

## CLASSICAL

## **Berlin airlift**

## Magnificent Mahler, plus two splendid lieder recitals

## by Lloyd Schwartz

he Berlin Philharmonic, often touted as the world's greatest orchestra, is not one of our most frequent guests. Its last visit here was in 1986 (Herbert von Karajan was ill — Seiji Czawa conducted in his place). And that was 12 years after its previous Boston appearance. In nearly four decades, the Berliners have come here only six times. Last week they rewarded our patience by returning with their new artistic director, Claudio Abbado, who was elected by the players to this position in 1989, following Karajan's resignation (he died three months later). The program consisted of only one work, but what a work: Mahler's last completed symphony, his Ninth.

Nearly an hour and a half long (one Celebrity Series audience member remarked that he was paying nearly a dollar a minue), the Ninth is monumentally complex yet also a work of profound simplicity. Written in the valley of the shadow of death, it is a work haunted — perhaps even overwhelmed — by Mahler's sense of mortaity. The symphony opens with a deep sigh of longing and regret in the second violins. And it ends with a slow movement that, especially in Abbado's conception, just won't tet go, the final fade-out getting quieter and quieter. It was so soft and distended, in fact, that the mood-crushing smattering of applause before Abbado lowered his baton for the last time may have resulted less from boorishness than from simple inaudibility. Even from my seat in the 14th row, there were moments during the long goodbye when the sound dropped out completely. This was not, I think, a flaw so much as

This was not, I think, a flaw so much as a miscalculation, because the performance up until that point was spellbinding. The players gave themselves entirely to their leader, as their leader gave himself entirely to the music. Abbado seemed immersed in

every moment, unselfconsciously shaping, sculpting each phrase, weighing the dynamic balances so that every line could be heard. making guillotine-sharp transitions between roar and hush. Even in the thickest textures (14 violas) and at the loudest levels, that singing line was always audible, and always musical. None of your raucous blaring at the shattering climaxes (not even from the brasses), but an immensity built out of rich, full-textured, intense, pressured tone. And in the delicate chamber passages, which thread through every movement (such as that spacy piccolo-and-bassoon duet in the country-dance Scherzo), the fineness and commitment of the plaving was even more palpable.

Scherzo), the lineness and commitment of the playing was even more palpable. Yet this was not one of your glutinous Karajan exercises in tonal sheen. Anyone who remembers Abbado's radiant Mahler Second with the BSO, back in 1979, would know better than to expect anything so superficial. The wind ensemble at the beginning of the second movement, the Ländler, sounded like a real village wind band. The brasses transformed themselves into a marching band. One minute we were at the Folies-Bergère, the next the storm troopers were marching through. Nasty muted trumpets and braying clarinets, in the two middle movements, presaged the nose-thumbing cynicism of Shostakovich (who learned it from Mahler). Mahler gives us the World — his world — with all its vulgarity, its pseudo-sophistication and queasy harmonies, yet his heart is breaking at the thought of leaving it behind. Abbado and his staggeringly accomplished ensemble were not afraid to give it all to us full in the face, no holding back. It's not just technique that makes the Berlin Philharmonic such a phenomenal ensemble.

Two of the most-widely admired younger singers of their generation, both originally associated with Emmanuel Music, offered local lieder recitals in the last couple of weeks that were beautifully

JON CHOMITZ



SANFORD SYLVAN: he's the true heir not only of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau but of Gérard Souzay and Charles Panzera.