

Concert review

Schoenberg cantata enraptures

By Janelle Gelfand

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The 2000 May Festival season was one massive crescendo that climaxed Saturday night with Schoenberg's monumental cantata, *Gurre-Lieder*.

James Conlon's magnificent direction of this opulent score made one wonder why it has been absent from the repertoire for a quarter of a century, since James Levine conducted it in 1975. Calling for a massive orchestra and chorus, the visual effect alone made a striking first impression.

To create Schoenberg's post-romantic sound world, Music Hall's stage was packed with 127 musicians of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra - including four harps, Wagnerian tubas, expanded winds and an enormous brass section - the May Festival Chorus and the Concert Chorus of the City of Dusseldorf.

Gurre-Lieder is based on the poems of Jens Peter Jacobsen, inspired by a mythological tale set in the Danish castle of Gurre. Its themes of love, death and transfiguration culminated Saturday in the crowning glory of the chorus singing "Seht, die Sonne" (See the sun). The singers projected a lush, refined texture, capping a memorable evening of all-encompassing passion and intensity.

Composed under the spell of Wagner, Schoenberg's work evokes the longing of *Tristan und Isolde*. It is set in three tableaux; the first depicts the love of King Waldemar and Tove, followed by her death, mourned by the Wood Dove (Waldtaube).

Tenor Jon Fredric West, a native of Dayton, was superb as Waldemar, conveying his passion with firm tone, imaginative expression and power. The most rapturous moment came in "Du wunderliche Tove" (Wonderful Tove), a gentle song with soaring climaxes, set against sweeping waves of orchestral sound. "The Wild Hunt," a ghostly, supernatural ride, was as chilling for Mr. West's dramatic portrayal as for the power that Mr. Conlon unleashed in the orchestra.

Sharon Sweet, as Tove, projected easily over the orchestra from her position behind it. Her dramatic reading was strong and full of character, and she spun a fine legato line. The first part concluded with the "Song of the Wood Dove," magnificently sung by Florence Quivar. In her 12th May Festival, Ms. Quivar entered to the plaintive song of the English horn (Robert Walters), and conveyed deeply moving emotion with a luxuriant voice.

Tenor Donald Kaasch, whose versatility has impressed during this festival, displayed spectacular personality as Klaus-Narr, the jester. William McGraw was powerful and expressive as the peasant who is frightened by the spectral ride, and the men of the chorus added to the atmosphere. Speaker Thomas Stewart brought distinction to his lines as the summer wind that sweeps away the passion. He navigated the *sprechstimme*, a combination of speech and song, with wonderful diction and expression. The moment was enhanced by a beautiful solo from concertmaster Timothy Lees, against a glimmering orchestra.

At the center of these vast forces, Mr. Conlon led forcefully, propelling the music with drama and momentum, and balancing its massive crescendos perfectly against the soloists. The orchestra responded with fine playing, despite the taxing score; the orchestral prelude was an exquisite canvas of shimmering colors.

At the work's conclusion, the audience of 3,193 rose once more for a lengthy ovation, followed by the traditional "Hallelujah Chorus."

Although the combined forces did not break the record of performers onstage (about 420, compared with nearly 500 for Mahler's Eighth last week), the audience brought the season to a record 13,175 for Music Hall's concerts alone, more than any season in the past 30 years.