

LSO review for Sept 15, 2023

What a powerful statement to start the beginning of Maestro Ed Polochick's 26th year of conducting Lincoln's Symphony Orchestra! In addition to a full house of usual patrons, several hundred more took seats in the balcony at the Lied Center for Performing Arts Friday night, expanding the crowd to well over 1,000 for the Orchestra's opening season concert.

Many new faces came to hear the Abendmusik Chorus, the Concordia University A Cappella Choir, the Nebraska Wesleyan University Choir, The St. Paul United Methodist Choir, and two notable soloists join the expanded Orchestra for the season's opening concert: Mahler's giant "Resurrection" Symphony No. 2 in C Minor.

The soloists were Soprano Esther Heideman, whose credits include roles in major US and overseas opera presentations along with performances of Mahler and other large works with the world's major orchestras; and Canadian Mezzo-soprano Susan Platts, whose dossier likewise features performances with many of the major musical bodies in Canada, England, and the United States.

Mahler's beginning Allegro movement, though quite somber, seemed to offer a glimmer of hope that there might be life after death. Excellent pianissimo playing in the low strings helped the orchestra keep the solemnity. Pitch control was fantastic in the orchestra's accompaniment to a well-played horn melody. The control continued through the intricate chromatics to the movement's end, perfectly in tune.

Mahler is no stranger to dance, with tuneful songs appearing in many of his symphonies. The dance mood of the second movement varied in moods. Some melody lines are lovely and lilting; strings and flute picked these up nicely. A quiet waltz toward the end of the movement act sounded pretty.

The dancing turned deadly in movement three. Mahler sets the orchestra to playing with a wicked smile and the ensemble picked up well on this, bringing to the mind a thought of a final dance before death. The beating of the orchestra's large bass drum spelled out destiny.

Movement four is marked "Urlicht" which, loosely translated, means "light from the beginning of time." In this movement Mahler seems to be saying that the best is yet to come. The mellow mezzo voice of Platts was the perfect match for Mahler's rhetoric in the text, "Oh, how I would rather be in Heaven!" The pleas of Platts were exquisite, but the patrons would have to wait for the final movement to see if hopes pan out. And the orchestra? A phenomenal job in acceding to Platts' pleas in this most expressive of Mahler's music.

Platts and the orchestra had patrons handsomely prepared for the Symphony's triumphant finale. But players had been working hard, and Conductor Ed Polochick had been on the stand evoking perfection for an hour. Now, with the addition of hundreds of choristers and Soprano Heideman to the crowd, could all maintain the ferocious intensity Mahler demands from the triumphant finale?

Yes! Percussionists using their expanded package of instruments continued the excellence. The horns offstage seemed to say that brighter days are coming in this movement. Excellent interpretation by brass and violins laid out a solemn tune as the percussionists evoked a magnificent announcement: The best is yet to come!

Choirs stood, and the moment patrons had sought was at hand. But it was not a cheering fortissimo to say the good had come; rather, basses and tenors, in their softest possible murmur, began an exquisite paraphrase on eternity: "Arise...again and begin immortal life!"

Heideman's stunning, clear voice warmed up the house. It stood in perfect balance with the texture of the large choir. Exquisitely quiet voices relished the text "You shall be sown to blossom again." Platts then returned to carefully articulate the text on "O believe, my heart, believe and you shall lose nothing!"

The orchestra, which had been playing role of the accompanist for much of this time, came into its own as the choirs loudly sang "Prepare yourself to live!" Horns, winds, and percussion pushed the limits to near deafening levels but stressed the musicality. High voices in the choir lifted the melody like blooms opening to the morning sunshine.

Even in the triumphant conclusion, solo voices, choirs, and the heroic orchestra seemed to be without fatigue. The stirring words "That which you have conquered...will bear you to God!" rang out as smiles burst on faces in the crowd. The huge orchestra conclusion brought patrons to their feet immediately.

Heavy applause complimented the soloists. Cheers and whistles came for the orchestra, and another round was just as boisterous for the choirs. Waves of hurrahs greeted orchestra sections as Conductor Polochick motioned them to stand and be recognized. Flowers came for soloists.

But the biggest roar started when Polochick invited the choir directors to the stage. Choristers yelled and stomped. It was a remarkable accomplishment for them: In just a month's time at the end of summer, they had prepared the sections of Mahler's huge choral work for a convincing, learned performance.

Also, the orchestra members had obviously put in extra rehearsal time to get this gargantuan masterpiece in order. Congratulations to all the musicians for such mastery and professionalism!

Crowd recognition continued for over five minutes, and above all, a big round of well-deserved praise came for Conductor Ed Polochick, who produced a glorious evening as he starts his 26th year of LSO leadership.

--John Cutler