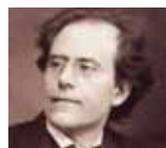


His Time Had Come: The New York Philharmonic and The Mahler Centenary 1960

Gavin Dixon



Musical Opinion 2010-2011 – II

Mahler Studies

Gustav Mahler was already a familiar name to New York audiences in 1960, but as a peripheral figure with a reputation for dividing musical opinion. His works had made roughly annual appearances on New York Philharmonic programmes since his two seasons as the orchestra's principal conductor from 1909 to 1911, and the hundredth anniversary of his birth offered the chance for a major reappraisal of his still controversial music. It also offered the orchestra's young, dynamic, and only recently appointed principal conductor, Leonard Bernstein, a platform for his own passionate advocacy of the composer. By the end of the decade, the 1960 Mahler celebrations would come to be seen as the start of a process by which Mahler's music was brought into the mainstream orchestral repertoire, a process driven by Bernstein's enthusiasm and propelled by his orchestra's skilful execution through a series of legendary performances and recordings.

Already by 1960, New York had come to see itself as the home of Mahler's music. *The New York Times* had written with pride at the end of January that year that the New York Mahler centenary celebrations highlighted the lack of similar festivities in Vienna, although a correction the following week acknowledged that the Vienna Festival would indeed be marking the occasion, albeit in more modest terms. And the composer's widow was a New York resident. The reputation of her third husband, the novelist and playwright Franz Werfel who had died in 1945, had waned just as that of her first was on the rise, and so she had spent the 1950s restyling herself back into the widow of Gustav Mahler. Poor health meant that she had all but retired from public life by 1960, but she remained on friendly terms with Leonard Bernstein, sanctioning his Mahler interpretations on

her visits to Philharmonic rehearsals.

Bernstein's appointment in 1958 was seen by many as the dawn of a new era at the Philharmonic. He was considerably younger than any of his recent predecessors. He was also the first American-born conductor to hold the position. But he was the right man for the job, and his first few years with the orchestra were marked by a rise in standards and a significant increase in audience numbers. Bernstein put Mahler at the heart of his repertoire, drawing on the orchestra's long association with the composer, but also on his own personal empathy with the music, the work of a musician who, like himself, struggled to maintain an effective balance between the parallel careers of conductor and composer.

But Bernstein was not the only champion of Mahler's music among the conductors then associated with the Philharmonic, and the centenary celebrations saw the return of two of his most esteemed predecessors, Bruno Walter and Dmitri Mitropoulos. Both were respected Mahlerians in their own right, but 1960 would be the last year either man would conduct in public, making the centenary celebrations something of a baton-passing event.

Bruno Walter's Mahler credentials were second to none. He had worked as Mahler's assistant at the Vienna State Opera from 1901 and they remained close friends until the end of the composer's life. After Mahler's death, Walter conducted the posthumous premieres of the Ninth Symphony and *Das Lied von der Erde*, the latter becoming his signature work in the American phase of his career. Bernstein's relationship with Walter was not close. He claimed to have learnt a number of Mahler's works from Walter's recordings, but took issue with many of his interpretive dec-

isions. Walter's more significant legacy to Bernstein was his inadvertently giving the younger conductor his big break. In 1943, Walter had pulled out through illness at just a few hours notice from a Philharmonic engagement. When Bernstein stepped in, the concert which was broadcast on national radio launched his career.

Dmitri Mitropoulos was a very different personality, a conductor with a reputation for championing the controversial and the obscure. Mahler was just one of the unfashionable names with whom he was associated, and for many concert-goers his programming of Mahler symphonies was as reprehensible as his taste for the music of the Second Viennese School or for that of contemporary Americans such as Lukas Foss or Gunther Schuller. But he was an important figure in the early dissemination of Mahler's music in America, making the first ever commercial recording of the First Symphony in Minneapolis in 1940, and conducting the American premiere of the Sixth with the New York Philharmonic in 1947. Bernstein's relationship with Mitropoulos was close but complex, and it has even suggested they were lovers. Professionally, the influence of the older maestro over the younger was profound; it was Mitropoulos who first suggested to Bernstein that he become a conductor. But when Bernstein inherited the New York Philharmonic from Mitropoulos in 1958, he found it at a low ebb. He would later describe his first few seasons at the helm as restoration work, rebuilding the orchestra's morale and returning its performing standards to their former glory.

Nevertheless, it was Mitropoulos at the podium for the first concert in the Philharmonic's Mahler Festival on New Year's Day 1960. A strong sense of retrospection runs through the press reports. Eric Salzman wrote in the *New York Times* that it was 'a program that commemorated a former music director and that was conducted by another'. Mitropoulos was in poor health, having suffered a serious heart attack the previous year (his second),



Leonard Bernstein in 1960

and had been forced to scale back his involvement in the centenary concerts to a four-week guest conductorship through January. The concerts included the First, Fifth and Ninth Symphonies. He also conducted the *Adagio* from the Tenth in a concert that included the premiere of *Spectra* by Gunther Schuller, a work that had been commissioned for him some years earlier by the Philharmonic as a farewell gift. The notices were respectful rather than enthusiastic, with the conductor's sense of structure and pacing winning praise, as well as his conducting completely from memory.

Bernstein began his contribution to the centenary celebrations on top form. On the last day of January, he conducted the Philharmonic in a performance of the Fourth Symphony. The soloist was the then relatively unknown soprano Reri Grist, but her inexperience proved no obstacle. The following day, they took the work into the studio and put down what was to become the first instalment in Bernstein's legendary first Mahler symphony cycle. Bernstein also tied in a televised Young Person's Concert with the title 'Who is Gustav Mahler?'. His approach was to use the Fourth Symphony's "child's view of heaven" as a window onto the composer's work for his young audience. Speaking from the podium, Bernstein explained his own personal empathy with Mahler's dual career as conductor and composer ('there never seems to be enough time to be both things') before going on to explore other contradictions that characterise the composer and his work: innocence and experience, east and west, symphony and

song. Each was illustrated through comparisons between the finale of the Fourth Symphony and that of *Das Lied*, which concluded the concert. Before playing the *Abschied*, Lenny confided: 'certain people were amazed when I told them I was going to play this for you today. They said...You're crazy—they'll get restless and noisy. They won't understand it ... Well, I know my young people, and I'm not afraid to play this music for you. I know you'll understand it, and even love it...'

Bernstein's centenary Mahler concerts spanned only the first two weeks of February, but included three programmes, each performed four times. The last programme included the Second Symphony, another work that would become one of the great milestones of his first recorded cycle. Howard Traubman, writing in the *New York Times*, reported a performance that clearly matched the intensity of his 1963 recording: '[Bernstein's] reading emphasised the violent contrasts and built up the climaxes with shattering impact ... It held the audience spellbound. There was spontaneous applause at the end of the movements.'

Like almost every critical voice at the time, Traubman remained sceptical of the claims to greatness that had recently been made on Mahler's behalf. In an article at the end of February he wrote: 'It is almost fifty years since Gustav Mahler's death, and there is no armistice in the war between those who adore and those who detest his music...'. Traubman claimed to 'take a middle position', but made his deep reservations clear, for example in his appraisal of the First Symphony's slow movement: 'This

funeral music is not merely the sad experience of an ardent young spirit; there is also the odour of the sickroom in it ... What invalidates much of the sorrow and joy in Mahler's works is his opting for ordinary, even banal, musical ideas. They tend to give his joy a febrile quality and make his sorrow lean to mawkishness.' For his colleague, Harold C. Schonberg, Mahler's greatest moments only served to highlight his intervening weaknesses: 'Mahler's head is so far in the stars that often he does not see where his feet are going; and when he trips, the fall is colossal!'

But the critics put their reservations aside for the final programme of the Philharmonic's Mahler celebrations, *Das Lied von der Erde* conducted in April by Bruno Walter. The 83-year-old's precise control of the orchestra came in for particular praise. Traubman's review, which was entitled 'Landmark for Philharmonic', lamented the fact that Walter's poor health had restricted his participation to this single programme. He wrote: 'Mr. Walter's interpretation was full of wonderful, sensitive details, all of which fell into place in a masterly reading.' Maureen Forrester, the contralto soloist, had already sung *Das Lied* at the same venue earlier in the year, in a concert given by the visiting Cleveland Orchestra under George Szell. Traubman commended both readings, but his highest praise was reserved for Walter, whose centennial Mahler performances would, he predicted 'long remain a landmark in the orchestra's history.'

Walter's visit to New York was brief, but it had the effect of significantly delaying Bernstein's effective monopoly on Mahler ►

interpretation at the Philharmonic. Within two weeks, Walter not only conducted four performances of *Das Lied*, but also made a studio recording of the work. Different soloists had been engaged for the recording, Mildred Miller and Ernst Häfliger replacing Maureen Forrester and Richard Lewis, and neither of the replacements were given a chance to rehearse with the orchestra. Nevertheless, the recording was a triumph, ensuring Walter's dominance over the work he had premiered well into the stereo age.

The following year, Walter was booked by Columbia to record Mahler's First with the Columbia Symphony. The arrangement came close to causing a minor diplomatic incident, as Bernstein was by then in the final contractual negotiations for his Mahler cycle on the same label, and had planned the First Symphony as one of the early instalments. Bernstein was openly critical of Walter's Mahler interpretations. John McClure, the producer for Walter's First

Symphony recording, remembered Bernstein visiting the control room and, on taking exception to a particular passage in the recording, exclaiming 'Why does he *do* that?'. Nevertheless, Walter's impressive results resolved the issue; when Bernstein heard the final edit, he immediately recognised its quality and agreed to postpone his own First Symphony recording until the end of the cycle.

By the time of this recording in 1961, Walter had only a few months left to live. His *Das Lied* concerts with the Philharmonic in April 1960 would later be seen as a poignant, if *de facto*, farewell to New York audiences. His farewell to Vienna was a more planned but similarly Mahlerian affair, with a performance in May of the Fourth Symphony with the Vienna Philharmonic and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. The event formed the centrepiece of the Vienna Mahler centenary celebrations (that had earlier been overlooked by the New York Times) and closed with a fitting encore

of three of Mahler's orchestral songs. Walter's death at his home in Beverly Hills in February 1962 brought to an end the most significant living link between Mahler himself and the newly flourishing performance traditions of his music.

Like Walter, Dmitri Mitropoulos remained an ardent Mahlerian to the very end. He had been pencilled in to return to New York in the spring of 1961 to conduct Mahler's Third Symphony, but it was not to be. In Milan on November 2nd 1960, he collapsed at the podium while rehearsing the same work with the Orchestra of La Scala and died just a few hours later. The following day, Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic paid tribute to the conductor, who had done so much to keep Mahler's spirit alive though decades of relative obscurity, with the performance of a short work in his honour – *Urlicht*, the fourth movement of Mahler's Second Symphony. ■



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