

ARTS

The music of poetry

Ensemble to perform two works based on the same ancient Chinese poem

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The sun descends behind the mountains. ... The moon floats like a silver boat through the blue lake of heaven. ... My heart is still and awaits its hour. ... "

Such imagery of leave-taking, drawn from ancient Chinese poetry, inspired one of the greatest works of Western music, Gustav Mahler's *The Song of the Earth* (*Das Lied von der Erde*), for vocal soloists and orchestra.

Those particular lines are from *The Farewell* (*Der Abschied*), the final movement, which, at more than 30 minutes, takes up half of this piece from 1909. Here Mahler confronts human mortality and the comforting, endless life cycle of nature. He wrote the concluding lines himself, very much in the spirit of the Chinese poets:

"The dear Earth blossoms everywhere in spring and grows green again. Everywhere and forever horizons shine blue and bright. Forever ... forever."

Music just doesn't get more profound than this.

The single movement of *The Farewell* is the impetus behind a remarkable program tomorrow night at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center. The Washington-based Post-Classical Ensemble, now in its sixth year of serving up fresh experiences guided by artistic director Joseph Horowitz and music director Angel Gil-Ordonez, will present that movement in an unusual context.

In addition to Mahler's work, sung by mezzo-soprano Delores Ziegler and performed in the chamber orchestra version arranged by Arnold Schoenberg, there will be traditional Chinese music and recitations of the original 8th-century Tang Dynasty poems that inspired Mahler.

There's more - the premiere of a piece by Chinese-born composer Zhou Long, also called *The Farewell* and also inspired by the same poetry that affected Mahler.

"I found it very fascinating to be working between these two cultures," Zhou Long says about composing his *Farewell*, which employs the same instrumentation as Schoenberg's

Mahler arrangement, plus two Chinese instruments, the pipa and erhu. "I feel I benefit from both traditions, combining the two types of instruments, with their very unique colors."

In a way, this cross-cultural exploration carries on what Mahler started, when he set to music poems that had already been Westernized and expanded upon by a German translator, Hans Bethge.

"The original poems used for The Farewell take maybe 45 seconds to read," says Gil-Ordonez. "Mahler took 30 minutes to convey them in music. And yet, somehow, they are the same - such profound and deep sentiments, expressed in a very different way. The poetry is about how two people who love each other say farewell forever."

Where Mahler employed a large orchestra for Song of the Earth, Schoenberg managed to reduce the forces down to a mere 13 instruments without destroying the exotic flavor of the original score.

"I think, of all the movements in the Schoenberg arrangement, The Farewell is the one that benefits the most from the chamber music approach," says Gil-Ordonez. "I know it is risky to take a single movement from a piece, but this one is so different from the other movements that I think it can be separated from them."

For his own Farewell score, Zhou Long, who teaches at the University of Missouri, takes the words of those poets as his starting point but does not actually set them to music. His work is purely instrumental.

"The first part of the piece is very direct," says the composer, who incorporates Chinese folk tunes into that section. "The second part is atonal, using a more abstract musical language."

Gil-Ordonez calls the new work "very exciting. Zhou Long has done an extraordinary job," he says.

As for Mahler's masterpiece, the philosophical depth he achieved in The Song of the Earth, the autumnal-shaded orchestration and hauntingly beautiful vocal lines, especially in The Farewell, provide a compelling summing up of the composer's art.

"Mahler set this poetry perfectly," Zhou Long says. "He found his soul mate with these Tang poets. The Farewell music is deeply personal and very original. You can feel it."

The Post-Classical Ensemble performs at 8 p.m. tomorrow (lecture at 7 p.m.) at Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, University of Maryland, Stadium Drive and University Boulevard, College Park. Tickets are \$30, \$7 for students. Call 301-405-ARTS or go to claricesmithcenter.umd.edu.

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