



## Czech Philharmonic Mahler Cycle with Semyon Bychkov

### Mahler Symphony No. 4

PENTATONE/8 April 2022

Semyon Bychkov conductor; Chen Reiss, soprano

*Limelight Recording of the Year & Orchestra Recording of the Year Nomination 2022*

*Radio Klassik Stephansdom, CD of the Day, 23 March 2022*

*Limelight, Recording of the Month, June 2022*

*BBC Music Magazine, Orchestral Choice, July 2022*

Magical start to Bychkov's Mahler cycle. The Czech Phil delivers a golden Fourth Symphony recording... Alchemy has been working wonders in Prague. In the case of the Czech Philharmonic it's simply an adapted sound building on magnificent traditions. But I always thought Semyon Bychkov, now one of the greats, was more a creature of earth and fire than air... It is a fascinating choice to launch a new symphonic cycle which the Czech Philharmonic more than merits... The Fourth is a special case, encouraging chamber-musical dialogues, which have never sounded lovelier or at times spookier, spotlighting some magnificent principals, chiefly leader/concertmaster, first horn, clarinet and an especially poignant oboe as the blue skies turn black in the slow movement. Dynamics from the quietest imaginable to the very loudest are perfectly handled by the Rudolfinum recording.

BBC Music Magazine, July 2022  
*Orchestral Choice*

This collaboration with the Czech Philharmonic is a thing of sweetly scented, gossamer beauty that weaves the interplay of childhood innocence and adult experience into something altogether sublime... Here, Bychkov refuses the bombast that others mistake for directness, choosing instead to err on the side of poetry. In that, he is well served by his Czech forces who relish connecting with a composer born in its Bohemian heartland and who imbibed the lilting lyricism of its folksong tradition as a child... Out of darkness, comes light, out of turmoil, peace, in the passionate but pacifying third movement, beautifully pitched and measured by Bychkov as part-hymnal, part-threnody, and matched by ardently articulate playing from the Czech Philharmonic... Pentatone's superbly engineered sound (recorded in the Dvořák Hall of Prague's Rudolfinum) enhances the pleasure of a Mahler Four that sings with the warming breeze of childhood subtly tempered by the chill winds of adulthood. The next instalment is eagerly awaited.

Limelight, June 2022  
*Recording of the Month*

With no need for tradition, Semyon Bychkov invites Vienna to Prague, beginning his Mahler journey with a classical Fourth Symphony, luminous in speech and timbre, so balanced that its conception ends up smoothing out the singular character of the Czech woodwinds and winds. A contradiction? More like a counterpoint, forcing the Czech Philharmonic to go deeper into its Mahler, to consider it from other angles, favouring the ocean of strings. *ArtaMag*, 25 May 2022

Personally, I think it's one of the finest interpretations of the work I've ever heard.

Limelight, 23 May 2022

Mahler's own constantly shape-shifting music teems with kaleidoscopic tempo fluctuations which not every conductor can interpret convincingly. Bychkov's mastery in this regard marks him as a genuine Mahlerian... The distinctive sound of the Czech Philharmonic is gorgeously captured in this Pentatone production; the strings are lustrous, the winds and brass incisive and the dynamic range is vast... this is a very auspicious start to what promises to be an exceptional Mahler cycle.

The Whole Note, 20 May 2022

Semyon Bychkov is beginning a Mahler cycle with this ensemble not with No. 7 but with the Pentatone release of No. 4, and the performance certainly bodes well for the sequence as a whole. Bychkov's pacing is well-considered; his attentiveness to detail is impressive (the sleighbells are quiet, not jangly, in the first movement, but come through with complete clarity); the orchestra's balance is very fine, with the sound of its brass particularly impressive... Well-paced, well-played, and well-considered throughout, with a just-right fade into the ineffable at its conclusion, this Mahler Fourth shines with the manifest beauties of bright sunlight – it is the sunniest of all Mahler's symphonies – against the bluest of blue skies.

InfoDad, 19 May 2022

The performance is unusually fresh: Brisk tempi are not pushed but unfold naturally. The scherzo has a dancey lilt, its contrasting sections gracious rather than rustic. The spacious, flowing slow movement is a true Poco adagio. The finale is forthright. All benefit from small,



distinctive touches: the first movement's buzzing trills; the flute's tentative suggestion at 7:09 of the scherzo is appealing- though the solo violin's imitation is unhelpful – or the "milked" oboe tenutos in the slow movement. Chen Reiss, the finale's vibrant soloist, intones the closing paragraph in a lovely hush.  
Stereophile, May 2022

The first time I played this disc I was struck by several things. One was the lovely, airy and natural recorded sound. Another was the exceptional quality of the orchestra's playing. The third was the excellence of Bychkov's conducting. Further listening reinforced those impressions... Superb playing, expert, idiomatic conducting and lovely recorded sound combine to make this a distinguished version. I've enjoyed it very much indeed and if future instalments are at this exalted level, then this Mahler cycle will be well worth following. I'm definitely keen to hear more. This is an auspicious launch for Semyon Bychkov's Mahler cycle with the Czech Philharmonic.  
MusicWeb International, 3 May 2022

At any rate, with plenty of fine recordings of the Fourth of varying vintage out there, any newcomers have to be very special. And the new release from Semyon Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic on the Pentatone, the first instalment of a new Mahler cycle which also launches a collaboration between this revered orchestra and the Dutch label, is just that... There's something of that emotional honesty and integrity in Bychkov's account, though the playing, as nurtured by him since he became chief conductor, and building on the legacy of the late Jiří Bělohlávek, is considerably more refined. It is captured in the Dvořák Hall of Prague's Rudolfinum with an admirable combination of focus and warmth that plays to this orchestra's many strengths: the golden-toned strings, the characteristically 'woody' wind, the incisive but never overpowering brass. One of the joys of this reading, which holds urgency, poise, detail and warmth in perfect tension, is the way in which Bychkov consistently allows the middle of the texture – bassoons and horns in particular – to colour the whole, without any sense of spotlighting, while taking enormous care over details of articulation, dynamics and phrasing... It should be evident by now that this exceptionally vivid performance is a most auspicious start to something that, with the musicians' collective experience and Bychkov's expert guiding hands, promises to add up to considerably more than 'yet another' Mahler cycle. And as a performance of the Fourth Symphony, it comfortably ranks with the very best.  
Europadisc, April 2022

Bychkov's performance starts off sleeker and less distinctive, though this Orchestra's transparent, warm sound is still very recognisable. Mahler's contrapuntal lines are always audible, Bychkov highlighting unexpected details without interrupting the first movement's flow. The unison flute theme six minutes in is glorious, and you can really hear the swirling string writing underneath. Bychkov is good at rapture; the radiant strings and horn passage before the first movement's clattering close is exquisite. And sample the scherzo's second trio, 50 seconds of sun-drenched loveliness. This third movement is one of the slower ones on disc but doesn't drag, and the big climax is suitably imposing... An enjoyable disc, captured in glowing sound.  
The Arts Desk, 29 April 2022

Four vital traditions inform this recording, the first in a planned cycle by the Czech Philharmonic and its Russian-Jewish chief conductor Semyon Bychkov. Mahler grew up in Czech countryside, in a Jewish family that spoke Yiddish and German. The Czech Philharmonic gave the world première of his seventh symphony and keeps scores with Mahler's markings in its archive, where I have studied them. Mahler twice visited St Petersburg where he had cousins, fostering an empathy with his music that feeds audibly into the symphonies of Dmitri Shostakovich and into Bychkov's personal upbringing. All four of these streams inform his interpretation, making this an unusually interesting Mahler cycle before a note is sounded... the reading of the symphony has an authentic and altogether inimitable Czech lilt that makes it pretty much indispensable to Mahler connoisseurs. It's a really positive start to the cycle.  
Ludwig Van Toronto, 22 April 2022

Plenty of Czech character from the winds, some lovely tempo choices and well-judged transitions from Bychkov, and those portamenti – those slides in the strings – beautifully done. It's an excellent first episode.  
BBC Radio 3 Record Review, 16 April 2022

Bychkov and the Czech Philharmonic launch a new Mahler cycle on Pentatone: Semyon Bychkov has contributed much to the reputation of the Czech Philharmonic as its Chief Conductor and Music Director in recent years. Now the Orchestra and its 69-year-old leader are setting out to climb one of the great musical mountains with a complete recording of all of Gustav Mahler's symphonies... In this work with a smaller orchestra, Bychkov impressively brings out the many colours of Mahler's music: from the macabre scherzo to rural light-heartedness as well as the transcendental finale in which soprano Chen Reiss, who is also very well known in Vienna, appears. A recording that certainly whets the appetite for future releases.  
APA, 13 April 2022



Any new recording from Semyon Bychkov is to be eagerly anticipated, not least the launch of this first disc in a new Mahler cycle, a recent collaboration with Pentatone. Judging by this cherished account, it's an auspicious start as the Czech Philharmonic seem to have Mahler's Fourth Symphony in their bones. Orchestra and composer have a long association extending as far back as the world premiere of his Seventh Symphony by the Czech Philharmonic in 1908... And given it's over forty years since the orchestra last recorded the composer's symphonies, then under the legendary Václav Neumann, this disc is more than welcome... Playing is variously idyllic, elegant and impassioned – the brief blaze of glory a case in point and the rapture that follows is exquisite... Overall, a warmly responsive performance that gets to the heart of the work and owes much to the players' sense of kinship with the composer. Bychkov's undoubted devotion is readily apparent too. Opera Today, 12 April 2022

Semyon Bychkov conducts the first movement in an alternation of tension and release, finely differentiated, with lively but never exaggerated accentuation and a pleasing rubato. Particularly striking right away are the beautiful, warm colours in the Orchestra's sound and the transparency of the well-balanced, spatially perfectly disposed sound image. And because Bychkov also traces Mahler's soul, the last two minutes of the first movement are particularly expressive. The listener holds his breath... In the second movement, one constantly has the impression that the music is developing naturally, very leisurely, as Mahler wished, but at the same time constantly enlivened with refined accents, nuances, ritardandi, accelerandi and other rhetorical devices. After these two movements, the 3rd movement becomes very lyrical and dreamy at the beginning, then alternating between hope, resignation and despair, Bychkov taking care never to let the atmosphere become too negative... A very spatially and optimally defined recording contributes to the excellent overall impression of this release. Pizzicato, 11 April 2022

This fine Fourth launches a Mahler Symphony Cycle from the Czech Philharmonic and Semyon Bychkov for Pentatone that promises much... Throughout, the playing is crisp, agile, sensitive and together, appropriately edgy in the macabre second movement, with its devilish violin solos, and rapturous in the slow third – idyllic, eloquent, impassioned – concentrated into something special (seductive oboe contributions), the various episodes given full value yet welded into a coherent whole leading to a sumptuous climax and poignant envoi (magical in fact: the studio-condition red light forgotten about)... A distinguished start then, a Fourth that can stand comparison with, say, Boulez and Szell (both Cleveland), Kubelik (Bavarian Radio) and Gatti (Royal Philharmonic Orchestra) – they're the ones that came first to my mind: purely personal. Classical Source, 7 April 2022

On this emotional field, the greatest contrast is with the third movement in which the moment of farewell to the world of illusion reaches its climax. The movement is mesmerising in its serenity, with the solo winds dancing on the smooth surface of the strings, preventing any escape from the dream... Sometimes it is best not to wake up. Muz Life, 6 April 2022

The Symphony No. 4 is one of the most radiant of Mahler's symphonies, and in this new recording by the Czech Philharmonic, under Semyon Bychkov (on the Pentatone label) it is elevated to a new level of transcendental intensity... Pentatone's sound-engineers have achieved a phenomenal balance between individual instrumental and section detail, and an overall richness and orchestral timbre, seldom heard today. An older, vintage analogue sound of vinyl records – that *weight* of orchestral richness which we used to savour so much – has been coupled with the modern digital wash of colour, sinew and sparkle – and all beautifully captured in the pleasing reverberation of Prague's Rudolfinum Dvořák Hall... In the slow movement, the Czech Philharmonic's playing moves with the grace and reassurance of an old hymn-like psalm. The meditation goes on, but at some point close to the end of the movement – when the music slows to breaking point – a mighty rush and fanfare erupts, galvanised by fantastic, thundering timpani. Sunshine pours down on the earth in the symphony's Zarathustra moment. The Quarterly Review, 1 April 2022

In the slow third movement Bychkov helps the players shape each sound so that it finds its home as if it had been teased into place with tweezers. If this sounds fussy, it is not. It forces the listener to pay attention and not take any phrase for granted. He often slows the tempo to a point where the wait for the next bar is agonising, yet the flow is not interrupted. The string sound is different in each movement too. At the start it is so unlike the usual Czech Phil, as if he has roughed up the sound with coarse sandpaper, especially the cellos, accentuating the danger and the folk origins of Mahler's style. Then in the *Adagio* the ethereal unity of the violins reasserts itself but here he has clearly learnt from period practice. There is a lot of portamento but much less obvious vibrato than in most performances from the 1950s onwards. Where vibrato is allowed, it is deliberate, not automatic.

Present Arts, 24 March 2022