



OPENING NIGHT: MAHLER'S "RESURRECTION" SYMPHONY

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 10 AT 8 PM

NASHVILLE SYMPHONY & CHORUS

GIANCARLO GUERRERO, conductor
Martha & Bronson Ingram Music Director Chair

TUCKER BIDDLECOMBE, chorus director

MALIN CHRISTENSSON, soprano

KELLEY O'CONNOR, mezzo-soprano

GUSTAV MAHLER *77 minutes*
Symphony No. 2 in C minor, "Resurrection"

- I. Allegro maestoso
- II. Andante moderato
- III. In ruhig fließender Bewegung
- IV. Urlicht (Primeval Light)
- V. Im Tempo des Scherzo

This concert will last approximately one hour, 17 minutes, with no intermission.

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GUSTAV MAHLER

Symphony No. 2 in C minor, "Resurrection"

Born on July 7, 1860,
in Kalischt, Bohemia

Died on May 18, 1911,
in Vienna, Austria

First Nashville Symphony performance:

April 17, 1972, conducted by Thor Johnson at War Memorial Auditorium with soloists Gwendolin Sims-Warren and Louise Parker.



Composed:
1888-94

Estimated
length:

77 minutes

First performance:

December 13, 1895, with the composer conducting the Berlin Philharmonic. Mahler also led the U.S. premiere in New York on December 8, 1908, with the New York Symphony.

Mahler's Second Symphony grapples with nothing less than the ultimate questions about faith and the meaning of our existence. The initial impulse for the work was an instrumental movement in the form of a funeral march, which he titled *Todtenfeier* ("Funeral Rites"). He composed this in 1888 and intended initially to present it as a self-standing symphonic poem portraying solemn mourning over a hero's death.

Yet Mahler came to realize that *Todtenfeier* implied a prologue rather than a complete statement on its own. He long brooded over the challenge of how to expand it into an entire new symphony. The answer came in a sudden epiphany that seized Mahler while attending an actual funeral commemoration for the famous conductor Hans von Bülow in February 1894, who had been something of a mentor. The memorial services included a hymn sung by choir to a poem called *Auferstehung* ("Resurrection") by the German poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724-1803), which struck Mahler as ideal for his project. He had already determined to build up to a choral conclusion.

Mahler's choice of Klopstock's text, from which he decided to set excerpts in the final chorus, came three years before he officially converted from the Jewish faith—into which he had been born—to Catholicism (for reasons of professional expediency, as otherwise he could not have taken up his post as director of the Vienna Opera). The Second Symphony incorporates moments of agonized doubt about the promise of an afterlife. Yet the touching simplicity and directness of faith expressed by Klopstock's ode opened up a way for

Mahler to address the universal hope for some kind of transcendence. By the summer of 1894, he managed to sketch out the mammoth structure of the finale—the longest of the Second Symphony's five movements—within just a few weeks.

Mahler modified his descriptions of the Second over the years, but they all trace the same basic narrative. The hero whose vitality had been celebrated in the First Symphony has died. We are left mourning by his grave in the tragic opening movement, which forces us to face the eternal questions. The Andante that follows evokes a flashback: "a last lingering echo of days long past from the life of the one who was born to his grave in the first movement," and an interruption of "the grim, austere march of events."

The puzzle of life returns in the Scherzo, the first of two movements that draw inspiration from the folk poetry anthology, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* ("The Youth's Magic Horn"), which provided a fertile source for Mahlerian song and symphony alike. The other is the fourth movement, *Urlicht* ("Primal Light"), in which the human voice is first heard—and with it "the moving voice of naïve faith."

Still, this is a childlike, though beautiful, illusion. The gnawing questions of the first movement and the Scherzo return in the sweeping panorama of the final movement. Mahler paints a dramatic musical fresco of despair, hope and anxious waiting before the answer comes in the affirmative vision sung in its final sections. Yet rather than merely avow the conventional Christian piety expressed in Klopstock's poem—a piety similar to that of *Urlicht*, which has already been supplanted—Mahler uses only two stanzas from the source poem,

grafting on stanzas of his own invention.

The resulting vision of redemption is highly personal, and the music expressing it suggests that the answer is to be found in art itself. Ultimately, Mahler was ambivalent about his audiences being distracted by this sort of extramusical “explanation,” and he insisted: “I leave the interpretation of details to the imagination of each individual listener.”

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The C minor key and low strings we hear at the outset evoke the Funeral March from Beethoven’s *Eroica* Symphony (another moment celebrating the memory of a deceased hero). The stern main theme sets the tone, generating an immense feeling of tension and suspense. A glowing second theme eventually emerges in violins and horns and soars aloft with a spirit of hope, anticipating the “resurrection” music to come in the finale. But that is still a long way off.

Mahler develops one of his signature funeral marches, finding room for tranquil reflections and memories amid the dire reminders of death. All of this builds to one of the most shattering climaxes in the symphonic literature. In the final measures, the music plunges mercilessly downward as bleakly as a coffin descending into the grave.

The Andante poses not so much a contrast as blithe denial, but a Schubertian and graceful glimpse over pleasures past that is touched with melancholy interludes. Mahlerian irony comes to the fore in the Scherzo, a purely instrumental elaboration of a song he wrote around the same time about St. Anthony preaching to the uncomprehending fish (from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*). The music’s unceasing flow, launched by powerful strokes from the timpani, returns to the C minor of the first movement. Near the end, we hear a shocking outburst of panic, described by the composer as a “cry of despair.”

In contrast to the epic scale of the massive outer movements, in *Urlicht* the soundscape is intimate, glowing with a radiant brass chorale and the amber sound of the low female voice. But, this first explicit reference to the promise of eternal life is also a kind of denial of the suffering that has gone before, and resolution remains in the far distance.

An even greater catastrophe has yet to be

encountered. Mahler links back to earlier music in the symphony by recalling the “cry of despair” at the start of the finale, and other thematic ideas heard earlier in the work recur throughout this movement. Immediately after this initial outburst, we encounter anticipations of how the choral finale will resolve everything: the ascending “resurrection theme” is sounded by the horns.

A terrifying percussion crescendo signals the arrival of a vast, apocalyptic march—a musical *Last Judgment*—featuring the use of an offstage band of brass and percussion. The horn and then brass issue a roll call for the assembled dead known as “The Great Summons” (a militaristic metaphor), followed by solo flute and piccolo as the deathly voice of the nightingale amid the ruins.

Mahler’s use of silence maximizes the sense of suspense. And from this, at last, emerges the chorus: not in blazing triumph but in an unforgettably unexpected a cappella hush: suddenly, the promises scattered earlier throughout the Second acquire a new resonance. The solo soprano floats aloft, and the resurrection theme now rings out in its most thrilling form. Soprano and alto unite in a duet, and the full chorus swells with the orchestra in a statement of overwhelming affirmation.

Much of Mahler’s music provoked misunderstanding or even hostility from his contemporaries. The premiere of the First Symphony in 1889, for example, was a nerve-racking fiasco. But, the Second Symphony was warmly welcomed by the public in its first performances and became the most popular of his symphonies for Mahler’s contemporaries. Its depiction of the hope for a rebirth, for some kind of enduring meaning, has lost none of its power to move audiences.

The Symphony No. 2 is scored for soprano and alto (or mezzo-soprano) solo, large mixed chorus, 4 flutes (all doubling piccolo), 4 oboes (3rd and 4th doubling English horn), 3 clarinets (3rd doubling bass clarinet), 2 E-flat clarinets (2nd doubling 4th clarinet), 4 bassoons (3rd and 4th doubling contrabassoon), 10 horns, 8 to 10 trumpets, 4 trombones, tuba, 2 sets of timpani, bass drum, snare drums, cymbals, tam-tams, triangle, glockenspiel, deep untuned bells, birch brush, off-stage percussion group (consisting of timpani, bass drum, triangle, and cymbals), organ, 2 harps and strings.

— Thomas May is the Nashville Symphony’s program annotator.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS



MALIN CHRISTENSSON
Soprano

Born in Sweden, soprano Malin Christensson studied at the Royal College of

Music, London.

Operatic highlights include Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro* in Los Angeles, Lisbon, at the Aix-en-Provence Festival and in Santiago di Chile; Barbarina at the Salzburg Festival; Zerlina in *Don Giovanni* at the Houston Grand Opera and at the Helsinki Festival; Sophie Werther in Baden-Baden; Marzelline in *Fidelio* at the Beethoven Festival in Warsaw; Drusilla in *L'incoronazione di Poppea* at the Drottningholms Slottsteater; Miss Wordsworth in *Albert Herring* at the Glyndebourne Festival; Flower Maiden Parsifal at Covent Garden and Papagena in *Die Zauberflöte* in Montpellier, at the Théâtre du Châtelet and at the Vienna Festival.

Highlights on the concert platform have

included Bach's *Matthäus-Passion* with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Nézet-Séguin, the Weihnachts-Oratorium with the Leipzig Gewandhausorchester and Pinnock; Mass in B Minor with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Nelsons; Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with the Swedish Radio Orchestra and Blomstedt; Haydn's *Die Schöpfung* with the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra and Bicket; Orff's *Carmina Burana* with the LSO and Harding; Mozart's Mass in C Minor with the CBSO and Nelsons; *Nielsen's Springtime in Funen* at the BBC Proms with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Litton; Adèle in *Die Fledermaus* with the Philharmonia Orchestra and John Wilson and Mahler's Symphony No. 4 with the Nürnberger Symphoniker and Shelley; Woodbird in *Siegfried* with the Hallé Orchestra under Mark Elder; Missa Solemnis with the Swedish Chamber Orchestra, *Fidelio* (Marzelline) with Thomas Dausgaard and SCO touring Stockholm, Brussels, Paris and Essen with Nina Stemme in the title role.



KELLEY O'CONNOR
Mezzo-Soprano

Possessing a voice of uncommon allure, the GRAMMY® Award-winning

mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor is one of the most compelling performers of her generation. She is internationally acclaimed equally in the pillars of the classical music canon—from Beethoven and Mahler to Brahms and Ravel—as she is in new works of modern masters—from Adams and Dessner to Lieberson and Talbot.

Sought after by many of the most heralded composers of the modern day, Kelley O'Connor has given the world premieres of Joby Talbot's *A Sheen of Dew on Flowers* with the Britten Sinfonia and Bryce Dessner's *Voy a Dormir* with Robert Spano leading the Orchestra of St. Luke's at Carnegie Hall with further performances accompanied by the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra led by Jaime Martín.

Kelley O'Connor has received unanimous international, critical acclaim for her performances as Federico García Lorca in Osvaldo Golijov's *Ainadamar*. Miss O'Connor created the role for the world premiere at Tanglewood, under the baton of Robert Spano, and subsequently joined Miguel Harth-Bedoya for performances with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and in the world premiere of the revised edition of *Ainadamar* at the Santa Fe Opera in a new staging by Peter Sellars, which was also presented at Lincoln Center and the Teatro Real.

Concert highlights of recent seasons include Mozart's *Requiem* and Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with Iván Fischer and the Budapest Festival Orchestra, Lieberson's *Neruda Songs* with the Philadelphia Orchestra under the baton of Stéphane Denève, a program of Berio and Crumb with the New York Philharmonic, and Korngold's *Abschiedslieder* with Sir Donald Runnicles and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra.