

Concert review: ASO triumphs in Mahler's Third Symphony

By Pierre Ruhe

For the AJC

11:34 a.m. Friday, March 5, 2010

Seven decades and a world away from Flower Power and the Age of Aquarius, Gustav Mahler imagined his own hippy-trippy ode to love, nature and the universe. He called it his Third Symphony, and its various subtitles set the mood: "What the flowers in the field tell me," "What love tells me."

Completed in 1896, the six-movement symphony was finally performed whole in 1902 and brought into the classical repertoire only in the swingin' 1960s -- an era sympathetic to Mahler's blend of idealism and hedonism.

It's the longest work in the standard orchestral repertoire and costly to perform. Understandably, we rarely hear it played live; the Atlanta Symphony last programmed it in 1997.

Thursday in Symphony Hall, Robert Spano conducted Mahler's mighty Third in a 105-minute triumph of orchestral unity and cosmic communication. At times it had the freshness and spontaneity of a world premiere. It's an unmissable event of the season.

From the opening horn calls – magnificently dispatched – it was clear Spano's reading would resist all sorts of Mahlerian conventions.

The conductor abstracted what are often treated as literal scenes from real life -- where harsh winter gives way to verdant spring with its bird calls, village bands, folks tunes, sudden rain showers, waves lapping on a lake and awesome mountain vistas.

Instead, conductor and orchestra found their own path inside. It was a modern view, more psychological and architectural than nostalgic or sentimental. No small details were overlooked. A little piccolo twitter (a bird in a hedge, perhaps?) sounded like part of the structure, not an ornament.

Mahler was famously neurotic, obsessed even as a young man with his own death and his place in afterlife. In the Third Symphony, Spano seemed to explore his inner life and mind, not external stimulations that are rooted in a time and a place from the 1890s.

The massive opening movement started with extreme anxiety, like we were careening toward the Apocalypse. Even when that mood broke and life was renewed, the sense of architecture and forward-progress was apparent -- with the woodwinds sculpting their lines beautifully in the "Flowers" movement.

Ruxandra Donose, a Romanian mezzo-soprano with a glowing operatic tone, sang lines from Nietzsche's "Midnight Song" with tenderness and passion. The women's chorus and Gwinnett Young Singers -- mostly girls, although the score calls for a treble boy choir -- sang with understated sweetness.

Spano last conducted Mahler's Third with the Brooklyn Philharmonic in the spring of 2001. Since then he's led Wagner's four-opera "Ring"

Cycle twice with the Seattle Opera, and you can hear this experience in his Mahler. He paced the symphony's fourth and fifth movements on the slow side, searching for gravitas, and they were intensely memorable.

In the massive finale, a deep adagio, Spano put aside his baton and shaped the phrases by hand like a potter at the wheel. All the anxiety from the opening made sense, where the composer tried to explain "What love tells me." Conductor and orchestra didn't have any answers but turned it back on itself, posing many meaningful questions.

Pierre Ruhe is classical music critic of www.ArtsCriticATL.com

CONCERT REVIEW

Mahler's Symphony No. 3. Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. 8 p.m. Saturday. Symphony Hall, 1280 Peachtree St. N.E., 404-733-5000, www.atlantasymphony.org