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Nec Youth Orchestra: Living Mahler

Mahler's Ninth Symphony: extraordinary emotional demands, extraordinary technical demands. Could the New England Conservatory Youth Orchestra comply? With the help of Benjamin Zander, one of the world's half-dozen finest Mahler conductors, it did last Friday at Jordan Hall. Missed notes? Lots -- but then, Jascha Horenstein's sublime 1966 performance with the London Symphony is no model of accuracy and ensemble. When you have a Zander on the podium, the real question is whether the orchestra will watch the conductor -- because so many orchestras don't. This one did.

The program offered a Mahler Ninth first, at least in my experience: an opening piece, the world premiere of Cynthia Wong's Piano Concerto No. 2, with the composer as soloist. Three movements, 11 minutes -- Ms. Wong doesn't waste time. Despite the echoes of Prokofiev (the nervous, march-like tramp), Ravel (jazzy brass), and Satie (broken chords from the left hand in the slow movement), the piece evinced a sure-footed integrity, and Wong was an extraordinarily self-possessed, self-effacing soloist who scarcely took her eyes off Zander and the orchestra. I wouldn't mind hearing it again.

The Mahler made for an instructive contrast with Zander's Philharmonia recording of the Ninth for Telarc. On a wretchedly humid night, the French horns were in continual difficulty, hitting bottom when they couldn't define the drop to the dominant that resolves the first movement. Well, it's a wretchedly difficult instrument. What counted was Zander doing his E.T.A. Hoffmann imitation on the podium, now sentimental, now sarcastic, and the *sound* of the orchestra: raw, rough, individual. The Philharmonia has more technique, more finesse, more nuance -- but it also has the professional blahs. For long stretches, I enjoyed this performance more than the Telarc CD (which would probably rate in the top 10 of recorded Mahler Ninths -- and I have upwards of 40, so I ought to know), its bad moments more than offset by the good: the bump-and-grind of the bass clarinet at bar 121 of the Andante; the snicker of stopped French horns immediately thereafter and the way open horns fade into stopped at bar 238; the distinctive personalities of ländler, waltz, and minuet in the dance movement; the limpid brilliance of the Scherzo's high-speed apotheosis; the bassoon's

expressionless inscrutability in the Adagio; everywhere the burnished growl of trombones; and everywhere Zander's passion. Only the closing page -- "extremely slow" -- seemed less than coherent. Or maybe, at the end of a long, muggy day, I was less than coherent.

Certainly I was less than pleased to hear Zander announce, as a kind of encore, the "traditional farewell" piece for the graduating orchestra members. Something to follow that entrails-on-sleeve last page of the Ninth? "This better be *Nimrod* or I'm leaving," I muttered darkly to myself. What other than that section from Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, perhaps the most beautiful four minutes of music written in the 20th century, could follow Mahler's Ninth? *Nimrod* it was. By this time, I was alert again, just as well, since Zander, conducting with only his right hand and producing swell after swell, delivered the finest performance of this piece I've ever heard.

-- Jeffrey Gantz



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