

# A mad ape. Panting stallions. Crushed love. Yes, it's a Charlotte premiere of Mahler.

BY LAWRENCE TOPPMAN  
*ltoppman@charlotteobserver.com*

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Mix a 20th-century Austrian Jew with two 8th-century Chinese poets, and what do you get?

An ape howling in a graveyard. Dying flowers. Stallions with hot breath and steaming flanks. A tottering alcoholic. A lonely wanderer bidding farewell to a friend and, perhaps, to life.

In short, one of the greatest orchestral song cycles – and a Charlotte premiere on Saturday, when David Tang conducts the first local performance of Gustav Mahler's "Das Lied von der Erde" ("The Song of the Earth").

In this case, the recipe actually calls for *two* 20th-century Austrian Jews. Mahler's massive orchestration would bankrupt impresarios who tried to do the original version, so Tang will conduct the reduced score Arnold Schönberg transcribed for 15 instruments.

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"He stays close to the colors in the Mahler," says Tang, whose Vox chorus will sing Schönberg's own "Friede auf Erden" ("Peace on Earth") to start the program. "He solves some of the ensemble issues in the chamber version, where small groups of instruments

make the lines clearer. But it's still difficult: Being a traffic cop for this piece is harder than anything I've done as a conductor.”

Tang gave Vox a stronger presence in Charlotte two winters ago, presenting the world premiere of Antonio Lotti's 300-year-old Gloria in C. Since then, he has led Herbert Howells' rarely-heard Requiem and Thomas Tallis' fantastically complicated “Spem in Alium.”

The idea for “Das Lied” came after one of his conducting students introduced Tang to Schönberg's reorchestration of “Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun” by Debussy. “It was horrible,” says Tang. “But it got me thinking about what else he'd re-done, and I came across this.

“The material was much clearer than in the original; he'd distilled it down to the purest (essence). And most of the musicians play all the time. In the original, certain players would have one note and sit around for a long time, counting measures.”

Schönberg kept Mahler's idea of using two voices, one high and one low, to sing the solo parts; tenor Daniel Shirley and baritone Neal Sharpe fill those roles here. Neither Mahler nor Schönberg figured the hour-long work required visual stimuli, but Charlotte will get some.

Painter Phillip Larrimore and Weihong Yan, executive director of the Confucius Institute at Pfeiffer University, have picked paintings and sculptures to be projected above the orchestra. Chinese calligrapher Zhao Hong has chosen one word to embody each of the six poems in the song cycle, and his work will also be projected.

“Too often, the music becomes a soundtrack when you do this,” says Tang. “Because we're using stills, not video, that won't happen. Phillip's work doesn't hit you in the face.”

Larrimore's using not only Chinese pieces but paintings by Germany's Caspar David Friedrich, who died 20 years before Mahler was born in 1860. “He has a strange Chinese-like quality to his drawings of rocks and trees – some people consider him the father of abstract expressionism – which reinforces the connection (between the two cultures),” says Larrimore. “And Mahler's the only Western composer whose songs have been translated into Cantonese and Mandarin.”

The melancholy songs come from the darkest period of Mahler's life. He wrote them in 1908, the year after he'd been forced out as head of the Vienna Court Opera, one of his two daughters had died, and he'd been diagnosed with heart trouble that would kill him.

To balance them, Tang has picked "Friede auf Erden," which Schönberg wrote in 1907 before abandoning tonality. Its uplifting, ultimately comforting text comes from a poem by Swiss writer Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, and its selection further links two men who remained friends until Mahler (who was 14 years older) died in 1911.

"Mahler always regarded himself as Schönberg's protector," says Larrimore. "When Mahler was dying, he asked, 'Who will look after him now?'" Little did Mahler know that Schönberg would soon be looking out for him.

*Toppman: 704-358-5232*

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## IF YOU'RE GOING

Firebird Arts Alliance presents "Friede auf Erden" and "Das Lied von der Erde" Saturday at 7:30 p.m. at Sharon Presbyterian Church, 5201 Sharon Road. Tickets are \$15 (\$10 students and seniors). Details: [sharonpcusa.org](http://sharonpcusa.org).

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