

REVIEW

With Crisp Precision, BSO Resurrects Tanglewood With Mahler's Symphony No. 2

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By [Keith Powers](#) 

Three years ago, at the press conference introducing Andris Nelsons as the 15th music director of the [Boston Symphony Orchestra](#), he said the appointment was “like being handed the keys to a Ferrari.”

Friday evening he drove it.

Nelsons kicked off the official beginning to the musical summer at the splashy [Tanglewood](#) opener in the Shed, with a precise, alert reading of Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony. With the largest possible version of the BSO on- and offstage, joined by the Tanglewood Festival Chorus and two notable soloists, Nelsons certainly had a muscle car at his disposal.

For a work that fills a full hour and a half, has five movements of sharply divergent character, and wrestles with ideas of fate, death and the afterlife, "Resurrection" is a surprisingly crisp, almost compact symphony.

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Not a measure seems out of place. Where many large-scale symphonies meander through musical forms, "Resurrection" plays like chamber music. Taut and focused, it may run through harrowing dissonances, playful dances and strange juxtapositions, but it all seems of one piece.

It also plays to Nelsons' strengths. Never one to hide his emotions, Nelsons came alive through Mahler's score.

Measuring Nelsons' work by gestural attention, he overdoes it. Twinkling his fingers for the harps, mimicking the valves of the trumpets, even playing air-mallets for the timpani, Nelsons ventures into the realm of over-conducting.

But measure him on concept as well, and you come away a believer. He never takes a measure off; the downbeat is never far away. A work like this crescendos

dozens of times, filled with emotional peaks and valleys. And none of it is hazy, or uncertain. Nelsons travels through it all intently, like a kid marveling at a drive through the Alps.

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His players leapt to the possibilities. Winds and horns are a notable BSO strength under Nelsons' leadership, and principals Thomas Rolfs (trumpet), Elizabeth Rowe (flute), John Ferrillo (oboe), along with concertmaster Malcolm Lowe, all offered crisp solos in varying moods.

“Resurrection” — not Mahler's title, but certainly appropriate — opens with a long sonata form movement, insistently dark (C minor, the home key), its gloomy, march-like dotted triplet reiterated constantly. It also contradicts itself, with lyric elegance appearing as a leaven to the over-arching pessimism. Vast and ambitious, the opening movement deliberately juxtaposes contrasting ideas to evoke Mahler's sense of life's hopelessness.

Mahler instructs the conductor to pause at least five minutes before launching into the second movement, a slow Andante. This instruction gets frequently ignored, but Nelsons took full advantage.

We had just been questioned on life's purpose, experienced elusive moments of sunshine, been plunged back into despair, then left bereft: Nelsons sat onstage and chatted about it with his string players.

It was a perfectly appropriate interlude. The Andante arrives incongruously, interrupting the heady investigations that Mahler has begun — and would resume. A gentle dance, its light pizzicato middle section takes the weight off for a moment. But it disappears easily.

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The third movement mocks the second. Also a dance — both waltzes, of a sort — it sounds like a scherzo built on anger, not on humor.

The brief fourth movement introduces the voices, and Mahler's questioning starts to find answers. Mezzo Bernarda Fink gently articulated “Urlicht (Primal Light),” the angelic text Mahler chose to initiate his climax. All the singing eased into music, as if the humans had to tread carefully with divine notions.

The finale — with chorus, soprano (Malin Christensson), offstage ensemble (horns and percussion), and fully engaged orchestra onstage — at first recalls not only the dotted triplets of the opening, but its earnest death march as well. But then it rises up above.

The chorus enters as softly as 120 singers possibly can, exhorting us “Bereite dich zu leben” (Prepare to live). The ensemble obeys, culminating in enormous fanfares, tolling bells and conjoined voices.

And so the summer begins.

The Boston Symphony Orchestra performs at Tanglewood through Aug. 27.

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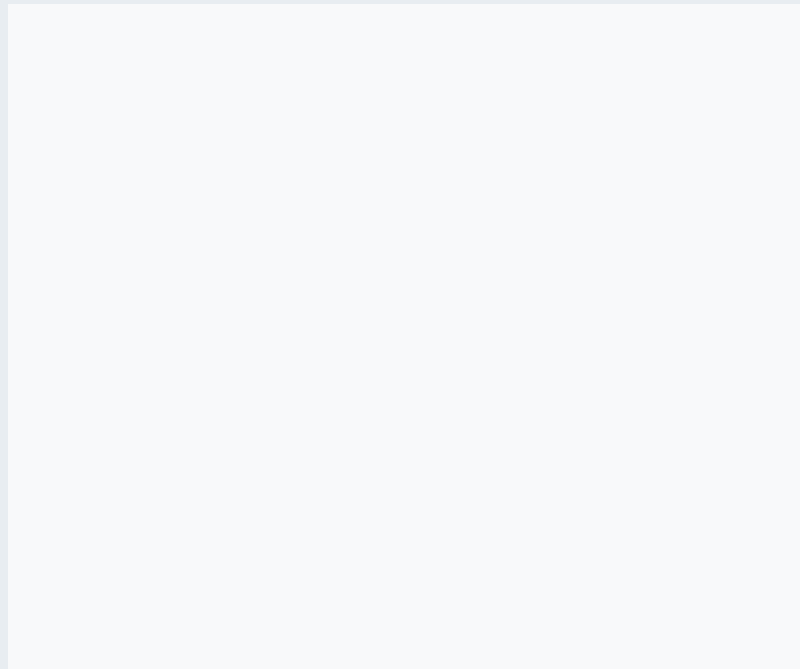
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