

Cleveland Orchestra: Mahler's third at Severance Hall (October 1)

by Daniel Hathaway



If The Cleveland Orchestra's recent performance of Gustav Mahler's third symphony were a restaurant, it would deserve the maximum three stars in the Michelin Guide ("exceptional...worth a special journey"). Franz Welser-Möst, the Orchestra, two of its choruses, and mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor took a captivated audience on a 95-minute journey into Mahler's magic world on Thursday evening, October 5, the first of a pair of performances that weekend at

Severance Hall, and an experience audiences in Paris and Vienna can look forward to during the Orchestra's October tour.

A blow-by-blow description of what happened during that hour and a half would be futile — and ultimately not descriptive at all. Mahler's fertile imagination, unleashed at the beginning of this symphony by the idea of summer suddenly bursting forth, sustains the six-movement work through its entire course. Half an hour after you hear the stunning horn section call that begins the mammoth movement, it comes around again, and you nearly forget where you've been and what you've seen and heard in between.

Of course, what you heard was fresh and entrancing music expertly played with the kind of rich transparency that is one of the hallmarks of The Cleveland Orchestra, with particularly captivating contributions by the horn section and acting principal horn Gail Williams, principal trombone Massimo La Rosa, principal trumpet Michael Sachs (both on and offstage), principal oboe Frank Rosenwein, and acting principal clarinet Benjamin Lulich. So riveting is Mahler's music and so engaging was its performance that the audience barely stirred through the whole of Part One — not a rustle of program pages, not a cough.

A brief pause before Part Two gave the listeners room to breathe while the Children's Chorus filed onstage to join the women of the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus, and the mezzo-soprano soloist quietly took her seat.

In the narrative that Mahler published in the printed program for a performance of the symphony in Berlin in 1896, the Introduction ("Pan awakes") and first movement ("Summer marches in — Bacchic procession") is followed by five philosophical movements characterizing what the composer had learned about life from the flowers in the meadow, from the animals in the forest, from man, from the Angels, and from love.

A charming minuet with delicious oboe and clarinet solos and a spirited *Rondeau*, interrupted by the sounds of a posthorn introduce two movements where Mahler brings words into his symphonic world. Friedrich Nietzsche's "Midnight Song" from *Also sprach Zarathustra* makes time stand still in its tracks. Kelley O'Connor brought her rich, even voice to bear on a few lines of poetry that at first seem like a downturn in mood but are ultimately profoundly joyful:

The world is deep!
And deeper than the day had thought!
Oh human! Deep!
Deep is its woe!
Joy deeper still than heartbreak!
Pain speaks: Vanish!
But all joy seeks eternity,
Seeks deep, deep eternity.

Eternity? Time to cue the angels for the "Bell Chorus," one of the most joyful five minutes in symphonic music. Springing to their feet, the women's and children's chorus introduced verses from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* with cheerful "bimms" and "bamms," going on to sing the story of Peter's redemption. Having thrice denied knowing Jesus during his arrest, Peter is graciously absolved of his sins and welcomed by the angels into the heavenly city. The choruses sang their affecting words with spirit and clarity, and Kelley O'Connor sounded as splendid in her higher mezzo-soprano regions as she had in her darker alto moments just before.

How do you end a symphony of such grand dimensions? Mahler's solution was a seemingly endless Adagio of cosmic spaciousness infused with the warmth of human emotion. The movement rises to multiple climaxes, then recedes only to build up for the next musical peak, amid gorgeous flute and piccolo solos played here by Joshua Smith and Mary Kay Fink. Franz Welser-Möst's calm but intense pacing provided the perfect

ending to a complicated work that had said all there was to say but still hinted at a bit more. The ovation was tremendous.

Photo by Roger Mastroianni of a previous concert with the entire Cleveland Orchestra Chorus.

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