

# Mahler 9—reduced yet memorably rendered by Argento Chamber Ensemble

By George Grella

The influence of great composers—Bach, Brahms, Stravinsky—is easy to gauge in how their forms, structures and sounds developed and endured in the music of the generations that follow. Not so with Gustav Mahler.

Composers revere Mahler, and some quote from him, but few have attempted to write music in his manner. Mahler left no particular form or structure to follow. His monumental genius was in the incredible style of his music, his ceaseless imagination, his pioneering orchestration, and his ability to express the most complex and profound human experiences.

Mahler leaves an indelible impression, as if one's mind was a wax seal left with the composer's personal imprint. He stays tucked in the memory, ready to return in vivid color, appropriate for an artist who's fundamental medium was memory, and time.

This was the context for the excellent concert Monday night from the Argento Chamber Ensemble, conducted by Michel Galante. The concert was part of two series—one, the top-notch and free Music Mondays concerts at Advent Lutheran Church on the Upper West Side; the other, a new and exciting concept from Argento: "Mahler as New York Contemporary." The latter pairs a Mahler orchestral work (arranged for chamber orchestra) with new pieces that express both Mahler's influence and his enduring relevance.

This opening night concert was "Gustav Mahler: After Nine." The two contemporary works used elements of Mahler's Symphony No. 9, and Galante led the ensemble in a chamber orchestra reduction made by conductor Klaus Simon in 2011.

It is high praise to point out that the memory of the new pieces lingered after what was an intense, powerful and beautiful performance of the symphony. Matthew Ricketts' *After Nine: Fantasia on Mahler*, for the ensemble, and *Arrhythmia*, written by Taylor Brook for string quartet and played by JACK, channeled that insidious Mahler effect. The line that connected the new works to each other and each to the symphony was the two-note, whole-step melody that opens Mahler's vast canvas. At two-notes, it's not a melody but a gesture. Mahler makes it a melody in retrospect by creating a monumental piece out of so little.

Ricketts and Brook build their own pieces around it. If Mahler wrote endless variations on his ideas, Ricketts has written an attractive, evocative and subtle set of variations on Mahler. The piano, played by Joanna Chao, gradually appears out of the mists to play an extended, solid, homophonic passage, and there is an appearance of music from Mahler's first movement coda, before it slowly recedes from view and disappears.

Brooks' title hints at the staggered brass rhythm that interrupt the flow of Mahler's opening movement, his variation is to start the piece with a series of staggered chords, arpeggiated via hocket. The music has unsettled harmonies and rhythms. Brooks' loose arch form builds to the two-note gesture and he seems to be arguing with the past, struggling with

influence, examining and accepting it. This piece is more abstract, less immediately ingratiating, but its rigor and skill are intriguing.

Simon's reduction of Mahler's Ninth pares away the entire low brass, harp, contrabassoon, and timpani—in their place is a piano and a harmonium. There are eight violins, three violas, two cellos, one bass, two horns, two clarinets, one trumpet and single players on the other winds. That's far less weight than usual in Mahler, where volume is its own quality, and in the crashing climaxes and chaotic *sturm und drang* sections of the music there wasn't the sensation of Mahler reaching into one's body. Simon's orchestration is generally wise, though he overuses the piano and harmonium to fill in missing brass chords, and the effect is mushy.

But there is a concomitant gain in the clarity of the line, and the Symphony No. 9 is an endless line. Galante formed and followed it with exceptional shape and focus. With such a light bass sound, he was sensitive to overall dynamic contrasts, and got such a full sound out of the musicians that the contrasts between quiet and loud became as satisfying as the enveloping feeling of Mahler's gigantic orchestral chords.

Clarity was a given, and it was enhanced by an unmannered interpretation: string portamento was judicious and compact, phrases felt natural. After some stiffness in the opening bars, the pace and rhythms were fluid. On this scale, the transitions between mood and style that are so important are laid bare and raw, and Galante handled them with exceptional care and judgment.

The second movement *Ländler* seemed too casual at first, but was convincing after what passes for a minuet and trio section gathered plenty of power. The *Rondo-Burleske* movement started off wild and raised the ante of intensity to just past sanity—it was some of the most exciting Mahler playing this critic has heard, regardless of arrangement. The orchestra seemed to swell in size for the finale, and perhaps that was due to the tremendous passion, expression and musicality they delivered throughout. This was beyond the routine of the finest performances, the musicians carried the growing sense that something special was happening.

The reduction exposes so many difficult parts, and praise goes to the heroic horn playing of Karl Kramer and Kyle Hoyt. Lance Suzuki's flute solo in the first movement was mesmerizing, clarinetists Alicia Lee and Pascal Archer doubled on bass and E-flat instruments with *élan*, and double-reed player Arthur Sato's English horn playing was gorgeous. There was a long, welcome silence after the final notes, and Galante found the space to offer a brief and deserved gesture of thanks to his fabulous musicians.

The next "Mahler as New York Contemporary" concert is January 14, 2015. [argentomusic.org](http://argentomusic.org)