

What GMS UK North and Midlands committee member, Penny Young, was up to earlier this year.

A TALE OF TWO RESURRECTIONS - MAHLER SYMPHONY NO. 2

I. THE WORCESTERSHIRE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA (WSO), CONDUCTED BY KEITH SLADE WORCESTER CATHEDRAL 13.05.23.

I never thought I'd compare Mahler symphonies to buses, but you wait seemingly forever for one, then two come along in quick succession. This symphony had been on my bucket list for such a long time that I could hardly believe my luck when it arrived on my home turf here in Worcester.

The context

For those unfamiliar with the work, it's not about the Christian Resurrection. Mahler was from a Jewish background and had yet to convert to Christianity when he wrote it, between the years 1888 and 1894. While this huge symphony is an ambitious challenge for an amateur orchestra, even a well-established one like the WSO, I had every faith in them, having caught their very powerful Mahler 6 a few years ago. The orchestra had advertised for experienced choral singers who presumably could learn the piece with minimal rehearsal, and having heard this symphony innumerable times, I think I know it fairly well.

The experience

You'll have heard of the Pink Panther, even pink elephants but what about the pink giraffe? No, not a children's nursery or a nightclub or even an exotic cocktail; it's one of the animals depicted in the huge and beautifully detailed stained-glass window at the west end of Worcester Cathedral, overlooking the river. Unaccountably it's a bright almost fuchsia pink. This unique creature was well in my sights from the choir seats above the orchestra.

As dusk fell and the desk lights of the orchestra became more prominent, I was glad of the extra layer I'd put on. Yes, you're sitting near a lot of other bodies all giving off heat, but heat of course rises, in this case drawn into the cavernous vastness of the cathedral ceiling.

The performance

Even Mahler's most devoted fans must surely admit that he's something of a Marmite composer who divides opinions. I can almost hear the outraged howls but sometimes I can understand why people criticise him for being bombastic and overlong. In the wrong hands the first movement can be like wading through treacle; however, vigorous conducting by Keith Slade did not drag the pace down, holding the 100-piece orchestra and this vast movement together most commendably. The second, Haydnesque, movement comes as a sharp contrast to what has preceded it, more digestible to those of the audience unused to Mahler's emotional and orchestral excesses. There's a good deal of variety in this symphony, the third movement being different again in mood and style.

How well did we do?

In the final choral movement I was a little put off by a chap behind me singing half a semitone flat and half a bar behind. You always get one. Some of the ladies I suspect thought pp stood for Pretty Powerful.

There was a substantial delay in composition between the first four movements and the last one, which came to Mahler in a rush of inspiration at the funeral of the famous conductor Hans von Bülow who had been critical of his music. You may ask how efficient a use of resources it is to have a choir of around 100 people sitting as quiet as mice for over an hour, but Mahler was not to write a fully choral symphony until his Eighth in 1906.

In the afternoon rehearsal it all came together for the first time. The impact of that glorious sound at such close quarters in that incomparable acoustic must have triggered an adrenalin rush because I surprised myself, reaching some of the top notes I'd previously struggled with. But then Mahler has that miraculous life-changing effect on many people, including Sir Simon Rattle who

Unfortunately I missed the warm-up for the evening performance and it made all the difference. We sounded amazing though, as I was later able to confirm from a short video clip uploaded to Facebook by one of the choristers. Only a heart of stone could fail to be moved by that rapturous upward sweep to the final chorus.

Did we do justice to Mahler's apocalyptic vision? Undoubtedly. The audience responded with the kind of enthusiasm that this monumental piece never fails to inspire. It was a night I'll never forget. Grateful thanks are due from GMS UK to Vincent Kirk of the WSO, who kindly arranged for GMS UK flyers to be printed and distributed to the audience.

2. THE LEAMINGTON SINFONIA, CONDUCTED BY JOE DAVIES ALL SAINTS CHURCH, LEAMINGTON SPA, 24.06.23.

I'd actually signed up for this second Resurrection by the Leamington Sinfonia before hearing about the Worcester concert, but it's much easier to perform in a symphony that's still fresh in your mind than to have to learn something from scratch. Having missed the first rehearsal altogether, in the second rehearsal I'd sung in the first a capella section of the chorus before hearing the orchestra at all. It was awesome then to experience the radiant orchestral vision illuminating every crevice of the ancient church, putting living flesh on its dry bones, a resurrection I think the composer would have appreciated. In the rehearsals as well as in the performance the chorus stayed in tune requiring no support, ready for the seamless re-entry of the orchestra.

The performance

In true Mahlerian tradition conductor Joe Davies was an exacting taskmaster but produced results. So many people wanted to take part that he got half again as many choristers as the hundred he originally requested. To me, this symphony demands the kind of love and commitment its composer put into it, the choral section requiring not only attention to dynamics, note lengths and changes of time signature, but also if possible an understanding of its meaning. It's a tall order - from the subtle almost inaudible first entry of the chorus to giving it all you've got at the end. But then Mahler makes you want to give it all you've got.

The first movement was taken at a brisk tempo, and the conductor did in fact observe the break that Mahler specified between the first and second movements. I thought that the soloists were particularly fine.

Mahler isn't always kind to his second sopranos, in some places supplying notes for us, in other places not. While it was never my ambition to sing Mozart's Queen of the Night, inevitably and frustratingly over time I've lost some of my top notes. In the privacy of my car on the way over I attempted some scales and arpeggios belatedly trying to loosen up those stubborn vocal chords, with limited success. Fortunately I know the route well. Driving under the influence of Mahler is otherwise not recommended!

A family affair

Having had to make a quick getaway after the concert I missed the fact that our performance had been graced by the presence of a Mahler relative, Dr Elizabeth Schächter, whose grandfather was a first cousin of Gustav Mahler. She later said in an email: -

"It was an absolute pleasure to have been associated with the magnificent musical project of Mahler 2. The performance on Saturday was extraordinary, so powerful and vibrant; the massed choirs of the finale brought tears to my eyes. It was one of the most moving musical experiences of my life. The standing ovation was richly deserved."

I heartily concur with her opinion. We hope to hear more from Dr Schächter in the future and look forward to the Leamington Sinfonia's performance of Mahler 6 planned for later in the year.

Penny Young

