahler's symphonies, to which Boulez had replied that Barenboim could conduct those, and he would conduct the others. At the same time, both would probably agree with Adorno, who, in his essay *Tradition*, writes: "The difference between what is past and what is present ... is not absolute. One can only understand Schoenberg if one understands Bach; one can only understand Bach if one understands Schoenberg."¹ Neither has ever evinced any inclination towards "authenticity" or "historically informed performance." Indeed, Boulez has always shown himself to be extremely hostile thereto, condemning its practitioners "specialists in nullity."² The combination of these two conductors, different yet sympathetic to each other's standpoints, presented an interesting opportunity to consider Mahler interpretation in the first decade of the twenty-first century. What follows is an account, written following the performances, which nevertheless attempts to explore some wider issues related to these themes. It is necessarily personal; any attempt to conceal that would be futile and dishonest.

Kindertotenlieder and Symphony no.1 (1 April 2007)

Thomas Quasthoff (bass-baritone)
Daniel Barenboim

Kindertotenlieder seemed a strange work with which to open the cycle. Indeed, I had assumed that the song-cycle to have accompanied the First Symphony would be the early *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, which is cut from the same cloth – sometimes thematically so – as the Symphony. But Thomas Quasthoff drew his listeners in. His voice appeared to have lost some of its refulgence: whether deliberately or not, it was impossible to tell. At any rate, the spareness, occasionally even dry, heightened the import of the text, not only always audible but always meaningful. Quasthoff had a terrible story to tell, one that grew with intensity as the cycle progressed, but which never descended into the banality of mawkishness. A certain dryness, and more importantly musical and verbal clarity, expressed evil rather better than hysteria could ever have done. Barenboim's shaping of the orchestra was consistent with his soloist's approach. Much of the music sounded like heightened chamber-music – or, to put it a slightly different way, to presage much of the later twentieth century's compositions for voice and ensemble. (Schoenberg and Boulez especially came to mind.) Individual lines were etched with an almost Boulezian, and certainly rather French, clarity. Such is Barenboim's neo-Furtwänglerian reputation – an estimate that is generally exaggerated, to neither party's benefit – that his feeling for orchestral color, especially that of the woodwind, has often been underplayed or unremarked, not least in

¹ Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, "Tradition," in *Gesammelte Schriften* eds Rolf Tiedmann and Gretel Adorno (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971-86), 20 vols. in 23, vol. 14: 140.

² Jean Vermeil, *Conversations with Boulez: Thoughts on Conducting*, tr. Camille Naish (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1996), p. 44.

his Wagner. It is no coincidence that he is a fine conductor of Ravel. Here was not only the conductor of the Staatskapelle Berlin; this was also the former conductor of the Orchestre de Paris. In the terrible final song, there was real violence in the strings, not least in the aggression of the violins' bowing. These instruments had not been prominent for much of the rest of the cycle, so the text's savage point ("Man hat sie [the children] getragen hinaus/Ich durfte nichts dazu sagen") truly hit home.

This was the third time I had heard Barenboim conduct the First Symphony, still one of the most astonishingly original symphonic debuts any composer has made. It was a good performance in many ways, but lesser, I thought, than that of the preceding song-cycle. Indeed, it corresponded in general outline to last year's *Festtage* performance, also rapturously received, but less satisfactory to this writer. The first time I heard Barenboim conduct the work was at the Proms, with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and that performance made a greater impression upon me. Exciting, flexible, colorful, and with a virtuoso command of the orchestra, it had exhibited the virtues of Solti, without his brashness and excessive metrical rigidity. Here, however, the strings had lost some of their bloom. Whereas last year they had sounded as if they would have been more at home with Brahms, here they sometimes sounded a little dull. The double basses were splendid in the ghostly Funeral March of the third movement, but this effect was heightened by its context. I should perhaps not make too much of this slight grayness, but it did dampen my experience, and contrasted both with the Proms/Chicago performance, and with Boulez's work the following night, suggesting that this may not be a work in which the combination of Barenboim and the Staatskapelle is at its best. The woodwind and brass, however, were excellent. Here, again, a certain "French" piquancy of coloring made itself felt, perhaps all the more keenly given the impression garnered from the strings. The contrapuntal clarity from all instruments – and conductor – of the third movement's "Bruder Martin" canon was exemplary. Bach stood in the background, even before Mahler's subsequent immersion in the master's writing, which would contribute so much to the Fifth Symphony. And its alternation with the pseudo-Klezmer writing had a suitable swing as well as color, although a little more sense of danger would not have gone amiss. As with the performance a year previously, the ending of the Symphony was tremendously exciting, but I had the same impression both times, of a sudden change of gear about five minutes before the end, in which excitement was somewhat artificially whipped up, not seeming to spring from the rest of the reading. If the white heat of the ending had been present throughout, this could have been a great performance, but it remained at the level of "good, yet strangely disappointing."

Symphony no.2 (2 April 2007)

Dorothea Röschmann (soprano)
Petra Lang (contralto)
Staatsopernchor Chor Berlin
Pierre Boulez

There is clarity, and then there is Boulez's clarity. It perhaps came as little surprise that the first movement was staggeringly precise, although maybe it should have done, for this is no mean achievement. However, as with so much of his work, especially – but not exclusively – his recent work, this X-ray vision of line was allied to a surety of style, a welcome warmth, which seemed spot on. This was no Bruno Walter; there was no *Gemütlichkeit* to Boulez's reading. Yet there was drama, there was lyricism, and there was a hint of neurosis, even if the neurosis was clearly that of the composer rather than the conductor. (There were no Bernstein-like extremes here; nor should one ever have expected there would be.) The funeral rites of the first movement were delivered by the same unsentimental, yet comprehending conductor as the Boulez of *Parsifal*, and to a lesser extent, the *Ring*. The same could be said of the work as a whole. Indeed, so naturally did everything fall into place that one might almost fail to notice how supreme was the command of line, the directional hearing that Furtwängler so memorably termed *Fernhören*.³ There was nothing

³ See, e.g., Wilhelm Furtwängler, *Notebooks 1924-54*, tr. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner, revised edn (London: Quartet Books, 1995), pp. 170-71.

bureaucratic about this; this was not the Boulez of anti-IRCAM caricature. Rather, it was the hard-won outcome – however easy he may have made it seem – of musico-dramatic thinking: symphony as well as drama, the two tendencies dialectically heightening rather than detracting from the impact of each other. All of Barenboim’s orchestral color was there – although, perhaps surprisingly, so were a very few noticeable instrumental mistakes – but always at the service of the greater symphonic-dramatic whole. The third movement was unusually fleet, but in no sense anonymous, and fitted well with the general dramatic sweep. Both soloists were very good, and benefited – as did every element – from the Philharmonie’s fine acoustic (at least where I was seated). The chorus exhibited Boulez’s virtues of warmth, clarity, and dramatic command, to put the seal upon a very fine, perhaps even great, performance. Almost every orchestral and vocal strand was audible at the greatest climax, without ever losing the sense of playing a crucial role in terms of a greater whole. The rhythmical inflection which, perhaps surprisingly, has been consistently characteristic of Boulez’s performances of this movement – a fitting contrast with the almost Klemperer-like intransigence of the first movement’s funeral rites – was combined with a due weight of orchestral sonority, which nevertheless was in no sense monolithic. Mahler presents his performers with an extremely difficult combination of balls to keep up in the air; Boulez negotiated Mahler’s task not only with aplomb, but with humanity and with integrity.

Symphony no.3 (3 April 2007)

Michelle DeYoung (soprano)
 Women of the Staatsopenerchor Berlin
 Aurelius Sängerknaben Calw
 Pierre Boulez

There is doubtless someone, not wholly without good reason, who will say that each of Mahler’s symphonies is the most difficult to bring off. I wonder whether the Third might be just that. With its giant first movement, and five more to follow, the fourth a setting of Nietzsche, the fifth involving a children’s choir, and the sixth Mahler’s first, astonishing essay at a symphonic Adagio, coherence is not an easy thing. Bernstein, Horenstein, Abbado, and Haitink spring to mind as conductors of very different interpretive hues who succeeded triumphantly in interpreting this movement. Boulez is of their number. The first movement was appropriately vast in scope (not just in terms of minutes); this is it should be. The fanfares so provocatively quoting from Brahms’s First Symphony announced that this would be a musico-dramatic experience taking up not from where Brahms left off, but from Wagner. In addition, the warm, rounded, yet never imprecise sonorities of the deep brass, especially the trombones, never let us forget this Wagnerian inheritance. There was, however, a Brahmsian heft which, unusually for Mahler’s symphonies, was not inappropriate here; the Staatskapelle could sound as itself, though this should not be taken to imply a lack of color and clarity. In the second and third movements, there was more instrumental untidiness than there should have been. The woodwind and brass instruments generally sounded splendid: distinctive and yet blending perfectly when required. However, there were slips which perhaps betrayed the orchestra’s relative unfamiliarity with the work. This would not have happened with Boulez in Vienna. Michelle DeYoung proved a well-nigh perfect soloist for the work. Her intonation of *Zarathustra* resonated Erda-like, albeit with a Lieder-singer’s attention to text and the marriage of text and music. The orchestra sounded sure once again, Boulez proving an attentive “accompanist,” without the slightest question that he was directing the performance. This was never less in doubt than in the great final movement. Boulez took the Adagio at a relatively swift pace, but it never sounded hurried, merely flowing, its direction suitably varied yet ultimately never in doubt. Here the strings came into their own, as did the timpani at the great, Zarathustrian climax, which set the seal upon a fine account of this difficult work. One could well believe that this was what Love had told the composer, for it seemed to vouchsafe us the same secret, even if we could never put it into words. However, it spoke to us without displaying its heart on sleeve; it told of a narrative, from the first movement’s primeval stirrings to something approaching – perhaps even achieving – transcendence at the end. There are many ways to present Mahler’s Third Symphony, but this was an astute and moving way to do so.

Six Songs from *Des knaben Wunderhorn* and *Symphony no.4* (5 April 2007)

Christine Schäfer (soprano)
 Pierre Boulez

Christine Schäfer was an ideal soloist here. Her pinpoint precision of tuning – recalling her collaboration with Boulez on *Pierrot Lunaire* – was allied to a beautiful silver, bell-like tone, and a corresponding acuity of response to the text.⁴ There was no need for the sparseness of tone adopted by Quasthoff in the first concert. Perhaps this reflected, at least in part, the very different nature of the magical *Wunderhorn* texts, suffused with all the freshness of early German Romanticism. And there was humour too, never overdone, yet a welcome addition. The *Lob des hohen Verstandes* lightly mocked pretension and lovingly portrayed the donkey, recalling Mendelssohn’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* Overture rather than presaging the extended vocal techniques of Ligeti or Berio. Throughout, Boulez and the orchestra proved equally ideal. There was a wonderful lightness of touch, and a responsiveness to the off-elusive “Viennese” lilt, which made me wonder heretically whether Boulez would care to take on the New Year’s Day Concert. Transparency and warmth were perfectly matched to a quicksilver response to the demands of text and singer. Orchestral – almost chamber – colors shone through without drawing undue attention to themselves, or detracting from the surety of line that was not the least of this performance’s virtues. This was as true a partnership as if it had been a *Liederabend* given by a long-established duo.

The Fourth Symphony provided the finest symphonic performance so far. That the audience’s reaction was rather less than the ecstatic response given to Barenboim’s First puzzled me: perhaps this corresponded to the less ‘spectacular’ nature of the work, or maybe this was owed to the home crowd’s enthusiasm for its music director. Yet where the orchestra had sometimes seemed out of sorts in that performance, here everything continued in the same line as that of the *Wunderhorn* Lieder. Orchestral balances were well-nigh perfect throughout. There was plenty of time to wonder at the Alpine vistas magically conjured up by Mahler’s orchestra and harmony, without them ever detracting from Boulez’s absolute command of line and telos. The character of each movement was beautifully delineated, without exaggeration but with a mixture of almost neo-classical – I use the word hesitantly in Boulez’s case – affection and mediated wonder. The strings added welcome *portamenti*, which reminded me at times of Mengelberg’s celebrated recording, yet at the same time, this was a thoroughly modern performance, which never left one in mind of the coloristic inheritance Mahler would bequeath to Webern.⁵ Death’s *scordatura* violin solo brought a nightmarish quality where necessary to the second movement, but this was no house of horrors. We never forgot that a nightmare is but a dream, and that the Middle Ages are long past. Whether for good or for ill, we respond with an alienated nostalgia to such imagery. The great climaxes were beautifully judged: things of wonder rather than of horror, which is as it should be in this of all works. Those instruments, which had previously had so much soloistic and chamber work to do, came together in a perfect orchestral blend, both warm and firm. I have never heard the third movement sound quite so Beethovenian, not in terms of orchestral sonority, but in a more spiritual resemblance to the vast scope of a great Beethoven Adagio. The cellos often took the lead here, playing with a richness of tone that belied Boulez’s reputation for coolness, and showing a sureness of response to the almost opposing demands of rhythmic flexibility and purposive journeying to their destination. Schäfer’s return in the last movement exhibited all the virtues of her earlier appearance. Yet there was a subtle change of emphasis, very much in tune with the different nature of the work – and of Boulez’s performance. The “as if” quality of this Symphony, its marriage of almost – and that is a crucial “almost” – childlike wonder and sophisticated, alienated nostalgia differs from the less complicated songs to which it is undeniably related. A performance such as this, which can so surely portray both its modernity and its backward glances, is a great one indeed. The import of the last movement’s so-called progressive tonality – opening in G major, but concluding in E major – was perfectly matched with the

⁴ Deutsche Grammophon 457 630-2

⁵ Cf. Mengelberg’s recording: Pristine Classics PASC055.

transformation of texture, which appears to bring us towards something heavenly, but only towards it. There is something it is not vouchsafed for us to know, which those unburdened by the alienation of modernity might have approached more closely, and with less trepidation.

Rückert Lieder and Symphony no.5 (6 April 2007)

Thomas Quasthoff (bass-baritone)
Daniel Barenboim

The *Rückert Lieder* were received ecstatically – to my utter amazement, for this was anything but a triumphant performance. Most of the first song, *Ich atmet' einen kinden Duft*, was painfully out of tune. Throughout the cycle, this alternated and sometimes coincided with a crooning that was both un-Mahlerian and unmusical. Barenboim also seemed ill at ease, following rather than leading the orchestra. How much of this was due to Quasthoff it is impossible for me to say. The exception was 'Um Mitternacht', which really did concern midnight. Quasthoff sang like the fine artist he can be, and Barenboim drew truly post-Wagnerian sounds from Mahler's dark orchestra. Unfortunately, *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen*, that extraordinary encapsulation of Mahler's world and music, was almost as bad as the first song. The reception this performance garnered made me wonder whether anyone who was applauding so ardently had actually listened to what was happening on stage.

The Fifth Symphony had a better performance: good, but not to be ranked alongside any of Boulez's readings. Barenboim clearly knew the score, and imparted a fine sense of direction. Yet the sound of the orchestra was much as it had been in the First, though richer and less "gray." Moreover, the instrumental variegation so crucial to Mahler's writing too often went for little. The Funeral March seemed dour when contrasted with Boulez's parallel march at the beginning of the Second, and indeed with Barenboim's impressively detailed account of the *Kindertotenlieder*. It must, however, be noted, that the strings, and especially the cellos, were not afraid to adopt a harsh aspect to their timbre when dramatically necessary. This was clear from the first movement onwards, perhaps testament to Barenboim's experience in those still frighteningly ugly passages from late Wagner (*Götterdämmerung* and *Parsifal*). If variegation might have been greater, this was not a Karajan-esque blend of beauty. How close the Scherzo should come to falling apart is to some extent a matter of taste; clearly, the danger is part of the point, part of its pivotal role as the second of three parts. (Barenboim rightly presented the five movements in Mahler's three parts, with no pauses between constituents of the same section.) Those crucial chorales, or parts thereof, pointing the way, yet never quite fulfilling the promise of the hopes invested in them, sounded splendid: testament to the fine quality of the brass playing. Barenboim did not, thankfully, adopt Sir Simon Rattle's gimmick of having the horn player in the Scherzo stand. Yet Rattle, in his Berlin Philharmonic performances, had displayed an attention to detail that was often lacking here. The mock-Bachian counterpoint – in praise (?) of high intellect – of the final movement was brought out very well, the strings and conductor seeming in their element here. This made me wish that Barenboim, not Kent Nagano, had been conducting the *St. Matthew Passion* three nights earlier: a performance drained of meaning, from which I simply had to absent myself during the interval. The ultimate climax, if climax it be, given the dissipation of the chorale, was tremendously exciting, but like the culmination of the First – although to a lesser extent – it did not seem quite to proceed from what had gone before.

Symphony no.6 (7 April 2007)

Pierre Boulez

There is no recording of the Sixth which I should esteem over that of Boulez and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. The first of his series for Deutsche Grammophon, it ranks as one of the finest Mahler recordings ever made.⁶ The identity of the orchestra helps, of course; it supplies that vital *Wienerisch* element, which other orchestras must either ape or find an appropriate replacement for. There was no such problem here, although the Staatskapelle Berlin does not have so

established a reputation as a Mahler orchestra. It has a naturally darker sound, which Boulez did not try to mask, but instead utilized to offer a slightly different slant on the work, albeit in the service of an interpretation that in its broader outline is very much that of Vienna (or indeed of the performance he gave a few years ago with the London Symphony Orchestra).

To say that Boulez exhibited absolute command over the work's structure from beginning to end, and that he communicated that command flawlessly both to orchestra and audience, is to point to something in danger of being considered unglamorous, yet something so rare that in itself it would have qualified this as a great performance. Every detail was perfectly etched, yet fitted – equally perfectly – into a series of greater wholes, be they paragraph, movement, or work. The first movement's exposition repeat can seem in lesser hands like a throwback to Classical norms, outmoded by the material. Here, there was no disjuncture; it barely seemed to be repetition, but rather a logical restatement, which followed as naturally from the first statement as it led to the development section. Only then did it seem that this was the time to say something truly new, as opposed to subtly intensified. The opposition between funereal darkness and if not light, at least love (the "Alma" theme) was lain bare throughout the movement, heightened by the appearance of those mysterious choral passages in the development, and then violently intensified in the recapitulation. Boulez – and Mahler – showed something Furtwängler would readily have assented to, namely that sonata form rests upon the violence of dualistic tension, not upon the stasis of 'balance'. Moreover, the way in which the last movement's vast structure was lain bare, through orchestral color and sufficient emphasis to harmonic direction, was a tribute to both conductor and orchestra. One could certainly hear as well as see the lack of the third hammer-blow. The dark, profound abysses beckoned one with a power it was impossible to resist, but so did those equally necessary lighter, if still wickedly rich, moments of Romantic relief. This Symphony may have been premiered in Essen, and may have been being performed in Berlin, but Vienna never stood very far away.

The Scherzo was placed second. Some zealots would reject such a performance out of hand, on the basis of the historical evidence of Mahler's wishes concerning the order of the inner movements. Boulez – wisely in my view – resisted such revisionism, or at least decided that this was not the view of the Sixth that he wished to project. This was the Symphony so valued by the composers of the Second Viennese School that Schoenberg lovingly detailed the harmonic contours in a celebrated analysis of the Andante and Berg was moved to write to Webern of "the only Sixth, despite the Pastoral." In this work, but especially in this performance, the Orchestral Pieces of Berg and Webern – not least the equally shattering Funeral March of Webern's Op.6 – were almost upon us. One would have thought that nothing – save perhaps the fourth movement – could possibly have intensified the tragedy of the first, yet here the Scherzo, crucially in the same key of A minor, did just that. This was a distortion, a revisiting, and a pushing of the soul to somewhere it had never dared visit before. (Not for nothing did this performance take place on Holy Saturday, as Christ awaited his resurrection in hell. Or perhaps, it was for nothing, but yet the coincidence added yet greater meaning to the experience.) After the Scherzo, the Andante sang came as the balm of consolation, still knowing and therefore ultimately tragic, yet unashamed to sing forth in its ardent, string-based climaxes. This was a less chaste, more passionate account than the Vienna recording, a difference owed not least to the rich tone of the 'cello section, on which so much of the harmony is based. We were reminded of the countervailing force, however unequal, of the "Alma" theme in the first movement. And we were also prepared for the damnation of the fourth. With Boulez, Virgil-like, as our guide to the Mahlerian inferno, the listener was in very sure hands, which made for an even more terrifying visit. The dark and hysterical orchestral sounds would have counted for little in an episodic reading. By the same token, only a sure grasp and communication of the structure could have delivered the ultimate shattering catharsis. This was truly a performance never to forget, a journey that will continue to haunt and yet ultimately to inspire.

⁶ Deutsche Grammophon 445 835-2

Lieder eines fahrendes Gesellen & Symphony no. 7 (8 April 2007)

Thomas Quasthoff (bass-baritone)
Daniel Barenboim

The *Lieder eines fahrendes Gesellen* were not as catastrophic as the *Rückert-Lieder*, but again this was a profoundly disappointing performance. Barenboim took more of a lead than he had done so with the previous songs, which made quite a difference, reflected in the more confident and colorful orchestral playing. There was here something of the vernal Romanticism which is so important to these songs (as it is to the related First Symphony). Yet Quasthoff once again disappointed. The faults – crooning and simply being out of tune – that disfigured his *Rückert-Lieder* were once again present, if to a slightly lesser degree. Once again, the audience erupted ecstatically.

The Seventh Symphony was an altogether different performance. Shortly after Barenboim had released his recording of this Symphony, I spoke to Michael Tanner about it (not having heard it myself).⁷ To my great surprise, he thought it perhaps the best performance he had ever heard of the work. And this was very fine too. Who would have suspected that what remains perhaps the most enigmatic of Mahler's symphonies would have responded so well to what one might characterize as a "straight symphonic" reading, placing it firmly in the great German symphonic tradition. This was a performance that might even have done a little to further Mahler's cause with Furtwängler. Barenboim's reading combined the best of his previously erratic response to orchestral color with a Klemperer-like weight and heft (not forgetting the ugliness where necessary, upon which I remarked in connection with his performance of the Fifth Symphony). The orchestra played with its typically dark, rich tone, yet proved transparent – perhaps translucent would be the better word here – enough to highlight Mahler's solo writing. This was worlds away from any account I have heard from Boulez, whose coloristic approach has tended to place the symphony in descent from Berlioz. Yet I was utterly convinced of the validity of Barenboim's approach. On this occasion, the conclusion of the final movement did not appear at all forced; it was a tremendously exciting conclusion to an extremely fine reading of what is by any standards a difficult movement to perform convincingly. This was neither the Bernstein house-of-horrors nor the post-Adornian, almost incoherent, alienation of Boulez, but a symphonic Finale. The multifarious references to other parts of the Symphony, to other symphonies by Mahler's, and to works of other composers – not least Mozart and Wagner – were integrated into an impressive cumulative development. They did not bring undue attention to themselves, but nor were they passed over as an oddity, let alone an embarrassment. All sections of the orchestra acquitted themselves with honor, but special mention should go to the cellos, once again astoundingly rich, even seductive, in tone, and to the brass, whose collective strength would have rivalled the fabled section of Barenboim's "old" orchestra, the Chicago Symphony, without ever approaching the strident quality which, especially under Solti, could sometimes disfigure their work. Wagner's *Nibelheim* more than once sprang to mind – and, I suspect, to Barenboim's mind too. The mandolin player's lines stood out better than I have ever heard (perhaps owing to the great acoustic of the Philharmonie). This led me to wonder: why is it that this instrument appears so often in key modernist works of the twentieth century? Mahler's own *Das Lied von der Erde*, Schoenberg's *Serenade*, Boulez's *Pli selon pli*, and Ligeti's *Le grand macabre* would be very different works without it. Perhaps there is nothing much to say on the subject, but it seems worthy of a little consideration.

Symphony no.8 (9 April 2007)

Twyla Robinson, Soile Isokoski, Adrienne Queiroz (sopranos)
Michelle DeYoung, Simone Schröder (contraltos)
Johan Botha (tenor)
Hanno Müller-Brachmann (baritone)
Robert Holl (bass)
Staatsoperchor Berlin
Prague Philharmonic Chorus
Aurelius Sängerknaben Kalw
Pierre Boulez

⁷ Cf. Barenboim's recording, Warner Classics 2564-62693-2.

If a performance of this work fails to be spectacular, then something has gone very wrong indeed. What this work of all works emphatically does not require, however, is to be treated as spectacle, a circus act that makes the *1812 Overture* seem small-scale. In a good performance, the elements of 'enormity' will take care of themselves. What the Eighth needs to be treated as is a piece of music, much of it – though of course, by no means all – of an extremely delicate chamber quality. In this, it is very much like Wagner, especially Karajan's Wagner at its best.⁸ Here Boulez succeeded triumphantly, and the former aspect followed quite naturally from the latter.

The first movement did not begin Solti-like, with all guns blazing.⁹ Rather it left room for intensification in the recapitulation, thereby heightening both the sense of arrival at that point and the general direction of the movement. There was a strong sense of gravitational pull towards the tonic E-flat throughout, without hurrying over Mahler's modulatory plan. The variation in the choirs' dynamic heft was impressive, again contributing to a far more variegated reading than anything the "choral extravaganza" school might have imagined. Every section of the orchestra had its moments of chamber music, and made the most of them.

This prepared us well for the second movement. The orchestral introduction is undoubtedly one of the greatest challenges Mahler ever set himself: to depict that extraordinary landscape from the second part of *Faust*, without words, and to add something to Goethe himself. This is landscape painting with a dramatic purpose, and both Mahler and Boulez proved infallible, creating a hushed sense of expectation that grew and grew: always *Werden*, never *Sein*. The chorus's entrance into this world added a still greater sense of mystery with its "Waldung..." interjections; introduction of the word in no sense detracted from the pantheistic vision. The various episodes – and they are various indeed – were surely handled, both by the fine team of soloists and by the conductor. To integrate them into a symphonic whole is a difficult task, yet one which Boulez achieved perhaps even more surely than he had done with the BBC in 1975.¹⁰ This was never at the cost of detail, however. Instrumental lines were without fail clearly delineated, even harp and celesta, when pitted against large forces indeed. This is a crucial aspect of Mahler's imagery, and any performance would fail, were it not to pay due attention to such tone-painting. Combinations of voices and instruments were in almost unbelievably perfect balance too, a situation owed not least to the fine example set by the concert-master, who throughout the cycle never appeared to set a foot – or a finger – wrong. Once again, the choral singing showed an impressive array of dynamic and tonal contrast, presenting this as the staggeringly differentiated music that it is, rather than as an occasion to sing as loudly as possible. This in no sense detracted from the climaxes, but rather heightened them, as Boulez clearly understood only too well. Opportunities to conduct this work present themselves infrequently; his mind had clearly not been idle during the meantime, but instead a whole world of musical experience had enriched his – and therefore our – understanding of the work.

Das Lied von der Erde (11 April 2007)

Michelle DeYoung (soprano)
Burkhard Fritz (tenor)
Daniel Barenboim

This was a good performance, which improved as it went on. Barenboim appeared to have reverted to his "French" coloristic approach, which had worked so well in the *Kindertotenlieder*. Perhaps this had something to do with treating the work as a song cycle rather than a symphony: a perfectly justified approach, indeed in many ways preferable. Although this is a work Barenboim has known for a while, there was a sense of rediscovery, of delight in Mahler's extraordinarily detailed and forward-looking orchestration. Schoenberg's *Four Orchestral Songs*, Op.22, more than once came to mind, as did his

⁸ I think particularly of his *Ring* (Deutsche Grammophon 415 141-2, 415 145-2, 415 150-2, 415 155-2).

⁹ Decca 448 293-2

¹⁰ This account may be heard on Living Stage CD 347.16.

Five Orchestral Pieces, Op.16 (a work of which Barenboim has long proved a fine champion). I also wondered whether the more differentiated approach had anything to do with the orchestra's increasing experience of Boulez's Mahler, not least in the preceding Eighth Symphony. All sections of the orchestra shone, whether individually or in the myriad of chamber and orchestral combinations Mahler summoned from his musical imagination. Special mention should be given to the Staatskapelle's woodwind section, which really excelled itself. Mahler's delicate *chinoiserie* was present without being overplayed, as must sometimes be tempting. Burkhard Fritz generally sang well, no mean achievement when set against Mahler's orchestra. His was not, however, a performance which seared itself into the memory. It wanted greater lyricism, an extremely tricky thing to bring off, given the necessary heft Mahler also requires. Not everyone can be Ernst Haefliger or Fritz Wunderlich, of course, but theirs' appears to remain at least the ideal type of voice for this work. Michelle DeYoung was more characterful, and her interpretation seemed to develop throughout the course of the work. The second half of the final *Abschied* was extremely moving, as her voice bloomed and appeared to acquire greater variety of coloration and greater depth of tone. Perhaps this had as much to do with the requirements of the music as with her personally. At any rate, she and Barenboim brought the work to a most impressive conclusion. This stressed the unusual nature of the last movement, which, despite its text, is so very much more "symphonic" than the preceding songs. The lengthy orchestral passages were not in fact interludes, but equally vital, equally colorful passages of a great symphonic Finale. And the dissipating sighs of "Ewig..." lingered duly in the memory.

Symphony no.9 (12 April 2007)

Daniel Barenboim

Barenboim's performance of the Ninth proved a fitting conclusion to Berlin's Mahlerian journey. This latter word has become an almost intolerable cliché, yet here it truly seems justified: all of the Mahler symphonies, bar the Tenth, in almost as many days, in chronological order. Barenboim employed a large orchestra, with no fewer than eighteen first violins, to devastating effect. Antiphonal division of first and second violins was used to considerable effect. (Barenboim had always employed this figuration, whilst Boulez had preferred to place the violins together, albeit with violas rather than 'cellos on his right.) The work's string-saturated character seemed to suit Barenboim – and perhaps the orchestra – better than some earlier works had done (although Boulez had shown how a different approach could produce musical dividends indeed). The richness and delicacy of the Staatskapelle's strings, from the basses upwards, made one realize that this was an orchestra – and a conductor – which could truly trace its lineage to the great German symphonic tradition, without any of the coloristic shortcomings that had accompanied, for instance, the performance of the Fifth Symphony. Once again, I could not help but wonder what Furtwängler might have thought, and concluding that he might actually have been rather impressed. This was a performance of extremes, dynamic and temporal, which yet hung together; it was a performance that rightly brought everyone involved, not least the audience – at least for the moments when it managed to refrain from bronchial commentary – to the edge of musical and emotional possibility. Barenboim's extremes of speeds, most notably in the outer movements, were never arbitrary, always appearing dramatically necessary. And drama was the hallmark of this interpretation; it was the work of musicians who knew their *Tristan und Isolde*, who recognized the similarities, and who recognized that music somehow had to go beyond that most terrible of Wagner's achievements. It was no coincidence that the Berg of *Wozzeck* was called to mind, and once again the strings were not afraid to sound both achingly beautiful and terrifyingly ugly in close succession. There was no doubt here of Mahler's Expressionism. I wondered whether Barenboim also had Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony in mind, especially given his approach to the sequence of third and fourth movements in a similar light. Whereas Rattle, in the last concert performance I had attended (with the London Symphony Orchestra), had attacked with great effect the final movement without pause, not incidentally forestalling the otherwise inevitable coughing and murmuring, Barenboim brought the savagery of the Rondo-Burleske to a thrilling climax, recalling his

earlier triumph with the Finale of the Seventh. It all might have been over – as with Tchaikovsky's March – but in both cases, there subsequently must come the threnody of the Adagio. This supremely flexible reading was testament to the virtuosity and, more importantly, the understanding, of both the orchestra and its music director. It had the dramatic flow of a post-Furtwänglerian reading of Beethoven or Wagner, yet spoke to a modern audience of a world that has known the modernism of which Mahler is not only a prophet, but so crucial, indeed so central, a figure. If regrets concerning the omission of the Tenth Symphony would recur, so final, so heavenly a destination did the conclusion of Mahler's Adagio resound, that it would be a day or so before such ungrateful thoughts dared surface.

Mark Berry is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow and a Fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge. He has written widely on intellectual, cultural, and musical history from the late seventeenth century to the present day. *Treacherous bonds and laughing fire: politics and religion in Wagner's 'Ring'* is published by Ashgate.



The Chicago Mahlerites is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting the music of the composer Gustav Mahler. The group sponsors an e-mail list to share information about performances, recordings, and publications, and also publishes its quarterly journal *Naturlaut*, which is a forum for sharing ideas through original articles, reprints of classic articles, reports, reviews, and other means. Selections from *Naturlaut* are part of our website, which we call the "Mahler Archives" (www.mahlerarchives.net), an Internet resource that also serves as a portal for locating other Mahler societies in other cities and countries. In our goal of promoting Mahler's music, we take no particular stand and do not endorse any single view. For us, the focus remains the excellent music of Gustav Mahler, whose works speak strongly to our membership and also to music lovers around the world.

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