

A Further Look at...

The Legacy of George Szell and his Performances of Works by Mahler

by Salvatore Calomino

“I cannot pour chocolate sauce over asparagus”¹

The impressive recorded legacy of George Szell contains only a limited number of works by Gustav Mahler, yet the significance of these recordings in the discography of the composer has long been recognized. In addition to purely symphonic works, Szell also conducted several noted performances of *Das Lied von der Erde* and a selection of songs from the Wunderhorn group. Four of the symphonies and *Das Lied* were performed and recorded in the late 1950s and 1960s with Szell conducting the Cleveland Orchestra, the song cycle in performance with the London Symphony Orchestra toward the close of that same period. Several of the Mahler recordings led by Szell are still available, although even these have not all remained consistently in print.

George Szell's debuts as a performing and composing prodigy as well as his earliest recordings stem from the years just before and after World War I. In a session which has now become famous – and which elicited some confusion over a lengthy span of years – Szell's youthful recording debut was linked to the career of Richard Strauss.² After a series of auspicious performing and conducting debuts at Vienna between 1908 and 1913, Szell was appointed by Strauss as an assistant at the Berlin Staatsoper in 1915. During the following year Strauss was himself scheduled to make his first recordings with full orchestra for the Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft. Earlier performances, primarily of his own works, had been recorded on piano-roll. As most recently recounted by Raymond Holden in *The Virtuoso Conductors* the works to be preserved in this session were his *Don Juan*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, and the suite from *Der Bürger als Edelmann*. Szell, acting as assistant, had been instructed to rehearse the orchestra until Strauss could take over to begin the recording of *Don Juan*. Because of the tardy arrival of his mentor, and the company's unwillingness to delay or reschedule, Szell was urged to start the formal recording session. He conducted the first two of four recording sides of *Don Juan* until Strauss arrived and led the orchestra for the remainder of the piece. Aside from this anecdote of fortuitous circumstance and Szell's overall indebtedness to Strauss, Holden does not treat the subsequent career of the youthful assistant in his discussion of the central European tradition in conducting.³ Yet for more than fifty years after this successful debut Szell maintained numerous conducting appointments, in both opera houses and symphonic venues, and he left a rich and varied history of recordings. His commitment to the work of Mahler will remain the focus of this essay and, it is hoped, will be a first step toward reassessing the performing and recording career of one of the most influential European and American conductors of the twentieth century.

While born in Budapest (7 June 1897), the early musical development of George Szell was already closely linked to Vienna where he pursued studies in composition and piano. Szell's teachers, as documented by Philip Hart among others, included Eusebius Mandyczewski for music theory and both J.B. Foerster and Max Reger for composition. Further, Szell supplemented these early, yet fundamental studies with keyboard instruction under the direction of Richard Robert. As a culmination of this curriculum, Szell's debut in Vienna at the age of eleven indeed featured him playing his own

compositions.⁴ This youthful period recalls the confluence of inspiration and disciplined study which Mahler had also experienced some decades earlier after a move to Vienna for the purpose of musical development and education. Doubtless significant for Szell's eventual conception of and respect for the musical score as the final word were his studies with Eusebius Mandyczewski [1857-1929]. Before the time of Szell's apprenticeship Mandyczewski had gained a formidable reputation as both a musicological and textual scholar, his philological astuteness in editorial work being especially praised.⁵ In addition to a close, personal association with Brahms and the editions of the latter's work after his death, Mandyczewski guided the progress of the critical edition of Schubert's *Lieder*. It was in this tradition of a strong respect for manuscript and text that Szell received his formative instruction and influence. At the same time, we may perceive Szell the composer and conductor within the historical context of orchestral composition and performance spanning the late eighteenth through to the twentieth centuries. Again, the influence of his Viennese mentors remains an essential ink in this generational chain culminating in those performances by Szell – primarily from the latter decades of his career – which have been preserved and which speak to the present topic. In addition to his teacher's editorial work, the commitment to musicological criticism and history remained strong for Mandyczewski. His association with the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde*, Wien resulted in his directorship of their archives as well as his supervision of a written history of the group at approximately the time of his tutelage of the young Szell. As a further link to earlier periods of both musical scholarship and composition Szell profited from his mentor carrying forward the mantle of the legendary Beethoven scholar Gustav Nottebohm [1817-82]. Mandyczewski had himself studied under Nottebohm and had also edited, through revision and expansion, the second volume of the latter's *Beethoveniana* [Leipzig 1887, 2/1925] based on essays that had previously appeared in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* and *Die Presse* [1863-71]. The heritage of these critical approaches surely played a role in the training of Szell's musical talent, both as performer and interpretive scholar. As an axis between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries we may understand Szell's position as both receptive to such traditional influence or inspiration and open to the challenges of contemporary music and modernity. A testament to this singular position would be later found in Szell's own written contributions to several volumes compiled in the 1940s on conducting technique and symphonic motifs. As a primary example, Szell's own thoughts on musical interpretation and conducting are synthesized in the “Foreword” which he contributed to Max Rudolf's influential book on *The Grammar of Conducting*, first published in 1950.⁶ Aside from giving a positive assessment to Rudolf's formulation of technique, Szell comments on changes which influenced the task of the conductor as it evolved from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. While glancing backward as the well-schooled observer of earlier technique, Szell, at the same time, keeps his eye firmly trained on changes in both musical form and the expectations placed on the contemporary conductor. As he states, “The problems that the contemporary conductor has to face are very different from those of, say fifty years ago. This is due to the general evolution of conducting from mere time-beating and “keeping things together” to a highly differentiated craft; to the increasing intricacies and complexities of symphonic and operatic scores of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and finally to the general demand for a degree of clarity, precision, and smoothness of orchestral performance undreamed-of even as recently as Richard Wagner's time.”⁷ These comments show a privileged and sensitive awareness to the trends and musical expectations which came before within a comparative context of more recent artistic developments. In the decade prior to this publication Szell had contributed to the survey of

¹ Quoted in: Philip Hart, “Szell, George,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 18, 491-92, here 492.

² Raymond Holden, *The Virtuoso Conductors: The Central European Tradition from Wagner to Karajan* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2005), 134-35.

³ See especially the chapter on Strauss in Holden, *The Virtuoso Conductors*, 119-42.

⁴ See esp. Hart, “Szell, George,” 491; further insights at Harold Schonberg, *The Great Conductors* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 334-41, esp. 337-39.

⁵ Significant information on the career and scholarship of Mandyczewski can be found outlined in Maurice J. E. Brown, “Mandyczewski, Eusebius,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 11, 611-12.

⁶ Max Rudolf, *The Grammar of Conducting: A Practical Study of Modern Baton Technique* (New York: Schirmer, 1950), “Foreword” at vii-viii.

⁷ Rudolf, *The Grammar of Conducting*, vii.

Symphony Themes – compiled by Raymond Burrows and Bessie Carroll Redmond – a “Chart of Performing Times and Lists of Instruments” for symphonic works from Haydn and Mozart through to Copland and Shostakovich.⁸ While reputedly based on sound recordings and the recommendations of living composers, Szell maintains that such timings must remain “approximate” and will “vary with the taste and temperament of the individual conductor.”⁹ From these parameters we can see that Szell thus allowed for the interpretive role of the conductor while reinforcing the need to respect the composer’s wishes as marked in the score. At the same time, such a chart of composers spanning nearly two centuries, and the roster of instruments featured in their works, demonstrates for Szell the importance of musical balance as well as a sensitivity to instrumental textures. The composer and conductor Szell was positioned at a significant juncture not only to continue the musical traditions of the past but also to remain open to shifts in perspective and to the innovations of succeeding generations.

The transformation of the multifaceted musical talents of George Szell into the primary role of conductor can be traced from those early years in Vienna and Berlin as well as a series of appointments that followed in the 1920s and 1930s. Although his first public performances featured Szell as pianist playing, in addition to other works, his own compositions, the role of musical director or conductor soon began to predominate. As early as 1913 Szell led a performance of the Vienna Symphony Orchestra; by 1915 he was engaged as an assistant at what would eventually become the Berlin Staatsoper, leading to the recording debut under his then mentor Richard Strauss, as noted above. During the succeeding years, before his taking up residency in the United States, Szell occupied a number of posts – in both musical direction and scholarly activity – while he also traveled widely as a guest conductor. Positions at opera companies during these years included Darmstadt and Düsseldorf in the early 1920s. Szell returned to Berlin thereafter and held a professorship at the Hochschule der Musik during the years 1927-30. For an extended period beginning in 1929 Szell acted as director of both the Deutsche Oper and the Philharmonie in Prague, during which time he broadened his conducting duties on extensive tours. These opportunities included his conducting debuts in both London and the United States during 1933 and 1930 respectively. Striking in this whole period of development is Szell’s professional commitment to opera and the number of such houses at which he directed or assumed visiting roles as conductor.¹⁰ It was indeed during travels away from his post at Scottish Opera, where he conducted for several years in 1937-39, that Szell chose to remain in the United States. This decision was made since performance would doubtless have been suspended, even if he were to have returned to Glasgow, as the War had started. During the next several years in New York, Szell continued his interest in opera and was hired periodically to conduct at the Metropolitan. Coincidentally, his first performance with the New York Philharmonic also took place at this time. When taking stock of the early training and artistic progress of Szell up to this point, parallels to the career of Mahler are inescapable. Both figures in their early and preparatory musical personalities share the central European tradition, significant exposure to and training in theory and composition, and the eventual series of both operatic and symphonic appointments in differing European cultural milieus.

George Szell’s call to the Cleveland Orchestra – leading subsequently to his memorable recordings of Mahler’s works – began just after the close of World War II. Starting in 1946 over a span of twenty-four years until his death in 1970 Szell molded and directed the Orchestra to fulfill his expectations. The opportunity given to Szell at this critical time spoke to his specific musical talents. As composer and performer he was especially aware of the type of instrumentalists needed to form an ensemble which could take on works on both small and larger scales. His previous decades of conducting experience also gave a

sense of balance to the variety of orchestral groupings required to achieve such effect. Finally his attention to detail in the score would assure the authenticity of performance as the Cleveland Orchestra developed under his baton. It is with these considerations in mind that we can appreciate Szell’s response, noted at the start of this essay, when describing his carefully reasoned approach to conducting: “I cannot pour chocolate sauce over asparagus.”

The bulk of George Szell’s recordings of Mahler’s works were indeed performed with the Cleveland Orchestra, among the first of these featuring the Ernst Křenek arrangement of the surviving movements of Mahler’s Tenth Symphony. Szell was an early champion of the Tenth, and his performance with the Cleveland Orchestra was recorded in November 1958 for Columbia Records (SONY). His performance remains one of the only documents of the Křenek arrangement, with Szell’s commanding interpretation of the first movement. From the start of this performance one notes the controlled yet lush playing of the strings, especially in the lower registers, and their skillful interplay with other instrumental groups. Even at moments when the motivic intensity diminishes, or begins to slow, its natural pace keeps an underlying forward progression under Szell’s direction. Small, quasi-melodic units or motifs are enveloped by the predominant complex of strings, so that after the eventual dramatic blast a masterful continuation of the adagio ensues until the close of the movement. The overall impression of this performance has prompted comments such as those by Lewis Smoley, who characterizes Szell’s approach as “one of the best versions ever recorded.”¹¹ Indeed the sensitivity to a sustained concept of the composer’s markings, in this case an adagio, reflects the approach maintained by Szell in his remaining performances of Mahler’s works preserved in recordings. As an example of developing a conceptual interpretation from the composer’s guidelines, Szell’s 1965 recording of Mahler’s Fourth Symphony stands out for its thoughtful and restrained approach. From the opening notes sounded by the flute and Schellenkappe, or fool’s bells, to the closing moments of “Das himmlische Leben” in the fourth movement, Szell leads a controlled performance typified by the integration of complementary themes throughout. Szell’s concept of the Symphony as a whole takes its impetus from the attention given to individual movements in keeping with Mahler’s suggestions. Hence the composer’s guidelines to proceed in the first two movements “with care,” “do not hurry,” “in comfortable motion,” “without haste” [“Bedächtigt,” “Nicht eilen,” “In gemächlicher Bewegung.” “Ohne Hast.”] are followed precisely, such that development of motifs builds recognizably toward a synthesis with the final vocal part. Individual instruments, or groups playing in unison, suggest an audible counterpoint without the impression of a specific group predominating, as in many other recordings of this Symphony. In the third movement, or Scherzo, marked simply “Ruhevoll” [“restfully”], Szell’s sensitivity as both Classical scholar and performer is evident through the languid development of themes and structure. Again, the clarity of individual instruments is sustained, while moments *in forte* are performed as a decided effect, with a gradual resolution into the predominant, and marked, intention of peacefulness. This mood leads naturally into the final movement, the setting of “Das himmlische Leben” for voice and orchestra. Already at the start of the song, performed by Judith Raskin in this recording, a spirit of detachment suggests the otherworldliness of being, as marked, “sehr behaglich” [“very comfortable”] in heaven. The singer is here allowed considerable opportunity to blend with the orchestra, but also to intone and decorate her part so that words and phrases in text remain clearly perceptible. As the roster of saints and denizens of heaven is recited in melody, the soprano and accompaniment here reach an achingly slow conclusion, when honoring Saint Ursula, Saint Cäcilia and especially “die englischen Stimmen” [“angelic voices”]. This touching apotheosis of music and heaven brings to a symmetrical close both song and symphony in Szell’s interpretation of the peacefulness achieved after struggle during the preceding movements and highlighted in the final one.

Additional performances of Mahler’s works featuring voice and orchestra under Szell’s direction yield an even broader perspective on the interest he had in eliciting dramatic potential from such musical

⁸ Raymond Burrows and Bessie Carroll Redmond, ed., *Symphony Themes, with Special editorial assistance by George Szell* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1942), 274-85.

⁹ Burrows and Redmond, *Symphony Themes*, 274.

¹⁰ Schonberg, *The Great Conductors*, 337-39, and Hart, “Szell, George,” 492.

¹¹ Lewis M. Smoley, *The Symphonies of Gustav Mahler: A Critical Discography* (New York/Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 156-57.

interrelationships. The selection of songs from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, chosen by Szell for his 1968 recording with the London Symphony Orchestra, shows the clear potential for painting a scene. Based on live performances from earlier in that year featuring the singers Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, the studio recording released by EMI was eventually included in the series Great Recordings of the Century. Perhaps most impressive in this collaboration is the convincing nature of the roles assumed by the principals and supported masterfully by Szell. Fischer-Dieskau's varying tones of brusqueness in "Revelge" or resignation in "Der Tambour'ssell" are examples of the singer inhabiting not only a character but also the fictional or societal world in which he moves. Schwarzkopf likewise uses her voice with utmost expression to suggest the alternating roles of mother and child in "Das irdische Leben." It was a stroke of genius for Szell to bring the two vocalists together for the songs where a male and female voice participate in some form of dialogue. The innocent world of "Verlor'ne Müh" ["Wasted Effort"] is evoked in all its deceptive simplicity as the young lad and girl exchange offer and refusal. The text of the song is predominated by Schwarzkopf in convincing dialect projecting the voice of a young maiden. Replies by Fischer-Dieskau are pointed in their brevity, yet convey the seeming disagreement between the pair. Szell modifies orchestral tempos so that a constant tension is felt to match the emotional game being played out by his singers. As another such example, in the "Lied des Verfolgten im Turm" ["Song of the Prisoner in the Tower"], both principals as lovers declare their thoughts and moods just as they sing past rather than to each other. The reality of their dilemma emerges in the final two strophes as both singers give the impression of confronting clearly a hopeless situation.

Among the historical, live recordings which preserve Szell's performances of Mahler's works, two recordings of *Das Lied von der Erde* and his document of the Sixth Symphony are to be counted as highlights in the last years of an illustrious career. The performance of *Das Lied* featuring Maureen Forrester and Richard Lewis stands out for its idiomatic rendition of the poetic texts by both singers as well as their ability to communicate emotion while singing at varying levels of volume. This interplay between vocalist and orchestra emphasizes especially the symphonic nature of *Das Lied* under Szell's direction. In the performance of the Sixth Symphony recorded during a concert at Cleveland in October 1967 one notes from the opening march tempo a sense of Classical restraint, to be sure allowing for the vivid expression of emotion yet maintaining such feelings within reasonable bounds. The recording remains, as aptly described by Smoley, a further example "by a conductor from whom we have all too few recorded Mahler performances."¹² After having considered the rich legacy of George Szell's involvement with the music of Mahler, it is certainly here appropriate to suggest that those recordings by Szell are worthy of a further look.

Discography of Significant Recordings under the Direction of George Szell

Mahler: Symphony No. 4
Judith Raskin, soprano
Cleveland Orchestra, George Szell, conductor
Columbia (SONY) 1965/1991

Mahler: Symphony No. 6 "Tragic"
Cleveland Orchestra, George Szell, conductor
Live Performance Cleveland 1967
Columbia (SONY) 1967/1991

Mahler: Symphony No. 9
Cleveland Orchestra, George Szell, conductor
Live Performance Cleveland 1968
Stradivarius/Memories – 1988/1990

Mahler: Symphony No. 10 (Adagio)
Cleveland Orchestra, George Szell, conductor
Columbia (SONY) 1959/1993

Mahler: *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*
Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, soprano, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, baritone
London Symphony Orchestra, George Szell, conductor
Great Recordings of the Century
EMI Angel 1968/2000

Gustav Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde*
Maureen Forrester, contralto, Richard Lewis, tenor
Cleveland Orchestra, George Szell, conductor
Live Performance, Berlin 1967
Hunt/Living Stage - 1991/2003

Gustav Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde*
Janet Baker, mezzo-soprano, Richard Lewis, tenor
Cleveland Orchestra, George Szell, conductor
Live Performance, Cleveland 1970
Cleveland Orchestra 75th Anniversary Edition 1993

Of related interest:

Great Conductors of the Twentieth Century: George Szell.
Includes selections of music by Auber, Dvořák, Debussy, Delius, Rossini, Tchaikovsky, Wagner, J. Strauss (both live performances and studio recordings).
Cleveland Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, WDR Sinfonieorchester Köln, Kölner Rundfunk-Sinfonie-Orchester, George Szell, conductor
EMI, SONY, WDR 3 – 2003 (2-CD set)

Of Note

Of Note is a column dedicated to listing recent publications and recordings of interest to readers of *Naturlaut*. While we attempt to list as many items as possible, it is impossible to include everything that is issued. At best, we find some of the important items. Thus, if you know of other recordings or publications to include in future issues, please contact Teng-Leong Chew and James L. Zychowicz.

New and Forthcoming Recordings

Gustav Mahler

Mahler: Symphony No. 1

Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Mariss Jansons, conductor,
RCO Live CD 7001 (Hybrid SACD)

Mahler: Symphony No. 2

Iris Vermillion, mezzo soprano, Sibylla Rubens, soprano, Birgit Remmert, alto, Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra, Middle German Radio Choir Leipzig Roger Norrington, conductor
Hänssler Classics CD 93166 (Hybrid SACD)

Mahler: Symphony No. 2

Heather Harper, soprano, Helen Watts, alto, London Symphony Orchestra, London Symphony Chorus, Sir Georg Solti, conductor
Decca 897602
Reissue on CD of Solti's first recording of Mahler's Second Symphony, which was made in 1966.

Mahler: Symphony No. 3

Michelle De Young, mezzo, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Bernard Haitink, conductor
CSO Resound CD 901701 (2-CD set)
This recording is based on performances given in Fall 2006 at the Symphony Center, Chicago.

Mahler: Symphony No. 5

Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Bernard Haitink, conductor,
Pentatone CD 5186183 (Hybrid SACD)
Remastered issue of a recording originally made in December 1970

Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 9

Staatskapelle Berlin, Daniel Barenboim, conductor
Warner Classics CD 64316
Recorded live on 15 November 2006 at the Philharmonie, Berlin

¹² Smoley, *The Symphonies of Gustav Mahler*, 94-95.