



AMERICAN PHILHARMONIC TO RECREATE MAHLER'S 'MUSICAL PAINTING' 5TH SYMPHONY

By Kaaron Carver

Monday, February 12, 2007, Cotati, CA. It is fitting that Mahler is a German word for painter, and for most listeners, Austrian composer Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) is a beloved "painter of music." His scherzos and rondos leave vivid impressions in the mind's eye and ear.

Mahler's fifth symphony will be the focal piece for the American Philharmonic - Sonoma County's upcoming February 16 - 18 concert at the Spreckels Center, following a Mendelssohn solo piano piece by local pianist Lauren Xie.

"Mahler's monumental Symphony No. 5 is a rapturous journey from bitter death to joyous life in the most dramatic Romantic musical language," says the AP-SC. This phrase may describe best why the orchestra chose to take on such a challenging piece, especially around Valentine's Day. The passion Mahler is known for isn't always extolled in traditional "happy" sounding music.

This concert, themed, "Moving from death to life," will focus on resurrection. The joyous fourth movement in Mahler's fifth symphony brings back the audience from the opening death march of the first movement. It is a celebration of life stemming from death, the latter being a focal point of Mahler reflected in much of his music.

Such a performance will be a step up for an orchestra willing to grow and expand, for Mahler's fifth is a study in complexity. It is so intricate that musicians from the AP-SC met in early November to emotionally prepare themselves for the experience to come. Dinner was followed by a speech from composer Charles Sepos and a movie on Mahler's motivations. That just lightly scratched the surface on the subject.

The fifth is Mahler's transcendent vision of moving from death into life. The first movement, written shortly after his brush with death from a stomach hemorrhage, sounds like a funeral dirge. The second movement is stormy, representing his pessimistic view that "everything is in vain."

After he composed the first two movements Mahler fell madly in love with and married Alma Schindler. This improves his mood greatly, until there are fits of infidelity and doubt, reflected in the third movement - a scherzo which is all over the place, with chamber music exploding.

The fourth movement, which allows all but strings and harps to "hibernate," leads up from death to resurrection. A single, long-held dying-away note on a solo horn leads us up from the darkness to the resurrection of the fifth movement, a rondo (repetition) of alleluia, a coming back into life, to live instead of suffer.

His message, according to Sepos, is "Each moment is beautiful - not just pleasurable ones, but also challenging ones." This belief is expressed in a "moment by moment" change in music which requires intense participation from both performers and listeners.

With that in mind, let us prepare by hearing from Herr Direktor Mahler himself. While Gustav did not like "programmes," or audience prep sheets, 100 years after his life we no longer see or hear him in the present, and it helps to remember the time and events that motivated his works.

When questioned about his use of scherzos, he answered, "A scherzo is like a spider web, or one of those woven shawls so delicately worked that you can fold them into a nutshell, or if you unfold them they stretch endlessly and show the most wonderful design knitted with thread as fine as hair."

While critics accepted this explanation, they felt his sudden use of them amongst heavier movements violated their attention to and worship of form.

A fan of Wagner, Gustav argued for polyphony, claiming to be "full of discordant sounds and nuances... in true polyphony, various themes run independently alongside each other each with its own beginning and conclusion as differentiated as possible from others, thereby allowing the listener to follow them individually."

Audiences will hear influences from nature such as cowbells, birds or hammers, reflecting his change in moods. We are in for a treat of sound bombardment, designed to evoke all the feelings - sorrow, joy, and all things in between. It will be conductor Gabriel Sakakeeny's job to arrange and unite these items into a harmoniously sounding whole.

As for the orchestra, the players have spent endless hours rehearsing individually and together, refining the challenges of this music in order to produce what they see as their most challenging work to date.

But if disheartened, they can take strength from Mahler's own ever-eccentric philosophy: "Geese are force-fed until they develop a liver disease which produces succulent foie gras. When you prepare a new production, you stuff yourself with enthusiasm and this results in a marvelous performance during confusion...a new piece seems like a liver disease but ends in excellent foie gras."

Audiences will be the recipients of this rich performance on many levels. "Songs reconnect us to our roots," says German-American music lover Edith Goss. "Hearing Mahler brings back the time of my grandparents, a time that is lost to me... if musicians do their job, we should feel that Mahler, a painter of music, is a lifeline to our roots."

Performances are at Spreckels Performing Arts Center, February 16 and 17 at 8 p.m, and Sun., February 18, at 3 p.m.

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