

Classical music: Mahler's Eighth given an all West Coast spin

Vancouver Bach Choir and the West Coast Symphony perform Mahler's Eighth Symphony on Feb 17, with the help of quite a few friends.



DAVID GORDON DUKE

Published on: February 7, 2018 | Last Updated: February 7, 2018 8:00 AM PST



It takes a family of choirs to do Mahler's Eighth. *PNG*

Mahler Symphony No. 8

When: *Feb. 17, 8 p.m.*

Where: *Orpheum Theatre*

Tickets: *From \$20, tickets.ubc.ca*

(<https://tickets.ubc.ca/online/mapSelect.asp?>

[BOset::WSmap::seatmap::performance_ids=4E5798A7-9910-46B4-8BF2-D9E383650BEC](https://tickets.ubc.ca/online/mapSelect.asp?BOset::WSmap::seatmap::performance_ids=4E5798A7-9910-46B4-8BF2-D9E383650BEC))

Mounting Mahler's Eighth Symphony (often called The Symphony of a Thousand) is a monumental undertaking. But that's exactly what the Vancouver Bach Choir (<http://www.vancouverbachchoir.com/>) and the West Coast Symphony (<http://www.westcoastsymphony.ca/>) have in mind.

For the choir, the symphony is a known entity: executive director Nina Horvath says this will be the 22nd time the ensemble has sung the piece. However, this will be the first performance of the score by the West Coast Symphony.



Bujar Llapaj, West Coast Symphony principal conductor. *PNG*

Bujar Llapaj, principal conductor since 2008, has been working with the

community orchestra for the past few weeks, and Marisa Gaetanne has been prepping the 60-voice children's choir before conductor Leslie Dala takes over for final combined rehearsals.

Mahler's popularity is fairly recent. In the years following his death in 1911, performances of his massive symphonies were thin on the ground; the Eighth, especially, was more talked about than heard. Things changed when the Mahler boom started up in the 1960s, but a community collaboration like that between the VBC and the WCS is still a real occasion.



Dala is no stranger to big opera and big oratorios, yet there's something sobering about the very idea of doing Mahler's No. 8. For him it's a piece with special resonance.

"Mahler's Eighth was a life-changing piece for me. I sang in the Canadian premiere in Toronto, when I was just 12, when I had no idea music of this power and scope existed. So it's a piece that imprinted on me very early. I became obsessed with Mahler. It's a complete drug — there's nothing like

it,” says Dala, who played harmonium during the grand Olympic year performance of the Eighth with the Vancouver Bach Choir and the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra.

“This is my first time conducting,” he says with palpable excitement.

The unconventional Eighth is in two parts: a shortish first movement that takes its text from an old Latin hymn, Veni Creator spiritus (Come, creator spirit) and then a longer, more operatic section based on the concluding passages of Goethe’s Faust. The pacing is anomalous, but all part of a well thought-out whole.

“We’re doing it without an intermission,” says Dala, who’s of the opinion that a gap between the two sections stops the music’s flow and blunts its impact.

Much of that power comes from lavish resources: eight soloists plus choir, children’s choir, and a gigantic orchestra. As far as the orchestra is concerned, there will be a note of practicality.

“Mahler Eight is something the WCS have been wanting to do but couldn’t see how to make it possible,” says Dala.

“We found a reduced score that takes everything down to triple (rather than quadruple) winds, which we decided was doable. We call it Mahler Eight Light — without all the calories.”

Even so, there will be around 250 performers on the Orpheum stage. With all the solo parts cast locally, it will be a completely homegrown event.

“We couldn’t have done it without the Bach family of choirs,” adds Dala.

If the Eighth has been a touchstone work in Dala’s life, he’s hoping it will also be one for a member of his family.

“My young son Andreas is almost 12 and in the Bach Youth Choir, so he will be singing,” says an obviously proud Dala. “He’s loving the music; I can’t wait until he hears the whole thing come together. It’s great that he will be exposed to it as this time in his life.”

• *For extra insight into the VBC’s longtime engagement with Mahler,*