

The Star-Ledger

Leader of the pack

Järvi 'beams' into Holy Week concert for stimulating evening with his favorite musicians

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CLASSICAL

NEW YORK -- Any conductor would love a chance to assemble an orchestra of his favorite players. Through a curious path, New Jersey Symphony Orchestra music director Neeme Järvi was able to do precisely that Tuesday evening, when he led a collection of Philadelphia Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, Detroit Symphony Orchestra and NJSO players in Mahler's Second Symphony at Riverside Church.

This was an evening of lucky confluences, in which filmmaker Jason Starr needed an orchestra playing Mahler's sprawling masterwork for a documentary; Riverside needed a marquee performance to celebrate its 75th anniversary during Holy Week (hence the "Resurrection" Symphony), and retired New York Philharmonic oboist Joseph Robinson, an entrepreneur by nature, had the connections to put it all together as a tribute to Järvi. All the instrumentalists, vocal soloists and Järvi himself performed for free; the professional New York Choral Artists worked for a reduced fee.

So, here's what the fairly large audience saw as it filed into Riverside's massive Gothic nave: instrumentalists and singers (two choirs, including the church's choir) stuffed into every nook around the altar, four elevated platforms with cameramen and two roving cameras, an outer space-looking microphone globe, and Järvi himself obviously loving every second of the opportunity.

Meanwhile, the elongated stone statues of saints and holy figures gazed on benignly while Mahler's texts for mezzo-soprano, soprano (Suzanne Mentzer and Twyla Robinson, respectively) and chorus explored the mysteries of the afterlife. Mentzer and Robinson delivered their sermon-like parts from the pulpit.

The extra reverberation time in this cathedral turned sound into an appropriately glowering, dramatic cloud. Järvi, much more hands-on with cues and hand gestures than usual, worked to shape this juicy, occasionally unordered sound coming at him. These were players working on emotion, not paychecks, and he wisely capitalized on this.

Visibly moved, Järvi embarked on his own lovefest afterward, signaling each subsection of the orchestra and choir to stand for applause before acknowledging soloists. He wandered their ranks, pointing to players for recognition, grabbing hands to pull them upward.

This "pickup" group of orchestral stars was intriguing enough to make one wish for more. Alas, the night will live on only in Starr's film and DVD, "The Resurrection of Gustav Mahler," which is to be produced by his company, Cultural Media Collaborative.

Scheduled for release as a double DVD, including a complete film of this performance, the documentary will likely be distributed by Video Artists International.