

The European Doctors' Orchestra performance of Mahler Symphony No. 3 at the Bridgewater Hall, Manchester on 3 September 2023.

On Sunday 3 September four members of the GMS UK North and Midlands group, and one from London, travelled to Manchester for the concert of Mahler Symphony no. 3 played by the European Doctors' Orchestra, with mezzo soprano Sarah Castle and conductor Timothy Redmond. This accomplished orchestra is made up of amateur musicians, all practising doctors who give several concerts a year in different parts of Europe.

The concert was preceded by a Symposium where several of the doctors addressed the theme: 'Mahler, Malady and Music: Reflections on how music can promote health'. Penny Young, a GMS UK North and Midlands committee member, tells the story:

“The European Doctors' Orchestra put on a great performance of the symphony in the Bridgewater Hall in aid of The Christie Charity, based at the specialist cancer centre in the north west of England. Mahler wrote most of his Third Symphony in Attersee in Austria's Salzkammergut, in a tiny hut on the lakeside.

It emerged from the Symposium that Mahler's encounters with the medical profession may not have been overwhelmingly positive. Mahler had been a very active man; a keen cyclist, swimmer and mountain walker, when a routine check on his heart following the death of his daughter in 1907 picked up a heart murmur leading to a diagnosis of mitral stenosis - narrowing of one of his heart valves.

Was it helpful for Mahler to know about this? The panel's view was, almost certainly not. On medical advice he gave up his hill walking, cycling and swimming, and aside from the worry and stress caused by the diagnosis, his heart murmur caused no problems until 1910 in New York when he had his tonsils cauterised. It is thought that this released bacteria into his bloodstream settling on his damaged heart valves, which led to bacterial endocarditis. In those pre-antibiotic days it proved fatal.

Of course medical science was much less advanced in those days, but it begs the question, horrifying though it may be, had Mahler not undergone this procedure might he have lived to write another day? We shall never know.”

Penny Young