NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
NJSO
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2018

Winter Festival: Music Speaks

Dawn Upshaw & Xian Zhang

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Maria Schneider: *Winter Morning Walks*

Jazz, classical and poetry join forces in this captivating cycle of nine songs on poetry of United States Poet Laureate Ted Kooser. Schneider's lyrical melodies intuit the essence of each poem, complemented by the improvised embroidery of jazz clarinets, piano and string bass.

Mahler: Symphony No. 4

By Mahler's standards, this symphony uses a smallish orchestra—but with what marvelous color! Jingling sounds at the beginning—heavenly sleigh bells—return in the last movement. Spooky sounds lurk in the slow movement, while the spirit of Schubert is present in the scherzo. The soprano solo in Mahler's finale relates a child's vision of heavenly happiness.

MARIA SCHNEIDER: *Winter Morning Walks*

MARIA SCHNEIDER

Born: November 27, 1960, in Windom, Minnesota

Currently residing in New York City

Composed: 2011

World Premiere: June 12, 2011, in Ojai, California

NJSO Premiere: These are the NJSO premiere performances.

Duration: 28 minutes

Even before she was inducted into the National Endowment for the Arts' 2019 Jazz Masters Group—the youngest woman ever to be selected for the award—Maria Schneider was a major figure in the world of jazz. Since 2013, when *Winter Morning Walks* won a Grammy for Best Classical Composition, she has been gained considerable traction in the classical realm as well.

Schneider studied music theory and composition at the University of Minnesota, then earned a master's in music from Eastman. Upon moving to New York, she studied with Bob Brookmeyer and worked with Gil Evans. "Bob and Gil were my musical heroes," she says. "I was lucky enough to study with Bob on an NEA Apprenticeship Grant and to work as an assistant for Gil." By 1992, Schneider had formed the Maria Schneider Jazz Orchestra, which was long a Greenwich Village staple and has performed at jazz festivals and in concert halls worldwide.

Winter Morning Walks was Schneider's second collaboration with soprano Dawn Upshaw. The cycle was jointly commissioned by the Ojai Festival, Australian Chamber Orchestra and Cal Performances. Schneider chose texts by poet laureate Ted Kooser, whose collection *Winter Morning Walks: 100 Postcards to Jim Harrison* chronicled a series of pre-dawn hikes in the Nebraska countryside during his recovery from cancer radiation and surgery. Excerpts from the preface to the published edition of his poems explains their genesis:

> In the autumn of 1998, during my recovery from surgery and radiation for cancer, I began taking a two-mile walk each morning. I'd been told by my radiation oncologist to stay out of the sun for a year because of skin sensitivity, so I exercised before dawn, hiking the isolated country roads near where I live, sometimes with my wife but most often alone.
>
> During the previous summer, depressed by my illness, preoccupied by the routines of my treatment, and feeling miserably sorry for myself, I'd all but given up on reading and writing. Then, as autumn began to fade and winter came on, my health began to improve. One morning in November, following my walk, I surprised myself by trying my hand at a poem. Soon I was writing every day.

> Several years before, my friend Jim Harrison and I had carried on a correspondence in haiku. As a variation on this, I began pasting my morning poems on postcards and sending them to Jim, whose generosity, patience and good humor are here acknowledged. What follows is a selection of 100 of those postcards.
>
> –Ted Kooser
>
> Garland, Nebraska
>
> Spring 1999

Both Kooser's story and poetry resonated for Schneider. She culled nine poems from his 100 and rearranged them to suit her artistic needs. She has written:

> These poems feel so like home to me, connecting with my southwest Minnesota roots at so many different levels, that I find it almost astonishing. There's nothing to explain about this music, except to say it was very hard to pick which poems from Ted Kooser's *Winter Morning Walks* I would choose. I could have gone on composing more, and someday hopefully will. These poems were originally titled with the date, for instance "Perfectly Still This Solstice Morning" was titled "December 21: Clear and five degrees." I changed the titles, as the dates were no longer chronological once musical considerations for song ordering entered the picture. But it did feel natural to open with the poem he wrote on the winter solstice, and to close with the poem he wrote on the vernal equinox, which seemed like the perfectly natural way to bookend *Winter Morning Walks*.

Schneider's elegant phrasing shows an instinctive gift for the rhythms of the English language. Her settings plumb the essence of each poem, bringing it to life with breathtaking orchestral color—and this, despite the fact that she limits her instrumental resources to strings and the three musicians freely improvising on clarinets, piano and string bass. Indeed, it is the magical unpredictability and immediacy of jazz, melded with notated music (the strings and the voice), that enrich *Winter Morning Walks*—and our listening experience.

Some of Kooser's poems focus on nature, others on human relationships. Ultimately, they are all about the miracle that is life. Schneider's music is spot on: well-paced, melodious, emotionally taut and beautifully illustrative of the poet's vivid images.

Instrumentation: rhythm bass, alto clarinet, bass clarinet, piano, strings and solo soprano.

MAHLER: Symphony No. 4

GUSTAV MAHLER

Born: July 7, 1860, in Kalischt, Bohemia

Died: May 18, 1911, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: Primarily from June 1899 to April 1901

World Premiere: November 25, 1901, in Munich. The composer conducted.

NJSO Premiere: 1973–74 season. Leona Mitchell and Catherine Malfitano were the soloists; Henry Lewis conducted.

Duration: 54 minutes

If Mahler composed a "Pastoral" symphony analogous to Beethoven's, this is surely the one. Opening with sleigh bells and lyrical, warm melodies, Mahler's Fourth is the most endearing of all his large orchestral works, successfully enveloping us in the sunlit world of children. With four movements in traditional symphonic form, the Fourth is, for most listeners, immediately more accessible than other Mahler symphonies. Its lighter scoring, shorter duration, clarity of texture and predominantly sunny character have all contributed to make it one of Mahler's most popular works.

Mahler began work on the symphony during the summer of 1899 and completed it in August 1900. The piece thus conveniently spans the turn of the century, and in many ways it is a symbol of Mahler's bi-directional stance: reflective of the traditions that preceded him, and looking forward to the changes that lay ahead.

Mahler's first four symphonies are generally grouped together as the *Wunderhorn* Symphonies, since they all in some way draw upon Mahler's settings of texts from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (*The Youth's Magic Horn*). This collection of anonymous German folk poetry was compiled by Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano in the early years of the 19th century. Goethe valued it highly, and the collection remained influential in Germany's romantic nationalist movement.

In the case of the Fourth Symphony, the most obvious *Wunderhorn* movement is the finale, which features a soprano soloist. Mahler originally planned to incorporate the song "Das himmlische Leben" ("The Heavenly Life") into his Third Symphony. Listeners who know Mahler's music will note a strong bond—sometimes even identical snatches of music—between the themes of the Third and Fourth Symphonies. He had worked on "Das himmlische Leben" as early as 1892; however, he took a while to find the appropriate musical forum for his ideas. In a letter to his friend Natalie Bauer-Lechner, he wrote:

> What I had in mind was extremely hard to achieve; the uniform blue of the sky being much more difficult to render than all its changing and contrasting hues. Well, that's the general atmosphere of the piece. Occasionally, however, it darkens and becomes phantasmagorical and terrifying: not that the sky becomes overcast, for the sun continues to shine eternally, but that one suddenly takes fright; just as on the most beautiful day in a sunlit forest, one can be seized with terror or panic. Mysterious, intricate and sinister, the Scherzo will make your hair stand on end, but it will be followed by the Adagio, which puts everything right again and shows that no harm was intended.

The fourth movement, with soprano solo, is an expression of joy, heaven perceived through a child's eyes. After the journey of the three preceding movements, it is both our destination and our reward. For a composer who insisted he was the antithesis of Richard Strauss and a proponent of absolute music, this is a highly programmatic work.

Ironically, the Fourth Symphony was not well liked during Mahler's lifetime, and it took a long while to work its way into public affection. When it was premiered in New York in 1902, one critic wrote:

"Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben* and *Thus Spake Zarathustra* are clear as crystal waters in comparison with Gustav Mahler's Fourth Symphony." In a 1903 letter to the German conductor Julius Buths, Mahler refers to it as "this persecuted step-child that has so far known so little joy in the world." Perhaps that is the reason Mahler continued to revise this and other works for almost 10 years. Well more than a century after he began to work with the *Wunderhorn* poetry, his music shows us a tender, joyous side to his personality, a childlike viewpoint that believes in a heaven where angels bake bread, fish swim happily into the net and St. Peter looks on benevolently.

Instrumentation: four flutes (third and fourth doubling piccolo), three oboes (third doubling English horn), three clarinets (second doubling E-flat clarinet, third doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, timpani, bass drum, triangle, sleigh bells, glockenspiel, cymbals, tam-tam, harp, strings and solo soprano.

SCORDATURA SCHERZO

Mahler's Fourth Symphony is traditional in its overall layout: four movements arranged sonata-allegro, scherzo/trio, slow movement and finale (in this case, a rondo). The second movement is a Ländler, an Austrian folk dance rather like a relaxed waltz. It was a popular ballroom dance in the early years of the 19th century. Schubert wrote many Ländler, and his symphonic heirs—Brahms, Bruckner, and Mahler—used the dance in many of their compositions.

Mahler marked his second movement "In gemächlicher Bewegung. Ohne Hast" ("In comfortable motion. Without haste"). His subtitle was "Freund Hein spielt auf" ("Friend Hein strikes up"). "Friend Hein" is a colloquial German reference to an ominous folk character who appears as a friendly fiddle-playing itinerant, gathering followers whom he leads to the great beyond. In short, he symbolizes Death. According to Paul Bekker's 1921 study, Mahler described the first two movements of the Fourth Symphony thus: "A dream excursion into the heavenly fields of Paradise, starting in the first movement with lively sleigh bells and leading through alternatively smiling and melancholy landscapes to *Freund Hein* (Death), who is to be taken in a friendly, legendary sense, as gathering his flock and leading it with his fiddle from this world to the next."

The fiddle in question is intentionally mistuned, a technique called *scordatura.* It results in a peculiar, other-worldly sonority and also makes it possible to play pitches not available with conventional tuning. In this case, the concertmaster tunes his instrument up a whole tone. The idea is to approximate the sound of a country village fiddler.

Mahler wanted an eerie quality, according to Natalie Bauer-Lechner, who published her *Recollections of Gustav Mahler* in 1923. She reported that, when he revised the Fourth Symphony, he altered the violin solo, rewriting the part in D minor instead of E minor. “This makes it screeching and rough sounding,” she wrote, “as if Death were fiddling away.” The mysterious scherzo is a fleeting shadow in this otherwise sunny work.