

Oberon's Grove

Mahler 2nd @ Carnegie Hall



Monday February 13th, 2017 - **Music For Life International** continuing their decade-long tradition of humanitarian concerts at **Carnegie Hall** in presenting **Mahler For Vision**, a benefit performance of Gustav Mahler's 2nd ("*Resurrection*") Symphony. The concert's proceeds go to the global efforts of [HelpMeSee](#), an organization dedicated to treating - and defeating - cataract blindness worldwide.

In support of this noble cause, prominent musicians of international stature assembled for this epic performance, with former Metropolitan Opera concertmaster Elmira Darvarova as leader under the baton of George Mathew. The *Resurrection* Symphony is a profound work, in which the composer employs voices and words as well as the orchestra in a piece which - from its premiere in Berlin on the night of December 13th, 1895 - marked the beginning of Mahler's fame.

The sprawling symphony commences with a long first movement abounding in themes that resonate as contemplations of the meaning of life, its sufferings, the inevitability of death, and the possibilities of what comes after.

Following this, a long pause is customary before the symphony continues with two movements more generalized in their musical nature; it is with the fourth movement - the *Urlicht* ('Primeval Light'), a solo for mezzo-soprano - that the symphony commences its journey to an uplifting finish: "I am from God and will return to God. The dear God will send me light, will light me to eternal blessed life!"

In the fifth movement, Judgment Day is at hand, and all humanity is summoned forth as fanfares signal the approaching apocalypse. Then, from out of ruin, the blessed assurance of the heavenly hosts swells up as the chorus sings "Rise again, yes, rise again thou wilt!" and the music rises to a magnificent and illuminating conclusion.

In tonight's performance, moments where the music's seams shone thru were inevitable: an ensemble of players - however fine - drawn together for a single evening can't achieve the unity and sonic radiance of an established orchestra who play together all the time. This fact faded to insignificance as the symphony moved forward, and to be sure there was page after page of excellent music-making. Of particular appeal were the passages for solo flute, notably in the first and final movements, impeccably voiced by the NY Philharmonic's principal flautist Robert Langevin. Among other Philharmonic representatives in the ensemble tonight were Timothy Cobb (bass), Kim Laskowski (bassoon), Leelanee Sterrett (horn), and Alan Baer (tuba). A young Graduate Fellow from the Manhattan School of Music, Henry Lee, played the organ which Mahler brings in at the very end.

The *Resurrection* Symphony calls for two vocal soloists. The famous *Urlicht* was voiced tonight by Susanne Mentzer, a beloved mezzo-soprano whose Met performances as Cherubino, the Composer, Idamante, and Melisande had enormous

appeal - and she continues to perform there. Eschewing darkish contralto leanings, Ms. Mentzer's approach was more lyrical, her vibrato lending an appealing vulnerability. Her singing radiated calm and a depth of emotion free of theatricality.

Regal in red, Indra Thomas was the soprano soloist. To be sure, Mahler does his two singers - or his chorus either, for that matter - no favors: they must sit thru long stretches of music to a point where any warning up they might have done has lost its efficacy. Ms. Thomas, her voice at once sensuous and spiritual, made the most of her too brief passages and displayed an especially warm lower range. This made me think what a striking Venus, Cassandra, even Dalila, she might make.

The beauty of the chorus's opening passage cast a spell over the Hall; several of the participating singers are members of *MASTERVOICES* (formerly the Collegiate Chorale) and their singing covered a wide dynamic range, from prayerful *piano* to full-throated *forte*. Their commitment, and that of everyone onstage, gave the evening its special resonance.

As expected at a benefit performance, there were speeches before the symphony began; a faltering mike made some of what was said incomprehensible, and - as speakers have since the dawn of time - they tended to go on too long. It's always wisest to let the music do the talking.

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