



Sakari Oramo

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Intriguing Mahler performance and rare Weill from Oramo and the BBC Symphony Orchestra

21/04/2025 by Mark Berry

🇬🇧 **United Kingdom** **Howell, Weill, and Mahler:** Anu Komsu (soprano), BBC Symphony Orchestra / Sakari Oramo (conductor, violin). Barbican Hall, London, 16.4.2025. (MB)



Anu Komsu (soprano and Sakari Oramo (conductor, violin) © Mark Allan/BBC

Dorothy Howell – *Lamia*
Kurt Weill – *Der neue Orpheus*, Op.15
Mahler – *Symphony No.4* in G major

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Placing little-known music with a Mahler symphony might be thought both a sensible and high-risk strategy. It will almost certainly result in the music gaining a wider audience. In the case of Dorothy Howell, though, it is difficult to imagine many wishing to extend that acquaintance. To be fair, she was young when she wrote *Lamia*, premiered (1919) and championed by no less than Henry Wood. Maybe there are better pieces from later on in her career. The muted reception accorded to a committed performance from the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Sakari Oramo said it all, alas. I cannot imagine anyone would have divined inspiration in Keats without being told so. An opening two-flute figure intrigued; like everything else, it led nowhere in particular. This was a tone poem that might just about have appealed as to those for whom Delius's music is too goal-oriented and too radical in musical language. If introductions to introductions to introductions were your thing, you might still find it featureless, though there usually seems to be an English 'enthusiast' market for rhapsodic expanses of lateish-Romantic sound.

Weill came, then, as a relief, in a rare opportunity to hear his 1925 cantata *Der neue Orpheus*. It continued a vaguely Grecian theme, yet is anything other than nostalgic, setting Yvan Goll's ironic, surrealist – perhaps ironically surrealist – poem in a witty set of musical parodies taking us from Clementi to Wagner via Stravinsky, Mahler, and other milieux. And that is only one central section of its twenty-minute span. (Howell, apparently, was significantly shorter, yet felt longer.) Can one hear absence? Almost certainly, if only contextually. The absence of violins in the chamber orchestra was surely felt in that sense at least, in typically wind-led sound, adopted with immediate security and conviction of idiom by the BBC SO. The orchestral introduction, imbued with a keen sense of drama, might have been the opening to an opera. Vividly communicative, Ana Komsis's account of the text relished its surrealism but also the humanity seemingly gained (shades already of the uneasy collaboration between Brecht and Weill?) by its alchemic conversion into vocal music. 'Everyone is Orpheus. Who does not know Orpheus?' Such apparently lofty universalism was immediately deflated, even alienated, by banal detail of his vital statistics and personality. Increasing presence of Busoni in the orchestra was splendidly brought out by Oramo, reminding us not only of the identity of Weill's teacher, but of the conductor's recent outstanding account of his Piano Concerto, Pierrot – as well as Orpheus-like, Oramo took up his violin, as sounds of the circus took us closer to the world of *Mahagonny* and, especially notable, that of *The Soldier's Tale*.



Sakari Oramo conducts the BBC Symphony Orchestra © Mark Allan/BBC

If Goll and Weill's *Orpheus* moved its audience, the performance of Mahler's symphony was not quite what I was expecting. This Mahler Fourth was arguably more dramatic in a stage sense and less Classical than most. It was not so much that movements in themselves – and in relation to one another – seemed to have been conceived separately as that conception apparently having been born more of contrast than line, even continuity. The first movement's opening was more deliberate than usual, really holding back before launching into a spirited first subject. It had charm, style, precision, heart, *and* heavily inverted commas. Flexibility is written as well as called for interpretatively, but both varieties seemed emphasised here and throughout in a notably nightmarish reading, in which sardonic presentiments of the Fifth Symphony took precedence over those of neoclassicism. It was doubtless more context than anything else, but Weill at times seemed only to be just around the corner. And the music certainly breathed: not always regularly, but it breathed.

Weird, childish, all things in good measure, the second movement got a move on without being hurried. If Oramo loved it a little too much from time to time, it was a fault in the right direction. And here a certain sort of neoclassicism did come to the fore; there were passages in which Schoenberg's *Serenade*, Op.23, was unquestionably a kindred spirit. It seemed to foretell both movements to come, the third unfolding 'naturally', almost in reaction, without trying to turn it into Bruckner. There remained in such contrast a highly modern subjectivity. Mahler's inheritance from Beethoven was neither overlooked nor overplayed in a passionate yet far from overblown performance whose climax proved properly moving. So too did the advent of the finale, palpable as it must be in sincerity that is childlike yet never childish. The singing of Komsí (Oramo's wife) contributed a further level of intercession as intermediary between us and the saints. This was rightly more Styrian than Sieneese, in voice and orchestra alike. I am not sure I have ever felt more immediately involved, mediation notwithstanding, as if a definitive, magical link had been forged in the Great Chain of Being.

Mark Berry