

An Additional Note from the Conductor

Most performers have occasional fantasies about conversing with the great composers of the past. In these conversations all their questions about the interpretation of the works of the masters receive definitive answers. Some believe they have actually had such conversations, which might explain the famous exchange between two of this century's most revered and influential musical figures, Natalie Boulanger and Wanda Landowska, after a heated argument about the interpretation of a keyboard work by J.S. Bach, which ended with Landowska saying, "All right, you play it your way, I'll play it his way!"

Since the earliest days of recording we have been able to hear performances of composers such as Elgar, Rachmaninoff, and even an extremely poor quality one of Brahms, which presumably represent pretty accurately what they intended, though there are certainly all sorts of other issues to consider, such as the restraints of very limited recording time imposed by the various recording media-- Edison cylinders, 78 rpm records-- when they were in their early stages of development, which might make tempo decisions in those early recordings suspect.

In Mahler's case, although we have no recordings of him conducting his symphonies and few metronome marks, we do have a small number of piano-roll recordings, including a complete performance of the first movement of the Fifth Symphony that is tremendously illuminating, though it raises more questions than it answers. However, it is very exciting to hear the actual sound of Mahler playing the piano, and the piano roll provides evidence of the enormous flexibility of his timing and his inimitable use of rubato. Especially remarkable is the amazingly free rendition, impossible to notate,

of the dotted funeral march rhythm with “overdotting” somewhere between the written rhythm and the double-dotted figure.

One other insight on the interpretation of the Fifth is found in quite an unlikely place: on March 12, 1905, Dr. Hermann Behn, a lawyer and an old friend of Mahler, attended the final rehearsal for a concert in Hamburg of the Fifth Symphony, conducted by the composer. He notes the timings of each movement as it was played, and these timings are now to be found at the front of the score in the most recent printing of the Universal Critical Edition.

I did not know of these timings until the present recording was completed. However, when I discovered them I was struck by the fact that the total timings of the performances were almost identical: 67:08 for this performance and 68:00 for Mahler’s Hamburg rehearsal.

It would be foolish to assume that these timings give us incontrovertible proof of what tempi Mahler used-- there are simply too many other considerations. However, it seems quite possible, and it certainly is our conviction, that we are not far off.

Mahler’s timings are recorded by Dr. Behn:

I. 12 minutes

II. 15 minutes

III. 17 minutes

IV. 9 minutes

V. 15 minutes

-- *BZ*