Masur brings Gewandhaus Brahms to Boston

GEWANDHAUS ORCHESTRA

OF LEIPZIG

Conducted by Kurt Masur

Brahms' 1st and 2nd Symphonies

Symphony Hall, Mar. 2

By BARBARA A. MASH

Kurt Masur is no stranger to Brahms. His vibrant recordings of "Hungarian Dances" with the Gewandhaus are lovely. But I had my questions about his performance of Brahms in Symphony Hall last Sunday night.

Consider Brahms' First Symphony: a gloomy, emotionally charged orchestral work. There could be no questioning Masur's authority over the orchestra, his intelligent pointing of detail, and the clarity of texture produced for which the Gewandhaus is renowned. What is more, Masur imbued the work with an expansive grandeur that complemented its spirit.

Yet the performance lacked the dramatic tension and thrust that also remain essential to account for the work's character. In the symphony's first movement, everything was just a bit too weighty, too wanting in urgency, and too expansive. In contrast to the first movement's lack of life, the second movement's sentimental treatment came close to being wayward, though there can be no faulting the playing of the solo instrument sections.

After the blindingness of the previous movements, Maus overwhelmed the finale with theatrical effects. This is a familiar complaint against the composition—not merely the performance—of the first movement of Brahms' First Symphony. Familiar motifs from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony also make one view this movement with some skepticism.

Masur began the movements with an un- restrained explosion of timpani, as the allegro introduction was presented. The allegro gave place to a lilting, restrained melody on horn accompanied by trombones introducing a mood of hopefulness. Still under the spell of the opening, the warmth of brass continued to recall the somber first movement themes. For the first time in the score, Masur changed the extremes of rhythm and augmentation that enliven the First Symphony.

The Second Symphony is the largest of Brahms' major works. Masur undertook the performance with an unswerving confidence. The tempo and rhythm of the Allegro con brio were set immediately. Brahms builds the entire work on the melody on horn accompanied by trombones, one of the compositional ideas Masur has been most familiar with. Though possibly not justified, Masur tremendously accelerated the Allegro con brio, a change in tempo that the orchestra had to accommodate. Though possibly not justified, Masur tremendously accelerated the Allegro con brio, a change in tempo that the orchestra had to accommodate.

The Second Symphony begins: a step curve, a falling fourth, a rising third; from these Brahms builds the entire work. Time and again, they turn up as part of the content of each movement. They express the background of the score, against which all the work's themes are developed. It has been called a "phantom" symphony, an idea even more accurately conceived to be the most approachable of Brahms' major works. Masur's interpretation of the Second was superbly rendered, as with the First, lacking in externalities. His approach, one of rhythmic freedom, animated the pulse of the work without violating the structure.

Noteworthy of Masur's fine direction of this symphony is the clarification of the often concealed counter melodies.

Masur's treatment of the fourth movement produced the concentration and brilliance which the symphony had lacked up to this point. Though possibly not justified, Masur momentarily accelerated the fourth far beyond any previous section, especially in the finale, thus drawing attention towards the movement. This theatrical choice has wondrous effect. The lyric, serene mood of the earlier movements are here transformed. Previous themes, considered as exposition, are imperceptibly dissolved. The final movement's initial subjects reappear to the surface and race on to a triumphant conclusion of the work.

Harvard University. Their program includes pieces by Brahms, Beethoven, and Bartok. Tickets are $7 reserved seating, $5 general admission, and $5 for students and seniors, available at the Holyoke Center Ticket Office. For more information, call 496-1700.

Saturday, March 8

The MIT Symphony Orchestra, with guest conductor Alan Yamamoto, will perform Brahms' Symphony No. 1 in F, Op. 68 at 8:30 pm in Kresge Auditorium. The program will include Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1, with guest pianist Charles Parry performing, and a piece by Beethoven. Admission is $5, free to MIT/Wellesley community. Tickets are reserved seating, and will be available by calling 232-2826 between 9 and 5 pm.

Questions? Please contact Lulu at 494-1567 or x3-2986.