The luminous, celestial final strains of Gustav Mahler’s Second Symphony enveloped the crowd at Boulder’s Macky Auditorium on the afternoon of Sunday, May 21 in a moment of unbridled ecstasy. That is not a significant observation, as this most glorious of all symphonic endings has the same effect whenever the work is programmed. What made this moment different was how much it culminated—not only the symphony, but also a five-concert series over five straight days, each of whose individual events was notable on its own.

Since his arrival in 2016, Colorado MahlerFest music director Kenneth Woods has progressively expanded the event’s traditional offerings from those of his predecessor, founder Robert Olson. He has introduced new symphonies by composers unknown to Colorado audiences, performed an entire one-act opera in an intimate church setting, and greatly increased the amount of chamber music. He has brought back vocalists and instrumentalists who have made an impact, creating a sense of reunion. MahlerFest XXXVI came close to a model established in 2019 with two separate Mahler-centric orchestral concerts on Saturday afternoon and Sunday evening.

With the establishment of Mountain View United Methodist Church as a constant venue for smaller events, Woods was able to stage all three of the other concerts there Wednesday through Friday, again using it for an operatic event in the opening concert May 17. It was billed as a “chamber orchestra” concert, which creates a cognitive dissonance when a portion of Richard Wagner’s “Ring” cycle is to be performed, whose orchestra is notoriously massive.

Woods deftly chose the first act of the second evening, “Die Walküre,” the shortest of the cycle’s ten acts, each of which is a seamless musical entity. It only has three singers, allowing Woods to introduce all but one of his featured vocal soloists. And he performed it in a chamber arrangement by Francis Griffin whose skillful orchestration lost very little of Wagner’s original effect. Mezzo-soprano Stacey Rishoi, in her third MahlerFest appearance, was a stunning Sieglinde, one of the separated twins whose union will produce the hero Siegfried. Tenor Brennen Guillory gave an impressive warmth and depth to the tortured Siegmund, while bass Gustav Andreassen was a stentorian Hunding, abusive husband of Sieglinde. Rishoi and Guillory performed together in Das Lied von der Erde at MahlerFest in 2018.

The MahlerFest Chamber Orchestra, a subset of the larger group used for the symphony, was heroic throughout, and Woods led them with confidence. The Wagnerian strains threatened to overwhelm the confines of the church sanctuary, but Woods obtained an appropriate balance. He paired the excerpt with something entirely different, a true chamber symphony by Austrian composer Hans Gál with a Mozart-like group of instrumental soloists.

Gál, who was editing Brahms’s complete works in the 1920s and died at age 97 in 1987, composed his fourth and final symphony in 1974. This was apparently its first performance in the United States. It is a refined and pleasing work, by turns delicate and intricate, the assured
product of a composer in his 80s. The solo or “concertante” group was composed of principal orchestra players, including violinist and concertmaster Zachary DePue, cellist Parry Karp, flutist Hannah Porter Oceañá, and University of Colorado faculty clarinetist Daniel Silver. This was the first of three prominent solo appearances for Karp, perhaps the hardest working of all MahlerFest musicians since the post-Covid return in 2021.

The first Mahler concert at Macky on Saturday, May 20 re-created one of Mahler’s programs from 1905, on which he daringly programmed an entire evening of his own orchestral songs. The concert justified the decision by Woods in 2019 to replace the traditional repeated concert with two separate ones. The festival’s fourth soloist, soprano April Fredrick, seen last year with Andreassen in Bartók’s Duke Bluebeard’s Castle, joined the other three from the Wagner opera.

She and Guillory opened with seven settings from the folk collection Des Knaben Wunderhorn, which had not been heard at Mahlerfest in their full orchestral garb since 2001. Both singers showed deep understanding of the text and music for their assigned songs. The inclusion of “Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt” was especially apropos given Mahler’s use of it in the Second Symphony. It is to be hoped that Woods will program the remaining five Wunderhorn songs soon. They would make an excellent companion for the Fourth Symphony next season.

Andreassen followed intermission with a shattering performance of the Kindertotenlieder, whose grim texts on the death of children experienced by the poet Friedrich Rückert were given haunting settings by Mahler. Andreassen’s deep and resonant bass was the ideal instrument. Finally, Rishoi performed Mahler’s other four orchestral Rückert settings, her rich timbre giving even more profundity to the last two, “Um Mitternacht” and “Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen,” than they usually provide.

Again, the orchestra provided the singers with a radiant backdrop, and aside from a minor textual slip in the longest and most complex Wunderhorn song, “Revelge,” the performances were technically impeccable.

The two chamber concerts on Thursday, May 18 and Friday, May 19 at MVUMC were imaginative and exciting. The first was a series of 20th-century works for solo instruments (notably not including piano), in stark contrast to the massed forces of the Second Symphony, again performed by principal musicians. Flutist Oceañá opened with the phenomenally difficult “Sequenza I” by Luciano Berio. Principal violist Lauren Spaulding followed with another challenging but thrilling work, the Rhapsody for Solo Viola by Egon Wellesz. Silver then took on the famous solo clarinet movement “Abîme des oiseaux” from Olivier Messiaen’s Quartet for the End of Time.

The last two pieces were extended multi-movement compositions. Karp was on point as usual with Max Reger’s Bach-like Suite in D Minor for Cello Solo, and DePue was dazzling in Erwin Schulhoff’s Sonata for Solo Violin.
Karp was still not finished. The second chamber concert comprised two large works by Mahler’s near-contemporaries. The first featured Karp in his third and most impressive appearance. Ernest Bloch is most known for his explicitly Jewish-themed compositions, but he wrote more than that, and his Suite for Viola and Piano is an extraordinary piece. Karp played it in an established version for cello by Gabor Rejto and Adolph Baller, accompanied by CU-Boulder pianist Jennifer Hayghe, who adeptly negotiated the complex piano part.

Erich Wolfgang Korngold is a well-known composer, but his early String Sextet is not. It should be, as it is certainly worthy to stand with other masterpieces of the genre by Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and Schoenberg. Woods, who has shown his solo cello skills in previous years, joined Karp, DePue, and Spaulding, along with violinist Caroline Chin and violist Aria Cheregosha in a tour de force rendition.

The festival’s traditional and beloved Saturday symposium, now held at MVUMC, was informative as always. The most prominent guest was renowned author Joseph Horowitz, who spoke about Mahler’s much-debated time in New York near the end of his life, a subject about which he recently published a book. Visiting from Germany, musicologist/editor Renate Stark-Voit discussed the challenges of publishing new editions of Mahler’s symphonies. In a special treat, superstar baritone and Mahler expert Thomas Hampson appeared via remote video during both presentations.

Mahler scholar Peter Davison spoke about the use of night and nature motifs in the music, with some connection to Wagner. Fredrick appeared to give an insightful discussion of a singer’s viewpoint on the songs to be performed that night, and finally, Woods gave his usual conductor’s discussion of artistic decisions that must be made when performing the Mahler score in question.

To precede the Second Symphony with all of this is impressive enough, but on the final concert itself, Woods opened with Scottish composer Thea Musgrave’s 20-minute “Phoenix Rising,” a virtuosic orchestral work from 1997 that complements the “Resurrection” theme of the Second. The Musgrave piece was a big bite for the orchestra to chew, given everything else the musicians were doing, but they brought it off stupendously, the offstage effects being especially felicitous.

And of course, the symphony was transcendent, from its extended and heart-stopping opening funeral march through the gentle second movement and the nihilistic “Fischpredigt” scherzo up to the hushed entry of Rishoi in the solo alto “Urlicht” movement. The orchestra was at its best in the first part of the massive finale leading up to the choral entry on the “Resurrection” chorale.

The Boulder Concert Chorale were the last of the festival’s many participants to make their entry, but they are the ones who brought it home. Director Vicki Burrichter’s singers are always well-prepared, and after patiently standing through not only the finale’s extended opening but also the three previous movements, their focus was laser sharp, with a perfectly paced buildup. From the still a cappella entry, out of which Fredrick’s crystal voice magically emerged, through
the vast sonic immersion at the end, the chorus, Rishoi and Fredrick summarized the full week’s events.