

Notes from MahlerFest XXIX

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I arrived in Boulder, Colorado in late afternoon on Wednesday, May 18 in time for the evening chamber music concert. It began with a short Lieder recital: some songs by Schubert, Brahms, and Strauss, and the Mahler "*Rückert Lieder*". Joshua DeVane, baritone and Joshua Horsch, piano, are, I believe, from the CU music department. After intermission and a glass of wine, the music continued with the original sextet version of "*Verklärte Nacht*," a version I had never heard in live performance. The musicians were Renée Patten, Ryan Jacobsen, Stephanie Mientka, Anne Ainomae, Andrew Brown, and Trevor Minton. The performance was intense and stunning; I noticed a number of people had their hankies out at the end. The sextet version feels more intimate and personal than the expanded version, and the effect is more powerful. It gave me renewed respect for the work, and there was much discussion about it back at the hotel after the concert.

On Thursday afternoon I attended a conducting master class at the Boulder Public Library. Kenneth Woods, the new MahlerFest MD, worked with three young conductors doing sections of Mahler's Fourth (Stein chamber version). The orchestra players sat on the stage with their backs to the audience thus allowing us to get a musician's-eye view of the conductors at work. The conductors, Boon Hua Lien, Francis Scully, and Michael Young are all actively engaged in the early stages of their careers, and all were exceptionally well prepared having spent much of the previous three days working intensively with Ken Woods. Each one had about 45 minutes to work with the orchestra while Woods gave criticism and helpful suggestions. I felt that I gained some valuable insight from watching the process, and I hope that they can continue this event in future MahlerFests.

Thursday evening was the [fourth] orchestra rehearsal for the concerts. First up was "*Nachtmusiken*, Op. 104" by Kurt Schwertsik. Woods worked on four of the five movements. The composer was present and responded to Woods's request for comments after each movement. There were no serious problems, and the orchestra seemed to enjoy playing the piece. Next came the Seventh with all its incredible intricacies. There was clearly a long way to go, but having attended fifteen MahlerFests, I knew that there was always a certain anxiety about the Thursday night rehearsal. And as always there were the dedicated Mahler fans in the audience, heads bent over their study scores, some with pencils marking problem passages and listening intently to the conductor's corrections and instructions. For me, these open rehearsals are always a high point of the festival, and after the rehearsals, there is always heated discussion at the social hour back at the hotel. On this occasion, Ken Woods himself joined the discussion, answering questions, and of course, contributing opinions along with the rest of us. If you read his blog, "*The View from the Podium*," it is just what you would expect.

On Friday afternoon, there was a screening of a film — a ballet set to the complete music of M7. I can't report because I missed it, not on purpose but because I missed getting a ride to the theater, and when I tried to take the bus, I got lost. I heard mixed reviews later at dinner. The evening "dress" rehearsal was much like Thursday night but better. We heard all of the Schwertsik piece straight through, but the symphony still needed some intensive care in a few spots. I worried that the Finale was faster than I had

ever heard it (15 minutes), but based on past experience, I was optimistic. There was the usual post-rehearsal wine & cheese and much talk.

The Saturday Symposium has been a major feature of MahlerFest since the beginning, and over the years we have had the privilege of hearing talks by many of the world-class Mahler scholars and experts in related areas. This year was no exception. Dr. Stephen Hefling of Case Western Reserve is a frequent and much appreciated Symposium speaker. He spoke of Mahler's response to the question "*Was kost die Welt?*" in the context of what it meant to compose something. Hefling delivered with his customary thought provoking wit. Peter Davison, a musicologist from Manchester spoke about the novelist Eichendorff's influence, not only on the two *Nachtmusik* movements, but on the color and imagery of the entire seventh symphony. Kenneth Woods began his talk by playing a recording of the entire exposition section of the first movement and then explaining how difficult it was to decide what Mahler's notation actually meant. He used the common dotted 8th + 16th as an example. Sometimes it was written as a double-dotted 8th + 32nd, and sometimes the two notations were used simultaneously with different instruments. He went into considerable technical detail about these seemingly simple things that actually have a lot to do with the mood and color of a passage. And with that in mind we all took a break for lunch.

The next speaker was Anna Stoll Knecht from Oxford, a musicologist who has done extensive work on the Finale of the Seventh Symphony. I have struggled to understand this movement for at least fifty years without really getting it. With diagrammed musical examples, Stoll Knecht presented a structural model that for the first time made sense to me. She also revealed further allusions to *Die Meistersinger* and other works that have eluded me. I will now be able to listen with a new insight. Kurt Schwertsik reminded us that Mahler was inescapable in Vienna and how this influenced musicians who lived there. He himself studied with Stockhausen and was a committed serialist in his early years. For reasons he did not discuss, he later rejected the Viennese avant-garde and turned to a tonal sound world with clear melodic lines and harmony used as a structural element. This is the graceful sound of his "*Nachtmusiken*." Kurt is an affable man with a good sense of humor, and he was popular with everybody at the evening social hours.

Woods himself delivered the pre-concert talk on Saturday night. He spent most of the time introducing "*Nachtmusiken*" and preparing the audience to hear a new work for the first time. I saw this as a kind gesture to a living composer who was with us in the hall. His relaxed manner was almost conversational, giving information without seeming to lecture. Hard to believe that in a few minutes he would be on the podium embarking on a marathon. The Schwertsik work opened the program. It was played with elegant confidence and was well received. The first movement of the Mahler Seventh had all the necessary weight and range of emotion. I could understand how Schoenberg was so impressed by it. The inner movements held their magical charm though the scherzo was pushed to the very edge of possibility, as perhaps it should be. The Rondo Finale held together even at extraordinary tempi. Woods demanded every last ounce from the orchestra, and they delivered. The audience was loudly enthusiastic, and I think I actually got the finale this time. The post-concert social hour was more intense than usual with talk of plans for next year. I retired shortly after midnight, but I'm told that serious talk went on until 2:00 a.m.

Sunday began with the traditional group brunch, this time again at the Chautauqua Dining Hall for the first time in about ten years. There were nearly thirty of us dedicated Mahlerites happy to be together again and celebrating last night's exciting concert. The afternoon concert was a repeat but with a higher level of confidence. The audience was ecstatic.

[The festival this year was dedicated to] Dan Dietrich, a man of exceptional sensitivity and generosity who died last year. His departure is a major loss for all who knew and loved him as well as for all who came back to MahlerFest year after year. We had the joy of being together and sharing the great music, but the absence of Dan was on our hearts. We were all keenly aware that the baton had been passed on more than one level. [...] Next year we will hear M10 in the Cooke 3 version for the first time at MahlerFest. Life goes on.