

MACKY REOPENS GRANDLY WITH MAHLERFEST

Composer's music goes beyond mere "return to normalcy"

By Kelly Dean Hansen, freelance classical music writer

A year ago, few would have predicted that the return to live full-capacity performance at Macky Auditorium--the venerated concert hall on the University of Colorado campus--would involve a symphony by Gustav Mahler. The venue's last concerts were in early 2020, and its regular occupants, the Boulder Philharmonic and CU Presents, have not staged events with an audience since then.

Colorado MahlerFest, one of the smallest and most resilient of Boulder's classical music organizations, navigated the COVID-19 pandemic as gracefully as possible. A performance of the composer's Second Symphony (which involves a large chorus) was scrapped in May 2020, with plans to present the Third (another work with singers) tentatively planned for May 2021. Several well-produced virtual events were made available when the 2020 festival was supposed to occur. But COVID worked on its own timetable.

Plans shifted again. CU held another virtual commencement in May, and MahlerFest decided to shift its events to August amid declining numbers. Somehow, the concert on August 28 happened despite the emergence of the delta variant. And an impressive audience starved for live music after 18 months was all too eager to enjoy it, despite masking restrictions that were not expected earlier in the summer.

Instead of a work with voices, the festival opted for the "safer" purely instrumental Fifth Symphony, composed in 1901-02. Still, Mahler's orchestra is large, making distancing less feasible. Vaccination requirements for the orchestra made it possible. Masked string and percussion players were a strange spectacle, but the music was not hindered.

MahlerFest artistic director Kenneth Woods prepared his orchestra with great care and confidence. This was the most technically polished and emotionally engaged performance since his tenure began in 2016. The five-movement, 75-minute work built strongly from its heart-stopping opening funeral march toward its glorious final climax. The massive central scherzo was particularly well-paced, and the famous all-string Adagietto movement was rapturous.

The playing of Woods's brass section was thrilling throughout, especially the demanding parts played with aplomb by principal trumpet Daniel Kelly and principal horn Lydia Van Dreel. Harpist Kathryn Harms provided a solid foundation for the Adagietto movement.

As a companion piece for the planned Second Symphony in 2020, Woods had scheduled the "Hommage to Kandinsky" by his friend and colleague, English composer Philip Sawyers. Woods has championed and recorded the orchestral works of Sawyers. The composer created his Symphony No. 5 during the pandemic, and Woods took the opportunity to give its world premiere at the MahlerFest concert.

Like the Mahler Fifth, the new Sawyers symphony has five movements. The music was ingratiating to the ear, and the structure was interesting and easy to follow. While not excessively long, the Sawyers symphony is not particularly short either. This resulted in an unusually long concert, but since live music has been so rare over the past year, the audience did not seem to mind the excess of riches, and the patrons appeared to genuinely enjoy the Sawyers work. Harpist Harms had more shining moments in the piece.

It speaks to the professionalism and skill of the orchestra that the players rose to the daunting task Woods had set for them in presenting a brand-new large-scale symphony along with a demanding Mahler work--and delivering a nearly flawless performance of the latter. Speaking of the audience, it was unexpectedly large, both in consideration of the pandemic and based on typical MahlerFest attendance in past years.

As usual, MahlerFest included several ancillary events, most notably the two chamber concerts. In both, CU faculty pianist Jennifer Hayghe's efforts were nothing short of heroic. She took the piano parts in five relatively modern, difficult, and lesser-known chamber works. "Mahler's Contemporaries," which opened the festival on August 24 at Boulder's Dairy Arts Center, included three large-scale pieces, all of which featured Hayghe.

Alexander Zemlinsky was a composer intimately connected to Mahler. The orchestra's principal cellist Parry Karp opened the concert with Zemlinsky's deeply romantic 1894 Sonata for Cello and Piano. Concertmaster Jessica Mathaes then joined Hayghe for Erich Korngold's 1919 suite of incidental music for Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, arranged by the composer for violin and piano. Finally, clarinetist Kellan Toohey teamed with Hayghe and Karp for the 1905 Clarinet Trio by Robert Kahn, a truly large-scale piece that exudes the influence of Johannes Brahms. The Dairy audience was small, but appreciative of these virtuosic post-romantic pieces.

"Mahler's Heirs," played the afternoon of August 26 at the venerable Chapel Hall of The Academy retirement community, included four later pieces, two of which contained Hayghe's indefatigable contributions. Woods, a cellist before he was a conductor, took his turn as a player in Czech composer Erwin Schulhoff's Duo for Violin and Cello from 1925, along with orchestra violinist Suzanne Casey. They navigated the highly exposed, difficult, and complex piece with skill and confidence.

Principal Second Violinist Karen Bentley-Pollick then played one of the earliest pieces by Sawyers, whose new symphony would be heard two days later, the Violin Sonata No. 1 from 1969. Casey, oboist Jordan Pyle, and cellist Andrew Brown presented a trio by female Polish composer Grażyna Bacewicz from 1935. This highly accessible piece was one of the festival's hidden highlights. The concert closed with Hayghe and principal violist Lauren Spalding performing the 1941 Viola Sonata by Austrian composer Hans Gál (who died as recently as 1987 at age 96), another composer often championed by Woods.

Woods has used the MahlerFest chamber concerts to promote Jewish composers suppressed by the Nazis, and his passion for this cause was again evident this year. Schulhoff was not only suppressed, but, like his fellow Czech Hans Krása, an actual victim of the death camps. Both

chamber concerts were a feast for the ear and the mind, giving several orchestral musicians a much-deserved spotlight, facilitated of course by Hayghe.

MahlerFest's celebrated academic symposium on the day of the concert was shifted from the CU campus (where classes had started that week) to License No. 1 in the basement of the Hotel Boulderado. It was an atmospheric setting, and those who attended were richly rewarded with intellectual stimulation. Sawyers--who was supposed to attend his world premiere in person but was not able to travel from the U.K. due to COVID restrictions--joined virtually to discuss his symphony with Woods, and Woods himself insightfully spoke about his preparation of certain passages from the Mahler symphony.

David Rahbee, Artist-in-Residence at the University of Washington in Seattle, provided a meticulous comparison of certain passages in Mahler symphonies with moments in earlier pieces that might have served as inspiration, particularly operas that Mahler conducted in his position as director of the Vienna Court Opera. The highlight, however, was keynote speaker and celebrated composer Jay Reise's profound, stimulating, and moving discussion of the reasons behind Mahler's appeal to modern audiences, both musical connoisseurs and lay listeners.

Filmmaker Jason Starr has produced acclaimed documentaries telling the "stories" of Mahler's symphonies since 2004, and all have been presented at MahlerFest. His most recent films about the First Symphony and the related Songs of a Wayfarer were not completed when the First Symphony was played at Macky in 2019, but they were screened at the Dairy's Boedecker Theater on August 25 to a packed audience. Starr joined virtually for a Q&A after the screening, giving hope that his beloved film series will continue.

MahlerFest plans to stage the Third Symphony in May 2022. Even if times are not "normal" at that point, the organization will find a way. MahlerFest XXXIV was as inspirational an event as we can hope to experience in 2021.

[Dr Kelly Dean Hansen](#) holds a PhD in Musicology from University of Colorado at Boulder where his dissertation was focused on the music of Mahler. He has produced a popular series of listening guides on the complete music of Johannes Brahms and served as music critic of the Boulder Daily Camera from 2011-2018.