

by Mitch Friedfeld

It should be no mystery that Chicagoans would travel to balmy Boulder, Colorado, in mid-January, but what about everyone else? Why would many people—including a contingent from Chicago, carrying not one ski pole among them, descend on Boulder in winter from all over the United States? Not only did no one ski, some of them did not even go to the Rockies, just a few minutes from any Boulder front door. *Naturlaut* readers will know the answer: They came for possibly the world's greatest ongoing Mahler celebration, Colorado MahlerFest. This year's installment, the eighteenth, took place between January 12 and 16, 2005. The featured work was Mahler's Ninth Symphony, paired with Johannes Brahms's "Tragic" Overture.

MahlerFest is not just a concert or even a couple of them. It is nearly a full week of Mahler activities, from open rehearsals — in which participants may sit amid the orchestra — to chamber recitals, the occasional art exhibit, a day-long symposium in which some of the world's greatest Mahler experts speak and answer questions, nonstop receptions and social hours, and, the capstone, two orchestral concerts featuring symphonies by our hero. The Colorado MahlerFest Orchestra deserves special mention. This is a group of players that gets together — traveling to Boulder at their own expense — simply for the privilege of participating in MahlerFest. Far from an "amateur" or "community" orchestra, this ensemble is made up of top-flight musicians, including a former long-time horn player with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. All events except the orchestral concerts are free, and the cost of a ticket to a concert leaves participants agape — with delight. MahlerFest's driving force, Stan Ruttenberg, wrote an excellent summary of the festival's development in the last issue of *Naturlaut* (vol. 3, no. 2), which needs no amplification from me. Instead, I would like to write about this year's Fest, which continued the tradition of exceptional performances and thought provoking discussions.

Before I talk about that, however, I should point out that some of the most rewarding aspects of MahlerFest revolve around the many Mahlerians who attend every year. This was my fourth consecutive Fest, and I am a relative rookie. Several attendees have been coming for well over ten years, which makes it feel more like a family reunion—but one in which there are no clashes, only a dedication to the life and work of Mahler. Inevitably, there have been losses. This year we mourned the passing of Edward R. "Ted" Reilly, the world's greatest expert on Mahler manuscripts and a mentor to many experts, and Pat Ruttenberg, Stan's wife and MahlerFest's godmother, whose behind-the-scenes work kept MahlerFest running smoothly for years. That MahlerFest ran as well as it did this year was a real testament to Stan and his staff.

The first formal event of this year's Fest was a chamber recital in Boulder, which was repeated later in the week in a Boulder suburb. This year marked a return to roots at MahlerFest. After a couple of years of Mahler-related works—Schubert's *Winterreise*, songs by Alexander von Zemlinsky and Alma Mahler—this year it was all Mahler all the time. On Wednesday, we heard a rarity: piano versions of the three tenor songs from *Das Lied von der Erde* in a program that included several Lieder from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and selection from *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*. The tenor who performed the music from *Das Lied von der Erde* was otherwise engaged Friday, so as compensation we heard more music from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* instead. I told mezzo-soprano Clea Nemetz that it was cruel for us not to be allowed to applaud her performance of "Wo die schönen Trompeten Blasen;" it was fabulous. But special notice must go to Britton Samuel Mungo and accompanist Michael Tilley, who delivered *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* in a manner that I won't soon forget. Both singing and accompaniment were remarkable, and the two men seemed perfectly matched and true believers. It really was a major cut above.

In the evenings, we had the priceless opportunity to watch the conductor Robert Olson build the enormous edifice that is Mahler's

Ninth Symphony from the ground up. Olson invited all listeners to sit amid the orchestra on a space-available basis. This gave us access to an unusual soundscape as well as Olson's instructions to the players. "Solving Mahler's puzzles is never easy," Olson said, a thought he would develop during his lecture on Saturday. The main problem he had was getting the Orchestra to play - both the *Ländler* and waltz passages in the second movement in the Viennese style. Many times he exhorted the Orchestra to stretch out each note, to think in four-measure phrases rather than one measure at a time. The players were hitting all the right notes but were not getting the lilt, the ballroom swing. In fact, I would say that in the four Fests I've attended, no movement has required as much rehearsal time as this one. By the end of the last rehearsal I attended, on Thursday night, it still wasn't right. Would the MahlerFest Orchestra "get it" by Saturday?

Not surprisingly, the Adagio also presented its own challenges. In such a crucial spot as the first three measures, Olson micromanaged everything. He insisted — citing Bruno Walter's 1938 recording — that the first measure should be played angrily: "Think of the first bar as being very angry, until the diminuendo starts...and then your heart rests." At the first note of measure 2, a C flat, Olson began the gradual diminuendo. This is in the score, but Olson *really* emphasized it. In performance, he cued every note of the ensuing downward scale, a practice he would continue literally throughout the 25 minutes — but only 185 measures! — of the Finale. There is so much drama packed into those few seconds, but they were played with such intensity that we knew the Finale would put us through the wringer as Mahler intended.

The symposium was, like every year, thought-provoking and informal; all speakers illustrated their talks with musical examples and participated in excellent give-and-take discussions. Kelly Dean Hansen, a doctoral candidate at the University of Colorado and author of the detailed musical analyses in at least the last four MahlerFest booklets, led off the symposium with a talk on "What Makes a Symphony 'Tragic.'" Kelly identified seven categories of tragic, then proceeded to compare Brahms' "Tragic" Overture to this model and to Beethoven's "Coriolan" Overture. He noted that the "Tragic" Overture's first two chords are similar not just to Beethoven's "Coriolan" Overture, but also to the falling motif at the start of Mahler's First Symphony, and that Mahler had conducted the "Coriolan" Overture many times. Space forbids a fuller description of Kelly's talk, but it was noteworthy because it was the only talk that discussed the "other" work on the program. Why was Brahms's "Tragic" Overture chosen as filler for the Ninth? In her pre-concert talk, Professor Marilyn McCoy noted the sometimes-cordial relations between Brahms and Mahler, and that both pieces spend much of the time in D major and D minor.

The second speaker was Stephen E. Hefling, one of the most widely published Mahler experts around and a MahlerFest regular. Not only is Hefling the author of the Cambridge Music Guide to *Das Lied von der Erde*, he also wrote the article on the Ninth in the Oxford University Press *Mahler Companion*. So, especially in light of the farewell motifs present in both those works, MahlerFest could hardly have engaged a speaker more qualified to speak on Mahler's Ninth Symphony. The main topic of Hefling's talk was possibly the biggest extramusical question of this symphony: What does it "mean?" In short, Hefling took issue with the "demythologizers" who claim that the Ninth is not a "farewell" symphony.

The autobiographical factor cannot be ignored, Hefling maintained. The events of 1907 had a huge impact on Mahler, and by the end of summer 1907, he was seriously depressed. Hefling also commented, "I don't think we can make light of Mahler's heart murmur." After composing his Eighth Symphony, Mahler was never to make a similarly grandiloquent gesture. As Mahler's music should be viewed as the transformation of personal experience into musical creation, the events of his life cannot help but be reflected in his works, and his works must have stemmed from the events of his life.

But the biggest challenge to the demythologizers is Mahler's expression markings on the score. Hefling noted that the famous musical quote of Johann Strauss, Jr.'s waltz "Freuet Euch des Lebens" ("Enjoy Life," of all things) comes right where Mahler wrote "O days of youth! Vanished!"

in the draft score of the Ninth Symphony. As "Freuet Euch des Lebens" was written to commemorate the opening of the building that housed the Conservatory, the music and the handwritten lament must be related and must both indicate a farewell.

Hefling also pointed out the significance of Mahler's use of the German word *esterbend* (dying away). Noting that there is no practical difference between that word and the more frequently used Italian word, *morendo*, Hefling said that Mahler used *esterbend* in only four places: near the end of "Urlicht" in the Second, near the end of the slow movement of the Fourth, near the end of "Der Abschied," and at the end of the Ninth. It was no coincidence that the latter two instances came after Mahler knew he was in health trouble, and that the Fourth was composed near the time of Gustav Mahler's life-threatening hemorrhage that occurred in February 1901.

Concluding, Hefling said that Mahler's quotation of music from his own *Kindertotenlieder* near the end of the Ninth's Adagio clearly refutes the revisionists' argument that the Ninth is not a "farewell symphony." The Ninth, according to Hefling, is a "subdued counterpart" to the ending of *Das Lied von der Erde*. Therefore, the farewell story of the Ninth is no myth; it will always be a germane part of the story of the symphony.

Next came Colorado University music professor Steven Bruns, who delivered Stuart Feder's paper, "Mahler: Mourning and Consolation." In 1909 Feder holds, Mahler's most precious possession was time. Mahler may not have been on death's door, but he was acutely aware that the time available to him was not unlimited; hence, he would never again take two summers to complete a work.

"The theme of mourning would richly inform the Ninth," Feder wrote. But mourning as a theme was not new with this symphony. It first showed up after the 1901 health crisis. That led to the *Kindertotenlieder*, which are as much about parents' mourning and consolation as they are about the death of children. There is also a feeling of loss as embodied in Mahler's abandonment of the *Wunderhorn* style. "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen," the song that Mahler famously said embodied himself, similarly evoked consolation. And Mahler's most subtle work up to that time, "Der Abschied," is also permeated with the idea of consolation. So if the Ninth Symphony indeed takes up the same themes as *Das Lied von der Erde*, it is important to note the commonalities between the two works. Feder pointed out the "subtle melancholia" in *Das Lied von der Erde* and the crumbling of structure in "Der Abschied;" both of these can be seen in the Ninth. Mourning is only fitfully addressed in *Das Lied von der Erde*, he maintained, but it continues in the symphony.

The feeling of consolation reaches its peak in the *Adagio*. A key characteristic of consolation is reunion with someone once thought lost; this is embodied by the *Kindertotenlieder* quotation at the end of the movement. The music of the *Adagio*, with its frequent restating of theme, makes you feel like you are being held, Feder wrote, and this is reinforced by the relative absence of violent, dissonant music. The extreme slowness, especially in the last two pages, makes you feel like you are holding on to each moment as it slips away.

Marilyn McCoy then led us on a journey through the first movement of Mahler's Ninth Symphony, in a paper entitled, "Stepping, Sliding, and Soaring into Mahler's Ninth." Her use of the word "journey" was deliberate, and she pointed out that marking "Andante comodo" means a "comfortable walking pace." The word "longing" is often heard in discussion about the Ninth, but how did Mahler express it? Marilyn noted that the starting key of the *Andante* is D major; the first utterance of the violins, which is repeated throughout the movement, descends from the third to the second note of the D major scale. But that line never goes down to the tonic. It is true that there are some feelings of repose in the movement when the tonic is occasionally reached, but that mood is then immediately disrupted until the very end of the movement, when we finally rest on D. But even that is unsettled: the last note is in a very high register, played by the piccolo; the feeling of repose is undermined because that note is in a different register than the notes that led up to it. And there is something else to think about in that last measure: Is the wide-open sonority—piccolo, above cello

harmonic at pianissimo—a reminiscence of the tuning of the universe in the First Symphony?

McCoy was followed by none other than the conductor Robert Olson, who talked about some of the decisions he had to make in conducting the Ninth Symphony. In his introductory remarks, Olson said he starts preparation for a given MahlerFest eighteen months in advance. He goes through the score measure by measure to see what challenges exist and how to address them. Now there's dedication to the Mahlerian cause!

Olson provided a seven-page handout of what he perceived as the key decisions, which he illustrated with musical examples. Space unfortunately does not permit a thorough review of his talk; suffice to say that this was a fascinating insight into what it means to be a conductor, and of this Symphony in particular. One insight I found most interesting was Olson's citation of Jascha Horenstein as being the conductor who most scrupulously tries to stick to the score; he considered Bernstein to deviate the most. Anyone who thinks that conducting is just a matter of waving a stick should have heard this talk and watched Olson in action throughout the week.

After the seminar, it was time for dinner and more stories—the unofficial motto of Colorado MahlerFest is, "MahlerFest—It's Not *All* about Food"—and then, what we'd all been waiting for: the orchestral concerts.

Above, I asked myself: Would the orchestra "get it" by Saturday? They would. The MahlerFest Orchestra assimilated Olson's instructions — exaggerate every accent and every short note — that could denote lilt or color, and orchestra members and audience alike were convinced that we were hearing an authentic representation of Mahler's wishes. Both performances were exceptional. There were a couple of "live music making" moments on Saturday, but not serious enough to take away from the overall thrill. As expected, those glitches did not recur on Sunday, and I am sure an excellent recording will result. If anything, the intensity of the final two movements on Sunday was even greater than Saturday. All of us were out of breath after the frenzied conclusion of the Rondo, and the angry start of the *Adagio* must have been exactly what Olson, and Mahler, wanted. A special commendation must go to first trumpet Keith Benjamin, whose start of the Rondo, the military tattoos in the *Andante* — Mahler's last, wistful look at *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*? — and above all his French-horn-like passage in the third movement were note-perfect and indescribably atmospheric. The audience passed the test as well: There was no early applause, and I had to believe that Mahler's message had resonated with listeners once more. When Olson acknowledged the real hero of the week by holding up the score of the Symphony, the ovation intensified even more— as it should be.

If I had to mention one thing that typified the week, it would be measure 49 in the *Adagio*. The first violins are told to play "molto espressivo." The violas are instructed to play "nicht espressivo." And the cellos are marked, "ohne Ausdruck" (without expression). Look at those subtleties of meaning, and all the while Mahler had never heard the Ninth. It was only in his head. That was the jaw-dropping context of the entire week, and when I left Macky Auditorium after the last orchestral concert I couldn't help saying to anyone who could hear, "That's our guy, and that's why we love him."

This was the best Colorado MahlerFest I've been to but I say that every year. This is an event that—for the recitals, symposiums, concerts, schmoozing, and most of all for the family—should be experienced at least once by anyone who calls himself a Mahlerian. Also, the program notes from past MahlerFests are online at www.mahlerfest.org.

