

THE WAYFARER

Are We Ready for Mahler 7?

Celebrating the return of live Mahler performance, KEVIN CAREY kicks off a series of reviews, taking the opportunity to reflect on the complexities of Mahler 7

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Pending articles have been held over to allow the publication of a series of reviews

To Live for You, to Die for You, Part 3

Mahler's Conductors 7: Bernstein

Mahler: Symphony 7 in E Minor (1904-05): 1. Adagio/Allegro con Fuoco; 2. Night Music in C Major/Minor; 3. Scherzo in D Minor; 4. Night music in F; 5. Finale in C, Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/ Kirill Petrenko, Prom 62, Royal Albert Hall, 03/09/22.

We will never quite know what happened to Mahler on that fateful morning when, suffering from 'Composer's Block', he took the boat to cross the Wurtheesee, a trip some Members of the Society made in 2015, having just visited the 'composing hut' where the 7th was composed. He later said that at that point he had finished the 2nd and 4th Movements but was grounded; then as soon as the oars hit the water, he saw his way through and completed the 1st, 3rd and 5th Movements in rapid time, so to ask what happened is not a mechanical question, it's a matter of the process on which he settled for completing the work.

Clearly, this did not quite parallel the way he wrote the 6th which might be properly characterised as neo-classical long before Prokofiev and Stravinsky earned that label, drawing on a tradition of symphonic writing which went back to Haydn; but the rhythmic and harmonic innovations should not allow us to overthrow altogether comparisons with the 6th.

The five Movements were not going to be wrought from the same material and presented as a ratiocinative production; neither, on the face of it, was it Mahler's intention to take the two finished Movements as jewels and set them in precious metal; the odd and even numbered Movements have too much thematic material in common for that to be the case.

The best place to start, I suggest, is with the score, so let's get the musicology sorted out. First, like the 1st and 5th, the 7th progresses from minor to major, rising a semitone. The five-movement structure, however, presents us with some problems: some commentators say that the odd numbered Movements were composed sequentially but it seems to me that the three inner Movements are wonderfully coherent and are encased by the outer two; some commentators struggle with the eclectic content but, as we will see, this may turn out to be the point; and there is a lively - if not very coherent - debate about whether one of the inner three Movements might be omitted.



Secondly, we know from Mahler, right from the beginning, that he does not regard the symphony as a purely 'classical', ratiocinative form in the way that Haydn would have understood it. The notion, as you would expect, was first challenged by Beethoven in his 6th "Pastoral" Symphony; then came Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique* but in Mahler's further break, after the 1st he broke from the narrowly programmatic because his idea was that symphonic writing should, in his own words, embrace the world. Thirdly, the First and Fifth Movements are so related that it is impossible to deny the notion of musical progression.

In summary, then, this is a recognisably neo-classical symphony with identifiable musical progression. So what's the problem? It might best be summed up by a fellow Mahlerian who reacted to Petrenko's interpretation of the 7th by saying that he "pulled the rhythm all over the place" to which I had to respond that it's Mahler who pulled the rhythm all

over the place and there is a fair cohort of recordings that fail because conductors try to pull the rhythms into a coherent shape. This work is deliberately jumpy, inconsistent, neurotic, illogical, fantastic and, rather than using symmetry, as does classicism, as a framework for emotional expression, the music is wildly asymmetrical, what we might call a description of all the inconsistencies, incompleteness and mixed emotions of real life. This is scorching realism which, in parallel with Freud, includes dreams and fantasies.



The final issue, which cannot be resolved, is the extent to which the work is autobiographical. Personally, I think that in general the biographical account of Mahler's writing is pretty flimsy outside the 1st Symphony - he simply grew out of it - and we might be free of it altogether if there were not so much nonsense written about the 6th; but I think the 7th is better understood as a kind of documentary about the state of Vienna. If Mahler had called this "A Vienna Symphony", anticipating Vaughan Williams' "A London Symphony", people might be less puzzled; the difference between stylised portrayal and documentary is obvious or, to put it another way, we should not be surprised if Mahler was a pioneer in the purposes for which a symphony was written. He was the first composer to use music to describe the human condition in all its complexity and contradiction, not forgetting the horrible and the barely visceral, the stuff that gets away.

Having got this far, then, the only outstanding issue is the way composers use symphonic language. In the classical symphony themes are stated, linked and transposed, either forming a platform for a finale or actually constituting it, the latter technique becoming more favoured as the 19th century went on, and exemplified in Mahler. This was reflected in narrative poetry and the novel, but as the century wore on, there was a tendency, beginning with

Dickens' *Bleak House* where a narrator and a participant alternate in telling the story, for the artistic conversation to become less directed, more allusive, culminating in TS Eliot's *The Waste Land* or Julian Barnes' *History of The World in 10 1/2 Chapters*. We might go further and think of 'Magical Realism' but that's enough to be going on with! The 7th contains all these modernistic quasi-commentariat techniques. That is not to say that there isn't some pretty awful writing in the work - there are passages in the Finale which seem to me to be bathetic but not deliberately so - but that is a price you pay for radical innovation, as you do with aspects of Joyce where there is not a little superfluity.

So what must a conductor do? Well, in the first place - and here Petrenko and the BPO were supreme - you have to play the score as it is written. By, say, the standards of his near contemporaries, Brahms and Bruckner, this score looks like a complete mess but, referring to another musical genre, you could say the same for the second side of *Abbey Road*, but McCartney got it to work (incidentally, I thought of this in the 2nd Movement where the night music is decidedly noisy, as is McCartney's rendering of the *Golden Slumbers* lullaby; but it works). Next, where rhythm changes violently, you can't split the difference; Petrenko never did. Thirdly, you can't blend an eclectic pot pourri of emotional and musical expression, you just have to concentrate on the integrity of every detail, a quality for which the BPO is well known. Finally, you have to play the thing for all it's worth which the BPO did, almost making you believe that the Finale was a piece of musical genius; only the BPO could do that, playing as well as it did in the great days of Abbado (sorry, Sir Simon!).

No doubt many will disagree. The balance of the playing can vary - although the 7th's Proms Premier under Horenstein with the NPO in 1969 resembles Petrenko in all the important points - but if we are to get closer to the music it's best to limit debate to the genuine mysteries, of which there are quite enough, without making the Symphony much more difficult than it really is. After Mahler premiered the work in Prague in 1908 he refused to revive it, saying that people were not yet ready; I wonder if they are, even now.



REVIEWS

Grace-Evangeline Mason: Mahler's Letters, Liverpool PO Cho/Slorach, Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, 08/05/22

Along with other members of GMS I attended the world premiere at Liverpool's Philharmonic Hall of *Mahler's Letters*, by the young British composer Grace-Evangeline Mason commissioned by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society for the Liverpool Philharmonic Choir, the premiere originally planned for 2020 having been postponed by the pandemic.

This unaccompanied piece for a mixed choir of about 35 singers was conducted by Ellie Slorach and is about 18 minutes long, in four sections labelled *Nature*, *Love*, *Music* and *Death* setting poems written by the composer using English translations of Mahler's many published letters. The composer herself was struck by how poetic his letters were, although perhaps we shouldn't be surprised.

Mahler was himself something of a poet, among other things writing the text for his song cycle *Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen*, as well as adapting Klopstock's poem *The Resurrection* for the Finale of his 2nd Symphony.

The four sections follow each other continuously, linked by the words "Dear You", taken up by the different sections of the choir. The minor-key melodic material makes expressive use of dissonance, the choir's different voices, and variations in dynamics. The first section, *Nature*, ends with the Latin phrase "Sic transit Gloria" (Thus passes (earthly) glory"), a phrase quoted in a letter to Alma from Lemberg (Lvov) dated 2.4.1903 (AMML p226).

The second section, *Love*, begins with "My beloved, the breath of my life", the words sung mainly by the lower voices. "When I awake or when I go to bed my thoughts fly to you ... kisses from me to you". He longs for a letter from his beloved wife Alma. "How lovely it is to love". This appears to be a combination of several letters: "Breath of my life" appears in one of Mahler's later letters to his wife, dated 4.9.1910. after he had discovered her infidelity (AMML p335).

"When I wake at daylight or when I go to bed ... my thoughts fly at once to you" (AMML p217-218).

"I send you a thousand kisses" is from Mahler's letter to Alma of 31.1.1902 (AMML p221). "How lovely it is to love" (AMML p338).

The third section, *Music*, begins "My work absorbs me again ... Music is such a mysterious thing ... the artistic conception no words can explain. The path is long and strewn with thorns".



"My job absorbs me entirely and monopolises me utterly" is from an undated letter to the composer, arranger and music patron Hermann Behn (MUL p.31). "The path is long and strewn with thorns" is from an undated letter to Annie Mincieux, possibly April/May 1896.

In the fourth section *Death*, Mahler compares himself to a hunted stag, telling of the untiring effort to live and to be. "For death I am yearning - it consumes my heart." This is reminiscent of one of the composer's early letters written to his friend Josef Steiner when, aged 19, Mahler was working as a tutor in Hungary: "... if the unbreakable links that exist between life and art can stir up in my heart only disgust with everything that was sacred to me - art, love and religion - then there is no solution but self-destruction ... However I have been unable to flee from my destiny ...".

The 'hunted stag' comment comes from a letter to his wife dated 17.1.1907, the year that was to see his resignation from the Vienna Opera after a campaign of criticism. "I don't find the world very kind to me just now. I am a hunted stag, hounds in full cry" (AMML p287).

However, what follows is from his later writings after he had discovered his wife's infidelity. "My God why hast thou forsaken me?" were among the last words of Jesus on the cross. "I have not escaped my destiny" again appears to be based on Mahler's already cited letter to Steiner.

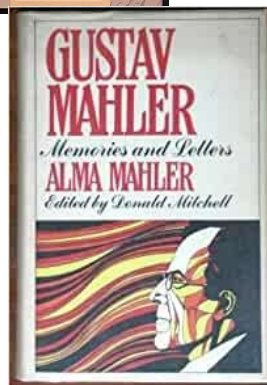
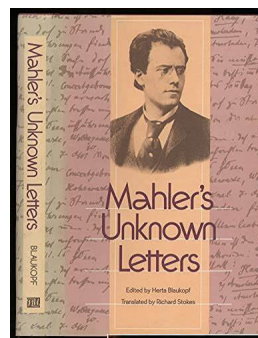
The music then reaches a thrillingly dramatic climax with high notes in the soprano part and a crescendo and decrescendo at the end.

While the composer has, as she stated in an email to me, used artistic licence somewhat in writing in lines to aid the musical shape, it seems to me that she has adhered remarkably closely to the original material.

The performance was very well received by the audience and while it is difficult to assess a work at a single hearing, and I understand that there is no recording yet, this short piece is skilfully constructed, sensitive to its subject matter and engaging to listen to. I'd like the opportunity to hear it again and to be able to follow all the words; and look forward to hearing more from this young composer.

Blaukopf Herta (ed): Mahler's Unknown Letters (MUL) tr. Richard Stokes, Gollancz, 1986.

Mahler Alma (ed Mitchell & Martner): Gustav Mahler Memories and Letters (AMML), (tr. Basil Creighton), Cardinal, 1990



With grateful thanks to the composer Grace-Evangeline Mason for helping me to track down some of these quotes. - Penny Young.

Mahler: Symphony 3, Royal Academy SO/S Bychkov, RFH, 23/06/22.

This concert, part of the Royal Academy of Music's Bicentenary celebrations, intrigued me because I had never seen Semyon Bychkov conduct anything, let alone Mahler, although I well remember his much-missed younger brother, Yakov Kreizberg, giving a wonderful performance of this Symphony during his tenure with the Bournemouth SO.

However, along with everyone else who consults the late Tony Duggan's detailed and comprehensive on-line reviews of Mahler symphonies on CD, I knew that Duggan considered Bychkov's Third with the WDRSO to be about the only modern contender to challenge the classics (Barbirolli, Horenstein, Kubelik, Bernstein). Bychkov's recording is hard to find (Avie AV 0019; 2003). Having witnessed this Festival Hall performance, I would probably bite the hand off anyone who was able to lend it to me (it's in the post - Editor) but I am also looking forward to his forthcoming Mahler Cycle with the Czech PO.

On this occasion the performers were the Royal Academy Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, with mezzo soloist Stephanie Wake-Edwards and the Tiffin Boys Choir. The performance, though not flawless, was extraordinarily fine. The astounding First Movement, from the opening roar of the nine horns to its joyfully cataclysmic conclusion, was thrillingly done: Bychkov seemed able to make room for all its multifarious moods and colours within a strong sense of forward momentum and the players were with him all the way.

I don't think I've ever heard the structurally crucial trombone solos played more confidently and characterfully than they were here by Isobel Daws; and the winding duet for violin (Iona McDonald) and horn (Annemarie Federle) at the Movement's still centre was a thing of rare beauty.

Bychkov took risks. At the two points in the First Movement where the music seems to burst through into another dimension, he held it back almost to stasis, as if the music was stunned to find itself face to face with an infinity which only the Finale would be able to comprehend.



I recall Sir Simon Rattle remarking that, for all the monumentality of the Symphonies, Mahler (I paraphrase from memory) "puts in every leaf and flower, so that they are actually made up of very tiny things." So it was here: this juggernaut of a Movement teems with tiny solos, etched in by each player with vividness and relish. So also in the lighter Second and Third Movements, from the lilting oboe that opens the Second to the off-stage posthorn in the Third, (well played, but too close for its magic to work fully). When the boisterous animals return, a passage that Mahler marked "Rude!", the playing was positively raucous.

The quiet sounds of the 'Nietzsche movement' were crystal clear. The soloist sang with passion and commitment but, as is so often the case, she was a mezzo rather than the true contralto this music needs.

The brief, carolling Fifth Movement almost stole the show. Both choirs, boys and women, sang from memory. The bimm-bamming boys were fine but the ladies were electric: buzzing with energy and bursting to tell us their good-news story (in essence, a lively playground version of George Herbert's Love Bade me Welcome). They pinned us back in our seats.

I had an inkling of what those unsuspecting Bethlehem shepherds must have felt when the sky was suddenly full of singing angels. It was dazzling. It blew away the darkness of the previous Movement; and - how can I put this? - it pushed us higher up Mahler's ascending Chain of Being, up into the light, so that we were already rapt as the Finale stole in.

I wonder how many times I have read a reviewer of a youth orchestra commenting that the only thing that let them down was a lack of fullness in the string sound. These young players, or many of them, are presumably on the threshold of orchestral careers: in their hands the Finale glowed from the start, increasing in depth and richness as the movement unfolded. The moments of anguish and doubt were startlingly vivid, the trumpets screaming over the orchestral tumult; and although Bychkov's handling of the final page made it harder than usual for the timpanists to synchronise, the ending was everything it should be. The reception, from a Hall packed with families, friends and well-wishers, was a performance in itself, and an affecting one.

Later, as I walked back from the Coach Station, I turned 74. What better birthday present could a music-lover wish for? - Chris Kettle.

**Birtwistle: Donum Simoni mmxviii;
Mahler: Symphony 2, Louise Alder
(sop) Dame Sarah Connolly (mez),
CBSO Cho, LSO Cho LSO/Rattle,
PROM 49, Royal Albert Hall,
24/08/22.**

On the only previous occasion when Sir Simon Rattle performed Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony at the Proms (with the VPO) in 1999) he prefaced it with Gyorgy Kurtag's brief, explosive *Grabstein fur Stephan*. This time he prefaced it with Harrison Birtwistle's even briefer *Donum Simoni* MMXVIII written, as its title indicates, in 2018 as a present for Rattle and the LSO. Birtwistle died a week before this year's Proms programme was announced. Before conducting the piece Rattle paid him a warmly affectionate tribute and dedicated the concert to his memory.

Rattle described *Donum Simoni* as "a little tapas of his whole style"; and so it proved, both in its scoring (for brass, woodwind and percussion) and in its gestures (before the first performance, Rattle told us, Birtwistle had said "Don't pretty it up, Simon"). Near the end of its three minutes the woodwind were allowed to introduce a moment of calm: and when the tuba wound the piece to silence it was less a descent into Stygian gloom, more a settling to rest. Perhaps It served, on this evening, as a suitably gruff *Grabstein fur Harry*, but without Kurtag's bleakness.

The Mahler 2nd that followed was stupendous. Rattle's credentials as a Mahler conductor, including characteristics that have not won universal approval, are by now well-rehearsed, as is the fact that this has been his defining work since he first heard it at the age of 11 (his "road to Damascus" moment, he has called it). Performances have marked key stages in his career, including the inauguration of his brainchild Symphony Hall, Birmingham, and his farewell concerts before leaving the CBSO, one of which I was lucky enough to attend. It was so powerful that I remember physically shaking for the final 15 minutes.

I recall a critic writing that the Finale of Mahler's 2nd never fails: it is conductor-proof. That may be the case but it is also true that if the First Movement does not deliver shock and awe the performance as a whole cannot reach the heights. Rattle knows this very well. From the beginning there was a compelling sense of urgency, the lower strings digging into their seismic phrases as ferociously (wild) as Mahler intended; the consoling violin melody, a fragile glimpse only in this performance, was brutally brushed aside; the climactic *molto pesante*, where the entire orchestra seems gripped by a shuddering rictus of horror, stunned both mind and senses; and so on to the haunted, abruptly guillotined end.



The Movement threw a long shadow, as it should, over the next two Movements, and beyond.

The graceful *Landler* in this context sounded tentative, for all the suavity of the cellos' counter-melody, and in the troubled central section the dragon stirred again. The ensuing pizzicato passage, which can sound merely charming, was here a ghostly puppet-dance.

Rattle saw to it that the timpani launching the *Scherzo* crashed in rudely without a pause. Throughout this restless, ironic and destabilising Movement, horror was never far away; some of its elements sounded almost hallucinatory, the close-harmony trumpet quartet, the dry rattle of the rute, the apparition near the end of a pair of celestial trumpets while the lower strings keep up a mysterious scurrying far beneath.

The *Scherzo's* senseless activity expires on the hollow sound of the gong; and the solo alto voice emerges magically from the silence, yearning for heaven. Often described as the pivotal moment of the Symphony, it did not feel like it here. Dame Sarah Connolly, singing with heart-stopping beauty, was a lone voice in the dark, swept away as all hell broke loose again.

We in the audience have to play our part: we should be unable to believe her vision until she returns (O glaube) to tell us to. In the Finale of the Sixth Symphony we miss out on the full Mahlerian experience if, knowing how it will end, we give up the struggle as doomed from the outset; conversely, here in the 2nd, we miss out if we sit back and wait complacently for the peroration to arrive. In a good - a great - performance, it is still in doubt, still all to play for.

Of course, in the end we got there - boy, did we get there - but it was the white-knuckle ride Mahler and Rattle intended. Nor did this performance try to suggest, as Abbado's sometimes did, an other-worldly dimension, a spiritual perspective (I remember an Abbado Prom performance where the off-stage brass was so remote it was practically inaudible). The drama was immediate, present in the hall; we were caught up in it. The horns and trumpets of the Last Judgement sounded not from afar but from the top gallery, their fanfares clashing over our heads. The LSO were on fire. The famous percussion crescendo went on and on and on until its noise filled the hall. The hushed entry of the massed choirs and the solo soprano (Louise Alder) gently disengaging and floating above, raised the neck-hairs; their climactic affirmations were overwhelming in their intensity and conviction. Bells rang, tam-tams flared, the organ thundered; the extra brass appeared on-stage to reinforce its orchestral colleagues.

The roof came off the Albert Hall. We, the audience, roared and rose to our feet.

Rattle knew exactly what he wanted and the LSO and the singers gave him every ounce, and then some. Details remain vivid in the memory, tirelessly gutsy double basses, a spectacular bass drum, but this performance was a mighty whole. Writing this the following afternoon, I have just been informed by Ian Skelly on Radio 3, that when the concert ended social media went mad; and that the BBC technicians arriving to set up for the late night Prom were astonished by the palpable energy still vibrating in the air of the Hall. So thank you, Sir Simon, for an experience that nobody who was there will ever forget. - Chris Kettle.

After a 3-minute piece by the late Sir Harrison Birtwistle, *Donum Simoni* (Gift for Simon), 2018, the LSO's strings alerted us to impending drama. Mahler's first notes in many works tell us that he understood drama and theatricality. He was of course a noted and innovative conductor of Wagner's operas. In his 2nd the tremolo strings and urgent basses stop our breath in readiness for something monumental.

This performance was filled with space; Rattle gave the orchestra sufficient time to fill the Royal Albert Hall's phenomenal space. Theatricality was not lacking with two groups of off-stage musicians in the gallery, horns and timpani on one side, trumpets opposite. The distant sound of the 'last trumpet' in the gallery (actually horns and trumpets) juxtaposed with the flute and piccolo on stage had the sound flowing around the venue just as Mahler intended, taking full advantage of the Hall's design.

There were frequent changes of tempo, a characteristic of Rattle's recordings of the "Resurrection" for many years and not without some basis in the score. Most notably the 'opening of the graves', marked *Molto Riten* (greatly held back) for the heavy percussion including tam tam, became a *Moltissimo Riten*. In the exceptionally long and gradual crescendo built from pp to very-many-fffs!

how must it have been for the orchestra to feel the ribs tingling and the whole body vibrating?

As for the soloists, Dame Sarah Connolly delivered *Urlicht*, the Fourth Movement, perfectly. Perhaps during the Finale she and Rattle weren't quite in agreement but no matter. Louise Alder's voice



provided an ideal complement to Dame Sarah. The Choruses of the LSO and CBSO under the direction of Simon Halsey were faultless, beginning at ppp and then

filled with power and perfect control until their final "Zu Gott wird es dich tragen" ("it will lead you to God"). We were ready to believe it.

There was of course a standing ovation; this was a Rattle performance with which the British public has had a long-standing love affair, as I once heard a radio presenter express it so memorably. This standing ovation was well deserved. - Catherine Alderson.

Because of the high demand for tickets for this eagerly awaited Prom, a delay in ordering mine meant that I had to settle for restricted view seats. While I could see only about half of the stage, the most important thing of course was being there.

In less skilled hands I can find the First Movement too heavy but Rattle blends plenty of air into the mixture, bringing out details I'd never heard before, with subtle variations of tempo throughout. Mahler's hair-raising dissonances are offset by the introduction of the "Resurrection" theme with its tantalising prospect of redemption.

Rattle observed the gap that Mahler specified between the First and Second Movements because of the contrast in material, allowing for a brief orchestral re-tuning, however, perhaps unfortunately, this was edited out of the TV version.

Rattle's lightness of touch brought out the counter-melody in the Second Movement (after the pizzicato episode) to a degree that I've never heard before. His reading of the Third Movement shows that he empathises with Mahler's subtle humour and irony.

A certain amount of head-turning from the audience greeted the off-stage band sounding eerily from the upper balcony, providing a degree of spatial separation only possible in large venues and which, again, I suspect can only be fully appreciated in a live performance.

I've also yet to hear a recording that does justice to the very loud percussive episode in the Final Movement which really does seem to be enough to wake the dead and sitting so close to the stage we received the full benefit of it. Dame Sarah Connolly was in glorious voice well matched with the soprano Louise Alder.



To me, the great climactic choral tsunami illustrates the mysterious nature of artistic inspiration. As Mahler said to Natalie Bauer-Lechner: "The increasing tension, working up to the final climax, is so tremendous that I don't know myself, now that it is over, how I ever came to write it."

Once again Rattle delivers, conducting the Symphony that has fascinated and inspired him since the age of 11 (as it has inspired, indeed grabbed, so many of us), kick-starting his stellar career. In fact, so embedded in his consciousness is this complex work that he conducts it without a score.

This was a very fine performance, a great and memorable concert, and it was a privilege to be there.
- Penny Young.

In remarking to Catherine after the concert: "That set the standard for what will follow", I reflected on several decades of many performances of Mahler's 2nd. This was the performance that I will remember as the ultimate. I put this down to two factors: first, the ability that Rattle has to achieve what I would call "controlled emotion", the intensity was there but the orchestra was sublime in its varied tempi and highly differentiated shades of soft and loud; secondly, the choir was just "wow" - perfection. And let's face it, if there is a performance of a Mahler symphony to be remembered, the setting of a packed to the rafters Royal Albert Hall helps!

- Leslie Bergman.

**Mahler: Symphony 1
"Titan", BBCSO/Canellakis
Prom 66, Royal Albert Hall,
05/09/22**

Thank goodness, given his massive though vulnerable ego, the 1st is the only Symphony which might be understood as Mahler representing himself as a Romantic hero fighting against the dark forces; from then on his concerns were mercifully wider.

But, being Mahler, to be personal is not to be trivial. The opening refers directly to the first pages of Beethoven's 9th, then as now the gold standard of heroic symphonic composition. The danger, however, is that the heroic in this Symphony can too easily be overwhelmed by avian chatter, particularly if the conductor is keen in pointing up every detail of the score. Canellakis nicely avoided either extremity by maintaining a good pulse through the first subject, *Ging Heut' Morgen* from the *Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen*; but as the Movement proceeded it unaccountably picked up tempo and the pulse became somewhat uneven with an unseemly dash for the finishing line.

The tempo remained a little fast at the beginning of the 2nd Movement but the waltz theme was charmingly relaxed. The speed problem persisted with a funeral march that was almost jaunty; now with Mahler it is possible that his ironic tendencies might have led him to mock the funeral march itself but the Shtetel second subject

works better as ironic if the funeral march is straight-faced. Again, once the second subject got into full swing, it speeded up so that I kept thinking of *Zorba the Greek* in a seaside tavern; but good order was restored with the third theme which was delicate and nicely astringent in the woodwind. The concurrence of the two major themes was nicely handled but it was never quite serious nor funny enough.



The Finale presents the usual issues of build-up in tension and volume (often mistakenly considered to be the same thing); Canellakis, not surprisingly given the account so far, got off to a swift start and obviously thought this could be balanced with slow playing in the reflective sections but slow became too slow. Nonetheless, the rendering of the *Die Zwei Blauen Augen* theme (again from *Fahrenden Gesellen*) was ravishing.

The problem throughout was that tempo and volume seemed to be the only tools for engineering contrast, not depending, as it should, more heavily on the weight and pointing of phrasing.

The closing pages with their triumphant theme were very well executed but I had never been frightened enough to feel the triumph.

- Kevin Carey



**Schubert, Mahler, R Strauss,
Grieg: Catriona Morison
(mez), Julius Drake (pf),
Oxford Lieder Mahler Day,
Wigmore Hall, 30/07/22.**

As GMS UK has previously sponsored the annual Oxford Lieder Festival, Members were pleased to attend some of the four London concerts at the Wigmore Hall. The recital that stood out was of Lieder by Schubert, Mahler and Richard Strauss.

Readers may remember mezzo-soprano Catriona Morison as joint winner of the 2017 BBC Cardiff Singer of the Year Competition. There is an evident rapport between Morison and Julius Drake, an experienced pianist described as "collaborative" by the *New Yorker*. Drake played Schubert's *Die Junge Nonne* and *An den Mond* with great warmth. He delivered the astonishing, continuous semiquavers of *Gretchen am Spinnrade* in faultless fashion. Morison used her voice sweetly in *An den Mond*: "Geuss, lieber Mond, geuss deine Silberflamme / Durch diese Buchengrün ..." (Shed your silver light, dear Moon / through these green beeches ...).

In Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*, settings of poems by Rückert who had lost two of his own children to illness, Drake gave us the fragility required for the relatively strange intervals of *Nun Will Die Sonn' so Hell Aufgehn* and Morison used her chest voice as a controlled sob in "nun seh' Ich wohl, warum so dunkle flammen ..." ("I could not guess ... that your brightness was already making for ... that place whence all light comes ... Look at us well, for soon we shall be far away.")

Similarly, we felt Morison's full power at the climax of *Wenn dein Mütterlein*, with the sobbed "O du, des Vaters Zelle, Ach, zu schnelle erlosch'ner Freudenschein"! (Oh you, the joyful light, ah, too soon extinguished, of your father's flesh and blood!)

The *Kindertotenlieder* would have been too emotional a tone on which to end a recital on a bright summer afternoon, so Strauss did the honours with plenty of "Sturm und Drang" in



a poem by Michaelangelo set as *Madrigal* (Op. 15 no 1) and *Four Lieder* by Adolf Friedrich the Count of Schack.

They are palpably the work of a young man, composed in 1886 when Strauss was 22, where the composer depicts heartache and grief rather than living it. The appreciative Wigmore audience was rewarded with a light-hearted though bitter-sweet song of Grieg, *The way of the world*, when a surprise encounter between a young man and woman results in a kiss and an awakening of love but, since neither declares their love, they both continue their way separately!
- Catherine Alderson.



**Mahler: Urlicht,
Birgid Steinberger (sop) Sholto
Kynoch (pf), Wigmore Hall,
30/07/22.**

I was fortunate to attend the German soprano Birgid Steinberger's evening performance of Mahler's *Urlicht*, (Primeval Light), as part of the Oxford Mahler Lieder Day; The piano accompanist was Sholto Kynoch, acclaimed Artistic Director of the Oxford Lieder Festival.

Birgid has acquired considerable experience as a soprano for the Wiener Staatsoper and Volkoper. She has also performed at the Bregenz Festspiele, with the Berlin State Opera, Deutsche Oper and Bayerische Staatsoper and at concert halls throughout Europe.

Her repertoire includes recordings of Mozart Operas and lieder by Schubert, Kraus and Wolf. she is also Professor of the Music and Performing Arts in Vienna. She is steeped in the Austrian/ German tradition of classical music training which, to my mind, added a further dimension to the quality of her performance of *Urlicht*.

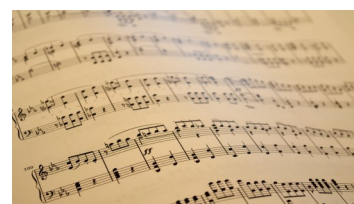
Urlicht is part of Mahler's setting of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, the collection of German romantic poems and songs edited in three volumes by L.A Von Arnim and Clemens Brentano between 1805 and 1808.

The piano version was composed in 1892 and later re-shaped as part of the Fourth Movement of the 2nd Symphony between 1893 and 1894. The text expresses a sense of salvation through innocent and simple faith and the piano version exposes and places exacting demands on the singer's interpretation of the work.

Steinberger's performance of *Urlicht* was excellent. Her presentation, including her engaging presence on stage, was enhanced by the purity of her voice and clarity of diction. She conveyed a depth of feeling and maturity in her subtle interpretation of the text while Kynoch's piano accompaniment was balanced and nuanced.

I felt a sense of warmth and radiance at the end of the performance.

- Anthony Raumann, Chairman, GMS UK



**The Gustav Mahler
Society
of the United Kingdom**

Address:

GMS UK
11 Whitelands Avenue,
Chorleywood,
Hertfordshire WD3 5RE.

www.mahlersociety.org

Email:

info@mahlersociety.org

Registered Charity:

No.1091973

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Leslie Bergman

Kevin Carey

Jim Pritchard

Robert Ross

Ian Willett

Editor, The Wayfarer

Kevin Carey

Email: kevin@112a.co.uk

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**IF YOU WILL BE IN OXFORD
BETWEEN 14 - 29 OCTOBER 2022:**

The Oxford Lieder Festival features Mahler on the programme on the closing night, with Dame Sarah Connolly, mezzo-soprano, and Michael Lafferty, baritone, singing Robert Schumann, Brahms, Richard Strauss, Schoenberg and a selection from Mahler's *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. For details visit www.oxfordlieder.co.uk

**Mahler: Symphony 4, Sabine
Devieille (sop), Les Siecles/
Francois-Xavier Roth,
Harmonia Mundi.**

Much as the Austro-German symphonic performance style, notably in Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Bruckner and Mahler, based around the twin pillars of Vienna and Berlin, has been widely admired and equally widely recorded during the past hundred years, there is a strong argument, based on recording history, that the tradition has become a self-generating phenomenon growing away from the scores it plays.

In this respect we have seen 'corrective' action taken by Emmanuel Krivine in his Beethoven cycle, John Eliot Gardiner in his Brahms cycle and Skrowaczewski, to a certain extent, in his Bruckner cycle.

When it comes Mahler the influence in conducting style of Bruno Walter, Otto Klemperer and a host of contemporaries (Scherchen, Rosbaud, Horenstein) was so great that not even Chailly or Abbado could shake off their grip. Now, in the person of Francois-Xavier Roth, we have a conductor who promises to do, if his Mahler 4 is anything to go by, for Mahler what Krivine has done for Beethoven.

As we have learned how 'traditional instruments' shed light on the way that music was played at the time it was written in the case, say, of stringed instruments in Bach or the fortepiano in Beethoven, it can hardly be a surprise that returning to the instruments that Mahler knew has an effect on the way he sounds.

This is Roth's first great virtue and what it shows is that Mahler's dynamic markings work much better in this context than they do with much more powerful contemporary instruments where - and this is illustrated best in Bernstein - the conductor has a much greater choice than did Mahler and his contemporaries in terms of phrasing, expression and dynamics.

With Roth you are much nearer to hearing what Mahler heard. You can hear the extremity we have reached in Simon Rattle's second recording of the 2nd which is the musical equivalent of a vast, multi-layered, excessively rich, excessively sweet wedding cake, producing a sound, lacking delicacy and naivete, which Mahler could not have imagined; you might just get away with this kind of excess in the 7th but surely not in the neo-classical 4th.

Secondly, the lighter touch enables a fleeter foot; you can honour all of Mahler's markings without hammering them; the bite of the sarcasm, when it comes, is much sharper for being contrasted so deftly with innocent playfulness, nowhere better illustrated in the 2nd Movement.

Finally, as to the enigmatic final Movement with its heavenly song, Roth is surely right, against a monumental - in both sense of the word - tradition to see the song as providing an extra subtle instrument in the form of the human voice and not to take the text too literally.

This was a breath of fresh air for a jaded old Mahlerian like me; don't miss it. - Kevin Carey