

A Great Symphony, and Then Two More Takes on It

JACK Quartet and Argento Riff on Mahler's Ninth



Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times
Argento Chamber Ensemble, conducted by Michel Galante,
performing Mahler at Advent Lutheran Church on Monday.

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Mahler's great, valedictory Ninth Symphony, about 90 minutes long and prevailingly intense, is more often than not left to fill an evening by itself. But the Argento Chamber Ensemble and the JACK Quartet built an ambitious program around it on Monday evening in the Music Mondays series at Advent Lutheran Church on the Upper West Side, adding two shortish contemporary works more or less based on the Ninth.

The Argento, conducted by its artistic director, Michel Galante, opened with "After Nine: Fantasia on Mahler" by Matthew Ricketts, and the JACK followed with "Arrhythmia" by Taylor Brook. After intermission, Mr. Galante led the Argento, some two dozen strong, in the symphony itself, arranged for chamber ensemble by the German composer Klaus Simon.

You listen to a new work that mines a classic with divided ears: one to take in the piece as a whole; the other to find the nuggets. "The melodic quotations promote a clear connection to Mahler's symphony, for those who know the work well," Mr. Brook wrote of his string quartet "Arrhythmia," "but in the end they amount to nothing more than winks."

For this listener, who does indeed know the symphony well, the nuggets were hard to find, the winks being perhaps more a matter of mood than of melody. (It might have helped to have heard the symphony just before, but no, you can't follow the Mahler Ninth with anything but silence.) What's more, the work's rhythm, or lack of it, was far from its most salient feature.

More striking were its thick textures and close harmonies, enlivened by minutely microtonal inflections. The work was gripping from the outset and engrossing throughout.

In "After Nine" the Mahlerian nuggets were more obvious: the symphony's germinal sighing motif, which Mr. Ricketts reworked midway through his piece and used baldly to end it; and in between, a characteristic crescendo to a climax that instead trailed off at its peak, its resolution long delayed. But the work as a whole, a study in instrumental color, was less consistently compelling than Mr. Brook's.

Mr. Simon's arrangement of the Mahler Ninth had its oddities (use of a harmonium accordion) and inevitable infelicities (occasional heavy reliance on the piano to scoop up great handfuls of notes), but it was not gimmicky. Once the ear adjusted to the reduced scale and volume, the wonderfully committed and beautifully executed performance made for a surprisingly complete experience of the symphony.

The young Argento players were uniformly terrific, especially in the death-haunted finale, where they simply poured their souls into music beyond their years.

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