UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND SCHOOL OF MUSIC PRESENTS

NATIONAL FESTIVAL ORCHESTRA
FISCH CONDUCTS
MOZART AND MAHLER

SATURDAY, JUNE 22, 2013 . 8PM

ELSIE & MARVIN DEKELBOUM CONCERT HALL
Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center
University of Maryland

PHOTO BY ALISON HARBAUGH
MOZART

Piano Concerto No. 17 in G Major, K. 453
  Allegro
  Andante
  Allegretto e presto

INTERMISSION

MAHLER

Symphony No. 6 in A Minor
  Allegro energico, ma non troppo. Heftig aber markig
  Scherzo: Wuchtig
  Andante moderato
  Finale: Allegro moderato – Allegro energico
In 1784, by then settled in Vienna and married to Constanze Weber, Mozart wrote no operas and no symphonies, but he produced one string quartet (the beloved “Hunt” Quartet in B-flat, K. 458) and no fewer than six piano concertos, one of which (No. 18 in B-flat, K. 456) was composed for the celebrated blind performer Maria Theresia Paradis, a goddaughter of the Empress, and two (No. 14 in E-flat, K. 449, and the concerto performed this evening) for one of the most talented of his pupils, Barbara Ployer. This remarkable production continued apace through 1786, by the end of which year the cycle of Viennese concertos initiated in 1784 comprised a round dozen works, but 1784 holds the record for the number composed in a single calendar year. All of these 1784 concertos are stunning works, and, to a degree almost as striking as the phenomenon of the three final symphonies composed in the summer of 1788, each has its own distinctive character that sets it apart from its companion works of the same year; No. 17 in G Major might well be regarded as both the most ingratiating and the most substantial of the lot.

Although two of Mozart’s youthful piano concertos based on sonata movements by other composers are in G major (the second of the three using material by Johann Christian Bach, K. 107, and the work listed as Mozart’s Concerto No. 4, K. 41), the present work is his only wholly original keyboard concerto in this key. If the keys of C minor, D minor and G minor held dramatic, passionate and tragic connotations for him, this key may be said to connote an expansive good humor. It is in that vein, in any event, that this concerto opens and closes. The opening of the first movement is one of the most richly melodic and directly appealing such gestures to be found in any of Mozart’s works, and is hardly less remarkable for the colors achieved with such modest orchestral means. Nothing is held back: suspense has no part in the scheme of this music, which unfolds, as the eminently quotable Donald Francis Tovey observed, “in the most intellectual vein of high comedy.” Neither the intellectual nor the comedic element here rules out warmth of heart, which also makes itself abundantly felt.

For all the solid pleasure afforded by the first movement, it offers little preparation for the altogether more profound character of the expansive Andante that follows. This music might be said to represent a certain compensation for — or in any event a reminder of — Mozart’s inactivity in the realm of opera during the year in which this concerto was composed: it suggests an extended aria or, more aptly, a scena, in its ruminative character, its dramatic pauses and the obligato passages for the various wind instruments. Arthur Hutchings, in his book on the Mozart concertos, noted a resemblance to the soprano aria “Et incarnatus est” in the great Mass in C Minor (K. 427) that Mozart left incomplete in 1783.

Only two of Mozart’s piano concertos have finales in variation form: this one and No. 24 in C Minor (K. 491), which came along two years later, at the time of The Marriage of Figaro. The theme of this enchanting Allegretto seems almost a pre-echo of the first aria of Papageno in The Magic Flute (1791), the aria in which Papageno introduces himself as a bird-catcher. There happens to be an avian connection here, too, in that Mozart trained his pet starling to sing a phrase reasonably close to this theme on which the five variations are based. The writing for the winds is almost as captivating as the material for the piano itself, and the last of the variations, following an unexpectedly introspective episode in G minor, is an especially cheerful episode, changing the tempo to Presto and leading to a coda with clear enough pre-echoes of the famous Papageno-Papagena duet.

The cadenzas Asher Fisch plays in this evening’s performance are Mozart’s own.
alma Mahler, who had a good deal to say about her husband’s music and its personal significance, did not hesitate to call the sixth symphony the most personal of all his compositions, and now, with the advantage of more than a hundred years’ rich hindsight, we may understand why it has also been regarded as a “prophetic” work, in both a personal sense and a more broadly artistic one.

Although the Byronic flamboyance of Berlioz and Liszt had been digested in large part by the middle of the 19th century, and Tchaikovsky had produced in that century’s final quarter “autobiographical” symphonies of such urgency that they were sometimes tagged “confessional,” no one could have been prepared for quite such intense self-revelation as Mahler presented, and least of all in a symphony. The intensity seemed to deepen from one work to the next, and Mahler himself was somewhat staggered by the impact of his Sixth. “No other work so affected him at first hearing,” according to alma, who noted that he conducted the premiere “almost badly, because he was ashamed of his agitation, and because he was afraid his emotions might get out of hand.”

In respect to form, the Sixth may be regarded as the most conventional of Mahler’s symphonies. It was the first he conceived from the start in the traditional four-movement format, with fast movements at both ends, and without involving a sung text. It was also the first without an affirmative ending. One might even say it is the only one without an affirmative ending, for there is really as much of affirmation as of lamentation — and perhaps even more — in the final Adagio of the Ninth and the Abschied that ends the song-symphony Das Lied von der Erde. At one point, in fact, Mahler appended the subtitle “Tragic” to the score of this work. As Mahler’s assistant at the Vienna Opera, Bruno Walter was especially close to him at the time the Sixth Symphony was composed. In his brief biographical reminiscence, Walter wrote that this work is “bleakly pessimistic; it reeks of the bitter cup of life.” Perhaps this is not pervasively true of the first three movements, but in the final one, as Walter put it, something resembling the inexorable strife of “all against all” is translated into music . . . . The mounting tension and climaxes of the last movement resemble, in their grim power, the mountainous waves of a sea that will overwhelm and destroy the ship; the work ends in hopelessness and the dark night of the soul.

Alma had a bit more to say about the work in her memoir:

After he had drafted the first movement he came down from the wood to tell me he had tried to depict me in a theme. “Whether I’ve succeeded, I don’t know, but you’ll have to put up with it.” This is the great soaring theme of the first movement. In the third movement he represented the arrhythmic games of the two little children, tottering in zigzags over the sand. Ominously, the childish voices became more and more tragic, and at the end died out in a whisper. In the last movement he described himself and his downfall, or, as he later said, that of his hero: “It is the hero on whom fall three blows of fate, the last of which fells him as a tree is felled.” Those were his words.

Not one of his works came so directly from his inner heart as this. We both wept that day. The music and what it foretold touched us so deeply. The Sixth is the most completely personal of his works, and a prophetic one, too. In the Kindertotenlieder, so also in the Sixth, he anticipated his own life in music. On him too fall three blows of fate, and the last felled him. But at the time he was serene; he was conscious of the greatness of his work. He was a tree in full leaf and bloom.

The first of Mahler’s “three blows of fate” came less than a year after the premiere of the Sixth Symphony, when he was forced under pressure to resign from his post
as director of the Vienna Opera. Shortly after that, in July 1907, the older of his two daughters, then in her fifth year, died of scarlet fever and diphtheria, and during the same summer Mahler learned of the heart disease that was to end his own life prematurely less than four years later.

While the Sixth Symphony enjoyed numerous performances, under Mahler himself in his last years, and other conductors as well, shortly after his death, it was, like most of his other works, given very infrequently from that time until the large-scale Mahler revival around the time of his centenary that put his symphonies at last in the so-called standard repertory. Listeners of a certain age, who first encountered this work in the form of recordings in the early 1950s — one from Vienna under F. Charles Adler, another from a concert performance by the Rotterdam Philharmonic under Eduard Flipse — found its four movements laid out in the conventional symphonic sequence, with the slow movement in second position and the scherzo in third. Some 15 years later, when stereophonic recordings of the work began to appear, under such conductors as Georg Solti and Leonard Bernstein, the order of the two inner movements was reversed, placing the scherzo before the slow movement, and there were other textual changes as well.

What had happened in the intervening years was that “critical editions” of Mahler's symphonies were published by the Vienna-based International Gustav Mahler Society, under the editorial direction of Erwin Ratz. While Mahler's symphonies in general present nothing like those of Bruckner in respect to competing editions or “versions” from which the conductor must choose, the changes made in the critical edition of the Sixth have been somewhat controversial. Some older conductors active in the 20th century, among them some who had had direct contact with Mahler, persisted in placing the slow movement before the scherzo, as did some younger conductors who were influenced by their senior colleagues. As far as most of the interested public was concerned, Mahler had simply been unable to decide firmly one way or the other.

As recently as 1998, the Kaplan Foundation published a research paper by Jerry Bruck stating that Erwin Ratz’s decision to place the scherzo before the slow movement had been ill considered. Bruck pointed out that, while Mahler did originally compose the Sixth with the scherzo preceding the slow movement, once he began actual rehearsals for the work's premiere he himself reversed that order. Mahler, in fact, followed up with letters to his publisher stating that the score be corrected (provided with a corrective insert until a new edition could be printed), and his own performances were consistent in this respect to the end of his life.

Despite Bruck’s strong presentation, however, letters or notes from such figures as the Dutch conductor Willem Mengelberg, Mahler's earliest champion, and Alma herself have been cited in opposing it. The discussion continues, with no general agreement either way very likely in the foreseeable future. Listeners at home, of course, may choose for themselves in playing a recording of the work, but in the concert hall it is still up to the conductor; Asher Fisch, like most of his colleagues at present, follows the Mahler Society’s critical edition in this respect.

Lest it be inferred from what Alma wrote that the entire first movement is simply a musical portrait of her, it should be noted that “the great soaring theme” is but one of the opening movement’s four thematic elements. The Sixth Symphony opens with the gruff tread of a march, and two themes (the first of which is to reappear at various points in the work as a sort of “Fate” motif) are introduced before the “Alma” theme makes its first appearance. These four elements are developed both independently and conjointly, each pulling in its own direction, and at the end of the movement the “Alma” theme itself is transformed into a sort of march, brassy and proclamative, with drums beating.

The Mahler authority Deryck Cooke wrote of the scherzo as a “gruesome comedy” of awesome proportions. The opening figure bears a certain resemblance to the old Viennese song “Ach du lieber Augustin,” and it is noteworthy that in his well-documented meeting with Sigmund Freud at Leyden in the summer of 1910 (the last summer of his life) Mahler linked that tune with a painful episode in his childhood. Ernest Jones reported, in his biography of Freud, “In Mahler’s opinion the conjunction of high tragedy and light amusement was from then on inextricably fixed in his mind, and the one mood inevitably brought the other with it.”

The Andante is one of the most poignant of Mahler’s characteristically otherworldly slow movements: an unhurried, dreamlike episode, opening almost as if it were to be a sentimental ballad. (One of the instructions in the score is “altväterlich.”) The atmosphere of a bucolic idyll is evoked by the sound of cowbells, which have already been heard in the development section of the opening.
movement and will be heard again in the finale, but the “idyllic” frame is shattered by the sheer intensity that Mahler achieves with relatively simple means. By way of illustrating the significance of the cowbells and other unusual effects in Mahler’s works (and this one in particular), our own Mahler authority Jack Diether cited a letter that Mahler wrote to a friend in 1879, five years after the death of his younger brother Ernst:

I go to the meadow, where the tinkling of cowbells lulls me to dreaming … Behind me in the village the evening bells chime, and their chorus is borne across to me by a kind of breeze … Shadowy memories of my life pass before me, like long forgotten ghosts of departed happiness. … There stands the hurdy-gurdy man, extending his hat with his withered hand, and in his discordant music I hear the greeting of ‘Ernst of Swabia.’ Now Ernst appears suddenly in person, stretching his arms to me, and when I look closer it is my poor brother. … I fear that some day I shall be shattered in the tempest that has so often dealt me cruel blows. … I’ve just come from the meadow, where I was sitting by the hut of Farkas the shepherd, listening to the music of his shawn. Ah, how it sounded, and so passionately ecstatic, the folk song he played!

In the final movement we hear not only the cowbells already introduced in two of the preceding movements, but also intimations of the church bells alluded to in that early letter, and of course the shattering blows predicted in the same passage. This longest and most dramatic portion of the work is a grand dénouement in much the same sense as the finale of the First Symphony. The earlier movements’ building toward this conclusion has been so subtle that what is unleashed here has the heightened force of the unexpected. The finale is built in part on thematic elements from the preceding movements, and seems to begin afresh after each of its several episodic sections. The coloring is as fanciful and bizarre as anything Mahler ever attempted. Visions of serenity, signaled by the return of the cowbells, are swept away in a rush of new material. A march figure that seems to be building toward self-confidence is grotesquely swallowed up, only to return mockingly in the form of a brass chorale. The first two hammer blows make for imposing climaxes among this macabre procession; the third, which Mahler deleted in one of his revisions (apparently in response to Richard Strauss’s remark that the work was “over-orchestrated”), came at the onset of the darkling coda, whose murky gloom is shattered by a single futile outcry before the last flicker of light is extinguished.

Notes by Richard Freed © 2013
About the Conductor

ASHER FISCH

Israeli-born conductor Asher Fisch appears with many of the world’s most renowned opera companies and symphony orchestras. With a vast repertoire that spans three centuries stylistically from Gluck to Adams, Mr. Fisch is particularly known and appreciated for his interpretive command of core German Romantic and post-Romantic repertoire, from Beethoven through Berg, including virtually the entire canon of Wagner and Strauss.

Asher Fisch is currently the Principal Guest Conductor of the Seattle Opera and formerly served as Music Director of the New Israeli Opera (1998-2008) and the Wiener Volksoper (1995-2000). In September 2013, he will take up the baton as Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor of the West Australian Symphony Orchestra.

Mr. Fisch split much of his time during the 2011-2012 season between two of Germany’s principal opera houses: the Bayerische Staatsoper, where he led a new production of Don Carlo and revival performances of Tosca, Turandot and Die Zauberflöte; and the Dresden Semperoper (Sächsische Staatsoper) leading Rigoletto performances. Outside Germany, Mr. Fisch led the Paris Opera production of Lehar’s Die Lustige Witwe, returned to the Wiener Staatsoper for Cavalleria Rusticana/I Pagliacci and conducted the Italian premiere of Alexander Zemlinsky’s Koenig Kandaules in Teatro Massimo Palermo. In summer 2012 he conducted Turandot at the Seattle Opera. In the world of symphony orchestras, Mr. Fisch
conducted the Dresden Staatskapelle, Staatsphilharmonie Rheinland-Pfalz and again worked with the National Orchestral Institute. He made his debut with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in July 2012 at the Tanglewood Festival in an all-Wagner program for the festival’s 75th anniversary commemoration.

In the 2012-2013 season, Mr. Fisch returns to New York’s Metropolitan Opera for *Parsifal*, to Seattle for *Fidelio* and will lead a variety of titles in German opera houses (Hamburg and Munich) including *Die Zauberflöte*, *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Manon Lescaut*, and symphonic programs with the Atlanta Symphony and Kansas City Symphony before returning to Seattle in summer 2013 for its quadrennial complete Wagner *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

Early on mentored and championed by Daniel Barenboim, Mr. Fisch began his conducting career as Maestro Barenboim’s assistant and kappellmeister at the Berlin Staatsoper during the 1990s. Emerging as a significant conductor in his own right, Mr. Fisch has since developed enduring relationships internationally, not only among the world’s opera houses but also with symphony orchestras. Among the North American symphony orchestras, Mr. Fisch has conducted those of Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Dallas, Seattle, Atlanta, Houston, Saint Louis, Toronto, Montreal, Minnesota and the National Symphony in Washington DC. In Europe, he appears regularly at the Munich Philharmonic and has also conducted the Berlin Philharmonic, Dresden Staatskapelle, Leipzig’s Gewandhaus Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra and Orchestre National de France, among others.

In Australia, he has been designated the Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor of the West Australian Symphony Orchestra (Perth) and has become a repeated guest at the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra since leading and recording Wagner’s Ring Cycle with that orchestra for the Adelaide Festival in 2004.

A regular guest at leading European opera houses, Mr. Fisch has conducted repertoire ranging from Mozart to Berg at the Berlin Staatsoper (Unter den Linden), Vienna Staatsoper, Milan’s La Scala, Paris Opera, Dresden Semperoper, Bayerische Staatsoper, Hamburg Staatsoper, Leipzig Opera and the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, where he conducted the concert gala celebrating the Golden Jubilee of the Royal Opera House, which was recorded and released by EMI Records.

After making his United States debut with the Los Angeles Opera in 1995, Mr. Fisch has since conducted at the Metropolitan Opera, Chicago Lyric Opera and Houston Grand Opera. In summer of 2003 he inaugurated the new Seattle Opera House to great acclaim with a new production of *Parsifal*, and returned to Seattle in July 2004 for *Lohengrin*. That same year he led the new production of Wagner’s Ring Cycle for the South Australian Opera, which won ten awards at Australia’s Helpmann Awards, including best opera and best music direction.

Mr. Fisch is also an accomplished pianist, with a first solo disc of piano transcriptions recently released on the Melba label. He often play-conducts, and also participates in chamber music and vocal recitals.