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# UVic pays tribute to Mahler

What: University of Victoria, Faculty Chamber Music Series: Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* When/where: Saturday, 8 p.m., Phillip T. Young Recital Hall (School of Music, MacLaurin Building, UVic); pre-concert talk at 7:30 p.m. Tickets: \$17.50, students, seniors, and alumni \$13.50



KRISTY FARKAS

## The UVic School of Music performs Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth) Saturday.

The University of Victoria's School of Music has been hosting since Monday a festival devoted to the music of Gustav Mahler. Lectures, a "listening room," open rehearsals, a vocal masterclass and other events are all free and open to the public. The festival continues today and culminates Saturday with a performance of *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth), widely considered to be Mahler's greatest work. (Details at [finearts.uvic.ca/music/events/2014/mahler](http://finearts.uvic.ca/music/events/2014/mahler).)

Completed in 1908, *Das Lied* is an hour-long symphony disguised as a song cycle. Each of its six movements features a vocal soloist and is a setting of ancient Chinese poetry (in German translation). Mahler conceived it in the wake of his daughter's death and the diagnosis of his own grave heart defect. Not surprisingly, the music reflects his grief, melancholy, fear, loneliness and disillusionment, his heightened sense of his mortality, his thoughts of the Beyond; even the movements that speak of youth and beauty, of the delights of nature and human society, are haunted by bitter awareness of the brevity and futility of life. This, Mahler said, was "probably the most personal thing I have written."

*Das Lied* was performed here twice in 2011, in honour of the centenary of Mahler's death, by the Victoria Symphony and (in Mahler's arrangement with piano) at UVic. Saturday's performance, part of UVic's Faculty Chamber Music Series, will offer yet another perspective on the music: an arrangement sketched in 1921 by Arnold Schoenberg (an acquaintance and devoted admirer of Mahler's) and completed in 1983 by Rainer Riehn, a German conductor, composer and musicologist.

The Schoenberg-Riehn arrangement calls for 14 instrumentalists: string quintet, wind quintet, two percussionists and two keyboard players. Saturday's performance will feature the Lafayette String Quartet, other members of the School of Music's unusually large performance faculty, and a few alumni and guests, with the vocal parts sung by local tenor Benjamin Butterfield and Montreal-based baritone Nathaniel Watson. Butterfield, who helped organize the concert, knows the Schoenberg-Riehn arrangement intimately, having participated in a performance and recording of it in 2012, at a festival in Vermont.

"It is the ultimate chamber-music piece," Butterfield says. Indeed, an ensemble of 14 constitutes a chamber

orchestra, straddling the chamber and orchestral worlds, both sides of which will be represented on Saturday: At first, *Das Lied* will be performed conductorless, as true chamber music, though the requiem-like finale, rhythmically challenging and as long as the other five movements combined, will be conducted by Ajtony Csaba, who leads UVic's orchestra.

Schoenberg began arranging *Das Lied* in 1921 for the Society for Private Musical Performances, in Vienna, which he had founded three years earlier to provide a sympathetic forum for new music, though earlier works were also performed. The society's means were limited, so orchestral music was usually presented in slimmed-down arrangements; Schoenberg arranged some works himself, including Mahler's early cycle *Songs of a Wayfarer*. Before he could complete his reduction of *Das Lied*, however, economic forces put an end to his society.

Because of those same economic forces, the chamber orchestra was an eminently practical medium in the years following the devastation of the First World War, though it was cultivated earlier and later, too; eventually, a huge repertoire of chamber symphonies, sinfoniettas and similar works emerged, by composers including some of the biggest names in 20th-century music (Schoenberg himself wrote two chamber symphonies). The chamber orchestra supplied one of the quintessential sonorities of 20th-century modernism — lean, tart, angular, transparent, so unlike the plush sound of the Romantic orchestra and thus ideally suited to music whose rhetoric was insistently anti-Romantic.



Of course, that plush Romantic orchestra was Mahler's orchestra, even in *Das Lied*, which is comparatively lean by his standards. By arranging this music as a chamber symphony, Schoenberg was effectively updating it, underscoring what was most forward-looking in it. The result, as in a modern-dress production of Shakespeare, is new light on a familiar work, and the kind of fruitful tension that often follows when one genius adapts the art of another.

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