

## WOODS BUILDS BIGGEST MAHLERFEST AROUND SMALLEST SYMPHONY

By Kelly Dean Hansen, freelance classical music writer

Gustav Mahler's Fourth Symphony is his most modest. Still broader in scope than most symphonies by other composers, it is restrained in comparison to his first three. Its orchestration is smaller, notably lacking trombones and tuba, and its finale (the starting point for the work's composition) is an orchestral song that only lasts ten minutes. When it came time for him to program the Fourth, Colorado MahlerFest music director Kenneth Woods took the opportunity to use it as the lynchpin for the biggest, boldest festival since he took over the beloved event in 2016.

MahlerFest 37 ran from May 15-19 in Boulder, and as in 2023, a five-concert model was used. There were, however, some distinct differences. Only one concert took place at the festival's "home base" of Mountain View United Methodist Church as opposed to three, and one of the evenings was expanded into a double bill for a total of six programs.

Woods chose to add a second major orchestral work, one that is anything but modest: the *Alpine Symphony* of Richard Strauss, his final and largest tone poem composed in 1915, four years after the death of Mahler. Instead of placing the Mahler and Strauss compositions together on the same program at Macky Auditorium, Woods spun each of them into its own concert, a bold and possibly daring decision, but one that paid off as both concerts were well attended.

The Fourth was placed at the end of the main concert on the afternoon of Sunday, May 19, and the performance was a fitting culmination. Soprano April Fredrick, a favorite partner for Woods, was featured prominently in the last two festivals, but this time she was truly the central character. Her selection to present the "Heavenly Life" song that closes the symphony was obvious, but it was actually her second performance of the piece, as she also sang it at the opening chamber orchestra concert on May 15, an evening that was pervaded by her radiant presence.

For the symphony, Fredrick entered before the glorious third movement, and she was already in character, her facial expressions following the music as it moved through diverse tempi and moods. Woods directed his orchestra with precision and passion throughout. The climax of that third movement, an incredibly tricky moment featuring trumpets that emerge as if they were proclaiming the opening of heaven's gate, was majestic and pristine. Guest concertmaster Alan Snow was visually and aurally arresting in the "demonic" violin solo of the second movement. And of course, Fredrick was sublime.

The *Alpine Symphony* was presented the previous night, May 18, with its enormous orchestral forces stretching the Macky stage to its limit. The rendering of the 50-minute work, which is

through-composed without any break, was another aural feast. The recent discovery of Strauss's original intention to use alphas in one passage is reflected in the new Breitkopf & Härtel critical edition used by Woods. The large instruments were placed in the balcony boxes, and their effect was astounding.

Woods preceded the main works on both concerts with substantial compositions for strings alone, both of which are ruthlessly difficult. The *Alpine Symphony* came after Mahler's virtuosic arrangement for chamber orchestra of Franz Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" String Quartet, and the Mahler Symphony after Strauss's very late, profound *Metamorphosen* for 23 solo strings, thus allowing each composer to complement the other. The string players were entirely on point for both. The Sunday concert opened with Richard Wagner's Prelude to *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, a familiar and festive overture that allowed most of the brass players from Saturday's *Alpine Symphony* performance to appear either there or in the symphony.

Speaking of the brass, they were more than compensated for their somewhat smaller role in the Fourth. The event on May 16 was a matinee concert at the Boulder Public Library Canyon Theater featuring a brass quintet of trumpeters Daniel Kelly and Richard Adams, hornist Lydia Van Dreel, trombonist Lucas Borges, and tubist Jesse Orth. They played an imaginative program featuring a world premiere by visiting composer Dave Biller, virtuosic modern works by Joan Tower and Morley Calvert, and a more romantic multi-movement piece by Victor Ewald. An arrangement of a song by Jimi Hendrix previewed the next day's program, and there was even a transcription of a Mahler song. It was an unusually entertaining and satisfying concert.

The double bill on May 17 might have been Woods's wildest (not to say craziest) idea yet. The venue itself, Boulder's Roots Music Project (which is basically a transformed garage), was already an unusual backdrop for "classical" music, although the opening program itself was fairly standard. The Tallā Rouge Duo of violists Lauren Spaulding and Aria Cheregosha presented a pair of enjoyable short works composed for them, while guest concertmaster Snow performed two blues-inspired pieces for solo violin by Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson, all of which were thrillingly virtuosic. The two violists then joined a string sextet that included Woods himself on cello for a memorable rendition of Arnold Schoenberg's exceedingly romantic *Verklärte Nacht*. 2024 is the 150th anniversary of Schoenberg's birth.

After a break came the nightcap, "Electric Liederland" or Hendrix meets Mahler. Few regular festival attendees were likely aware that in addition to his conducting and cello prowess, Woods is also an amazing electric guitar player. Fronting a rock quartet (which included composer Biller), he led a set of his own arrangements, reimagining two of Mahler's late symphonic movements in the style of Jimi Hendrix (who was known to admire Mahler). He also included a similar reworking of the Cello Concerto by Edward Elgar (to whom another festival Woods directs, in the U.K., is devoted), along with one of his own pieces and songs by Hendrix himself.

The Mahler arrangements, from the Ninth Symphony and the symphonic song cycle *Das Lied von der Erde*, were genuinely moving and profound, and while the Hendrix songs (which Woods also sang) were played with exuberant brilliance, the volume and style of “Machine Gun” might have been a little much for some of the MahlerFest regulars in attendance. It may have been a “crazy” concept, but artistically, it was very sound indeed.

The opening chamber orchestra concert at the church was also centered around Woods’s arrangements, this time a “suite” of songs and instrumental pieces called “Visions of Childhood.” This suite features music by Mahler, Wagner, Schubert, and Engelbert Humperdinck in chamber orchestration matching Erwin Stein’s version of Mahler’s Fourth. As noted before, the suite closes with the “Heavenly Life” song. While there are large instrumental segments, most notably Wagner’s *Siegfried Idyll*, Fredrick’s voice, which could be described as both “heavenly” and “childlike,” held the entire concept together.

Woods has recorded his “suite” with Fredrick, and that recording paired it with James Ledger’s chamber orchestra arrangement of Strauss’s *Four Last Songs*, an incredibly sensitive reduction of the original conception for voice and large orchestra. These were also featured on the concert before intermission and preceding the suite (thus ensuring that all three composers from the main orchestral concerts were heard). Even with her twofold performance of the Mahler song-movement, these Strauss songs were probably the highlight of Fredrick’s presence at the festival. She sang them with utter devotion and profound feeling.

The concert (and the festival) opened with another wonderful oddity arranged from the Fourth Symphony. Pianist and scholar Joseph Horowitz, who would present at the festival symposium, arranged the second movement of the Fourth, the “demonic” scherzo, for bass trombone and chamber orchestra for his friend and frequent partner, the great trombonist David Taylor. The trombone carries the melody throughout, not just the original violin solos. The movement was recognizable, especially in the chamber orchestration, but hearing the leading threads played by an instrument that is famously not included in the symphony itself was jarring to say the least. Taylor, accompanied by Horowitz at the piano, encoored with an equally wild arrangement of Schubert’s song “Der Doppelgänger.”

The Saturday symposium—other than the symphonic performance—is the festival’s most constant element going back to the days of founder Robert Olson. It is now held at the “home base” church. This year’s speakers and topics were diverse and stimulating. The highlight was the opening presentation about the Fourth Symphony by scholar Jeremy Barham, with arresting visuals and remarkable insights about the symphony’s connections to both other works by Mahler and pieces by earlier composers. Horowitz’s talk “Taverns in Paradise” drew parallels between Mahler and Schubert, focusing on rustic and celestial elements in both.

Musician and producer Aaron Cohen went behind the scenes of his Mahler-themed podcast “Embrace Everything,” while scholar Matthew Mugmon discussed the influence of Mahler on

American composers, most specifically Aaron Copland. Finally, Breitkopf & Härtel publisher Nick Pfefferkorn teamed with Woods for a presentation about the firm's new critical edition of works by Strauss.

The entire festival, despite its diversity and scope, was unified in theme and impeccable in presentation, but one does wonder if Woods has stretched things as far as they can go, both for the musicians and audience. MahlerFest 38 in May 2025 will be built around the "tragic" Sixth Symphony.