

Resurrected and Transformed: Allentown Symphony, Chorus to perform monumental Mahler

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Why do people write music? Why do people search for a meaning of life beyond themselves? What is the purpose of our time on earth? What legacy will we leave behind? And what might we experience after death?

These are questions that have haunted musicians, artists and creative souls for generations and for centuries. We are continually searching: Pursuing our never-ending quest for answers that we will never confirm.

Remarkably, Richard Strauss, 24, and Gustav Mahler, 28, were both writing music with these thoughts in mind in 1888. Strauss was working on his tone poem, "Death and Transfiguration," which the Allentown Symphony performed in its March concerts program, and Mahler was working on a tone poem, "Todtenfeier," which translates as "Funeral Rites." This piece became the first movement of his 2nd Symphony, which was eventually titled the "Resurrection Symphony."

Mahler wrote the following description of this work:

"We stand by the coffin of a well-loved person. His life struggles, passions and aspirations once more, for the last time, pass before our mind's eye. And now in this moment of gravity and emotion which convulses our deepest being ... our heart is gripped by a dreadfully serious voice ... What now? What is this life -- and this death? Do we have an existence beyond it? Is all this only a confused dream, or do life and this death have meaning?"

These thoughts became the framework of a massive piece in five movements that is now the most played and most beloved symphony that Mahler ever wrote.

When we think of Gustav Mahler today, we think of a man who was revolutionary in his vision for symphonic music. He was so revolutionary that his symphonies really did not become a part of the standard repertoire until about 50 years after his death in 1911.

Mahler pushed the boundaries of the symphonic form, both in the numbers of musicians involved and in the length of his symphonies.

He was known for superimposing conflicting melodies on top of each other, for abrupt mood changes in his music, for extremes of register in the instrumentation and for his lilting use of folk melodies and popular tunes.

Mahler was also an expert at scoring for the brass, and knew how to write some really good marches. In fact, some of his melodies were very carefully borrowed and appear disguised in some of the popular films of today.

Some say that it was Leonard Bernstein who resurrected Mahler and his symphonies and brought them to the public's attention in the 1960s, but in actuality, it was probably the invention of the long-playing record in the early 1950s that allowed for Mahler's complete symphonies to be enjoyed by music lovers in their homes.

The Symphony No. 2 is massive and much of the focus is on the final movement, where Mahler mimics Beethoven's 9th Symphony and adds in the solo voices of a soprano and mezzo-soprano, along with a full symphony chorus. My favorite moment in the piece is when the orchestra stops playing and from a moment of silence rises the a cappella voices of the choir singing "Aufersteh'n, ja aufersteh'n" ("Arise, yes, arise").

The text is drawn from three sources. The mezzo soprano solo in the fourth movement, "Urlicht" ("Primal Light") is from a set of German folk poems, "Des Knaben Wunderhorn."

The chorus entrance in the fifth movement is a text by the German poet, Friedrich Klopstock, called the "Resurrection Ode." This is followed by a reworking of another poem by Klopstock, "Oh, glaube, mein Herz" ("Believe my heart") with additional text which ends the piece written by Mahler himself.

After the first complete performance of his Symphony No. 2, Mahler wrote, "The whole thing sounds as though it came to us from some other world. And I think there is no one who can resist it. One is battered to the ground and then raised on angels' wings to the highest heights."

The Allentown Symphony Orchestra performs Gustav Mahler's Resurrection Symphony No. 2 at 7:30 p.m. April 8 and 3 p.m. April 9 in Miller Symphony Hall, Allentown. The concerts feature the Allentown Symphony Chorus and vocal soloists Charlotte Daw Paulsen, mezzo soprano, and Ashley Milanese, soprano.

Mahler's symphony indeed comes from a higher place of inspiration. Hearing Mahler's Symphony No. 2 performed live is a rare treat that doesn't come around very often because of the number of musicians involved on the stage. Our performance will feature more than 150 people.

Because it is such a rare treat and such an inspirational piece of music, I have known people that have driven two to three hours to hear a performance of Mahler's 2nd Symphony.

It is really a life-changing experience to hear the piece live, and one that you will not want to miss.

"Meet the Artist," noon April 7, with Diane Wittry, Allentown Symphony Orchestra Music Director and Conductor; Eduardo Azatti, Allentown Symphony Chorus Master; Charlotte Daw Paulsen, mezzo soprano; Ashley Milanese, soprano, and Todd Cravens, ASO Conducting Fellow. The talk is free and open to the public.

Diane Wittry is Music Director and Conductor of the Allentown Symphony Orchestra, Artistic Director (USA), International Cultural Exchange Program for Classical Musicians, Sarajevo

Philharmonic, Bosnia, and author, “Beyond the Baton” and “Baton Basics” (both, Oxford University Press).

Allentown Symphony Orchestra concert tickets: Miller Symphony Hall Box Office, 23 N. Sixth St., Allentown; allentownsymphony.org; 610-432-6715