

PHILHARMONIC: RAFAEL KUBELIK

By DONAL HENAHAN

Published: March 19, 1982

CONDUCTORS who compose and composers who conduct seldom encounter great trouble in finding orchestras to perform their works. That lack of resistance smoothed the way, for instance, for the music of Berlioz, Mahler, Wagner, Liszt and Strauss, and has helped lesser mortals such as Wilhelm Furtwangler, Felix Weingartner and Jean Martinon, to name just a few in each category. One can only guess whether Rafael Kubelik would consider himself a conductor/composer or a composer/conductor, but in any event he is following a great tradition in seeing to it that his music gains currency.

Not that the Czechoslovak musician, who is currently guest conducting the New York Philharmonic, has flooded us with his pieces. It is three seasons since he led the Philharmonic in the world premiere of his "Orphikon, Music in Three Movements," which was followed last night at a decent interval by the New York premiere of his "Sequences," a score that dates from 1975. "Sequences," as its title suggests, proved to be constructed largely of repeated ideas - melodic, harmonic and rhythmic - in various ingenious disguises. Mr. Kubelik has written a half-hour, one-movement work for a big orchestra containing plenty of extra percussion.

At times the motivic coherence of "Sequences" was emphasized so strongly that a kind of passacaglia seemed to be building up. This had some attractiveness, particularly since Mr. Kubelik's inside knowledge of the orchestra allowed him to write rich sonorities that fell easily on the ear. The composer's program note explained that the piece dealt with "the sequences of the relationship between harmonics (overtones) and timing," and that he was trying to work out these correlations between horizontal and vertical sounds. It was possible to grasp what Mr. Kubelik was trying to do without being at all able to hear these relationships coming alive. What came across most plainly was the score's accessibility and solid workmanship, even though it struck one as squarely constructed and lacking in real musical invention. "Sequences" never managed, in spite of many determined attempts at varying tempo and pace, to shake off an addiction to plodding rhythms and chugging ostinatos.

Perhaps because Mr. Kubelik and the orchestra had their minds on the business to come, the concert's opening piece received a so-so reading. Mozart's Overture to "La Clemenza di Tito" went off briskly enough, but accents were not quite in place and the result was an oddly flabby and perfunctory performance.

There was nothing at all lifeless, however, about the Beethoven Symphony No. 7 with which Mr. Kubelik rounded off his evening. Never one for pedantic purity and precision at the expense of finding the heart of the music, he played the work for all the peasant heartiness and impulsiveness he could find in it. Since an irresistible propulsion seemed to be his principal aim, he found it necessary to eliminate some of Beethoven's repeats, including the massive one in the first movement that so many conductors find expendable. Beethoven is especially liberal with literal repetitions in this symphony, but chopping them out does seem a procrustean method of solving the problem.

Still, Mr. Kubelik drove the symphony along in high spirits and even, despite some desperate moments, held things together at a breathlessly fast tempo in the finale. There were a few bumpy spots, of course, such as some sour wind chords in the trio of the scherzo, which are infamously difficult to get right and hold in balance. On the whole, the musicians played alertly for this conductor, as usual, giving him what he seemed to want even when it was not clear from his great floppy beat exactly what he was asking for.