

JoAnn Falletta



MAHLER Symphony No. 8, “Symphony of a Thousand” - JoAnn Falletta, conductor;
Jennifer Check, Rebecca Nash, Jennifer Welch-Babidge (soprano); Ann McMahon Quintero,
Robynne Redmon (mezzo-soprano); Gregory Carroll (tenor); Lester Lynch (baritone); Jason Grant (bass);
Virginia Symphony Orchestra & Choir; Christopher Newport University Chamber Choir; Old Dominion
University Concert Choir; Richmond Symphony Choir; Virginia Children’s Choir - HAMPTON ROADS 009
(72:27) Live: Virginia 5/27/2012

By Dave Saemann
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JoAnn Falletta is a first class orchestra trainer. Record collectors are aware mainly of the quality she has raised the Buffalo Philharmonic to, but her work with the Virginia Symphony is equally notable. With that orchestra she has performed the complete cycle of the Mahler symphonies, of which this live recording of the Eighth is the completion. The Virginia Symphony, enlarged to 120 players on this occasion, performs with style and effectiveness. The horns are particularly beautiful, as are the solos of the concertmaster, Vahn Armstrong. But this recording is not just a testimony to the professionalism of the orchestra; it is a vital interpretive document confirming Falletta’s position among the foremost conductors of our time. It is one of the fastest interpretations of the Eighth I’ve heard, although it never is rushed. I would prefer to call it urgent, with plenty of time taken to relax when the music requires it. The 365 choristers sound absolutely thrilled to be singing this music; their excitement is palpable throughout. Falletta writes that “the Eighth Symphony is nothing if not about song,” and her interpretation manages to marry a vocal extravaganza with symphonic rigor. The soloists are not major names, but they have been prepared carefully and almost always convey the beauty behind the notes. In this regard, Falletta joins Maurice Abravanel and Neeme Järvi in recording a noteworthy Eighth without the assistance of international stars. Of this work Falletta writes, “Mahler creates a kind of ecstasy in symphonic form.” Falletta conveys that ecstasy with a mastery surpassed by few Mahler conductors.

Falletta’s interpretation features many telling moments, but I would like to concentrate on just a few. In the first movement, “Endow our weak flesh/with everlasting strength” brings an instant of tender supplication. “Drive the Enemy far away” has echoes of the *Dies Irae* of Verdi’s Requiem. In “Glory be to the Father,” the performers rise to an extraordinary pitch of fervor. The orchestral prelude to the second part, in Falletta’s words, possesses

“enormous poignancy and spiritual darkness.” When baritone Lester Lynch sings Pater Ecstasticus, Falletta accompanies him with the fluidity of a love song. Tenor Gregory Carroll sings Doctor Marianus with passion and considerable tonal beauty. As Mater Gloriosa “soars into view,” Falletta draws very tender playing from her orchestra. Doctor Marianus’s final exhortation, “Virgin, Mother, Queen,/Goddess, be gracious!” initiates a passage of celestial love music, gorgeously evoked by the chorus and orchestra. The concluding Chorus Mysticus, which Falletta paces beautifully, is earthshaking. I’ve rarely heard a Mahler Eighth where the orchestral details are so clearly inspired by the words of the text. As Falletta writes, Mahler “blends the spiritual and secular.” Falletta approaches Mahler’s musical message with complete conviction, even if his literary sentiment may seem to some a trifle dated. There is no way to perform this music without taking Mahler totally at his word, regardless of the questions raised by the composer himself in his subsequent works. Falletta has wrestled with the musical and philosophical issues posed by the Eighth Symphony, and has come out victorious.

Veteran Naxos producer and engineer Tim Handley has provided the sound for this CD. It is clear and full, but somewhat dry and lacking in atmosphere. It is a major challenge, though, to record any performance of the Eighth Symphony, particularly a live one. As a fashion expert said of Raquel Welch, “How do you dress a Sherman tank?” No text or translation is provided. The recordings of the Eighth I listen to most often are those by Colin Davis with the Bavarian Radio Symphony and by Leonard Bernstein with the London Symphony. I’ve heard Falletta’s five times, and it wears very well. This work is so huge that there is no one classic account of it to recommend. I think anyone who collects multiple versions of the Mahler symphonies will want to consider owning this disc. Let us also note the significance of placing a woman in charge of nearly 500 musicians. It’s about time.