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May 4

## [Concert Review: PSO does Mahler exceedingly well](#)

By CHRISTOPHER HYDE

On Sunday afternoon, while climbing up to the balcony at Merrill Auditorium, someone next to me said: "I had to hear it live." There is still a chance today (Tuesday) to hear the Portland Symphony Orchestra, under Robert Moody, in a rare live performance of the Mahler Symphony No. 2 ("Resurrection").

### CONCERT REVIEW

#### PORTLAND SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

**WHERE:** Merrill Auditorium, Portland

**WHEN:** May 2

If there were ever an orchestral work that could not be captured on a recording, the Mahler No. 2 is it. The climax of the final movement, for example, is almost painful in its intensity, but all of the voices can still be heard.

The "Resurrection" Symphony, historically one of Mahler's most popular, is the dream of every conductor, calling upon the utmost reaches of orchestral volume and color, with enhanced percussion -- including Chinese tam-tams and church bells -- off-stage brass choirs, beefed-up brass, woodwinds and strings, contra-bassoons, two harps and a gigantic chorus.

All sections of the augmented orchestra, Masterworks Chorus of the Choral Art Society, and two soloists, soprano Lisa Saffer and mezzo-soprano Mary Phillips, fully deserved the flowers, stamping and cheers that greeted the final gigantic chords.

Mahler's symphonies have been called bad novels in music because of their length, programmatic nature and striving for effect, but even bad novels can still bring tears to your eyes. Purists can think of No. 2 as a grand fantasy on themes from Mahler's song cycle, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, which is quoted throughout.

The entire third movement, which is supposed to express the meaningless nature of life, ending in a "death-shriek," is simply an expansion of one of these songs: "Anthony of Padua Preaches to the Fish," one of the most flowing and beautiful things Mahler ever wrote, in spite of its sardonic nature.

The Masterworks Chorus, which appeared only in the long fifth movement, was up to the challenge, including the composer's instruction to sing "with the utmost volume."

Of the soloists, Phillips appeared first, in the short fourth movement, "Urlicht," based upon another Wunderhorn song. What was particularly striking about her reading was the way it progressed from doubt to triumph, based almost entirely upon vocal color. Both Phillips and Saffer were superb in the "The Great Call," of the finale, solo or soaring above the massed chorus and orchestra, and their voices were perfectly suited to a melodic duet.

The orchestral high points of the hour-and-a-half performance were too many to mention in a review, but the trumpets from the four corners of the auditorium were particularly effective, as were the many unusual instrumental combinations that only a composer with Mahler's conducting experience could have devised.

Christopher Hyde's Classical Beat column appears in the Maine Sunday Telegram. He can be reached at:

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