

REVIEW: Mahler Players



The Mahler Players taking a break from rehearsals. Picture: Callum Mackay

The Mahler Players: Aaron Copland *Appalachian Spring*, Gustav Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen/Songs Of A Wayfarer* (arranged by Arnold Schoenberg) and Gustav Mahler *Symphony No 1* (arranged by Klaus Simon)
Nairn Community And Arts Centre

The MAHLER PLAYERS' Nairn audience couldn't even wait through the usual breath of silence you get at the end of a classical piece before furious clapping and stamping of feet began last Friday.

But the musicians, baritone Douglas Nairne and Players' musical director and conductor Tomas Leakey more than deserved the response for a performance that was joyful, thrilling and spring-filled.

From the first piece, Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, in the highest level of seats at the back of Nairn's Community And Arts Centre, you could hear a blackbird singing along outside in quiet moments.

The bird's song instantly suggests the new pleasures bright spring evenings bring in the Highlands and there's that same sense of a new world beginning as Copland's music for Martha Graham's ballet opens.

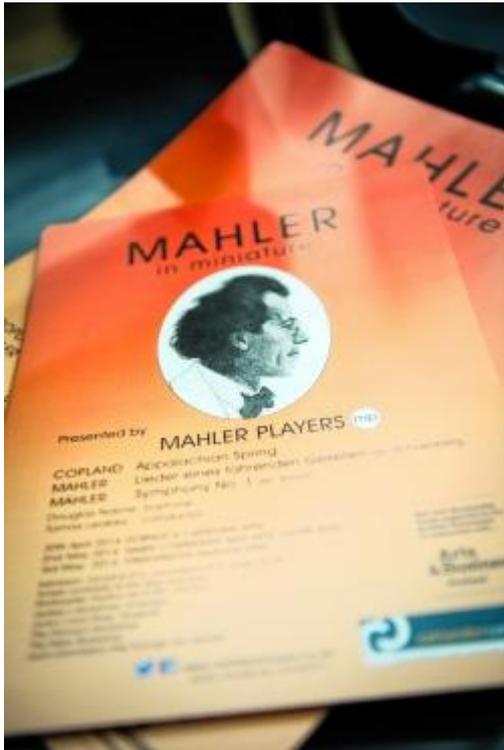
But as the enlightening Players' programme notes informed – it was Graham's dancing Copland saw in his mind's eye as he wrote, rather than spring or the Appalachians, the setting in the ballet for an American pioneer couple about to start their life together.

But that mood of expectation is there from the start – as the first long notes are picked up by the woodwind – flute, oboe, bassoon, then piano.

The Players - befitting for their Mahler In Miniature tag as a chamber-sized number - performed an arrangement for a small group of musicians that Copland himself had created back in the 1980s from his original chamber ballet score.

Conducted by Tomas Leakey with unshowy control, the 13 musicians for this piece were unity personified during the testing syncopated stops and starts of the increasingly urgent, jazz-influenced composition.

The tempo is intentionally fluid at times and the dynamics helped demonstrate the Players' masterly gear control, from pianissimo whispers to impressively swelling volume.



With the venue's almost bird's eye view of the players, it was easy to watch the music passing between the instruments and sections – and how each 'voice' blended and also played against the others. The only downside was heat built up as the night went on, though it didn't seem to take too much of a toll on the instruments – bar a quick retune before the symphony's third movement.

Folk music is one of the links between the works the Players had chosen for their programme. In the Copland the Shaker tune *Simple Gifts* (the melody of *Lord Of The Dance*) brings the human to the picture of nature.

In the third movement of Mahler's Symphony No 1, it's the *Frere Jacques* tune that is built in, arranged as a funeral march. The almost post-modern referencing of the existing tune makes Mahler's theatrical storytelling – with its huntsman's halloo and its klezmer band interlude – cinema for the ears and a strangely familiar technique to 21st century music fans used to the mash-up.

The Players' handy English translation of Mahler's own lyrics for a despairing spurned lover in *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (*Songs Of A Wayfarer*) meant if you were a certain age, you could find yourself wryly grinning at the overwrought sentiments. But there was no mistaking the genuine emotion baritone Douglas Nairne aroused with his sensitive but full-blooded performance ending with the love-lorn wanderer finding a kind of peace, sleeping beneath the blossoming linden tree, trying to persuade himself – and Mahler, maybe his listeners – that all is well with the world.

The Players' Mahler In Miniature two-year journey is a particularly powerful idea for anyone who comes to Mahler's work with fresh ears that don't miss a favourite recorded version here or a previous live concert experience there.

With the Players' seductive soundtrack into Mahlerworld – and an essential roadmap to it via the programme notes – why wouldn't you get on the bus?

Margaret Chrystall

**For more info and details of the group's next three concerts in September, go to:
www.mahlerplayers.co.uk and follow on: www.facebook.com/mahlerplayers and on
Twitter: @mahlerplayers**