BRUNO WALTER: MAHLER AND WAGNER, 1947

Bruno Walter's March 1947 appearances with the Boston Symphony Orchestra brought together one of the orchestra's most distinguished guests, a conductor with unique authority in Mahler, and a soloist ideally suited to the Fourth Symphony's mixture of innocence and experience. The Wagner *Siegfried Idyll* preserved here comes from Symphony Hall, Boston, on 18 March 1947. Mahler's Fourth follows from the orchestra's broadcast concert at the Metropolitan Theatre, Providence, Rhode Island, on 25 March. Walter had first conducted the Boston Symphony on 30 March 1923, and these 1947 concerts renewed that relationship under Serge Koussevitzky's directorship after an interval of twenty-four years.

Bruno Walter was not merely an interpreter of Mahler; he belonged to the composer's circle. In 1894 the young Walter joined the Hamburg Opera, where he came under Mahler's influence, and in 1901 he rejoined him at the Vienna Court Opera. The artistic bond became a deep personal loyalty. After Mahler's death in 1911, Walter conducted the premières of *Das Lied von der Erde* and the Ninth Symphony. Few conductors of Walter's generation could claim such direct continuity. When he conducted Mahler, audiences heard not only a great musician but a witness.

Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll* offers an intimate and affectionate prelude to the larger symphony that follows. Written as a birthday gift for Cosima Wagner and first performed on Christmas morning 1870 at Tribschen, it transforms themes associated with the opera *Siegfried* into something private, tender and domestic. This is no orchestral showpiece but a work of chamber-like delicacy, its lyric lines unfolding with warmth and simplicity. Walter, who always combined breadth with tenderness, responds instinctively to its inward character.

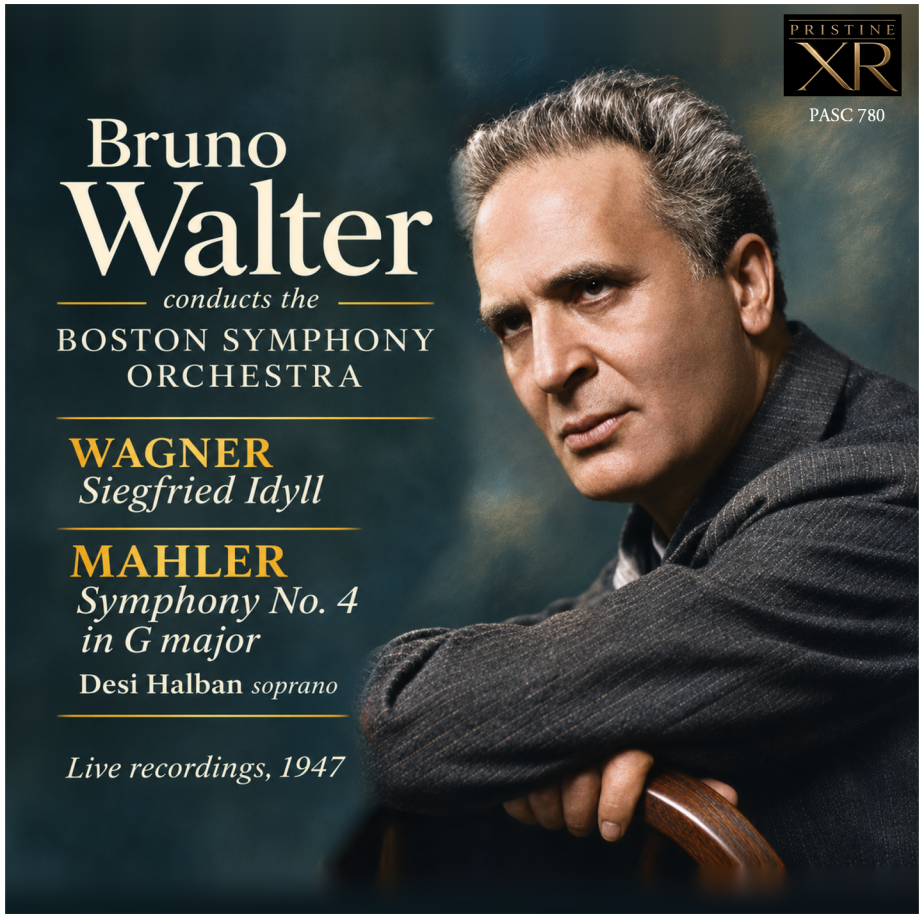
Mahler's Fourth Symphony, composed chiefly in 1899 and 1900, is outwardly his most classical and approachable symphony, yet its apparent innocence conceals considerable subtlety. The finale, the song *Das himmlische Leben*, had been written earlier, in 1892, to a text from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, and Mahler built the whole symphony towards that child's vision of heavenly life. The reduced orchestra and transparent textures give the work unusual clarity, but this clarity is often double-edged. The opening sleigh bells suggest ease and grace, yet shadows soon appear; the scherzo, with its tuned-up solo violin, introduces an uncanny dance; and the slow movement rises from serene song to radiant exaltation.

Only in the finale does the promised heavenly world reveal itself. Here the soprano sings with childlike directness of the joys of paradise: abundant food, saintly music and a peace beyond earthly care. Yet, as so often in Mahler, innocence is never merely innocent. The poem's bright surface carries an undertone of strangeness, even cruelty, and the symphony's achievement lies in holding wonder and unease in perfect balance. The Boston Symphony had only recently taken up the work, giving its first complete performance under Richard Burgin on 23 March 1945, so Walter's interpretation brought to it not familiarity but authority.

The soprano Desi Halban brought another Mahler connection. Born in Vienna in 1912, she was the daughter of Selma Kurz, the celebrated soprano whom Mahler had engaged for the Vienna Court Opera in 1899. By 1947 Halban was already an experienced interpreter of the Fourth, having recorded it with Walter and the New York Philharmonic in 1945. Her light, poised delivery and clear diction suit the finale perfectly, preserving its simplicity without sentimentality.

Contemporary Boston criticism, later reprinted in *Chord and Discord*, shows how strongly Walter's Mahler made its mark. Cyrus Durgin in the *Boston Daily Globe* stressed the conductor's special authority in the score. Alexander Williams in the *Boston Herald* praised Halban's unaffected, graceful singing. Warren Storey Smith in the *Boston Post*, though less persuaded by the work itself, wrote admiringly of the slow movement's quiet intensity and recorded the audience's enthusiastic response. Such notices remind us that in 1947 Mahler's Fourth was by no means routine repertoire. Walter was still helping to win this music its secure place in American concert life.

These performances therefore preserve more than a pair of beautifully shaped interpretations. They capture a conductor in music central to his artistic life, leading an orchestra to which he returned as an honoured guest, and joined by a soprano whose own background linked her closely to Mahler's world. Wagner's intimate offering and Mahler's celestial vision make a revealing and deeply sympathetic partnership.



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MAHLER: Symphony No. 4 · WAGNER: Siegfried Idyll
WALTER · BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA · HALBAN

BRUNO WALTER

BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA · LIVE BROADCASTS, 1947

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WAGNER *Siegfried Idyll*

01	RADIO Introduction to Wagner	1:36
02	WAGNER Siegfried Idyll	16:31

18 March 1947 · Symphony Hall, Boston, Massachusetts

MAHLER *Symphony No. 4 in G major*

03	RADIO Introduction to Mahler	1:07
04	I. Bedächtig, nicht eilen	16:37
05	II. In gemächlicher Bewegung, ohne Hast	9:02
06	III. Ruhevoll (Poco adagio)	20:08
07	IV. Sehr behaglich	8:42

25 March 1947 · Metropolitan Theatre, Providence, Rhode Island

Desi Halban, soprano



DESI HALBAN
soprano

Bruno Walter, conductor Boston Symphony Orchestra

Gene Hamilton, ABC radio announcer

XR remastering and Ambient Stereo restoration by Andrew Rose

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