

Lafayette Symphony shines in Mahler concert

By DICK JAEGER
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It was a bird of rare plumage that flew over Long Center on Saturday evening when Maestro Nicholas Palmer and a larger than usual orchestra brought an audience to its feet, applauding wildly and granting six curtain calls to the performers.

And the standing ovation was not of the normal type where one jumps to his feet at the mere completion of the show.

There were many highlights, not the least of which was the second half with the performance of Gustav Mahler's "Symphony No. 1 in D Major," a work that challenges the greatest of orchestras and conductors. More on that later.

Opening the concert with a little ditty confusingly named "A Festive Violet Pulse" which was loud and mercifully short, the program proceeded to Jacques Ibert's "Homage a Mozart." The piece has all the elements of Ibert's mastery of orchestration with the joyful abandon of a Three Stooges pie fight.

The composer was well known as a provider of French movie scores as well as his more familiar "Divertissement" and "The Entrance of the Clowns." Palmer skimmed the fun without sacrificing the musical elements.

The guest soloist of the evening was French hornist Richard "Rick" Graef, a master of that instrument that is capable of producing haunting moods as well as rich brass contributions.

The Mozart "Horn Concerto No. 3" is one of many he wrote for his friend Ignaz Lelutgeb.

He delighted in writing dazzling elements for the horn which at the time was not a valved instrument.

Instead, colorations and pitch variations were controlled by the player's embouchure and the hand position within the bell of the horn. Graef used a modern valved horn but the dazzle was evident in the scales, trills and the sensitivity of shading and phrasing which Mozart made sure were included.

The composer was especially fond of the sound of the hunting horn.

Gustav Mahler was born in 1860 into a Jewish-Bohemian household.

He was not raised in poverty as he often averred but his music contains images of a troubled life fraught with neuroticism and chronic angst.

During his lifetime he was better known as an orchestral conductor, especially of operas where he was principal conductor of the prestigious Vienna Opera.

When his early symphonies were not exactly Top 40 hits, he said, "My time will come," and the late Leonard Bernstein saw to it that it did. Bernstein began to feature Mahler's works in the 1950s and even wrote a monograph entitled "His Time Has Come" as indeed it had.

The symphony is a rich compendium of sounds of nature, a sprightly waltz that is probably undanceable and a funeral march based rather incongruously on a the children's round, "Freres Jacques" which is hauntingly mindful of Mahler's fixation on death. The irony of this morphing into a sound resembling Jewish folk music is apparent.

He was familiar with the death and dying because of the 12 children born into the Mahler family, five died in childbirth, his favorite brother died at age 13 and his older brother committed suicide.

The orchestra handled the requisite pianissimos and fortes with restraint and vigor as Palmer was in total command at all times.

His mission was to probe the nuances and sensitivity in the music and not merely beat time with his baton.

The result was a touching yet thrilling musical experience that scholars and rank and file listeners could relate to and appreciate.

It is exciting to hear our local symphony orchestra begin to expand its musical horizons into horizons not heretofore explored. Let us hope this trend continues.

Jaeger is a retired choral music director and may be contacted by calling the Journal & Courier at (765) 420-5226.