

Cleveland Orchestra in Mahler's Sixth (October 5)

by Daniel Hathaway



Gustav Mahler's Sixth Symphony is the perfect candidate for a 75-minute, straight-through concert. Bursting at the seams with musical content of astonishing variety and emotional range, it bombards the listener with almost as much sonic stimulation as a human ear and brain can process in one sitting. Franz Welser-Möst

and The Cleveland Orchestra put the work across with total conviction and arresting effect on Thursday evening, October 5 in Severance Hall, a few days before departing on a European tour.

The stirring march that begins the work introduces a persistent rhythmic motif in the snare drum that recurs throughout, nearly the sole feature that binds the symphony's rangy and disparate elements together. Penetrating winds — bells in the air — join in a chorale, answered by opulent strings. The snare drum returns with chilling persistence and the march resumes. Lovely small combinations of instruments (celesta, horn, and violin) offer emotional respite before the march returns yet again. The first movement is a gigantic tussle of moods, sometimes overwrought as only Mahler can be.

The second movement is gentle and studded with delicious solos by English horn over flutes, and horn and clarinet supported by winds. The full string section dallies with alluring melodic sequences, cowbells ring with no pastoral scene for context, and a tortured *tutti* emerges from nowhere.

The Scherzo is forthrightly bizarre and restless. A pair of piccolos shrill, a blaze of horns answer, an odd *col legno* idea infects the low strings — who tap on the strings with the wrong side of their bows — and the last word goes to the contrabassoon.



The listener might hope that Mahler will make clear what all of this means in the end, but the finale, long and sprawling, asks more questions than it answers. Strange textures abound, the tuba gets an important solo, answered by woodwind roulades, and bassoons growl. Then the march resumes. And two hammer blows signify something perhaps more ominous than suggested by the almost cartoonish instrument itself (adroitly wielded by Marc Damoulakis).

The composer appears to be groping for a resolution, but instead, new ideas emerge — like the one the violas propose and that the orchestra decides to take up.

Mahler Six produces an emotional effect far greater than its essential ambiguities would suggest. Any listener who didn't feel completely wrung out at the end simply wasn't engaged — and that rhythmic motif must have become an earworm for many who heard this performance.

The audience on Thursday was rapt throughout the piece, and rewarded the intensity — as well as the loveliness — of the Orchestra's playing with a long and resounding ovation. European audiences who will hear TCO play this work in the next few weeks have something memorable to look forward to.

Before the performance, Musical Arts Association president Richard K. Smucker bestowed the Orchestra's Distinguished Service Award on Dennis W. LaBarre, who led the Orchestra as president of its board of trustees from 2009, and became its board chairman in March.

Orchestra photo by Roger Mastroianni.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 10, 2017.

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