

# Mahler's 9th Rules – Even in a Chamber Version!

by Daniel Goode

Published: September 30, 2014

So, it was reduced forces like 2 horns instead of 4, 1 trumpet, 2 clarinets, 1 flute, etc., no lower brass, and strings: 3,3,3,2,1. No harp? It's impossible without harp to do the 9th! But so cleverly, the piano and yes, that was an accordion, did amazing things to sound like all those missing instruments—the piano as harp was my favorite, but also its “lower brass” explosions were tasty. It was the Argento Chamber Ensemble conducted by Michel Galante. My friend and collaborator, Stephanie Griffin led the viola section and tipped me off to this September 15th New York premiere (of the chamber version)—seems to me it was a first—at the Advent Lutheran Church, Broadway and 93rd where they have a free Monday music series.

What worked amazingly was the completely adequate volume in the loud sections. It was overpowering where required. I sat close to minimize excess church reverb, but the direct sound was satisfyingly loud. (An aside: the emotional climax driven, formally clinched pushing-through (*Durchbruch*, or breakthrough—Adorno) must, of course, leverage the sheer phenomenon of acoustic volume, Must! Mahler is all about how to do climaxes right, and then what should follow.)

What didn't work in the chamber orchestra version was interesting. Not the missing instruments: and especially not-missing were all those piquant solos in Mahler's full orchestra original, no problemo! No, rather it was the counterpoint—I really mean something more generic even than counterpoint, the counterbalancing of competing rhythmic channels—among the five string groups, especially the upper three. So much information, expressional verve, sheer thrill is in the way these bodies play against and with each other within the generous harmonic framework of the whole. But strings merged as one body all too often, and especially in loud tutti sections.

But the symphony as a successful artifact was all there, and wove its amazing web. And we

thank Klaus Simon, a theorist commissioned by Universal Edition, Mahler's publisher, for this brilliant feat. And for Michel Galante's directing these fabulous musicians. A free concert on the Upper West Side is a dangerous demographic act if you want to attract people as young as these performers were. Yes, dangerous, because it was, movingly, a geriatric crowd with lots of walkers and wheelchairs in the aisles... We love our culture, and many of us, our Mahler! I'm thinking of images of those young string players biting down and into those forte attacks in those crucial places, because expression is a function of the gestures' placement in music's time experience, and in feeling's time.

I loved the lilting regularity of the opening Andante, first movement. I once touted this quality of the piece to Ann as being the perfect long, long theme for “meditative walking” (yes: the meaning of the best andantes for me is meditative walking). But when I took her to a full orchestra performance, the conductor made so many stretchings, speedups and slowdowns of these opening bars and pages, that I had to look at her helplessly and say, oh: I guess not. Anyway, Michel Galante understood the movement's beginning in the right way for me. The unfolding of the long, long theme and its varied repetitions was hypnotic because of the regularity, and much more cumulatively affecting than those other ways of doing it.

Only the viciously contrapuntal Rondo Burleske third movement didn't work that well. The fast clip meant that the final stretto section had to be too fast to hear much detail, becoming an exciting mess of sound, only, instead of a hilariously thrilling combining of all the ideas at once in a headlong race to the end.

Another review on the two new pieces by young composers influenced by Mahler's 9th will come in another thumb nail review.

Thumbnail Review #39