



CELESTIAL VISIONS. SUBLIME MELODIES

Mahler's Heavenly Fourth

Sunday February 11th, 2024 - 3:30pm
Beachwood High School Auditorium

Martin Kessler, Guest Conductor
Marian Vogel, Soprano



R. STRAUSS (1864-1949)

Festmarsch, Op. 1 (1876)

R. STRAUSS (1864-1949)

Marian Vogel, Soprano

Four Last Songs (1948)

I. Frühling

II. September

III. Beim Schlafengehen

IV. Im Abendrot

- Intermission -

G. MAHLER (1860 - 1911)

Marian Vogel, Soprano

Symphony No. 4 in G Major (1900)

I. Bedächtig, nicht eilen

III. Ruhevoll, *poco adagio*

IV. Sehr behaglich



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INTRODUCING OUR GUESTS:

Martin Kessler



Martin Kessler, Guest Conductor

Martin Kessler's return to our podium completes a span of more than forty years of music making with this ensemble. During his tenure as music director, the SSO grew in size, stature, and stability, while expanding its repertoire far beyond the traditional reach of an adult avocational orchestra. Besides important anniversary concerts at Severance Hall, Maestro Kessler led the SSO in eight major oratorios with his other adult ensemble, Choral Arts Cleveland. His last concert with these groups was the Bernstein Centennial Concert at the Maltz Performing Arts Center in 2018. He retired from both organizations as Music Director emeritus.



Mr. Kessler was also the Director of Music at University School's Hunting Valley Campus for 32 years. This position included the conductorships of the school's orchestra, its glee club and over 30 musical theater productions. Since leaving US, he has also served as an adjunct professor for Cleveland State University's Department of Music.

In 2005, Trinity Cathedral of Cleveland presented "Life Lessons and Carols—Twenty Years of Original Christmas Carols by Martin Kessler." For this, and for his contributions to the cultural life of his native city, he received the Award of Achievement for Classical Music from Northern Ohio Live Magazine in that year. He has also received similar honors from the cities of Cleveland, Cleveland Heights and Beachwood for his endeavors in the field of music.

Since his retirement from full-time conducting, Mr. Kessler has begun a second career as a writer. He has had articles published in Provincetown Arts and ChorTeach, and in 2022, he published his memoir, *The Podium Papers* with Outskirts Press. He lives with his wife, Joyce in Cleveland Heights and Provincetown, Massachusetts.

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INTRODUCING OUR GUESTS:

Marian Vogel



Marian Vogel, Soprano

Hailed as, “thrilling”, “surprisingly powerful”, and “bursting with dramatic intensity”, lyric soprano, Marian Vogel has been recognized as a gifted performer both on the concert and on the operatic stage. She has debuted in Carnegie Hall under the baton of composer/conductor John Rutter performing both the Mozart Requiem and Rutter’s Magnificat. Ms. Vogel has performed on several occasions with the Cleveland Orchestra at Severance Hall and on their recent European tour to Vienna and Luxembourg performing in their groundbreaking production of “The Cunning Little Vixen”. Other notable concert appearances include: the complete Egmont Incidental Music of Beethoven, the Requiems of Verdi, Brahms, Mozart, Faure, and Rutter, The Peacemakers (Jenkins), The Seasons (Haydn), Haydn’s Mass in Time of War, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, Mahler’s Symphony No. 4, Bach Cantata No. 191, La Petite Solennelle (Rossini), Regina Coeli (Mozart), Mozart’s Grand Mass in C Minor, the Poulenc Gloria, Exsultate Jubilate (Mozart), Les Nuits d’Ete (Berlioz), Knoxville Summer of 1915 (Barber), Four Last Songs (Strauss), Concert Suite from Porgy and Bess (Gershwin), and Carmina Burana (Orff). Ms. Vogel appeared with the Summit Choral Society in Bach’s “St. Matthew Passion” at E.J. Thomas Hall and in Respighi’s “Laud to the Nativity”.



Regarded as “resplendent both vocally and dramatically,” Marian is quite at home on the operatic stage and had frequent appearances with Cleveland Opera. She made critically acclaimed performances as Violetta in La Traviata, Cio Cio San in Madama Butterfly, Micaela in Carmen, Donna Elivira in Don Giovanni and Tosca in Tosca. The Cleveland Plain Dealer described her as “magnetic” and “a glamorous and poignant Violetta who responds to every nuance in the score.” Of La Boheme, Cleveland Classical wrote that, “Marian Vogel’s sparkling performance... ignited the production.” Her rendition of Elvira’s aria in Don Giovanni was described as, “superlative.” A versatile performer, Ms. Vogel has performed such roles as Mimi and Musetta (La Boheme), Susanna (Le Nozze di Figaro), Zerlina in Don Giovanni, Pamina (The Magic Flute), Gretel (Hansel and Gretel), the Mother (Amahl and the Night Visitors), and a wealth of Gilbert and Sullivan heroines such as Josephine (H.M.S. Pinafore), Yum Yum (Mikado) and Patience (Patience).

Described as “exquisite”, “vocally alluring”, and “irresistible”, Marian has toured extensively as a soloist, both in the United States and in Europe. Ms. Vogel is a two-time first prize winner of the Metropolitan Opera National Council District Auditions and the winner of the Belle O. Morse Young Artist Award given by Cleveland Opera and is a graduate of the University of Cincinnati, College-Conservatory of Music.



Note from the Guest Conductor on Today's Program

by Martin Kessler

It has been a joy to reconnect with this wonderful group that I was honored to lead for so many seasons. And, to appear before this loyal audience—many members of whom I still recognize!

I love the symmetry of programming the Strauss Opus 1—composed when he was 12, and the Four Last Songs—written when the master was 84 and published posthumously. You will hear both the confident promise of youth and the bittersweet wisdom of old age in these fine works.

The Fourth is the sunniest, shortest and most widely popular symphony in the Mahler canon. But fans of this piece may rightly be disappointed by our exclusion of the Scherzo second movement. Let me explain.

This will be my third performance of the Mahler with the SSO, so I am well acquainted with the pleasures and pitfalls of preparing it. Although no isolated passage is too difficult for this fine orchestra, the Scherzo presents a set of unique challenges. Besides the dizzying number of string divisi—sometimes, each section divided into four groups, there is the issue of the unusual role of the concertmaster. Instead of leading the first violins, she must play an extended independent line on an instrument tuned one step higher than normal. The composer's aim is for this solo to sound keening and strident; thus, imitating a country fiddler playing on an inferior instrument (what we used to call a "cigar box").

What is lost is ten minutes of sardonic wit, but what is gained is extra preparation time and consistent leadership for the remaining forty-five minutes of symphonic glory. I hope you approve!



R. Strauss: Festmarsch

Notes by Abbey Koehl

Richard Strauss was one of the most notable German opera composers of the first half of the twentieth century. Festmarsch Op. 1 is a piece that kicked off his career as a notable early work. Composed at twelve years old, this piece hides nothing about Strauss's work to come in latter years. It is a romantic composition that is a combination of force and festivity, beautifully highlighting echoes of the strings and winds seemingly playing back and forth to one another. Listen for the subtle nod through a key melodic twist to the finale of Beethoven's 7th.

R. Strauss: Four Last Songs

Notes by Abbey Koehl

As we play a selection of Strauss's early work through Festmarsch, we also have the privilege of sharing a finale of his compositions through The Four Last Songs. The Four Last Songs came to Strauss through poems bearing the names of each movement where he wrote music to match the text. The order of composition is as follows: Frühling, September, Beim Schlafengehen, and Im Abendrot. Except for "Frühling," all of the songs focus on death. They are meant to be taken with a sense of calm and wholeness within a person when passing occurs. It is a fulfillment of the soul through death. Hauntingly, these would be the final works of Strauss. Written at the age of 84, Strauss passed shortly before the premier of these pieces where homage was paid to him in the performance in London. We hope the listeners find a sense of serene in listening to these compositions and the voice of our talented accompaniment.



Notes on the Program

1. Spring

In dusky vaults
I have long dreamt
of your trees and blue skies,
of your scents and the songs of birds.

Now you lie revealed
in glistening splendour,
flushed with light,
like a wonder before me.

You know me again,
you beckon tenderly to me;
all of my limbs quiver
from your blissful presence!

3. While going to sleep

Now that the day has made me so tired,
my dearest longings shall
be accepted kindly by the starry night
like a weary child.

Hands, cease your activity,
head, forget all of your thoughts;
all my senses now
will sink into slumber.

And my soul, unobserved,
will float about on untrammelled wings
in the enchanted circle of the night,
living a thousandfold more deeply.

2. September

The garden is mourning,
the rain sinks coolly into the flowers.
Summer shudders
as it meets its end.

Leaf upon leaf drops golden
down from the lofty acacia.
Summer smiles, astonished and weak,
in the dying garden dream.

For a while still by the roses
it remains standing, yearning for peace.
Slowly it closes its large
eyes grown weary.

4. In the twilight

Through adversity and joy
We've gone hand in hand;
We rest now from our wanderings
Upon this quiet land.

Around us slope the valleys,
The skies grow dark;
Two larks alone are just climbing,
As if after a dream, into the scented air.

Come here and let them whirl past,
For it will soon be time to rest;
We do not wish to get lost
In this solitude.

O wide, quiet peace,
So deep in the red dusk...
How weary we are of our travels --
Is this perhaps - Death? --

G. Mahler: Symphony No.4 in G Major

Notes by Rachel Gamin

In 1897, the Austrian-Bohemian composer and conductor Gustav Mahler was appointed as director of the Imperial Opera of Vienna and was kept so busy by his new duties that his compositional output was limited for nearly three years. Finally, in 1899 while on vacation in Bad Aussee, he had a breakthrough and created sketches about half of what would become his fourth symphony, finally completing the first draft in late summer 1900. It explores themes of childhood, innocence, and faith and is the capstone of what Mahler called his "perfectly self-contained" tetralogy of his early symphonic output, sharing many themes and motifs with his previous symphonies, especially the Third.

Although he originally conceived the symphony as a sort of six-movement humoresque featuring alternating instrumental and vocal features, the final symphony contains of three traditional orchestral movements and only one of the original planned songs, "*Das himmlische Leben*" (the Heavenly Life,) as its finale. Mahler had composed the song in 1892 while adapting the German folk poetry collection *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* but did not choose to include it in the song cycle, saving it instead for use in the symphony. Although generally disliked by critics and audiences at the time, who thought the juxtaposition of "high" art music and folk music to be vulgar and insincere compared to his monumental *Symphony #2*, it is now one of the composer's most enduring and accessible works.



Notes on the Program

Mahler scored the Fourth symphony for a comparatively small orchestra without trombone or tuba, (but with "lavish" percussion) using different instrumental combinations to create texture and color instead of volume. Although ostensibly in G major, the symphony progresses ultimately to E Major and is unified by an overarching cyclical form in which motifs in the first three movements recur in the finale. The influence of Schubert, whose music Mahler had studied extensively, is recalled throughout both in the intense melodicism and the use of chamber-type ensembles in contrast with full orchestration.

- I. *Bedächtigt, nicht eilen* – a musical "walk through the countryside," this movement begins with a flute and sleigh bell motif that gives way to a pair of warm, cozy melodies that Mahler compared to "a dewdrop on a flower that, suddenly illuminated by the sun, bursts into a thousand lights and colors." As the movement progresses, a violin solo and woodwind bird calls take the melody into a somewhat darker and complex development as if one had become lost in the woods, culminating in a swirling, shattering orchestral tutti followed by a trumpet call Mahler named "the little summons" (later used in the 5th Symphony) that literally calls the movement to order and returns us to the warmth and safety of the initial melodies.
- III. *Ruhevoll, poco adagio* – Mahler's favorite of all his slow movements, this double theme and variations features a tender, peaceful melody introduced in the cellos and violas and a melancholy oboe theme, unified by an ostinato in the bass and harp throughout. The mediative mood is interrupted by a whirling carnivalesque passage reined in by the horns and culminating in a massive, breathtaking wall of sound representing the opening of the gates of Heaven with angel wings beating and triumphal brass. This is also the point at which the symphony arrives in the "celestial" key of E Major.
- IV. *Sehr behaglich* – This movement features a soprano soloist singing about a child's view of Heaven." It describes a peaceful yet festive realm in which saints look on fondly as the residents dance, sing, make merry, and feast. Themes from all three previous movements are woven throughout the texture and give the Finale a sense of inevitability and resolution. As in the second movement, there is a hint of Mahler's sense of mortality as a lamb and some oxen are led to slaughter (presumably for the feast, but also having heavy theological overtones) before settling in to enjoy the music of the angels and a sense of restfulness, peace, and tranquil joy. The symphony finally closes with a pianissimo orchestral postlude that fades to nothing, suggesting the promise of a Heaven only briefly glimpsed, but continuing in perpetuity nonetheless.

The Heavenly Life (from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*)

We enjoy heavenly pleasures
and therefore avoid earthly ones.

No worldly tumult
is to be heard in heaven.

All live in greatest peace.

We lead angelic lives,
yet have a merry time of it besides.

We dance and we spring,

We skip and we sing.

Saint Peter in heaven looks on.

John lets the lambkin out,
and Herod the Butcher lies in wait for it.

We lead a patient, an innocent, patient,
dear little lamb to its death.

Saint Luke slaughters the ox

without any thought or concern.

Wine doesn't cost a penny
in the heavenly cellars.

The angels bake the bread.

Good greens of every sort
grow in the heavenly vegetable patch,
good asparagus, string beans,
and whatever we want.

Whole dishfuls are set for us!

Good apples, good pears and good grapes,
and gardeners who allow everything!

If you want roebuck or hare,
on the public streets
they come running right up.

Should a fast day come along,
all the fishes at once come swimming with joy.

There goes Saint Peter running
with his net and his bait
to the heavenly pond.

Saint Martha must be the cook.

There is just no music on earth
that can compare to ours.
Even the eleven thousand virgins
venture to dance,
and Saint Ursula herself has to laugh.

There is just no music on earth
that can compare to ours.
Cecilia and all her relations
make excellent court musicians.
The angelic voices
gladden our senses,
so that all awaken for joy.



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