

If Mahler Were Writing Now

Argento at the Armory, with 'Das Lied'



Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times
Argento Chamber Ensemble, with James Benjamin Rodgers, center, performing Mahler's "Das Lied von der Erde" at the Park Avenue Armory.

By JAMES R. OESTREICH
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Gustav Mahler, maker of gigantic symphonies, may seem an odd preoccupation for a chamber group. But preoccupation he is, this season, for the adventurous Argento Chamber Ensemble, which presented the second concert in its series Mahler as New York Contemporary on Thursday evening in the Board of Officers Room at the Park Avenue Armory.

Like the first program, in September, this one offered a major work by Mahler arranged for chamber ensemble — the symphonic song cycle "Das Lied von der Erde," in a reduction begun by Arnold Schoenberg, finished by Rainer Riehn and touched up by Argento's conductor, Michel Galante — along with two contemporary works influenced by Mahler's music.

The first, "Clair-obscur," a 20-minute instrumental piece by Oliver Schneller completed in 2006, takes its title from the French term for chiaroscuro, the play of light and shadow in Renaissance and Baroque painting. "The edges of the painted shapes," Mr. Schneller writes in a program note, "become soft, often uncertain and elusive." He cites Mahler's Ninth Symphony (the big work in the September program) as a prime influence, its

conclusion stretching its lines "to a point of near-extinction."

"Clair-obscur" emulates that ending. It is also painterly in its blending and contrasts of instrumental colors and sound qualities, natural and amplified.

"Threshold," a song by Jesse Jones to a poem by Rabindranath Tagore, made for a natural fit with "Das Lied," Mahler's setting of texts from ancient Chinese poets. Both explore, in Mr. Jones's words, "concepts of mortality and transcendence over death" outside Western traditions.

A big, oddly clamorous climax accompanies the lines "And because I love this life, I know I shall love death as well." And the ending speaks of consolation, but the voice trails off irresolutely.

Still, there is much here to counter the refrain in Mahler's first song ("The Drinking Song of Earth's Misery"): "Dark is life, is death." As there is elsewhere in the ultimately consolatory "Das Lied," which ends quietly on the word "forever."

The performances — with the percussionist Matt Ward conducting the Schneller, Mr. Galante the rest — were excellent. Zach Finkelstein negotiated Mr. Jones's high tenor flights with aplomb. James Benjamin Rodgers's rough and ready approach to Mahler's tenor songs suited their boozy nature and jostled nicely with Jennifer Beattie's warmth in the alto numbers.

Of the instrumentalists, Emilie-Anne Gendron (violinist), Lance Suzuki (flutist) and Kathy Halvorson (oboist) had several especially fine moments. Carol McGonnell (clarinetist) had no end of them.

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