

syracuse.com

Dedication of park bench to commemorate the performance of Gustav Mahler and the New York Philharmonic in Syracuse 100 years ago

Published: Thursday, December 09, 2010, 6:00 AM



Melinda Johnson / Post-Standard arts editor



Courtesy photo

Conductor and composer Gustav Mahler traveled with the 85 musicians of the New York Philharmonic on its Great Lakes Tour. It began in Pittsburgh and moved on to Cleveland, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and ended in Utica on Dec. 10.

Turn back the clock 100 years to this day. Syracuse was cloaked in 4 inches of snow. Conductor and composer Gustav Mahler and the New York Philharmonic stepped off the train after having performed in Rochester on the evening of Dec. 8.

The conductor and his 85 musicians were nearing the end of their six-stop Great Lakes tour, which began in Pittsburgh, followed by Cleveland, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Utica.

A concert was scheduled for Friday evening at the Wieting Opera House. The performance hall, which was demolished in 1930, sat on the southern side of Water Street on what is now Clinton Square. The program featured Bach, Beethoven and Wagner. Mahler not only conducted but was soloist. He sat at a Steinway piano, reconfigured as a harpsichord, facing the audience and performed his arrangement of Bach's Suite for Orchestra.

The critic for the Syracuse Herald wrote: "From the musical point of view, the orchestral concert of the New York Philharmonic society at the Wieting last night, will rank among the great successes of its kind in the musical history of Syracuse."

This momentous occasion will not go unforgotten on the 100th anniversary. On a similarly snowy Syracuse day, music lovers and history buffs will converge on Clinton Square at 12:30 p.m. today to dedicate a bench commemorating Mahler's visit as a performer and conductor.

Mahler aficionado **Hamilton Armstrong**, of Manlius, is underwriting the purchase of the granite bench and its inscription. The **Onondaga Historical Association** is organizing the ceremony with **WCNY-FM radio** and the assistance of the Syracuse Department of Parks, Recreation and Youth Programs, the New York State Historic Preservation Office and Karl Lutz Monument Co. It also will be broadcast live on WCNY-FM.

Weeks before, another ardent admirer of Mahler, **writer Norman Lebrecht**, flew from New York City to Syracuse.

"I set out to retrace Mahler's footsteps because he invented orchestral touring. Nobody remembers that. But Mahler was the first person to put a full orchestra on a train and to say 'that the things we're doing here in the middle of Manhattan are far too remarkable for eight city blocks. Let's get them out to the rest of the country,'" says Lebrecht, author of the recently published **"Why Mahler? How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed Our World."**;



Courtesy of
Norman Lebrecht

Norman Lebrecht is author of the recent book "Why Mahler? How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed Our World." In retracing the footsteps of Mahler's Great Lakes Tour, he visited Syracuse recently. He will be interviewed at noon today on WCNY-FM (91.3).

During his brief visit to Syracuse, Lebrecht stopped by Clinton Square and also recorded an interview at WCNY-FM to be aired at 12:06 p.m. today. The writer is back home in London's St. John's Wood, just around the corner from the Abbey Road Studio where the Beatles recorded their first albums. After finishing a U.S. book tour, he is "hunkering" down as London experiences heavy snowfall.

Lebrecht also felt compelled to follow Mahler's Upstate travels to remind people of the "extraordinary" orchestra tour and his incredible influence. During a phone interview, the author says Mahler "rewrote the rules of music in America," from introducing a subscription series at the New York Philharmonic as well as several series focused on contemporary music, the evolution of music from Bach to present time and an education program.

"He did all sorts of things that today seem challenging and at that time were beyond revolutionary," says Lebrecht. "Much of what he did in that short time — 1909 to 1911 — is still the basis of the way that orchestral music functions in America, still today."

The author describes Mahler as an "iconoclast" who spent his life trying to change what an orchestra can do and how the public perceives it. As conductor of the New York Philharmonic (1909-1911), he realized this dream. Mahler introduced "multi-directionality and spatial elements into music, so you're sitting in the hall and you don't know where it is coming from," says Lebrecht.

Mahler was intent on changing music from being "frontally delivered by an orchestra onstage to (a) passive audience in a hall" to a surround-sound experience.

As a composer, Mahler left 11 major works that Lebrecht considers central to our understanding of the development of music, "a synthesis of much that came before and crucible of Modernism, the beginning of the modern age."

Lebrecht, who also wrote "Mahler Remembered" (W.W. Norton & Co, 1987), is surprised there is little public recognition in New York City of Mahler's tenure as conductor of the New York Philharmonic. He also has been

overlooked in Europe. Mahler was director of Vienna's opera from 1897 to 1907.

"He's still a prophet pretty much without honor in Vienna."

Lebrecht only learned of the Mahler commemoration upon his arrival in Syracuse in mid-November.

"I was thrilled when I came to Syracuse and found that somebody else has remembered it and was putting up a monument on the ninth of December. I was really moved by that."



Courtesy Onondaga Historical Association

Conductor Gustav Mahler and the New York Philharmonic performed at the Wieting Opera House on Dec. 9, 1910. The concert hall sat on the south side of Clinton Square, on Water Street, in Syracuse. Over the years, there were four Wieting Opera Houses at this site. The last Wieting, dating to 1897, held 3,000 seats.

Lebrecht is effusive when discussing Mahler and shares many anecdotes about the composer. Almost 100 years after Mahler's death in 1911 at the age of 50, Lebrecht believes Mahler's influence reverberates in mainstream music and in other delightful places.

"The language and syntax of the Hollywood soundtrack is rooted in Mahler through various disciples of Mahler who went to Hollywood in the 1930s," says Lebrecht. "Every time you see Harry Potter lift off on his broomstick, what you hear is a phrase of Mahler as he takes off. The first time it happens it's from 'Resurrection' Symphony (aka Symphony No. 2). There's various other phrases from Mahler's 'Resurrection' Symphony."

"Without our knowing it, Mahler is there in our lives, without us every having been to a concert. He's there in movies and he's there in popular music. And, of course, he's there in classical and orchestral music. He may very well be in your ringtone."

Thursday's events

A formal ceremony will be today at Clinton Square to mark the 100-year anniversary of conductor Gustav Mahler and the New York Philharmonic's concert in Syracuse. WCNY-FM also has planned an afternoon of programs. Here is the schedule for today's activities:

12:06 p.m. on WCNY-FM (91.3): Writer Norman Lebrecht will discuss the importance of Gustav Mahler and talk about his recent book, "Why Mahler? How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed Our World."

12:30 p.m. Dedication of the Gustav Mahler bench will be held in the warming room of the Clinton Square Ice Rink

because of the weather. (Enter the rink entrance of the Atrium Building at 2 Clinton Square.) WCNY announcer Bill Baker will be master of ceremonies. Gregg Tripoli, executive director of Onondaga Historical Association, and Daniel Hege, music director of Syracuse Symphony Orchestra, will speak. It also will be broadcast live on WCNY-FM.

1 p.m. on WCNY-FM: Henry Fogel, vice president and program director of the former classical music station WONO in Syracuse from 1963 to 1978, will introduce music selections along with commentary on Mahler. The program will follow the order of compositions performed by Mahler and the New York Philharmonic on Dec. 9, 1910, in Syracuse. Mahler's tenure with the orchestra predates live recordings. Instead, WCNY is substituting recordings from several orchestras, conducted by renowned conductors.

Here is the program:

J.S. Bach, arranged by Gustav Mahler. Suite for Organ, Harpsichord and Orchestra. Performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, conducted by Esa-Pekka Salonen (2000).

Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, "Pastorale." Performed by the Vienna Philharmonic, conducted by Wilhelm Furtwangler (1953).

Wagner, Prelude and "Liebestod" from "Tristan and Isolde." Performed by the Philharmonia Orchestra, conducted by Otto Klemperer (1960).

Wagner, "Siegfried Idyll." Performed by the German Opera Orchestra, conducted by Christian Thielemann (1999).

Wagner, Prelude to "Die Meistersinger." Performed by the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam, conducted by Willem Mengelberg (1940).

© 2010 syracuse.com. All rights reserved.