

# Mahler Symphony No. 9--Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra; Bruno Walter, conductor (1938)

Added to the National Registry: 2015

Essay by Erik Ryding (guest post)\*



*Bruno Walter*

Now one of the cornerstones of orchestral literature, Mahler's Ninth Symphony had its first performance on June 26, 1912, with the Vienna Philharmonic conducted by Bruno Walter. Mahler himself, who usually premiered his works, had died in 1911, so the job of introducing the Ninth to the world fell to Walter, his younger friend and protégé, who would champion Mahler's music for the rest of his career. The concert was given during the Vienna Music Festival Week, which included two other "Ninths"—Beethoven's and Bruckner's, conducted respectively by Felix Weingartner and Arthur Nikisch. History has amply demonstrated that Mahler's Ninth belonged in that exalted company; today it is a canonical work, played by all major orchestras and even by advanced youth orchestras.

Nevertheless, the Ninth Symphony, like many another work of genius, received mixed reviews at its unveiling, and for decades repeat performances were sporadic at best. The first set of shellacs were made only in 1938, under the aegis of HMV's artistic director Fred Gaisberg, who resolved to record the piece and acted as producer during a live performance in Vienna; as he recalled in an article published in 1944: "I put forward the suggestion that the Gramophone Company should record the complete symphony at a performance in the old Musikverein to be held on Sunday morning, January 16th, 1938." He proposed that "Bruno Walter, the direct link with Mahler, would be the conductor, and that there would be five rehearsals during which our engineers could make their tests and experiments." Gaisberg noted that "the work was difficult and could never be economically recorded in a studio, as it required many rehearsals and a big orchestra. For the same reason it rarely made its appearance in a concert programme."

As Gaisberg had envisioned, the concert took place in the gilded Grosser Musikvereinssaal, the splendidly resonant site of its premiere, with Walter and the Vienna Philharmonic. The performance, which lasted about 70 minutes, was brisker than most subsequent readings—including Walter’s own 1961 stereo account with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra, which clocks in at 81 minutes—but close to the “hour and thirteen minutes actual playing length” of the world premiere. So the 1938 recording represents a precious sound document, capturing one of the towering works of the symphonic repertoire as performed by the orchestra that first presented it to the public, interpreted by its original conductor (himself Mahler’s most eminent disciple), and recorded in its original venue.

Gaisberg offers a vivid account of the proceedings on the occasion of its first recording: “I took my place in the top corner amongst the timpani, facing the conductor. . . . Two recording machines . . . were used alternately; while one was recording the other was being loaded with wax and was ready to take up the thread as the number one record was finishing.” Charlie Gregory, the senior engineer in charge of a “switchboard control box,” was “advised by a musician who followed the performance with a full score.”

With its 70-minute duration and huge dynamic range, the symphony was a challenge to record in the 78-rpm era, but the project came off successfully. Two months later, however, the Nazi empire would change the face of Europe with its annexation of Austria. So Walter, who had already been driven from his native Germany for being Jewish, was now exiled from Austria, his adopted home. And with Austria under Nazi rule, the music of Gustav Mahler—an artist attacked by anti-Semites already well before the rise of Nazism—would soon disappear from the country’s concert programs, following a dismal pattern already set in Germany.

Despite this momentous change in the balance of power, Gaisberg carried on with the project and presented test pressings to the exiled conductor several weeks after the concert. “Walter turned up, a bewildered refugee, in Paris,” Gaisberg wrote, “where I met him to play over and obtain his approval” of the recorded symphony. “So delighted was he with the results that his usually sober face brightened up considerably.”

Although he writes of Walter’s satisfaction with the test pressings, Gaisberg confessed in 1947 that rehearsing the Ländler movement had been a time-consuming trial. And the conductor himself was critical when RCA Victor reissued the recording in 1954 without his knowledge—he learned about it through reading “The New York Times.” “You will have noticed the musical and technical shortcomings of this recording,” he wrote to George Marek at RCA. “The turbulent political happenings of March 1938 in Austria interfered drastically with my ability to concentrate on the merits of the test pressings then forwarded to me to Holland and made it very difficult for me to come to a definite approval or disapproval.” (It’s unclear whether the test pressings were assessed in France or Holland—or, if more than one set was submitted over time, both countries.)

Fortunately for future listeners, Marek proved persuasive, and this historic recording has since been reissued many times. James A. Altena, in a review of a recent release, writes that it “has been issued on CD on at least 13 different labels.”

Introducing the Ninth Symphony to the public would in itself have assured the conductor a place in music history, though Walter achieved many other triumphs in his long career—including the premiere performance and recording of another landmark piece by Mahler, “Das Lied von der Erde.” He was, moreover, also an author, and we have a firsthand account of his thoughts on Mahler’s Ninth Symphony from his book “Gustav Mahler,” published in 1936:

A unique soaring between farewell sadness and a vision of heavenly light . . . lifts the [first] movement into an atmosphere of celestial bliss. . . . The second movement, again in a new form of the intimately familiar scherzo and, in this instance, progressing in broad principal time, is remarkable for its great wealth of varying moods. A tragic undertone sounds in the joy and one feels that “the dance is over.” In the defiantly agitated third movement Mahler once again furnishes most striking proof of his contrapuntal mastery. In the last movement he peacefully bids farewell to the world, the finale being like the melting of a cloud in the ethereal blue.

The 1938 account of the Ninth has a special significance for me because it was the performance that made me fall in love with Mahler’s music. Despite the constricted sonics and occasional rough patches, the music that emerged from the speakers when I first played the recording drew me into its world immediately. It was like nothing I’d heard before: the first and last movements were, to my surprise, slow—though Walter made them move with grace, drama, and urgency; the harmonies were mysterious, decadent, irresistible; the Rondo was exhilarating in its febrile intensity; the polyphonic fabric of the whole was lush and stimulating, beautifully shaped by Walter’s masterly hands. And although I felt lost when trying to follow the extended structure of the work—the opening movement, after all, lasts almost 25 minutes, longer than some classical symphonies in their entirety—I knew that this was a profound statement that I would return to over and over in succeeding years.

Not long after my initiation to the Ninth, I read that Mahler had made revisions to the score in New York City during the winter of 1909–10, when he was music director of the New York Philharmonic, and, as a New Yorker, I used to think of its wistful opening phrases whenever I would walk by Central Park on a snowy day in January or February and watch the flakes dance in the air and fall to the ground. I still do.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.