

Managing Mahler Magnificently: The Quad City Symphony, April 5 at the Adler Theatre

Written by Frederick Morden
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From an Adler Theatre stage filled with more than 200 musicians, the Quad City Symphony forcefully premiered Gustav Mahler's monumental *Symphony No. 3* on April 5. Moving from the dissonance of uncertainty to the transcendental climatic moments of harmonic resolution, the concert was abundant in gravitas, contrasts, and drama that revealed a thorough artistic vision from Music Director and Conductor Mark Russell Smith and included a valuable collaborative process with other area musical organizations.

There are important reasons why it took the Quad City Symphony 99 years to perform this epic Mahler composition and why it is infrequently played by other organizations. "It is gigantic in every detail," Smith said in a pre-concert discussion.

Approaching 100 minutes, this symphony is the longest in the classical-music repertoire. (The first movement alone is longer than Beethoven's iconic *Fifth Symphony*.)

It requires a massive orchestra: an augmented string section, twice the normal complement of winds, off-stage soloists, an alto vocal soloist, a children's choir, and a large adult women's chorus.

The symphony is also saturated with detailed musical instructions. In some sections, every note requires a particular nuance, articulation, or dynamic variation.

But arguably the most intimidating element of this symphony is clarifying the meaning of the depth and breadth of its subject matter, what Mahler called “The World” – all of nature and what it communicates to us about life. Discarded before publication, Mahler’s original subtitles for the six movements identified what his music depicted, from “What the Flowers in the Meadow Tell Me” to “What Man Tells Me” to “What Love Tells Me.”

“Such ideas and music deserve all the technical means at our disposal,” Smith said. And with ample instrumentalists, singers, and choir directors on board, he said that the time was right to bring Mahler’s symphony to the Quad Cities area.

The performance was an affirmation of the conductor’s and orchestra’s capacity to produce stunning presentations of large-scale, complex music. For me, the first movement (written in sonata form) was unquestionably the highlight of the concert. The comprehensive control over contrasting expressive details marked in the notations made Mahler’s extreme and subtle differences in the musical characterizations vivid and persuasive.

The blistering horn declaration set the tone of the symphony with unmistakable gravity. Returning repeatedly throughout the first movement, the eight horns were precise and musical, picking out awkward intervals with skill while maintaining an edge to the musical narrative.

The expansive solo trombone recitative conveyed a message of anguish and suffering in striking relief to fancifully playful tunes in the oboe and solo violin interspersed in the first movement. The entire trombone section was impressive, bringing both the brilliant fanfare elements and contrasting dark, funeral-march-like triplets into musical focus.

Even the adjustment of stage position to accommodate the large orchestra dramatically supported the clarity of subtle timbre changes, especially in the string section. Moved out from behind the proscenium arch to the edge of the stage, the strings sounded more immediate with a broader and more vibrant tonal spectrum, infusing human qualities – moaning and groaning, ebbing and flowing – into huge musical sighs of expression in Mahler’s music. With their sound holes pointed toward the audience, the first violins, cellos, and basses pushed a thicker, more robust sound directly into the hall.

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Mahler's grand musical ideas were so convincingly played with clarity and intensity that the audience burst into sustained applause after the first movement. A compelling visceral moment, it was Mahler, Smith, the orchestra, and a spontaneous audience at their best.

The remainder of the symphony was a more distinct representation of Mahler's programmatic narrative, with specific elements of nature clearly depicted in more subtle changes of sound from the orchestra.

In the third movement, the off-stage trumpet solo worked well with the on-stage horn duet, and in the extreme dynamic changes the orchestra was balanced.

The differences in the tone color and the accuracy of pitch and German diction in the voices made the contents of the text clearer. From the dark recesses of the low, slow, brooding cellos and basses in the beginning of the fourth movement, guest mezzo-soprano Adriana Zabala's haunting "O Mensch" announced a shift inward from depictions of nature to the wisdom of mankind in the roundelay from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Even in her softness of tone, Zabala's sound cut straight to the back of the Adler.

In contrast, the clear, light vocal timbre produced by the Quad City Symphony Youth Choir and the Quad City Women's Choir (made up of women from the Augustana Choir, Quad City Choral Arts, the Handel Oratorio Society, the Jenny Lind Vocal Ensemble, and the Pleasant Valley High School Chamber Choir) was appropriately angelic. The tonal balance between the singers worked well when they all sang together, and the sound quality of the melodic arches provided a light, airy sonic color that floated over the orchestra.

The last movement, beginning with the string section, was a reverently and intensely played instrumental hymn to platonic love. As more instruments were folded into the slowly, majestically building sequences of overlapping themes, the eloquent and comforting musical climax brought Mahler's grand expression of "The World" to a powerful conclusion.

Frederick Morden is a retired orchestra-music director, conductor, composer, arranger, educator, and writer who has served on the executive board of the Conductors Guild. He can be reached at f.morden@mchsi.com.