

“Of Love, Death and Beyond” – a Toronto premiere to Jason Starr’s documentary on Mahler’s ‘Resurrection’ Symphony. VAI Audio, Cat.#4560, 91min

January 21st marked not only the first [Toronto Mahler Society](#) event of this year, but it was an equally important date to local music enthusiasts and film documentary lovers in Toronto. Together with the [Cultural Media Collaborative](#) and its award-winning artistic director [Mr. Jason Starr](#), the TMS proudly presented the *Toronto premiere* to Jason Starr’s “Of Love, Death and Beyond,” a documentary on Mahler’s “Resurrection” Symphony. Since summer 2011, TMS core members diligently organized logistics to public viewing rights, distributed advertisements at various outlets, and located a sizeable venue to accommodate the enthusiastic responses. The TMS selected the downtown historical venue, [Bloor Street United Church](#), for this important screening. Over 40 attendees commuted long distances on a cold Saturday afternoon to participate in this 2½ hour event. If one word can be used to describe an attendee’s impression and aftermath of this documentary, *engaged* would serve this function.



Over 40+ attendees attended the screening of the Starr documentary in Toronto.

Patrick Lam from the TMS hosted this documentary screening (for his presentation slides, please click [here](#)). He started with a quick introduction to Mr. Jason Starr’s prolific career, gave a slideshow of photos taken at the New York premiere of this documentary this past December, and alluded to the fact Mr. Starr’s interests on Gustav Mahler had precedence in a previous documentar. Mr. Starr’s “*What the Universe Tells Me*,” a documentary on Mahler’s Symphony No.3 (see [VAI](#), Cat#4267), won numerous awards in Canada and abroad since its release in 2004. “*Of Love, Death and Beyond*” (see [VAI](#), Cat #4560) is Mr. Starr’s latest creative output on the composer, in which Starr and other scholars in this documentary addressed a fundamental questions: is Mahler’s “Resurrection” Symphony a musical essay of mere religious beliefs to life and the afterlife? Perhaps, as the speakers in this documentary alluded, the “Resurrection” Symphony can be viewed as a musical essay of greater universal truth, in which Mahler joins life and death with an element of “love,” a trinity that defines a path to resurrection.

Inviting such eminent Mahler scholars as Constantin Floros (University of Hamburg), Peter Franklin (University of Oxford), Henry-Louis de la Grange (Int’l Mahler Society), Stephen Hefling (Case Western University), and Donald Mitchell (University of Sussex), as well as leading-thinkers and pioneers in musicology (Morten Solvik, Renate Stark-Voit), philosophy (Martha Nussbaum), recording (Jerry Bruck) and theology (Neil Gilman and Catherine Keller), this documentary adopts a combination of ‘old’ and ‘new’ devices. Historical re-enactments, interviews and innovative computer graphics weave

the framework, and together with Thomas Hampson as an engaging narrator, this combination evokes numerous cues throughout the documentary that stimulate a viewer's higher brain centers.

"Of Love, Death and Beyond" is divided into nine sections. The **first section** dissects the origins and founding idea of "death" in the *"Resurrection"* Symphony. Some of these include Mahler's personal life accounts (with Marion von Weber; tragic deaths in his family) and literary influences (from Adam Mickiewicz's original text; Siegfried Lipiner's translation of Mickiewicz's writings). Together, these sources stimulate Mahler to conceive the music of *Totenfeier* ("Funeral Rites") in 1888, which is to become the first movement of this colossal work. Reception of this music, at the time in the late 19th century, was not as well received as it is now. Here, the documentary illustrates one such occasion, a historical re-enactment of the infamous reaction from Hans von Bülow, the pre-eminent musical figure in 19th century Europe: "...if this is music I hear, then I know nothing about music!" The **second section** elaborates on the literary devices Mahler drew to compose the inner movements. *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* ("The Youth's Magic Horn"), a collection of German poetry written by Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano, was held at high esteem by Mahler, of which he wrote music to the entire collection published under the same title. Two poems in particular, *"St. Anthony of Padua's sermon to the fishes"* and *"Primeval light,"* are not only referenced in the inner movements, but they are evidently the key to one's understanding behind the penultimate question in this Symphony: what is it that turns "death" to "life?" Should the answer to this question lie restricted to a particular religious faith? Speakers of this documentary argue that the symbolism of "love," that of universal love and unconditional love, may be the gateway from "death" to "life." One comes to grasp that Mahler consolidated this idea through his musical portrayals of youthfulness (i.e., "a single female, almost childlike voice") and of a red rose (i.e. representing a purity of love). Finally, the **third section**, represented by the Finale of this Symphony, unifies these philosophical concepts in a mighty force of humanly voices from two soprano/mezzo-soprano soloists and a mixed chorus. The path to "Resurrection" is vividly put into music by Mahler, including the use of off-stage brass instruments, and cleverly adaptation of texts by Friedrich Klopstock and Mahler himself. A rebirth of life is reached gloriously and triumphantly at the final bars of this movement, and as Morten Solvik in this documentary illustrates, one technique was Mahler's ingeniously craftsmanship in modulating the *Dies Irae* motif.

Music presented throughout this provoking 90mins documentary is taken from a live performance of the *"Resurrection"* Symphony conducted by Neeme Järvi, together with soprano Twyla Robinson, mezzo-soprano Susanne Mentzer, and members of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, New Jersey Symphony, New York Philharmonic and the Philadelphia Orchestra, New York Choral Artists and the Boys Choir of Hambourg. A studio performance of *"St. Anthony of Padua's sermon to the fishes"* by Thomas Hampson and Craig Kutenberg at the piano is also included.

The TMS was pleased to invite Canadian music producer, host and teacher [Mr. Rick Phillips](#) as an honourable guest at this event. Raymond Chan from the TMS introduced Mr. Phillips on stage, who then led attendees to a roundtable discussion of comments and

questions for about 20mins. The floor was opened to a stimulating conversation and a total of 9 attendees raised comments and questions. The consensus appeared to agree on the idea Mahler wrote the “*Resurrection*” Symphony as an affirmation to a universal truth, as suppose to a bias towards a single religious faith on this topic of afterlife, *per se*. Mr. Phillips wrapped up this segment reminding how Mahler deliberately removed references to “Jesus Christ” in the text used in the Finale movement of this Symphony.



Mr. Rick Phillips engages in a conversation with TMS attendees.

To end, here are some comments left by attendees of this event:

“The documentary was powerful and insightful. It was well worth braving the cold to attend.”

Ron, *Toronto Friends of Classical Music*

“An entire film to explain the second Symphony in laymen's terms. Fantastic!”

John D, *Toronto Friends of Classical Music*

“Excellent. So interesting to see the Documentary. And the young man in charge was so efficient and gentle. He with Raymond, had carried in loads of equipment from the parking lot. Easy to get to the location from St. George subway. Altogether, well organized and extremely well attended by what seemed to be other groups as well as the Mahler Society and the CMG.”

June Gurvich, *Toronto Friends of Classical Music*

“I really liked the Powerpoint presentation, Patrick, very well done!”

Lyda Weaver, *Toronto Mahler Society*

By: Patrick P.L. Lam

Photos courtesy of: Toronto Mahler Society