

# Mahler treat from Highland ensemble

## REVIEW

HIGHLAND ensemble the Mahler Players paid their first visit to the Universal Hall, Findhorn, last Friday night with a stunning repertoire of music composed and arranged by Webern, alongside the headliner, Mahler's symphonic work *Das Lied von der Erde* or *Song of the Earth*, arranged by Cortese.

Comprising mainly Highland-based musicians, both amateur and professional, the Mahler Players are founded and conducted by Tomas Leakey, previously director of the orchestra of Christ's College, Cambridge, and former trombonist in both the Highland Regional Youth Orchestra and National Youth Orchestra of Scotland.

In the first half, they played Webern's innovative orchestration of Bach's *Ricercar* from his collection *The Musical Offerings*, sometimes

referred to as the Prussian Fugue. Based on a single musical theme given to Bach by Frederick the Great, Webern's arrangement is not only an orchestration but also a re-imagining.

He does not change a single note of the original Bach, yet he orchestrates in such a way that each musical line or voice is constantly exchanged between instruments, resulting in perpetual, kaleidoscopic variation of timbre.

The joy of listening to the Mahler Players perform such a work is the ability to fully experience the compositional detail up close, an aspect which is sometimes lost in a full-scale orchestra.

Continuing with Webern, the Players performed his *Symphony Op.21*, written using the 12 tone technique first developed by Schoenberg in the early 1920s and performed on just nine

instruments. This abstract piece comprises two parts, the first a sinuous call and response between the players, the second section becoming capricious and lively.

Inverness-born composer Stuart MacRae introduced his new commission *Birth - Rebirth*, explaining the challenges of creating something symphonic on a modest scale and describing how his inspiration came from the theme of life and death underlying both the Webern and Mahler in this programme. This work was thought-provoking and atmospheric, a contemporary nod to two cutting edge composers of the twentieth century.

Regarded by many as Mahler's most perfect work, *Song of the Earth* was composed in 1908 after a series of intense personal tragedies and is considered to be a work deeply concerned with human mortality.

Following the death of his daughter, his own diagnosis of a life threatening condition and losing his position at the Vienna Court Opera due to anti-Semitism, the disillusioned Mahler became enchanted by a translation of Chinese Tang dynasty poetry which shaped the song cycle in the six movements of *Song of the Earth*.

The Mahler Players were joined by mezzo soprano Karina Lucas and tenor Luke Sinclair, whose exquisite voices brought great passion and vulnerability to this final performance.

The Mahler Players excel at delivering great works in miniature. Tomas Leakey has lovingly crafted an evening of musical morsels like a box of handmade truffles, each selected to complement the other and be savoured in their own right. This is the ultimate Mahler treat.

Paula Nichols