

WOODS ONCE AGAIN “DEFIES” THE ODDS AT MAHLERFEST 38

By Kelly Dean Hansen, freelance classical music writer

June 6, 2025 - Colorado MahlerFest has undergone significant evolution since music director Kenneth Woods took the reins in 2016, but a five-concert series running from a Wednesday evening through a Sunday afternoon in mid-May has taken root as the pattern, concluding with two large orchestral concerts at Macky Auditorium in Boulder. The second of these culminates in that year’s featured symphony by Gustav Mahler.

At MahlerFest 37 in 2024, Woods pushed the envelope by programming an enormous orchestral showpiece by Richard Strauss as the festival’s second major work. He did the same for MahlerFest 38, which took place May 14-18, 2025, but this time the Mahler symphony—the 1904 Sixth—was a bigger and longer work than last year’s Fourth, and the complementary work, while not as lavishly orchestrated as Strauss’s *Alpine Symphony*, was what Woods describes as one of the most “fiendishly difficult” symphonies he has ever conducted. It was apropos for a festival whose theme revolved around “defiance,” led by a director who recently overcame a major health crisis.

Erich Wolfgang Korngold wrote his only Symphony in 1952. At that point, he was known as a major Hollywood film composer, and he had vowed only to return to classical concert music after the end of the Second World War and the defeat of the Nazis. The Symphony in F-sharp was dedicated to the memory of Franklin D. Roosevelt, a tribute recognizing the U.S. president’s role in ending the European conflict. The work exemplified the theme, inspired by Mahler’s Sixth, of “Defiance, Protest, Resistance and Remembrance,” but in contrast to the “Tragic” Sixth, which ends in defeat after a valiant struggle, the Korngold symphony emerges in triumph.

The best-known feature of Mahler’s symphony is a pair (or sometimes a trio) of moments in the vast half-hour finale, moments that are as significant visually as they are aurally: the “hammer blows” of fate. Mahler specified the sound he wanted, but did not really explain how exactly to produce it. A special afternoon session on Friday, May 16, was a demonstration of how the hammer and the box it struck were conceived and constructed. The hammer itself, built by board member Jim Hajost, is a beautiful object. Percussionist Jack Barry explained how he approached the blows. Their execution at the Sunday performance lived up to the buildup, and it was hard not to experience at least some regret that Woods chose to follow Mahler’s ultimate wish to remove the third blow he originally included at the end of the score.

Aside from the hammer, Woods’s interpretation of the symphony and the orchestra’s presentation on May 18 were magnificent. His decisions on the other two “questions” that always accompany the Sixth were sound. He took the long exposition repeat in the first movement, which helps balance it against the finale. He chose the more typical and musically

satisfying order of the two middle movements (about which Mahler vacillated and scholars continue to argue), placing the radiant “Andante” movement third. The pace in all four movements was on the brisk side, but still conveyed the necessary gravitas. The first movement moved easily between its grim marches and its joyous outbursts. The tricky metric shifts in the sweet, but off-kilter contrasting sections in the otherwise demonic scherzo were especially impressive. The cowbell-tinged climaxes of the Andante were full-hearted and thrilling. And the finale was both devastating and inspiring, with the orchestra’s stamina providing a real example of “resistance.”

Woods placed two short pieces before the symphony that illustrated remembrance and defiance, respectively. Bohuslav Martinů’s *Memorial to Lidice*, composed in 1943 as a poignant response to the Nazi atrocity in that Czech village, established the tone. *Dismal Swamp*, a 1935 tone poem for piano and orchestra by the great African-American composer William Grant Still, is an effective depiction of the dangerous paths toward freedom used by enslaved people along the Underground Railroad. Pianist Leah Claiborne was a vivacious presence on the stage, and her deep understanding of Still’s musical painting was apparent.

The Korngold symphony anchored the Saturday evening performance. It is a complex score, thornier and less immediately accessible than the composer’s film scores or even his most popular concert piece, the Violin Concerto, but it rewards the patience of the audience and the effort of the orchestra. After hearing it, the only possible reaction was astonishment at what a great piece it actually is and gratitude for the opportunity to experience it.

Deborah Pritchard’s brief concerto for trumpet and strings called *Seven Halts on the Somme*, composed in 2016, was inspired by artist Hughie O’Donoghue’s series of paintings depicting stopping points for British troops during the Battle of the Somme in World War I. Woods recorded the work and chose it to precede the Korngold, thus incorporating both World Wars in the concert. MahlerFest principal trumpet Daniel Kelly took obvious delight in presenting the colorful piece. A passage utilizing the harmon mute was especially distinctive. The orchestral strings were also at their best.

If there was a questionable decision by Woods, it was the choice to open the concert with *Todtenfeier*, an early draft of what became the first movement of Mahler’s Second Symphony, which the festival staged just two years ago. For most listeners familiar with the Second, it simply sounds like that movement with a few moments perhaps seeming “off,” and its inclusion, despite a tenuous connection to the theme, seemed not only redundant, but also a bit much to ask of an orchestra that was already giving a great deal.

Of the three smaller concerts, the one that placed the festival’s theme in starkest relief was the first one on May 14 at Mountain View United Methodist Church, a concert presentation of Viktor Ullmann’s one-act opera *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* (*The Emperor of Atlantis*), written in 1943 while the composer was imprisoned by the Nazis at the Theresienstadt ghetto. The mere

fact that this opera exists and survived is remarkable, but it is also a wonderful piece of music. Ullmann had to make do with what he had available, resulting in an eclectic but evocative combination of instruments, including banjo, saxophone, and harpsichord. The composer himself did not survive. He was transported to Auschwitz and murdered less than a year after writing it.

The plot is a bold and subtle satire of the Nazis themselves. The six singers, two of them familiar faces from previous MahlerFest seasons, were phenomenal. Baritone Ryan Hugh Ross, a champion of Ullmann and other composers suppressed by the Nazis, was nuanced and convincing as the title character. Bass Gustav Andreassen depicted Death, who “goes on strike” in the opera, and his extended low note on the word “lang” (“long”) was amazing. Tenor Brennan Guillory effectively navigated two characters, the harlequin figure symbolizing “Life” and a soldier who falls in love with his adversary (sung delightfully by soprano Alice Del Simone) when he cannot kill her. Baritone Andrew Konopak was highly amusing as an anthropomorphized loudspeaker, and mezzo-soprano Hannah Benson was oddly terrifying as the drummer.

The presentation of *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* was richly supplemented, both by the screening of a film about Ullmann at two venues and by a pre-concert presentation from journalist Dave Maass, who very recently adapted it into a graphic novel.

An afternoon program at the Boulder Public Library on May 15 was a song recital featuring all six singers heard the previous night. There were four songs taken from Mahler’s collection of folk song settings *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, along with a song from Franz Schubert’s cycle *Schwanengesang*, a number from Dmitri Shostakovich’s Fourteenth Symphony, and a cycle by English composer Philip Sawyers, a favorite of and frequent collaborator with Woods.

Other than the Schubert, all these songs with themes of protest and defiance exist primarily with orchestral accompaniment but were here performed with piano by University of Colorado professor Jennifer Hayghe, whom Woods called the hero of the event. The most memorable portion was probably the presentation of *Songs of Loss of Regret* by Sawyers, sung in alternation by Benson and Del Simone, though Andreassen’s exuberant rendering of the Shostakovich also made an impact, as did Konopak’s closing with Mahler’s hilarious “Lob des hohen Verstandes” (“In praise of high intellect”).

The festival returned to the transformed garage in east Boulder called “Roots Music Project” for another Friday night double bill. After last year’s extraordinarily successful MahlerFest debut there, Woods was excited to return, and the space is remarkably conducive to classical chamber music, despite the photos of Gene Simmons, Billy Idol, Tom Petty, and B.B. King that adorn the walls.

The opening chamber music program was substantial, directed toward the exceedingly difficult and exciting String Sextet composed by Erwin Schulhoff in the 1920s after his service in World

War I. The piece includes unusual string techniques, many moments of bitter irony, gestures toward atonality, and hints of neoclassicism. It was preceded by Shostakovich's Seventh String Quartet, the shortest, but most intensely concentrated of his fifteen essays in the genre.

The string performers spread between the two works included violinists Suzanne Casey and Sophia Szokolay, along with concertmasters Zachary DePue and Alan Snow. The violists were Aria Cheregosha and Lauren Spaulding, who delighted as a duo last year, and the cellists were Parry Karp and Karl Knapp. Karp, a festival mainstay, gave a brilliant rendition of Ernest Bloch's Third Suite for Solo Cello before the two larger string works. The brass quintet, featured on last year's library program, opened the program with two exuberant works, Gwyneth Walker's *Raise the Roof!* from 1987 and Kevin McKee's *Escape* from 2007.

Due to his earlier health crisis, Woods himself did not play cello as he usually does on chamber programs, nor was he able to prepare the planned follow-up to last year's striking "Electric Liederland" nightcap. The latter was replaced by an enjoyable "roots music" program by bassist Craig Butterfield and multi-instrumentalist Jesse Jones. As a duo, the pair records and performs music composed by Jones that is informed by jazz, rock, classical, and traditional elements. Jones played mostly mandolin, but also banjo and guitar, in their set, which was diverse and varied in mood and tone, and was just the right length, providing satisfaction without overstaying its welcome on what was already a long evening.

The Saturday symposium, one of MahlerFest's most enduring elements, was held at a new venue this year, a wonderful and invitingly open space at the new Academy Mapleton Hill senior living community. University of Arizona Ph.D. candidate Kalanit-Liat Chalstrom opened with a thoughtfully prepared outline of Mahler's Jewish identity, along with his conversion to Catholicism, and how his music should be viewed through that identity.

University of Columbia adjunct assistant professor Marilyn McCoy, who was a MahlerFest fixture during the tenure of founder Robert Olson, made an extremely welcome return. She engagingly led the audience through the glorious Andante movement of the Sixth Symphony, with visuals from her own hike in the Dolomite mountains that were loved by Mahler.

The other two speakers were festival performers. Pianist Claiborne, as much a refreshing presence as in her performance, introduced the audience to William Grant Still and his *Dismal Swamp* while baritone Ross discussed the highly divergent paths of four composers who were affected by the Nazi regime, including Ullmann.

MahlerFest 38 lived up to its theme. Woods and his musicians have settled into a successful pattern to which audiences have responded positively. The festival's 39th edition in May 2026 will be centered on the composer's last completed symphony, the Ninth.