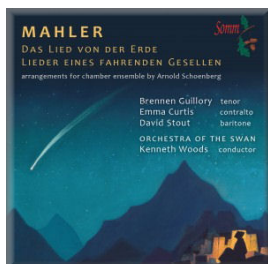


## From MusicWeb-International



### **Gustav MAHLER (1860-1911)**

*Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (1885) (arr. Schoenberg, 1920) [17:01]

*Das lied von der Erde* (1909) (arr. Schoenberg/Riehn 1983) [62:00]

David Stout (baritone: Gesellen) Emma Curtis (alto) Brennen Guillory (tenor)  
Orchestra of the Swan/Kenneth Woods.

rec. November 2010, Townsend Hall, Shipton-on-Stour. DDD

SOMM SOMMCD0109 [79:27] 

The *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfaring Lad) and *Das lied von der Erde* (The song of the Earth) are respectively Mahler's first and last orchestral song cycles. The nearly twenty-five years that separate them can be seen in the scope and in work's vastly increased length - over three times the Wayfarer cycle. The Wayfarer songs open in the fresh morning of Mahler's career; he re-used some of this thematic material in the First Symphony. The Song of the Earth, one of his last major works and his last vocal setting, celebrates and seems to bid farewell to human existence. In this work the orchestral interludes are elaborated to the point where the orchestra becomes an equal participant with the vocal soloists. Song of the Earth is scored for a large orchestra, including several percussion instruments.

After the Great War, orchestras capable of playing these works were hard to assemble. This prompted Arnold Schoenberg to make arrangements of them for chamber orchestra. The arrangement of the Wayfarer cycle was completed in 1920, but that for The Song of the Earth remained incomplete until 1983, when the conductor Rainer Riehn finished the re-orchestration from Schoenberg's sketches. The arrangements preserve the clarity of Mahler's orchestration, but obviously lose some of the weight of a full symphony orchestra. According to Kenneth Woods, the current recording is the first to present these two arrangements on one disc.

The wind solos at the first of the Wayfarer songs are quite forward in the balance, and the rhythm is precise; these are to be hallmarks of this recording. David Stout's characterisation of the vocal line is alternately stoic and sensitive; his breath control copes well with the slow tempo. The second song introduces a feeling of greater animation, with delicate wind playing doubling the vocal line. There is a sense of intimacy here similar to a lieder recital. The smaller orchestral sound registers in the turbulent opening of the third song; this gives way to a calmer mood. The last song begins with a characteristic funeral march. The pulse, faint at the start, gradually firms as the hero prepares himself for his solitary journey, in a resigned but resolute mood. This is a really distinguished Wayfarer cycle; the performance is beautifully played and sung, and has an unerring focus on and sensitivity to the text.

The comparison is with the performance from 1988 with Thomas Allen and the English Chamber Orchestra conducted by Jeffrey Tate. The timings are close to the present recording; the greatest discrepancy is with the second song "Ging heut' morgen über's Feld", which Allen *et al* take at 4:33 versus 4:01 for Stout. Thomas Allen is not as fresh-voiced as David Stout; together with the more distant recording, this diminishes the youthful feel of the work. The clarity of the Schoenberg arrangement further enhances the attractiveness of the Woods performance.

1907 was a year of crisis for Mahler, marked by his resignation from the post of Director of the Vienna State Opera, the death of his elder daughter, and the diagnosis of his incurable heart condition. It was at this time that he acquired a collection of poems translated from the Chinese by Hans Bethge, of which

he set five in the Song of the Earth. Despite the size of the orchestra this is one of the most delicately-scored of Mahler's works, with a frequently oriental flavour. The origin of the texts seems to be reflected in its mood, which from time to time is rather detached. This paradoxically does not detract from its vast emotional range, which encompasses disgust at human life, animal high spirits, pleasure at the beauty of youth and nature, and an anguished and finally tranquil leave-taking. It is difficult to think of many works that combine, as this one does, the intimacy of lieder with an extended orchestral setting. It can be performed by tenor and either contralto or baritone; the former combination is what the present recording uses.

The tumultuous opening song again registers the smaller orchestral forces, but with a gain in transparency; the voice is framed by the orchestra rather than having to struggle through it. Brennen Guillory sings intelligently; his Heldentenor reserves are tested by the cruelly high writing. The wind and violin solos are prominent and characterful. The second song paints a picture of depression; the winding oboe and flute solos over the winding string lines are superbly played. Emma Curtis avoids self-pity in her performance, achieving instead a weary resignation, which breaks into a passionate declamation at "Ja, glib mir Ruh". She has a fresh voice, which reminds me a little of Elizabeth Schwarzkopf's silvery sound; however, her diction is not always totally clear. The middle songs all feature beautiful wind solos, well characterised contrasts between and within the songs, and lively rhythms. The oriental-sounding writing for the winds in the fourth song is particularly delightful. The fifth song returns to the roistering mood of the first, but with a more Bacchanalian feel. The horn solos, strings and triangle create a delicate and warm colouration.

The final song setting, *Der abschied*, far exceeds the preceding ones in length, being nearly half an hour in duration. Mahler intersperses the text with extended orchestral interludes, scored with both vividness and restraint. The performance by Emma Curtis and the orchestra is one of the utmost sensitivity. The wind and string solos are all prominent, and beautifully played, as before, and Woods' control of the ebbs and flows of the pulse is unerring. For all this I didn't find this movement quite as involving as the previous ones. The smaller sound from the strings registered more here, particularly in the funeral march episode, which lacked a sense of inevitability. Emma Curtis's return at "Die Liebe Erde", however, ushered in a finale that was magical in its tenderness.

The competition for this work is fierce; just about every Mahler cycle has included a Song of the Earth, and there are numerous stand-alone recordings for both vocal combinations. On this occasion the comparison was with a recording dating from 1982 and 1984 with Klaus König and Agnes Baltsa as the tenor and contralto, and Klaus Tennstedt conducting the London Philharmonic. I remember reading that Tennstedt was dissatisfied, which is why it was not included in his EMI Mahler cycle. However I have always felt it one of the most effective performances. The vocal soloists are committed and eloquent and the orchestra plays wonderfully; the whole seems to lift a notch for *Der abschied*, which is very moving. This doesn't feel like a slow performance, but Tennstedt's tempos are generally a little broader than Woods', most of all in *Der abschied*, where he takes 31:27 as against 28:53.

My allegiance will always be to Mahler's original version; the use of the full orchestra gives the conductor a broader brush and wider range of colours with which to work. However, it isn't a matter of one being superior to the other; the chamber orchestrations reveal new dimensions to these great works. Woods and his performers certainly mount a convincing case for Schoenberg's arrangements, which are something that every lover of Mahler should hear.

*Guy Aron*