

Cleveland Orchestra: Schubert & Mahler with Runnicles, Groves & DeYoung (Feb. 9)

by Neil McCalmont



The sounds of German Romanticism filled Severance Hall on Thursday, February 9, as guest conductor Donald Runnicles led The Cleveland Orchestra in Schubert's *Symphony No. 8 in b*, "Unfinished," and Mahler's epic song-cycle *Das Lied von der Erde*.

Schubert sketched only the first two movements of the "Unfinished" — and lived six more years — puzzling musicologists as to why he never finished the work. Regardless, the tuneful piece has become a staple of the concert repertoire since its premiere nearly forty years after the composer's death.

Runnicles and the Orchestra captured the classical elegance of Schubert. The winds and strings achieved a pristine blend throughout the performance, pouring out one rich melody after another as if the notes were fondue. The intricate use of dynamics, particularly in the violin line during the transition between the second movement's main themes, gave the interpretation a transcendental feel — luscious, but never saturated.

While technically a song-cycle, Mahler composed *Das Lied* as if it were a symphony, with full orchestral forces, a duration of nearly an hour, and the philosophical unification one might expect in a symphony. After he had finished his Eighth Symphony, he refused to call this piece his ninth for fear of the "Curse of the Ninth." Ironically, Mahler wrote his Symphony No. 9 directly afterward, and died shortly following its completion.

Divided into six songs, the Chinese-poetry inspired *Song of the Earth* alternates between alto and tenor soloist. While Runnicles sometimes allowed the orchestra to cover up Paul Groves's singing, the tenor found his balance with the instrumentalists and conveyed the character of each poem intensely. The Cleveland Orchestra reveled in Mahler's

technically demanding writing — from the full swells of texture to Frank Rosenwein’s haunting oboe solo in the second movement (“The Lonely One in Autumn”). They captured both the work’s drama and its pessimism convincingly.

Mezzo-soprano Michelle DeYoung’s clear voice soared over the orchestra like a ship on the rising current. The long last movement, “The Farewell,” daunting to any singer, showcased a range of emotions from unparalleled strength to delicate renunciation. The final bars — *Ewig....Ewig* (“forever...forever”) — froze time still. Though the ethereal silence was cut short by an over-enthusiastic audience, the performers deserved all of the recognition they received and more.

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