

Mahler 'fireball' ends Minnesota Orchestra season

REVIEW: "Resurrection" symphony to be recorded.

By Michael Anthony Special to the Star Tribune

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File photo Osmo Vänskä and Minnesota Orchestra musicians in a 2017 photo.

For many American music lovers, it was the Minneapolis Symphony's 1934 recording of Mahler's mighty Symphony No. 2, "Resurrection," with Eugene Ormandy conducting — the first electrical recording of the complete symphony — that was for many years the primary access to the work.

Jumping forward in time and recording technology — from 78s to LPs to 8-track tape to CDs and now the ear-caressing Super Audio CD process — the orchestra, now the Minnesota Orchestra, will rerecord the work this week with Osmo Vänskä at the podium and also featuring the excellent Minnesota Chorale and a pair of soloists.

Wisely, the orchestra programmed the Mahler 2 as its season finale and gave three performances of the work at Orchestra Hall this past weekend.

It's possible, given the scope and sensual beauty of the piece, for it to make an effect even in a routine performance. There was nothing routine, however, about the performance Friday night. Vänskä, always an animated figure at the podium, looked on this occasion to be in constant motion, urging the musicians to deliver ever-bigger, ever-more-vivid sound, as if his life depended on the outcome; and the orchestra, never less than good these days, responded with 86 minutes of precise, artfully-sculpted, cohesive playing.

As an interpretation, much Friday night was similar to the performance Vänskä led here at the start of the 2014-15 season, at which time the word "Resurrection" carried extra weight: The orchestra, emerging from a bitter 16-month lockout, was hoping for a brighter future with new management and board leaders.

Again, there was one of Vänskä's trademarks, careful observance of the score down to its tiniest details — the occasional use in the strings, for example, of portamento (sliding between notes) — along with a wide dynamic range and shrewd manipulation of tempo transitions.

What was special Friday night was the sheer force of the playing. The funeral march at the start was like a fireball of energy propelled from the stage. The country dance in the second movement carried an aura of gentle sadness and nostalgia, and the vast finale where, as Mahler put it, “the earth quakes, the graves burst open, the dead rise and stream on in endless procession,” a vivid picture was painted of apocalypse and ultimate transcendence.

The playing of the brasses was beautifully modulated throughout, though the balance with the offstage instruments in the finale needed adjustment. (A wise addition this time was printing of the text on the hall’s back wall.)

The chorus, superbly prepared by Kathy Saltzman Romey, sang with admirable resonance and commitment. With her sepulchral tone, mezzo Sasha Cooke brought a sense of wonder to the fourth movement solo, and soprano Ruby Hughes provided luminous high notes in the finale.

The pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin delivered an adroit, witty account in the first half of Haydn’s Piano Concerto in D Major with expanded cadenzas in the first two movements. It’s an old question: What, if anything, should proceed the Mahler 2nd in a concert? Usually the answer is nothing. In this case, Haydn’s jaunty concerto was an apt choice, a light moment before the storm.

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