

The Symphony Orchestra of India embarks on its thirteenth season, in a few weeks, and will feature as part of its repertoire Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 5 and Richard Strauss' Tone Poem 'Tod und Verklärung'. It is a point of pride that our orchestra can perform works by these two composers and is returning for the second time to each. It is also perhaps fair to say that our orchestra has a 'romantic' bent and acquits itself with panache when faced with works that need pathos and emotional intuition. So that said, let us prepare ourselves for what lies ahead, with some intuition of our own. I put forward here a healthy – but entirely personal – perspective on Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss – because both occupy a special place in my heart. It's not just because they were *über* composers, but because their combined oeuvre would probably satisfy me for quite some time on a desert island- (alright, I'd probably have to take along Brahms and few others as well ).

Can you imagine the flurry of creative activity from 1850-1950, in all walks of life? Can you imagine the extraordinary changes in society – a crusty class ridden hierarchy giving way to post war modernism? Within the lifetime of Mahler, the societal turn was not as pronounced as it would become after two world wars, but a year after his death in 1912, after the shameful loss of life on the Titanic, the die was cast. Anyone from anywhere had the promise to become anything, unfettered by birth, station or class. Can you imagine living through all that and still rising to singular prominence among your peers? Let us examine some of this amazing contemporary landscape. In the period between 1860 and 1895 the 1<sup>st</sup> Transatlantic cable had been laid, the Suez Canal had opened, the telephone, the phonograph and the light bulb had been invented, Daimler had acquired the patent for his auto motor, Marconi had sent his radio messages and the Xray had been discovered. Meanwhile, Dostoyevsky, Ibsen, Engel, Nietzsche, Marx and Freud were busy at work. Tchaikovsky, Puccini, Wolf, Debussy, Ravel, Schonberg, Dvorak, Brahms, Wolf, Lehar, Leoncavallo, Mascagni, Borodin, Bartok and Verdi were busy at work too, lest we thought musical competition was lax. This was the age of Hermann Winkelmann, Theodor Reichmann, Richard Mayr and Nelli Melba. It was also the age of Degas, Cezanne, Rodin, Monet, Gauguin, van Gogh, Klimt, Lautrec, Matisse and Picasso. How on earth does one retain world standing with all of these as a yardstick? Here's my view.

In the case of Mahler and Strauss – they inherited two things that are from different sources but can easily be viewed as cause and effect, which then joins them at the hip. Firstly, the harmonic language of composition had been stretched to such an extent that any combination of chords could be considered viable. The harmonic richness prepared on a plate by Wagner, was either going to be taken up and expanded by acolytes like Mahler and Strauss, or very quickly by 1923 overturned by the Second Viennese School of Schönberg, Webern and Berg. Secondly, to fully explore the new found harmonic freedom, great strides were made in orchestral sound. New instruments were forged like mythical swords and large combinations of players were brought to bear, which increased the size of a sitting orchestra to its historical maximum. 9 Horns, 7 Trumpets, Double woodwind, Wagner tenor Tubas, and a shameless battery of percussionists in what came to be jovially known as the 'kitchen' – more like a battalion HQ than an added effect. Both Strauss and Mahler not only revel in this realm of possibilities but conquer and master it to lasting effect.

Both composers give us music that insists on emotional involvement. Namely, if you are not prepared to 'cut your wrists' emotionally, along with the composer, then you cannot understand it, shouldn't be listening to it, and certainly shouldn't be criticizing it. Let's look at the last claim. Some of the early criticisms of both Mahler and Strauss came from that hierarchical, stoic society that could not show emotion and must not show emotion on pain of unstiffening the upper lip. Both composers broke this class barrier – and put the emotional reach of music front and centre for the whole of society. Both composers enjoyed far more prominence in the post 1945 period, because with two bloody world wars, raw emotion was easily tapped and not a new process for anyone, anymore. So the two composers arrive at the right time in history, or at least speak to the historical context in which they find themselves.

Mahler represents titanic struggle and insists that you struggle with him, here on earth. There are precious few moments of spiritual salvation, which he himself sparingly provides. It is the work of the outsider constantly struggling to be accepted. Even in Iglau where the family initially set up home, - consider which influences would command him most? Was he a Jew surrounded by Catholics? Was he part of a German enclave surrounded by Czech Moravia. Was he a pacifist in a garrison town? Was he taught that life was fleeting and precious, solidly enforced by the experience of so much untimely death? What did that shape in his ability to portray extreme pain? These questions raise more issues that can be readily answered, but one must take all of them into account if one is to begin to understand. Mahler's nine symphonies and the beginning of the tenth speak to all of this. They are also connected to two other things, the phases in his personal life and the thematic material from song cycles. The early works, Symphonies 1-4 are very much a part of the thematic material of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and its connected work *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*. The latter is part of the first symphony and also is a font of creativity into the *Wunderhorn* songs, so that much of the language and intent is joined. Mahler's 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Symphonies move in a different ambit, where there is more struggle, more titanic depth, more emotion and larger scope. The fifth provides the pivot from one phase to the other. By the time Mahler is contemplating the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> symphonies and *Das lied von der Erde*, he has suffered ill health himself, married Alma Schindler creating a frenetic wave of anti semitism, and fathered two daughters one of whom would tragically succumb to scarlet fever. It seems that for Mahler the tragedy in his music mirrors the tragedy in his life and his efforts to shape it from a sense of inadequacy mirrored his own instabilities.

For Richard Strauss, there was far less instability. Strauss knew where he stood. Strauss knew what musicians thought of him. Strauss knew his overall place in society, perhaps one would say arrogantly. Strauss certainly knew that his music was great. There was little soul searching or tragic evolution for him personally, though his music can traverse the whole range of emotional expression. His major contribution is, of course, his operas. From *Elektra* onwards, it is certain that he has found a unique and powerful voice which is instantly attractive and appealing. *Elektra* did so well that he was able to finance his home at Garmisch with the immediate proceeds. His extraordinary literary relationship with librettist Hugo von Hoffmansthal is almost as fabled as that between Mozart- Da Ponte. The harmonic language is as raw and visceral as with Mahler, and the heroes and heroines of his operas soar in majestic triumph, whether in a moment of beauty, or in a moment of anguish. His compositional style,

whilst carrying all that I have mentioned, is carefully crafted, as if to challenge musicians and performers. There is a 'show and tell' side to Strauss that insists that you marvel at the emotional feeling and then marvel equally at the architecture. No one had done this since the music of Brahms, which is perhaps the only compositional style that is comparable. So where Strauss excels in the body of his operatic work, he is clearly master of a style that is long evolved. He is also impacted by the changes wrought by history that extend from the death of Mahler in 1911 to his own in 1949. As mentioned, the two world wars had totally changed class and society, not only in structure but in expectation. The onset of air travel would forever alter mans sense of time and space – which dramatically altered mans sense of art and creativity. The urgency of making facile things quicker in the computer age - continues to alter it in ways that if not recognized in the modern context spell doom for the creative process as a whole.

The tone poem 'Tod und Verklärung' featured in this SOI season is fully blossoming Strauss, but from an age of pre-operatic, pre 1900, earlier forays into instrumental music. Though Strauss did not give us a Symphonic cycle, one cannot deny the Tone Poems their force of language or orchestral mastery. The *Alpine Symphony*, *Sinfonia Domestica* and to some extent the concerti play out in operatic Technicolor as much as symphonic form. Of the great tone poems, the SOI has performed the dramatic and storied, Don Juan – replete with heroics, and love scenes. The orchestration dazzles, and orchestras who play it are raised to a special level of competence, as with the others, Ein Heldenleben, Don Quixote and Till Eulenspiegel. 'Death and Transfiguration' is much more introspective and clearly a spiritually defined work. The throes of death, the final moments of life on earth, the life flashing before ones eyes, the almost transfigured soul, the fall back to the deathbed, the final peace and the rapture of salvation - who doesn't ponder what this would be like? When asked if Strauss knew what death and the afterlife were like, he pointed to this piece as if to say, "yes, of course, I know – it's exactly how I wrote it".

Our method in choosing orchestral repertoire for the Symphony Orchestra of India always seeks to challenge and inspire our players into a better understanding of the orchestral palette. In the choice of these composers the gauntlet is thrown down, to challenge and inspire the audience as well.

©Zane Dalal-2012

*Zane Dalal is Resident Conductor of the Symphony Orchestra of India and is a regular contributor to On Stage. Dalal is committed to the NCPA's mission of bringing the joys of western music to a wider audience in India.*