

Marijn Simons, Symphony No. 2

Marijn Simons has called his second symphony “a bit of an homage to Mahler.” He is in good company. Composers from Alban Berg and Benjamin Britten to Luciano Berio and Uri Caine have paid their respects to the composer, wrestling with his seductive allure or deconstructing that allure through free-association mash-ups. Simons has a different take. He approaches from a distance, his early love for the music of Stravinsky, Milhaud, and Villa-Lobos having inoculated him against late-Romantic *Weltschmerz*. Accordingly his symphony seems less an homage to Mahler than to what he has become: an artifact of cultural memory, a quarry of ideas and gestures, an inventory of postures and states of mind – nostalgic longing, disruptive juxtapositions, stoic grandeur, bizarre grotesqueries, utopian visions – that persist in a curious afterlife.

Simons’ evocation of Mahler is at once familiar and disorienting. The movements, the motives have models in the composer’s works, but they are filtered through Simons’ wonderfully quirky sensibilities into a sound world uniquely his own. In the first movement it is as if he has stumbled upon a darkened depot where Mahler’s musical props, some now quite threadbare, are stored. He enters, flashlight in hand, its erratic beam landing here, there, jerking into life, like so many musty marionettes, motives we know by heart but can’t quite identify: fanfares, dotted rhythms, a flourish of trills from a flat-footed march, an insistent tritone on a screaming clarinet, an irritating falling fourth in search of its cuckoo, bits of a forgotten klezmer melody in swaying parallel thirds. By the end, the depot, now ablaze with klieg lights, is teeming with thematic shards careening toward a chaotic collision that is closer to Ives than Mahler.

The deep bells, harp, and marimba that accompany the long-breathed oboe solo at the opening of the second movement initially suggest, slightly askew, the Adagietto of the Fifth Symphony, but Simons is evoking a paradigm for the kind of contemplative movement that runs through the whole of Mahler’s oeuvre. This introspective calm is soon undercut by unseemly interjections – a lumbering colloquy between tuba, horns and trombones, flourishes and fanfares in the woodwinds (all based on material rescued from the wreckage of the first movement) – before first strings, then a sonorous brass choir restore a majestic tranquility derived from the swaying thirds of that now distant klezmer melody.

Simons deploys an orchestra of Mahlerian proportions, but with an even larger complement of percussion, all on prominent display at the outset of the third movement. This quasi-scherzo likewise has its Mahlerian antecedents, but we’re veering off in new directions with a robust undercurrent of jazzy syncopation that suggests what Mahler might, in time, have learned from New York. The powerful trombone ostinato and swaggering trumpet solo that inaugurate the final drive toward the climax announce that Aaron Copland and Mahler’s latter-day champion Leonard Bernstein are just around the corner.

The last movement opens with a snarling trumpet motive juxtaposed with solemn chords, variants of ideas last heard in the second movement. Ascending whole-tone scales against a gentle rocking motive in the high strings gradually disarm anguished chromaticism, taking us still further from Mahler, or perhaps toward the Mahler that feeds into Schreker rather than Berg. The movement has the feel of a slow-motion coda – weightless stasis over gently sustained pedal points. The symphony has traversed its path toward, through, and past Mahler to arrive at a place of timeless wonder – the depot’s props fallen into dust, its doors thrown open to the morning sun.

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