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Fairytale unfolds at May Festival

Concert review

By Janelle Gelfand

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"Tonight we've prepared for you a fairytale," said conductor James Conlon, just before the Cincinnati May Festival presented its third-ever performance of Gustav Mahler's "Das klagende Lied" Friday night in Music Hall.

The festival's second weekend opened with Mahler's early symphonic cantata, honoring the 100th anniversary of his death this month. In addition, Conlon led the festival's first performance of Haydn's 1796 Mass in B-flat, nicknamed the "Heiligmesse." Both works showcased the hard-working May Festival Chorus, superbly prepared by its director of choruses, Robert Porco.

Conlon, who led the festival's first performance of "Das klagende Lied" during his first season as music director in 1979, has championed this work, leading premieres from New York to Paris.

Why it's not heard more often is a mystery. Written by the 20-year-old Mahler, "Das klagende Lied" means a Song of Lament, or literally, of Complaint or Accusation. The music is fantastic, anticipating the extraordinary nature sounds and great horn calls that would begin in Mahler's symphonies five years later. In fact, written for an expansive orchestra, it is more a symphony than a cantata, but Mahler provided lush music for the chorus and soloists.

In three parts, its tale is based on old German legend: A knight kills his brother to win the hand of the fair queen. But a wandering minstrel finds the bones, and carves one into a flute. The bone "sings" the tale of his murder and accuses his brother on his wedding day.

It's unfortunate that more people were not in the hall to hear this remarkable performance. As befits a fairytale, Conlon strove for delicate textures from beginning to end, capturing a magical atmosphere with muted horns, sustained strings and glowing harp sounds. It was striking to hear the lightness in the chorus and the detailed orchestral colors – such as bird calls, nature sounds, marches, folk tunes and lightly pointed brass chorales – so familiar in Mahler's symphonies. The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, now playing at its height, performed it all magnificently.

The chorus told the tale with focused sound, fine enunciation and beauty of expression. Conlon's tempos were ideally balanced to propel the drama forward or linger on the beauty of a magical moment.

A fine quartet of soloists served as storytellers: Keri Alkema, Ekaterina Semenchuk, Rodrick Dixon and William McGraw. In her festival debut, Alkema's big, glorious soprano captured the drama of the tale. Semenchuk, also her first festival, presented a voice of arresting power and color, particularly in the contralto solo, "Was ist der König so stumm und bleich?" (Why is the King so pale?).

The tenor Dixon, who also gave an excellent pre-concert recital, was firmly expressive, and McGraw's phrases added warmth.

The evening opened with Haydn's uplifting Mass in B-flat Major, also named "Missa Sancti Bernardi de Offida." The forces included the May Festival Chamber Choir and a reduced Cincinnati Symphony.

Six excellent soloists provided beautifully balanced ensembles: Alkema, Hana Park, Semenchuk, John Aler, McGraw and Yohan Yi.

But the real joy of this performance came from the chorus. The singing was buoyant and choral blend was refined. From the opening Kyrie to the joyous Dona nobis pacem, the choral enunciation was crisp and the sound was both elegant and energized.

Conlon's tempos were well-chosen and the light orchestral sound was an asset. Highlights included nicely shaded phrases by the winds in the Et incarnatus est, and a stunning Agnus Dei with chorus and soloists Park, Aler, Semenchuk and McGraw.

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