

Pioneering Copland meets mini-Mahler

Masterminded by Thomas Leakey, the '*Mahler in Miniature*' project is an exploration of reduced orchestration versions of large-scale works of the late 19th and 20th centuries. As the name suggests, the Austrian composer Gustav Mahler is at the heart of the enterprise, and two of his works featured in the latest round of concerts by the Mahler Players. The rarity of full-scale performances of Mahler's work due to the huge scale of his orchestrations – one of the motivations behind the project - meant that chamber versions appeared quite soon after the composer's death, and it is these chamber incarnations that the *Mahler in Miniature* concerts draw upon.

The main work in the recent set of concerts was Mahler's *First Symphony*, a work of such gigantic proportions that it acquired the name the '*Titan*'. Even in Klaus Simon's 2008 reduced orchestration, this was the work which involved all 22 of the Mahler Players. Although not yet a 'sound universe' as Mahler termed some of his later symphonies, the First Symphony ranges far and wide for its subject matter, invoking nature, quoting the composer's own songs and encompassing death and the struggle for life. Some impassioned playing from the MP strings, particularly in the histrionic Finale, was well supported by an accomplished woodwind section, occasionally dramatically raising their bells in response to the 'Schalltrichter hoch!' instruction much beloved of the composer. Incisive brass and percussion punctuation heightened the drama, and notwithstanding a few cracked notes due to pressure or exhaustion – this was a long and demanding programme – the overall impression was thrilling. However, perhaps the most revelatory section was the laconic slow movement, *The Huntsman's Funeral Procession*, where the reduced orchestration revealed more of the intriguing inner workings of the music.

The first half had concluded with Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, a set of four orchestral songs to texts by the composer in the naïve folk style of the *Knaben Wunderhorn* collection, which he would draw on extensively elsewhere in his work. The Mahler Players were using a reduced score by Mahler's younger Austrian contemporary Arnold Schoenberg, surprising in its sparseness, with only two woodwind and no brass parts. The slack was ably taken up by Fiona Sellar on the piano and Gordon Tocher on electronic keyboard and harmonium, who provided much of the missing texture. The guest singer, baritone Douglas Nairne, brought a vivid measure of drama to these four contrasting songs, although his positioning seemed slightly to unsettle the sense of ensemble in the strings. A varied if somewhat underemployed percussion section added suitable spice to these engaging performances.

The concert had opened with to my mind the musical highlight of the evening, both from the point of view of instrumentation and performance. The American composer Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring* is the archetypal musical evocation of pioneering life on the frontier, and sealed his reputation as the voice of unspoiled America. Composed for a small chamber ensemble to accompany Martha Graham's dance company, the work is perhaps most familiar in Copland's own much-expanded orchestral suite. Fortunately, he later returned to the bare bones of his original score to produce the magical chamber suite which the Mahler Players performed. Unlike the rest of the programme, this then was an original work in its original scoring, pared

down like its pioneering subject to absolute essentials – in the words of the Shaker Hymn which brings the work to a conclusion, *'Tis a gift to be simple.'* The MP strings, joined by flute, clarinet, bassoon and piano, produced a definitive and deeply involving account of this magical music. Indeed this was a concert full of magical moments, and whether you prefer your Mahler full-scale on CD or are prepared to accept reduced orchestrations in exchange for the thrill of live performance, the Mahler Players are to be congratulated for exploring this rich and little-exploited vein of musical history.

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