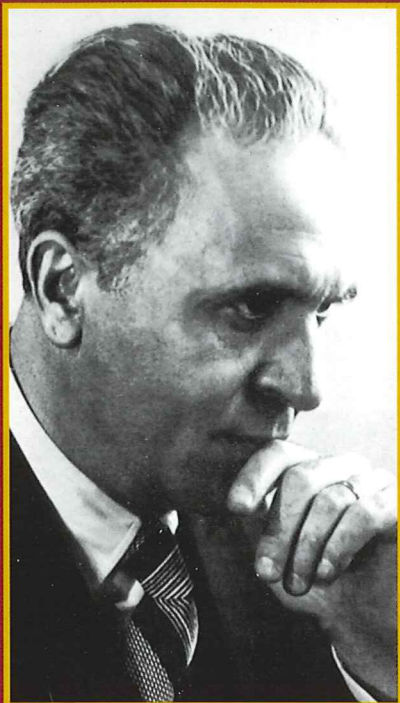




Great Conductors • Walter

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MAHLER

**Das Lied
von der
Erde**

**Adagietto from
Symphony No. 5**

**Kerstin Thorborg, Contralto
Charles Kullman, Tenor
Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra
Bruno Walter**

(Recorded in 1936 and 1938)

Great Conductors • Bruno Walter

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911): Adagietto from Symphony No. 5 in C sharp minor “Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen” from the Rückert Lieder Das Lied von der Erde

Among the most admired conductors of his generation, Bruno Walter, who was born in Berlin on 15th September 1876 and died in Beverly Hills on 17th February 1962, developed a close association with Mahler right from the outset of his career. During 1894-6, he assisted Mahler in Hamburg, the latter's favourable impression confirmed when he obtained for his protégé a post in Breslau. The two were reunited in 1901, when Walter became Mahler's assistant at the Vienna Hofoper. Despite the latter's controversial departure in 1907, Walter remained there until 1912, when he conducted the Vienna première of Mahler's *Eighth Symphony* and the world première of the *Ninth*.

Bruno Walter spent the next two decades as Director of Music in Munich and then in Leipzig, meanwhile consolidating his reputation throughout Europe and in America. Distrustful of the more radical trends in contemporary music, he gave important premières of operas by Korngold and Pfitzner (*Palestrina*), introduced Puccini's *Turandot* to Berlin in 1926 and gave an enthusiastically received Mozart opera cycle in Paris in 1928. After the Nazis came to power in 1933, he returned to Austria, where his opera productions at Salzburg achieved legendary status. The 1930s also saw the making of several recordings, including Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* and *Ninth Symphony*, the latter recorded live, literally hours before the Anschluss made it impossible for him to remain in Austria.

Resident in the United States from 1939 (he took American citizenship seven years later), Walter was Music Director of the New York Philharmonic from 1947 to 1949, recording Mahler's *Fifth Symphony*. His most famous Mahler recording, however, dates from 1952, and features Julius Patzak and Kathleen Ferrier in

what many still regard as the definitive *Das Lied von der Erde*. A visit to Britain with the New York Philharmonic in 1958 marks the beginning of the surge of interest in Mahler in Britain, the *Second Symphony* receiving a mixed critical but enthusiastic public reception. Walter was active on the podium and in the studio until just before his death. His last recording was of the *Ninth Symphony* of Mahler, a work of which he had given the first performance almost half a century before.

A close friend of Thomas Mann and latterly an advocate of Rudolf Steiner, Bruno Walter had definite ideas on the purpose of music, both as a phenomenon in itself and its rôle within society, and these determined both his choice of repertoire and even the works of those composers closest to him. He never, for example, conducted Mahler's *Sixth Symphony* on account of what he saw as its nihilistic conclusion. Moreover, he could afford to be selective in his approach, at a time when integral symphony cycles were only just becoming an issue with record companies.

Walter's 1938 Vienna account of the *Adagietto* from Mahler's *Fifth Symphony* is less highly charged than that in his 1947 New York account of the complete work, but has a flow and limpid beauty he was not to surpass. The passionate central section proceeds with virtually no change of pulse, yet with a magical hesitation going back into the main theme. The movement's climax is arrived at with a potent combination of control and inevitability.

Kerstin Thorborg's rendering of *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* is more forthright than might be expected today, her richness of timbre well suited to Friedrich Rückert's beatific vision of earthly detachment. The various wind contributions, notably

the important cor anglais refrain, have survived the limitations of live 1936 recording well, and are shaped by Walter into a reading of poise and tranquillity, yet with no sense of cloying emotion.

Bruno Walter gave the world première of *Das Lied von der Erde* in 1911, and made three commercial recordings. The first, like his pre-war Vienna account of the *Ninth Symphony*, was recorded at a live performance in 1936, and features expressive contributions from Thorborg and Charles Kullman, singers particularly associated with the work at this time, and a response from the Vienna Philharmonic to remind one that the piece was still at the modern end of the repertoire.

The Vienna strings are sorely tested at the beginning of *Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde*, but Walter steers the players securely, and often audibly, through the harmonic and rhythmic difficulties of this opening movement. Listen especially to the wonderfully nuanced interlude, where Mahler's intricate orchestration is brought subtly and effortlessly to life. Kullman is a capable if perhaps a little staid exponent of life's sorrows, but meets the challenges of despair and resignation at the close head-on. Thorborg brings a chaste poignancy to *Der Einsame im Herbst*, and Walter integrates the ruminative woodwind-led theme seamlessly into the warmer string-based music, with the surge of emotion the more telling for being short-lived. The instrumental postlude has a liquid transparency which rivets the attention after 65 years.

Kullman is amiable, though not especially youthful-sounding in *Von der Jugend*, where Walter reaffirms his

acute understanding of Mahlerian rhythmic motion, above all in the halting gait of the refrain. He complements Thorborg's wide-eyed anticipation in *Von der Schönheit* to perfection, the breezy arrival of the horsemen not over-rushed, and coaxes finely-honed playing as the final bars recede from earshot. Kullman is at his most persuasive in *Der Trunkene im Frühling*, stubborn and open-hearted in his hazy recollections. Walter ensures such details as the violin solo at '*Was hör'ich beim Erwachen?*' have the requisite sentiment without sentimentality.

Walter's perspective on *Der Abschied* was remarkably consistent over his three recordings. Not for him the implacable fatalism of Klemperer, or the transfigured emotion of Horenstein. Here, the knowledge of transcendence is implicit from the outset, and Thorborg's lyrical contribution, with its unfussy though rarely unimaginative phrasing, matches his approach in full measure. Nothing is overplayed: the rush of emotion at the climax of the first part does not overshadow the return to the depths, while the funeral tread of the central interlude acts not as a self-contained interlude, but as a pivot between the two settings, fusing them conceptually as well as musically. The starkness with which the second part opens has been transformed by the final lines, and a gentle radiance persists through to the close, harp and celesta adding magical arabesques as Mahler's vision of eternity fades into memory.

Richard Whitehouse

Producer's Note

The present recordings of *Das Lied von der Erde* and the Rückert song were made during a public performance on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Mahler's death. The take numbers for *Das Lied* imply that this was the second of two concerts recorded by Columbia. The second side of *Der Abschied* (the only one here indicated as "Take 3") is not from a third performance, but is rather a dubbing in all published editions. To maintain the atmosphere of a live concert, I have linked the songs using the ambient sounds which precede them on the published 78 rpm discs. The present transfers were made from pristine U.S. Columbia "Full-Range"-era shellac pressings (for *Das Lied* and the Rückert song) and a pre-war Victor "Gold" (for the *Adagietto*).

This album, with its songs of resignation and farewell to the world, is respectfully dedicated to the memory of Ann M. Silvi, an accomplished mezzo-soprano and former college classmate of mine, the news of whose death from cancer at the age of 44 reached me just as I finished work on this release.

Mark Obert-Thorn

Mark Obert-Thorn

Mark Obert-Thorn is one of the world's most respected transfer artist/engineers. He has worked for a number of specialist labels, including Pearl, Biddulph, Romophone and Music & Arts. Three of his transfers have been nominated for Gramophone Awards. A pianist by training, his passions are music, history and working on projects. He has found a way to combine all three in the transfer of historical recordings. Obert-Thorn describes himself as a 'moderate interventionist' rather than a 'purist' or 're-processor,' unlike those who apply significant additions and make major changes to the acoustical qualities of old recordings. His philosophy is that a good transfer should not call attention to itself, but rather allow the performances to be heard with the greatest clarity.

There is no over-reverberant 'cathedral sound' in an Obert-Thorn restoration, nor is there the tinny bass and piercing mid-range of many 'authorised' commercial issues. He works with the cleanest available 78s, and consistently achieves better results than restoration engineers working with the metal parts from the archives of the modern corporate owners of the original recordings. His transfers preserve the original tone of the old recordings, maximising the details in critical upper mid-range and lower frequencies to achieve a musical integrity that is absent from many other commercially released restorations.



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Kerstin Thorborg, Contralto * • Charles Kullman, Tenor †
Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra • Bruno Walter

Playing
Time
72:02

1 Adagietto from Symphony No. 5 in C sharp minor 8:10

Recorded 19th January 1938 in the Musikvereinsaal, Vienna
Matrices 2VH 7049-2A and 7050-2A. First issued on HMV DB 3406.

**2 "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen" 5:56
from the Rückert Lieder ***

Recorded during the performance of 24th May 1936
in the Musikvereinsaal, Vienna
Matrices CHA 744-1 and 745-1. First issued on Columbia LB 45.

Das Lied von der Erde 57:57

3 Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde † 8:29

4 Der Einsame im Herbst * 8:36

5 Von der Jugend † 3:05

6 Von der Schönheit * 6:23

7 Der Trunkene im Frühling † 4:15

8 Der Abschied * 26:57

Recorded during the performance of 24th May 1936
in the Musikvereinsaal, Vienna
Matrices CHAX 125-2, 126-2, 127-2, 128-2, 129-2, 130-2, 131-2, 132-2, 133-2,
134-3, 135-2, 136-2, 137-2 and 138-2.
First issued on Columbia ROX 165 through 171.

Mahler composed *Das Lied von der Erde* in ill health towards the end of his life, and he died before the work's première took place in 1911, conducted by his close friend Bruno Walter. Incredibly, it took another 25 years before the work was first recorded, once again conducted by Walter, with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, which in 1936 would have included musicians who had played under Mahler himself. Not since this recorded première from 1936 has the sophistication of Mahler's visionary masterpiece been so closely preserved. To complete the programme Walter conducts the tender *Adagietto* from the *Fifth Symphony*, undoubtedly Mahler's best-loved work.

MADE IN
E.C.



Producer & Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn
Special thanks to Don Tait for providing source material for this release.

www.naxos.com

Cover Photograph: Bruno Walter - circa 1940 (Private Collection)

