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Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
by J. Michael Allsen
Subscription Program No. 1: Primal Light
October 17-18-19, 2025

Our 100th season opens with the transcendent *Symphony No. 2* by Gustav Mahler. The “Resurrection” will be played by an expanded MSO, with two vocal soloists, soprano Jeni Houser and mezzo-soprano Emily Fons, together with the Madison Symphony Chorus. This symphony, one of Mahler’s most profound artistic and spiritual statements, begins and ends with titanic movements: the funeral march and mourning of the opening movement is answered by the glorious reassurance of the conclusion. The title of this program, *Primal Light*, comes from one of the internal movements, which Mahler described as the “voice of innocent faith.” And what better way to celebrate 100 years than to look ahead to the future: our opener is a 2024 work by the American composer Mason Bates. His *Resurrexit* is an exciting and thoroughly satisfying work...that also happens to be the perfect program pairing for the Mahler. Then Madison’s own Christopher Taylor joins us to play the challenging piano part of Franck’s *Symphonic Variations*. Mr. Taylor makes his fifth appearance with the orchestra at this program. Previous appearances were in 2007 (Gershwin, *Concerto in F*), 2011 (Schumann, *Piano Concerto*), 2015 (Bach, *Keyboard Concerto No. 4* and Liszt, *Piano Concerto No. 1*), and 2018 (Bernstein, *Symphony No. 2, “The Age of Anxiety”*).

Mason Bates, certainly among America’s popular living composers, is notable both for his incorporation of electronica in many works, but also for the wide variety of musical influences he adopts, and for the approachability of his music.

Mason Bates

Born: January 23, 1977, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania..



Resurrexit

- **Composed:** 2024.
- **Premiere** September 30, 2024 by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Manfred Honeck. The work was commissioned to celebrate Honeck's sixtieth birthday
- **Previous MSO Performances:** This is our first performance of the work.
- **Duration:** 10:00.

Background

Resurrexit, a work written for a traditional symphony, Orchestra, deals with the biblical story of the Resurrection.

Grammy Award-winning composer Mason Bates divides his efforts between composing symphonic music and DJ'ing electronic dance music. Beginning with his *Concerto for Synthesizer* (1999), Bates has often blended electronica and symphonic music in works such as *Liquid Interface* (2007) *The B-Sides* (2009 written for a traditional symphony, Orchestra, deals with the biblical story of the resurrection) and *Mothership* (2011), or most recently, *Silicon Hymnal* (2025—an “electro-acoustic book of songs” written for the phenomenal trio Time for Three). Nor has he neglected more traditional idioms; Bates has written two operas, *The (R)evolution of Bill Gates* (for which Bates won his second Grammy in 2019; his first was in 2017, for a recording of three of his works by the San Francisco Symphony), and *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (which will open the Metropolitan Opera's 2025-26 season) and symphonic works like his *Piano Concerto* (2022—written for pianist Danil Trifonov), *Nomad Concerto* (2023—for violinist Gil Shaham) and *Resurrexit* (2024). Bates has also written film scores, including a score for *Philharmonia Fantastique*, an innovative animated introduction to the instruments the Orchestra for children. Regarding his *Resurrexit*, Bates writes:

Composers from Bach to Mahler have set the Resurrection in large-scale choral settings, but the story has not been animated in the purely symphonic, kinetic form that attracted me. *Resurrexit* challenged me to consider a subject and soundworld I had never explored musically, a biblical narrative full of mystery and the supernatural.

What You'll Hear

This is a work with a dramatic arch, from a mysterious and quiet beginning through a triumphant ending.

Bates provides the following description of *Resurrexit*:

The piece opens in darkness, with the dusty mystery of the Middle Eastern evoked by exotic modes and sonorities, as a throaty melody laments the death of Christ. The entrance of the beautiful Easter chant *Victimae Paschali Laudes* signals the first stirrings of life, conjured by trills, altar bells, and the remarkable Semantron (a large wooden plank hammered by huge mallets used by Byzantine monks as a call to prayer). Mystery turns into magic as the ‘re-animation’ is illustrated by quicksilver textures that whirl and flicker, building to exhilarating finale which features a soaring reprise of the Easter chant.

The piece has a clear dramatic form, from the quiet mystery of the opening, through the statement of the chant by woodwinds and percussion, leading to a wild acceleration. Following a long, turbulent passage, the trumpets proclaim *Victimae Paschali Laudes* as the opening of a triumphant conclusion that ends with the chant thundered out by the full brass section.

Franck, one of the 19th century’s great organists, wrote this work for piano and orchestra for a French piano virtuoso, Louis Diémer.



César Franck

Born: December 10, 1822, Liège, Belgium.

Died: November 8, 1890, Paris, France.

Symphonic Variations for Piano and Orchestra

- **Composed:** 1885.
- **Premiere:** It was first performed in Paris on May 1, 1886, with Louis Diémer as soloist.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** Previous performances at these concerts have featured Sigfrid Prager (1932—Prager was the orchestra’s first conductor and also a fine pianist), Morton Schoenfeld (1944), Leo Steffens (1968), and Jorge Bolet (1985).
- **Duration:** 15:00.

Background

The *Symphonic Variations* were written as “a little something” for Diémer, in gratitude for the pianist’s role in the success of a Franck orchestral piece in early 1885.

Franck was known for much of his career as one of the greatest organists in an age of great French organists. Born in Belgium, he spent nearly all of his career in Paris, as organist at the church of Ste-Clothilde, and eventually as organ instructor at the Paris Conservatoire. Something of a late bloomer as a composer, Franck wrote most of his truly significant music after reaching his mid 50s. The *Symphonic Variations* is one of these mature works. It was inspired by the playing of virtuoso Louis Diémer, one of the leading French pianists of the late 19th century. In March 1885, Diémer played the piano part in the premiere of a now-little-known Franck symphonic poem, *Les Djinnns*. Franck credited much of the success of this performance to the stellar playing of Diémer and pledged to reward him with “a little something.” That “little something” turned out to be the *Symphonic Variations*, completed in December 1885. This was a success at its first performance and remains—with the *Symphony in D minor* of a few years later—one of Franck’s most often-played works.

What You’ll Hear

The piece features a relatively equal partnership between the piano and the orchestra. It has an innovative form in which the “variations” of the title are only a central episode, surrounded by large introduction and finale sections.

The *Symphonic Variations* was a strikingly original piece for its time, both in its scoring and musical form. In *Les Djinnns*, the piano part Diémer played was soloistic, but also clearly a part of the orchestral texture. Franck took a similar approach in the *Symphonic Variations*. The piano here is more of a “concertante” instrument in the Baroque sense of an equal balance between soloist and orchestra. While the piano does get the flashiest bits, the orchestra plays an equal role in developing Franck’s ideas. The form was also innovative. Not a traditional theme and variations, Franck’s *Symphonic Variations* is instead a three-part form: a relatively brief episode in the middle with a theme and six variations, surrounded by a long introduction and a huge finale.

The unhurried introduction begins with a dour orchestral statement, answered by a melancholy idea from the piano. This theme and a few secondary ideas are developed carefully in a musical dialogue between piano and orchestra. The piano alone introduces the theme, a simple triple-meter tune. The first five variations are fairly straightforward, but the sixth, carried largely by the cellos, ends with a free passage that culminates in a long trill. This leads into the finale—really a miniature symphonic movement in itself. This introduces and develops a pair of much brighter themes, before a forceful ending.

This autobiographical symphony has Mahler wrestling with the essential questions of existence: does our life have meaning and does our soul survive after death? As you will hear in the glorious ending, he answers these questions in the most affirmative way possible!



Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Born: July 7, 1860, Kalischt, Bohemia.

Died: May 18, 1911, Vienna, Austria.

Symphony No.2 in C minor, “Resurrection”

- **Composed:** Between 1888 and 1894.
- **Premiere:** After a partial premiere of the first three movements in March 1895, Mahler conducted the first public performance of the entire work in Berlin on December 13, 1895.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1996 and 2011.
- **Duration:** 80:00.

“One score always lies on my piano—that of Mahler’s second symphony—and I never cease learning from it.” - Richard Strauss

Background

Mahler had composed the first four movements by 1893, without a clear idea of how to finish the work. His breakthrough came as result of an experience at the funeral of Hans von Bülow, one of Mahler’s important early supporters.

For Gustav Mahler, composing was autobiography. He saw his own life as the substance of his musical works, writing in 1897 that his symphonies “...exhaust the content of my whole life—they are what I have experienced and what I have suffered, truth and poetry in tones...if one were to read close enough, he would indeed see my life transparently reflected in them.” This autobiographical ideal is nowhere more evident than in the second symphony, where he tackles the subjects of death and resurrection. The movements of the symphony, particularly the finale, do indeed reflect the events of his life, but they also reflect a crisis of religious belief. A Jew by heritage, and Catholic by conversion, Mahler was never comfortable in his beliefs and struggled with his own reaction to the Klopstock

poem *Resurrection*. This poem inspired the final movement, but he obviously saw it as a statement that needed a response. In searching for text to complete the finale, Mahler “ransacked the religious literature of the world” before deciding to write the concluding lines himself—all of text from “Believe, O my heart” onwards is Mahler’s most profound statement of his own faith.

The composition of this work extended over six years, 1888-94. The enormous first movement, to which he gave the title *Totenfeier* (“Funeral Rites”) was completed by 1893. During that year, Mahler showed it to his mentor and artistic patron, conductor Hans von Bülow, who was impressed and just a little shocked by the movement’s size and boldness. The internal movements were completed in the summer of 1893. While the *Andante moderato*, sketched out for the first time in 1888, was always intended as the second movement of a large C minor symphony—both the third and fourth movements both have their origins in songs—settings of texts from an early 19th-century collection of folk poetry titled *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (“The Boy’s Magic Horn”). The scherzo is a reworked version of his setting of *St. Anthony’s Sermon to the Fishes*. The fourth movement, *Primal Light*, was also intended originally for his orchestral cycle of *Wunderhorn* songs. Mahler adapted it here, however, as the bridge to the as-of-then uncompleted finale.

By the end of 1893, Mahler had reached a creative roadblock: he had posed an enormous question in the opening movement, and had three internal movements, but was unsure about how to end the symphony. The inspiration for the final movement came just a few months later, with the unexpected death of Hans von Bülow. The memorial service for this man, for whom Mahler had boundless respect, served as the catalyst needed to complete of the *Symphony No. 2*. Later, he wrote:

At that time, I had long planned to introduce the chorus into the last movement, but hesitated, for fear that this might be viewed as a superficial imitation of Beethoven... As I sat there and thought about [Bülow], my mood was precisely that of the work that was occupying me. At that moment, the chorus, up in the organ loft, intoned Klopstock’s “Resurrection” chorale. It struck me like a bolt of lightning, and everything stood clear and vivid before my soul. It was the flash, the “Holy Annunciation” that all creative artists wait for.

Mahler completed the final movement just a few months after this “lightning bolt.”

What You'll Hear

The symphony is cast in five movements:

- An immense and turbulent first movement in sonata form.
- A placid and pastoral second movement.
- A pastoral scherzo with uneasy undertones.
- A serene movement with a mezzo-soprano solo.
- A gigantic finale that moves from apocalyptic imagery through a serene choral passage, to a magnificent conclusion.

Mahler was always hesitant about attaching programs to his symphonies and abandoned this device altogether in his later works. He did, however, provide a rather extensive program for the *Symphony No. 2*, which sheds some light on his intentions. In describing the opening movement, he wrote:

We are standing beside the coffin of a man beloved. For the last time, this man's life, battles, sufferings, and purpose pass through our mind. And now, at this profound moment, we are gripped by a voice of awe-inspiring solemnity... What next? it says. Is it all an empty dream, or does our life and death have a meaning? If we are to go on living, we must answer this question.

The first movement is a sonata form of gigantic proportions, with its main divisions set off by a furious motive from the basses, and a doleful march theme. Contrast comes in the guise of more pastoral music from the strings and horns, but the anger of opening soon creeps in once more. Subtly working its way into the development section is a motive drawn from the Catholic Mass for the Dead—the first four notes of the chant *Dies irae* (*Day of wrath*). After the recapitulation, the basses and horns enter again to announce a surprisingly understated coda.

Coming almost as a relief after the ferocity of the opening, the second movement (*Andante moderato*) begins with a placid string melody, which gives way to a more agitated triplet figures in the strings below a flute melody. The opening melody returns, now with a lovely cello counterpoint. Mahler brings his contrasting melody back, now in more forceful minor-key variation. In the final section, the main idea creeps back again, now in pizzicato strings, punctuated by “cuckoos” from the piccolos. Mahler described this movement as a remembrance of “a sunny scene, calm and untroubled, from the life of this hero.”

After the “nostalgic dream” of the *Andante moderato*, we awaken in the scherzo and “return to life’s confusion.” Mahler explained the mood of this movement:

...the perpetually moving, unending, always incomprehensible hustle and bustle of life becomes *eerie* to you, like the movements of dancing figures in a brightly-lit ballroom into which you gaze out of the dark night—from such a distance that you *cannot hear the dance music!* Life becomes senseless to you then, a ghastly apparition from which you may recoil with a cry of disgust!

The music is set in a large three-part form. In the two outer panels, the strings play a flowing melody above a boisterous country-dance background. The brief central section, beginning with solo trumpet, is more questing in nature. The final section builds gradually towards a series of forceful brass chords—the “cry of disgust” described in Mahler’s program—and just as gradually subsides back into the country-dance feel of the opening.

The fourth movement, titled *Urlicht (Primal Light)*, marks an important moment of transition in the flow of this work. In his program for the movement, Mahler wrote: “The mourning voice of innocent faith falls upon our ears.” This marks the first appearance of the mezzo-soprano soloist, singing a text from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. Her opening invocation and the answering brass chorale set a serene and contemplative mood. Even at the moment when the text becomes more agitated and narrative in nature, the solo line is simple and unhurried. This text sets up what is to come in the finale, expressing the central theme, a search for redemption and resurrection.

The first and fifth movements stand at either end of the *Symphony No. 2*, massive anchors of a colossal arch. If the first movement poses the essential questions of existence, Mahler’s struggles and faith come through in the fifth, which he described as “a fresco of the Day of Judgment.” The finale shatters the placid mood of *Urlicht* with an echo of the scherzo’s “cry of disgust.” Offstage brass give the first hints of the great summons that is to come. The first peak of emotion comes at the close of a *pianissimo* trombone chorale on the *Dies irae*, as the music comes rest triumphantly in C Major. The mood soon changes, as Mahler launches into an extended orchestral fantasy on the *Dies irae* motive. The character subsides once more, only to build into another frantic climax. In his program for this opening section, Mahler draws on appalling imagery from the text of the *Dies irae*: the graves have opened, and “marching in a mighty phalanx” come the trembling

and terrified dead, rich and poor, peasants and kings, all together waiting for judgement. Finally, a section of the score titled *Der grosse Appell* (*the great summons*) begins with offstage brass and pastoral woodwinds. The chorus, held in reserve until this most profound moment of all, begins unaccompanied, and almost *sotto voce* with the Klopstock chorale that inspired the movement. Then, in Mahler's own words, the soloists and chorus transmit a message of resurrection and faith, culminating in the triumphant: "Rise again! Yes, you will rise again, my heart, in but a moment! What you have fought for will carry you to God!"

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Note: we will provide a projected set of surtitle translations for movements four and five.