

Review: Symphony rises to challenge of Mahler's third

R.F. Yeager, Special to the News Journal Published 11:45 a.m. CT March 6, 2017 | Updated 12:35 p.m. CT March 6, 2017



(Photo: Jimmy Nguyen / online@pnj.com)

Saturday, the Pensacola Symphony Orchestra brought Gustav Mahler's "Symphony No. 3" to the Saenger Theatre. For those unfamiliar with this music, putting such an accomplishment into context might be helpful.

With an average performance time above 95 minutes, Mahler's third is the longest single composition in today's standard symphonic repertoire. The instrumentation is unparalleled, including (in part) four flutes, four oboes, five clarinets, four bassoons, eight horns, four trumpets, four trombones, a tuba, two timpani, a bass drum, multiple snare drums (one played with birch twigs), cymbals, tam tam, triangle, tambourine, two glockenspiels, two harps and a vastly expanded string section. All those the audience can see. Audible but unseen offstage are also tuned hand bells and a "posthorn," an antique instrument often replaced by a cornet or flugelhorn. (On Saturday, it was a D trumpet.)

Nor is the human voice overlooked: the score calls for an alto solo (sung on Saturday by the mezzo soprano Susan Platts) and choral parts, performed on Saturday by the UWF Women's Chorus and the Pensacola Children's Chorus, arrayed in the box seating, stage right. At one point, a hundred-plus musicians filled the stage.

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This means that a performance of Mahler's third is as much a logistical challenge as it is a musical one. It demands qualities of leadership in the director akin to a general's, managing an invasion. In Maestro Peter Rubardt, Pensacola — Symphony and city — has been gifted for the past 20 years with precisely such a leader. It is altogether fitting, as the PSO celebrates this milestone in Rubardt's career, that Mahler's vast masterpiece should be part of the season. In so many ways, this work showcases the conductor. Unlike many symphonies that foreground single-instrument solos, and are memorable through them, Mahler's design can only be achieved via the subsumption of all the players within the evolving whole. It is a symphony of predominantly "langsam" ("slow") tempos, and frequenting low registers as well, and often played very softly. A hundred musicians must "sing," as it were, in a single voice — something harder to do, "langsam" and quietly. Crafting, shaping and controlling that "voice" for more than an hour and a half without an intermission is a feat of the baton — and seldom has Rubardt wielded it more effectively, to more expressive, powerful results, than on Saturday evening at the Saenger.

Necessarily, even amidst such intentional unity, Mahler gave ripe moments for particular instruments to shine. First among these is the alto soloist in movement four. Susan Platts was simply spectacular, both in range and in control. Principal violin and concertmaster Leonid Yanovskiy had two brilliant moments, in movements two and four, as did principal trombone Bret Barrow in movement one. But for this reviewer, the finest work was done invisibly: Dale Riegler, principal trumpet, playing offstage (per Mahler's directions) the posthorn part on his D trumpet — so melodiously, sweetly, movingly, that out there somewhere, Mahler must have smiled.

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