

Mahler in the Service of a Vital, Humanitarian Cause

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 **United States Mahler:** Indra Thomas (soprano), Susanne Mentzer (mezzo-soprano), MasterVoices, The Mahler for Vision Orchestra / George Mathew (conductor), Carnegie Hall, New York City. 13.2.2017. (DS)

Mahler – Symphony No.2 in C minor (*Resurrection*)

Though Leonard Bernstein is long gone, his belief in the power of music to bring people together and change the world with a humanist vision remains with us, and has inspired other groups as well. In 1987 at Carnegie Hall, he conducted a renowned concert to fight AIDS.

Thirty years later, on the same stage, Music for Life International followed in those footsteps with “Mahler for Vision: A Concert for the Restoration of Vision,” raising funds to end preventable blindness – enriching lives and preserving human dignity across the globe.

To make this world a more livable and compassionate place, we must connect across boundaries and open borders, and that idea was symbolized by the variety of participating musicians. Concertmaster Elmira Darvarova, formerly in the same role at the MET Orchestra (and the only woman to hold that job) was seated next to Daniel Andai, concertmaster of the Miami Symphony Orchestra. Wilfried Strehle, former principal viola of the Berlin Philharmonic, led the violas, and the cellos were guided by the New York Philharmonic’s former associate principal, Alan Stepansky. Lead players across the winds and brass joined from such prominent ensembles as the Philadelphia Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, and Orchestra of St. Luke’s, among others. Musicians also flew in from Europe and Asia to grace the stage.

As the energetic, impassioned music director, George Mathew, emphasized in his opening words, humanitarian projects rely on “contributions of people who cross boundaries.” Similarly, music professionals joined with rising students and alumni from conservatories across the country, as well as dedicated amateur players – all devoting their time to this lofty cause. Young professionals from successful self-starters like the Knights Chamber Orchestra, and contemporary music groups like the Shattered Glass Ensemble from Indiana also joined the ranks. It takes people of different ages, life paths, and nationalities to achieve some of the greater goals on this planet, and the membership of the Mahler for Vision Orchestra paralleled this thought.

Only one work was featured on the evening’s program, Mahler’s Symphony No.2 – of cosmic scale, in five movements with chorus, here sung by MasterVoices, and two soloists, soprano Indra Thomas and mezzo-soprano, Susanne Mentzer. Together, they joined in giving flight to inspirational words such as “I shall soar upwards/To the light which no eye has ever seen!”

The concert supported the fieldwork of HelpMeSee, an organization whose mission which could not fit better with Mahler’s fourth movement “Urlicht” (“primal light”), which Mentzer, an expert in Mahler song, sung captivatingly, with gentle strength. The movement ends on an insistent desire for love and light with the words, “The loving God will give me a little light, will illuminate me into the eternal blessed life.”

The willingness of so many players to leave their everyday jobs to rehearse this demanding piece (in an undoubtedly short time) is yet another part of this story of humanitarianism. And given that this was a one-time performance – a benefit – everyone did great justice to the score, and to the emotional effects of Mahler’s powerful message.

Daniele Sahr