

Sinus up for the symphony...

Audience quaffs pre-performance Benlyn

by J.C. LaDalia

The second pair of concerts for the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra's 1976-77 season were performed Friday and Saturday, Oct. 22 and 23 to the most coughless audience I have ever heard in Jubilee.

The concert opened with Glinka's overture to *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, his second opera, which was composed between 1838-1840. Glinka is often regarded as the 'father' of Russian music because of his concern with developing nationalist musical traits which were widely adopted by such later composers as Borodin, Balakirev and Moussorgsky. The opera is seldom performed outside Eastern Europe but the overture turns up fairly often as a 'Russian Orchestral Showpiece' along with Rimsky-Korsakov's Russian Easter Overture and Borodin's *Polovtsian Dances*.

Since the ESO is not yet in the virtuoso class I think a less frenetic pace would have made the performance more satisfying, thus emphasizing the melodic aspects rather than the razzle-dazzle. Nonetheless it was well-played and effective. (Elgar's Introduction and Allegro for Strings was the originally scheduled curtain-raiser but music parts did not arrive in time. It has been promised, however, for the Nov. 12 & 13 concerts.)

Following the Glinka we heard the Mahler Fifth Symphony in c-sharp minor. Mahler began its composition in the summer of 1901 and completed it in 1902 after his marriage to Alma Schindler. It was first performed in Cologne in 1904. It is the first symphony of his full maturity, following the four 'Wunderhorn' symphonies (which draw upon and inhabit the world of his settings of *Das Knaben Wunderhorn*, songs based on German folk poetry).

The fifth, sixth and seventh symphonies form a kind of series before the choral affirmation of

the eighth, and the farewell gestures of the ninth and tenth. In the sixth the epic struggle ends tragically, but in the fifth and seventh the conclusion is a hard-won but triumphant fugal rondo. The fifth lasts some seventy minutes and is perhaps the longest all-orchestral work the ESO has yet essayed.

It was an intelligent choice, for in it Mahler reveals a new chamber-music transparency which the previous symphonies lack, and which the ESO could bring forth persuasively. Although the work is in five movements Mahler described it as falling into three parts. The first comprises movements one and two, which are a vast funeral march, several times interrupted by anguished developments, followed by an intense, mercurially changing movement which is one of the stormiest and most hysterical in his *oeuvre*.

It ends in a short-lived chorale apotheosis. The vast scherzo is the centre of the work, the turning-point, and has been described as depicting the death of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Certainly its cosmic lander is one of Mahler's most Viennese conceits, and makes Ravel's *La Valse* seem, though ravishing, unnecessary. The fourth movement is an adagio for strings and harp (and, incidentally, was used as the theme for Visconti's film of *Death in Venice*, where its tendency to sound lugubriously pathetic, when taken out of context, was fully exploited).

This movement is immediately followed by a rondo-finale which opens by quoting Mahler's song *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale*, thus signalling the listener that a full academic display of triple-fugal prowess is to follow. The adagio's yearning theme reappears here in more confident guise, and the symphony ends with the second movement's chorale raised to

triumphantly sustained heights. It is, in sum, an immensely complex and very great symphony. That it is nevertheless accessible and can make a powerful first impression was demonstrated by the audience's considerable enthusiasm.

The playing was, overall, extraordinary, and, indeed, nearly all the reservations I have about the performance stem from the orchestra's size. The ESO was about seventy players strong, while Mahler had in mind an orchestra of one hundred. Our strings have become a formidable corps, but when anything else of prominence is taking place they are readily covered.

This was apparent in the first movement when the snare drum menaced the principal themes, or even in the fourth, where the harp, rather than providing delicate coloristic nuances, assumed concertante proportions. It was also clear in the scherzo where the strings' key rhythmic underpinnings were swamped by brass and woodwinds. Six celli are simply not enough to dig into the fugal opening of the finale and make it sound really vigorous. Again, because the triumphant climax in the second movement dissolves so appallingly fast it is even more important that the passage be genuinely triumphant, however brief.

But on Saturday the sheer playing of the passage was such a struggle that the triumph, and the point, were muted. The adagio is very difficult to sustain in such a rapt manner unless there are more players to spell one another, and though the result was quite impressive it must have been very problematic for the players. The point is simply that when one hears an appropriately large orchestra play this work the depth of Mahler's conception is more

apparent. The geniality of the third and fifth movements is of a heartier, more gruff sort, the manic anguish of the second is more convulsive, the disparity between chamber music scoring and the intervening cataclysms is much more powerful.

Should the ESO not have attempted such a work then? No, but it should be borne in mind that with the symphonies of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven the ESO has as many (or more) players as the composer envisaged, and can conceivably give performances the equal of any Canadian orchestra. But when it comes to the post-Wagnerian symphonists (Bruckner, Strauss, Mahler, Schmidt) we simply lack the beefiness for which the composer was expressly writing, of which Montreal and Toronto are presumably capable, and which New York, Boston and Chicago can patently achieve.

The clearly satisfying experience Jubilee's audience had, many of whom will not know Mahler at all unless they are record collectors, was ample justification for performing the work. It was the kind of ear-opening evening which a symphonic concert should always be, rather than the cozy, complacently soporific experience it too often is.

As well, it's wonderful that the ESO have the opportunity to

play such a work rather than the war-horses they've been sawing through since the age of 12. However I hope Hetu does not plan to attempt a great many of such vast works in order to 'prove' we're in the Big Time and the equal of X or Y. An even more difficult test will be the February production of Strauss's *Salome*, which has no intermission, and is written for 106 players. There must be a way of challenging the ESO without driving them paranoid!

Recordings: there are many versions of the Glinka overture available, by Bernstein, Ormandy and Solti, to name some of the most exciting. Solti has two versions which are accompanied by several other works. Arthuro Rodzinski has a very good and idiomatic version on Seraphim, a budget label.

The best versions of the Mahler Fifth are conducted by Bernard Haitink on Philips label, and Barbarolli's on Angel. The at times rough playing of the latter's orchestra is offset by his deep understanding of the work.

As well, the fourth side of his set contains Janet Baker's incandescent version of Mahler's *Five Ruckert Songs*. Karajan's Fifth on DGG is gorgeous, but perhaps too gorgeous, so that some of the struggle gets glossed over. Solti's recording for London is excellent too, though occasionally too hard driven.

Stage Band gives performance

Music ranging from that of the big band era to contemporary stage band stylings will be performed by the University of Alberta Stage Band Wednesday, October 27, at 8 p.m.

The concert, which will take place in the theatre of the Students' Union Building on campus, will include renditions of pieces by Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Thad Jones and Stan Kenton.

Tickets, priced at \$3, are available at the Students' Union box office, all Woodward's tickets offices, the Coliseum box office and Bonnie Doon Plaza ticket outlet.

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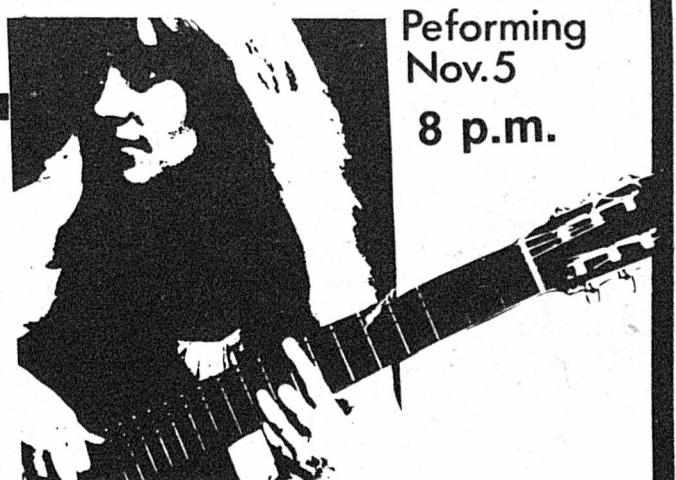
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