

Mahler New

Symphony No. 1 in D

Hungarian National Philharmonic Orchestra / Zoltán Kocsis

BMC Records BMCCD188 (full price, 54 minutes)

Website www.bmcrecords.hu

Producer László Matz

Engineer Endre Mosó

Dates Live performances at the Concert Hall of Ferenc Liszt Music Academy, Budapest, on February 29th and March 30th, 2004

„We live in Mahler-sated times, which perhaps does not do full favours to this composer’s music; too much of it too often. Clearly, though, it finds willing followers, certainly in concert halls, mostly packed when a Mahler symphony is given. I first heard the First Symphony courtesy of BBC Radio 3, decades ago, when Georg Solti’s LSO Decca LP was broadcast. I had to buy the work (knocked out by it), but conversely I opted for Carlo Maria Giulini’s wonderful Chicago version, simply because it was new, an EMI ASD vinyl. It’s another Chicago taping, the one with Pierre Boulez in 1998, that I would opt for if I were ever choosing just one recording for the library (DG 459 610-2).

This one from Zoltán Kocsis and the Hungarian Philharmonic Orchestra is from concert performances, from ten years ago, but whether it translates to the permanence of CD is another matter. Some listeners may object to intrusive coughs along the way. It’s a swift performance, 54 minutes, and that includes the exposition repeat in the first movement (which Mahler originally named ‘Spring without End’) and with Blumine as the second one. There’s nothing unusual about a conductor returning Blumine to its original spot, but the scant documentation is a little disingenuous. Kocsis conducts the final four-movement version, or seems to – with Blumine added (as I say, there are numerous precedents for this), but the information, such as it is, seems to imply it is done with Mahler’s authority. It is not, certainly not as far as the final publication is concerned. By 1896, the symphony’s nickname of ‘Titan’ and the descriptive titles of each movement had been dropped, and these are not replicated in the annotation.

This account, decently played and recorded, is fresh and enjoyable, but lacking subtlety at times, with the conductor forcing the pace; but it’s volatile, which has a certain Mahlerian validity. In what seems an unedited performance, the odd lapse of ensemble is forgivable, and there is certainly character invested, not least in a suggestive reading of Blumine. The horses are not spared in the third-movement Scherzo (originally ‘In full sail’), but matter-of-factness counts against it; those who don’t like the Trio too languorous will appreciate Kocsis’s approach. With the ‘Funeral March in the Manner of Callot’ (as it was known), it is good to report that a solo double bass is used (some conductors have been known to use the full section – very unconvincing). By now, more repose is needed, but it is not forthcoming. The tempestuous and triumphant finale (which Mahler designated ‘From Hell to Paradise’) suits Kocsis best of all. There are slight amendments from what we are used to in the final version – so maybe Kocsis uses the penultimate 1894 score as given in Hamburg and Weimar that year (greater documentation on BMC’s part would have been welcome), in which bass drum and timpani are prominent and strings are rather backward, but differences between these two scores are slight.

Ultimately, though, this brisk performance is generally possessed of vivid detail and primary colours but brings rather less in the way of refinement; sadly, much is glossed over that more expansive versions uncover, and in what is a crowded recorded market it is difficult to recommend it. The audience is very enthusiastic (applause accounts for 50 seconds of the total playing time); had I been there I might have been reasonably pleased but I think the experience would have been quickly forgotten by the time I had returned to the hotel.”

Colin Anderson