

TSO pulls off historic triumph with Mahler

By **JAMES D. WATTS JR.**

World Scene Writer

A bit of history was made Saturday night at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center. For the first time since it was written more than a century ago, Mahler's Symphony No. 5 was performed live in Tulsa.

This news is sure to get a rousing "So what?" from a large portion of the population. More's the pity for that, because the music Gustav Mahler wrote more than 100 years ago sounds — and more importantly, feels — remarkably up to date.

It's also historic — or at least, significant — that the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra performed this piece. As Benjamin Zander, the conductor for Saturday's performance, put it during an interview last week on KWGS-FM's "Studio Tulsa" program, here is an orchestra that did not exist three years ago, and now it is performing Mahler's Fifth Symphony.

That, Zander said, is amazing.

Amazing because everything Mahler wrote requires a huge number of players, and requires them to push themselves to the limits — extremes of volume, both loud and soft; extremes of speed; extremes of dynamics; extremes of technique; extremes of emotion.

"The symphony," Mahler once said, "must be a whole world." So, whenever an orchestra decides to perform a Mahler symphony — especially one of his last five epic works — that orchestra is in a sense answering the question:

"Are you ready to take on the

world?"

Saturday's answer from the Tulsa Symphony was a resounding "yes."

There were some rough spots in the performance — episodes when the clash of instrumental voices lost definition and reduced the sound to a muddy rumble or roar. But, on a whole, this was a triumphant performance, one that brought the close-to-capacity audience to its feet for a seven-minute ovation.

Much credit goes to Zander, who guided the orchestra and the audience through this 70-minute work. His comments before the performance explained the physical as well as the emotional structure of the work, making for an even richer experience.

The orchestra responded with passionate playing, so that the anxiety and grief of the funereal first movement, and the wild violence of the second were palpable — so that the triumphant blast of D Major near the end was like the sun breaking suddenly through clouds before being swallowed up again by darkness.

The grotesque manipulations of the waltz that make up the third movement were like seeing the veneer of civilization being pulled away to reveal the cant and hypocrisy beneath.

Then came the fourth movement, the well-known Adagietto, which Mahler wrote as a love song for his bride-to-be. And heard in its proper context, this gentle wash of strings and harp sounded the way love

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should be — like a haven from all the ugliness of the outside world.

Special praise is due principal trumpet Tim McFadden, for exemplary work in the first movement; principal French horn Bruce Schultz, who did an excellent job with the many lengthy solos in the third movement; harpist Tabitha Reist Steiner; and timpanist Steve Craft.

Mahler tends to eclipse just about everything else, which might be why the performance of Mozart's Overture to "The Marriage of Figaro" lacked a certain punchiness. It was well played, but it didn't have the snap and fizz one expects from this music.

Violinist Filip Fenrych was the soloist for another Mozart work, the Violin Concerto No. 5, the "Turkish." Fenrych had the music in front of him, but his performance in no way sounded like sight-reading.

He sounded quite secure in his playing, making his solo violin sound as if every phrase rose organically out of the orchestra rather than being set against or placed on top of it.

Fenrych brought a suave tone for the opening theme; a darker hued sound for the second movement so that the lovely, melancholy melody truly sang and made the finale bright and energetic.

Fenrych also handled the cadenzas with flair, keeping these often showy passages melodic and expressive, when they can sometimes sound like a bag of fiddler's tricks spilled on the floor.

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