

Minnesota Orchestra's Mahler might provide the transcendence you seek

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Are you discouraged? That's understandable. Many are the burdens that could push a soul toward surrender right now. Maybe what you need is to experience a great work of art that will help give you the strength to go on, the sense that change is inevitable, and the infusion of spirit that could help make that change possible.

Something like Gustav Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony. As a Jew in Germanic lands, that turn-of-the-20th-century composer battled bigotry throughout his career. However, the Second Symphony confronts his travails and transcends them, climaxing in some of the most triumphant music in the classical canon, moving out of the shadow of death and into a brightly illuminated union with the divine.

And, if you ever experience a more powerful, heart-filling performance of it than the one offered at Minneapolis' Orchestra Hall Friday evening, you should consider yourself extremely fortunate. Full of passion, energy and exceptional musicianship, it might have been the Minnesota Orchestra's most memorable performance of the season. And that would be saving the best for last, for this is the season's final program. Music director Osmo Vanska conducted an expertly prepared interpretation, channeling the forces of 260-some musicians into a performance both awesome and inspiring.

It was a good bet that this was going to be some very strong Mahler, for Vanska and the orchestra — along with soprano Ruby Hughes, mezzo Sasha Cooke and the Minnesota Chorale — are preparing to record the symphony next week. When posterity beckons, orchestras tend to be at their best, but this performance felt like it was seeking something well beyond technical tightness: Every dynamic decision seemed designed for maximum engagement of the audience, pulling listeners in with whispered profundities, building tension with roiling crescendos, then exploding with the full emotional force of the ample ensemble.

Sadness and beauty arrived in equal measure, the funereal tones of the opening movement interrupted by angry outbursts, the ensuing second movement full of tiptoeing dance rhythms and swirling pizzicatos and the third galloping like a graceful horse through a sun-soaked field. It's unusually warm material for the death-obsessed Mahler, who acknowledges the insistent specter of death periodically, but ultimately declares it powerless.

Just as on Beethoven's Ninth Symphony — a work with which the "Resurrection" Symphony has much in common — a solo voice intrudes upon the orchestral landscape. But it's a far gentler voice here, the smooth, sweet instrument of mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke singing confidently of transcending earthly bonds. It would be the evening's most gripping vocal performance, but the Minnesota Chorale made such a glorious sound on the finale that tears flowed in the balcony around me.

This was Osmo Vanska at his finest, seizing the reins of his orchestra with a complex and confident interpretation, and shaping the sound with high-energy body language and a level of attention to detail hard to achieve with such an expansive ensemble. And he was as engaging to watch as I've ever seen him, a virtual dervish on the podium.

Such a performance would be well worth the price of admission, but these concerts also feature one of the world's most accomplished pianists, Marc-Andre Hamelin, showing off his artistry on Joseph Haydn's 11th Piano Concerto. The composer known as the father of both the symphony and the string quartet doesn't have his piano concertos performed often, so it was exciting to hear what this artist of the ivories did with Haydn, especially during a tender slow movement of soft resignation and a lightly articulated sadness. Hamelin might be playing Haydn better than anyone in the world right now, so this is a chance worth seizing.