

THE BALTIMORE SUN

Tim Smith | Music

October 20, 2010

A brisk, bracing Mahler 8 from Gergiev, Mariinsky Orchestra in Washington

In the midst of a substantial Mahler fest in New York, Valery Gergiev and his mighty Mariinsky Orchestra zipped into D.C. for a performance of the composer's Symphony No. 8 on Tuesday night at the Kennedy Center.

There are never enough opportunities for live encounters with the so-called Symphony of a Thousand, so this was a must for any serious Mahler nut. It was more like Symphony of the Three Hundred in this presentation by the **Washington Performing Arts Society**, but that number of performers provided more than enough vocal and orchestral fire power. Joining the Mariinsky instrumentalists were singers from the Mariinsky Theatre, the Choral Arts Society of Washington, Orfeon Pamplones from Spain, and Children's Chorus of Washington, all packed tightly onto the stage and the balcony overhead. (The only thing missing was the text. Maybe the whole house knew the Latin hymn and the German words from Part II of Goethe's "Faust" by heart, but I rather doubt it.)

Although I had reservations about some of Gergiev's interpretive approach, the experience ended up reaching quite a peak of expressive force and sheer decibels. The last half hour or so were truly magical.

This was a brisk Mahler 8. Gergiev tore through Part I, "Veni, Creator Spiritus," at a bracing clip. I wouldn't have minded more relaxation in places, but the primary message of this movement -- "Light the light of our senses, pour love into our hearts" -- emerged compellingly. The conductor also seemed in a hurry at the start of Part II. (I still vividly recall how Lorin Maazel, in his final concert as music director of the New York Philharmonic a few years ago, drew out this long orchestral passage to suspenseful and gripping effect, each tremolo from the violins, each pizzicato from the lower strings registering deeply.) Gergiev showed far more interest in the remainder of the symphony. In masterful form, he shaped the music's final rapturous ascent, slowly building toward Mahler's stunning depiction of the ecstatic loosening of earthy bonds.

There was some untidy playing by the orchestra, but also a lot of richly expressive work, including some shining violin and viola solos and warm-hued woodwinds. The choruses handled their demanding assignments with distinction; voice sections in the adult choirs were smoothly balanced, articulation clear, dynamic contrasts sensitively delineated. **The children sounded charming (they cupped their hands over the mouths to produce a little more volume).**

By and large, the solos singers came through in style. Lyudmila Dudinova sang with particular radiance; her fellow sopranos -- Anastasia Kalagina and Viktoria Yastrebova -- were not far behind in warmth of tone and phrase. Bass Yevgeny Nikitin and, especially, baritone Alexei Markov produced vivid phrasing. Olga Savova's burnished mezzo was another plus. Tenor August Amonov was nearly defeated by the punishing high notes (like Strauss, Mahler expected the unlikely, if not the impossible, from tenors), but he regained his footing and delivered the stirring "Blicket auf" passage quite affectingly.

Mahler's Eighth, conjuring visions of redemption and the eternal life-force that might melt the most determined agnostic, remains one of the most impressive works of Western music. It felt great to be in its presence again.