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Andris Nelsons leads the Boston Symphony Orchestra in Mahler's Symphony No. 9. Courtesy Photo/Liza Voll, BSO

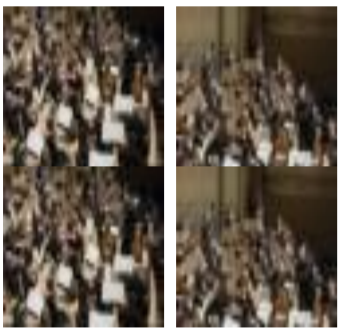

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Andris Nelsons leads the Boston Symphony Orchestra in Mahler's Symphony No. 9. Courtesy Photo/Liza Voll, BSO



By Keith Powers/Daily News Correspondent

Posted Apr. 15, 2016 at 12:20 PM

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BOSTON - What Mahler never heard, we glory in.

The composer was dead at 50 in 1911 before the Ninth Symphony, his last completed work, was ever performed. He imagined it, he composed it, and no doubt he heard it all in his head. But as for its overwhelming artistry, and its profound emotional impact - that's all left for us.

The Boston Symphony Orchestra, performing the work under music director Andris Nelsons Thursday evening at Symphony Hall, has played a major role in the century-long performance history of Mahler's Ninth.

Serge Koussevitzky led the first American performances of the giant piece in 1931. Seiji Ozawa conducted the symphony in his final concert as music director of the BSO at Symphony Hall in 2002. And, more recently, Nelsons' success conducting the Ninth in first appearance with BSO -subbing for James Levine in 2011 at Carnegie Hall - had much to do with his subsequent appointment as Levine's successor a few years later.

Each of the Ninth's four movements presents a distinct scope and style. While it feels in its unfolding like four different works, there is an undeniable sense of completeness at its conclusion.

The opening movement, by far the longest - almost half an hour's worth of music - challenges listeners and performers - as well as the

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came through. A movement like this is nearly perfect for his animated style.

It's a bumpy ride, but far too perfect for parody. Mahler may be exaggerating folk styles, but he's not mocking anyone.

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conductor meant to form it into a whole. Frequent modulations, injected dissonances, and the episodic use of orchestral colors - a horn blast here, a bassoon outcry, a timpani ostinato - all lead to what feels like a series of disparate musical events.

It begins with a cello and horn syncopation, softly suggesting what will come. Mahler takes his time. Details are many, but a true melody grows from little bits. On that quiet opening, the harp builds. The second violins make this theme more prominent, first partnered in duet with horns, then the first violins.

The music ebbs and flows, the climax of the movement not arriving as a glorious crescendo, but as chamber music - still carved out as individual voices, not as a unified whole.

Not yet. The hushed mystery ends abruptly, at the start of the second movement. Marked as a "clumsy and coarse Landler" - a popular dance, distant cousin to the waltz - the movement would be a comedy, or a parody, if the music did not have so much style.

Mahler makes it "clumsy" by over-emphasizing accents, with too frequent rests and exaggerated dynamics. Nelsons found a way to articulate it, making sure both the excesses and the directness

came through. A movement like this is nearly perfect for his animated style.

It's a bumpy ride, but far too perfect for parody. Mahler may be exaggerating folk styles, but he's not mocking anyone.





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