

CONCERT 5th Oct 2020

My reminiscence for today is back to the 70s when, in addition to playing in the ABC recording orchestra or "Showband" as it was called for TV, I was booking orchestras for many of the visiting artists from the US and UK. The ABC job was 10.00 to 5.00 allowing for evening work either in opera or, more lucratively, in backing visiting artists, a concept that was just beginning to take off in Australia. Mega venues such as the Tennis Centre and Hamer Hall were yet to be built, so the largest facilities were the Palais Theatre, Festival Hall or, in summer, Kooyong Tennis Centre Court One. I booked and played with dozens of artists up to the early 80s but the most gracious and open was our own Helen Reddy who sadly passed away this week. She was a great artist who never lost her infectious Australian 'down to earthness'. Orchestras were always announced with the Stars name attached, but she said, "no Gerald, you did the work getting the players together, it will be announced as Helen Reddy and the Gerald Keuneman Orchestra". When I was working with Australian greats like Helen, Peter Allen and Olivia Newton-John the personality of these great performers never warped into the all too often Super-Star aura.

It is a rather spurious exercise to rate symphonies in greatness but it is often done. We all have our favourites: Mozart 41, Beethoven 3, 5 and 9, Dvorák 9, Tchaikovsky 6 etc. One of mine, and certainly one of the longest, is the Mahler 2nd in C minor (Resurrection). Needing 10 horns, eight trumpets and two sets of timpani with at least five percussionists, chorus soloists and organ and running for most of an hour and a half, this is indeed a mighty work. The symphony was composed in segments, but within an overall plan and message knitting it all together. Mahler composed the first movement in September 1888 immediately after completing his first symphony. Calling the movement 'Funeral Rite', it was to be five years before he was to add two more movements, the scherzo and andante, in the summer of 1893. However, it was the following March when Mahler realised that the idea of resurrection must be the basis of the finale. This revelation occurred when Mahler attended the memorial service in Hamburg of fellow conductor and occasional critic, Hans von Bülow. There he heard a boys' choir singing a chorale setting of verses by a poet called Klopstock called "You will rise again, my mortal dust, after a short repose". Mahler added some stanzas of his own and completed the movement in December 1894. The fourth movement, 'Urlicht' (primordial light) is a setting of a poem from a collection of folk poetry called in English 'The Youth's Magic Horn' from which he had drawn previously and would do so again in his 3rd and 4th symphonies. Mahler inserted this vocal movement between the scherzo and finale and used the precedent set by Berlioz's 'Symphonie Fantastique' in planning out five movements. Beethoven had of course set the precedent for employing voices in a symphonic setting in his ninth.

The first movement marked 'allegro maestoso' is a funeral march on a grand scale in C minor. Suffice to say, it is in a complicated variation of sonata form with a secondary development section in E flat major. It is dominated by the funeral march, full of anger and bitterness, but giving way to the lyrical theme of the E major section, perhaps a memory of happier times. This 'Dies Irae' chorale is heard again later in the movement, and is the basis of an important theme in the 'finale'. The march, however, resumes. The movement finally ends with a coda, suggestive of a resignation to one's fate, with a C minor triad and descending chromatic scale. This one movement is the length of many earlier symphonies. It is a good time to pause and replenish, as the next four movements should be heard and watched without a break, as was Mahler's request.

Briefly describing the next movements, the andante is in A major with a graceful 3/8 and a lilting pastoral style. Mahler described the movement as a "blissful moment in life and a mournful memory of youth and lost innocence" Poor man, he must have suffered! After a troubled trio section the Ländler reappears, firstly recalling the ferocity of the first movement but eventually restoring tranquillity.

The scherzo is another three-in-a-bar movement but faster. Mahler drew on the melody from his 'Wunderhorn' song about St. Francis preaching to the fishes, who remain unconverted. "The world and life become a witch's brew and the Spirit of unbelief and negation has taken possession". There are squealing interjections from the E flat clarinet and other woodwind and clattering 'col legno' (striking the string with the wood of the bow).

The contralto voice of Fiona Campbell enters, singing beautifully in this performance I would suggest. This is movement number four, the Urlicht song, and begins without a break between movements by quietly sliding into position. She dispels the lack of belief, proposing instead a confidence in eternal life.

The poem 'Primordial Life' is self-explanatory and begins,
O dear red rose!
Mankind lies in greatest need! Mankind lies in greatest pain
Far rather would I be in heaven!

The number of horns and trumpets is now increased in the finale to convey the drama between heaven and earth. It begins with a violent outburst which Mahler himself calls a 'cry of despair' (Aufschrei der Verzweiflung). Woodwinds and horns quietly sound the 'redemption' theme in C major.

Offstage horns described by Mahler as 'the voice of him that cries in the wilderness' sound out and at length fanfares and trills lead to a tremendous crescendo for brass and percussion as the graves open. The development now begins and is a march of the resurrected dead to judgement.

Distant horns sound the call answered by a near trumpet and fanfares from four nearer trumpets ending with the sound of the Last Trumpet. Through this we hear birdsong (flute and piccolo), a last echo of earthly life. Incredibly softly the chorus, which by now has been sitting still for well over an hour, enter with the first lines of Klopstock's 'Resurrection Ode'. The soprano soloist joins in and then with the contralto becomes prominent with 'O glaube' (Oh believe). The soprano sings from Urlicht 'Bereite dich zu leben', (prepare to live), and we end with an incredible coda including brass, chorus, bells and organ in the Resurrection key of E flat major. In Mahler's words "An overwhelming love lightens our being".

The recording I guide you to today can be found on ABC Iview, with the West Australian Symphony Orchestra conducted by Asher Fisch. The contralto is Fiona Campbell who sings beautifully. As well as being a renowned international artist, Fiona is also a producer, ABC presenter and prolific recording artist. She has won many awards and is in high demand throughout the country and through her many engagements in Asia. The soprano is Kiandra Howarth and choir comprises the very patient WASO and UWA choruses.

I hope you give yourselves the opportunity to enjoy this performance given in Perth, the most remote capital city in the world. It is one of the greatest symphonies, here performed by a young and vibrant orchestra brimming with talent.