

Winston-Salem, NC

L.A. excels

Philharmonic resonates

By JEANNETTE SORRELL

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On their way to the Kennedy Center and Carnegie Hall, the Los Angeles Philharmonic stopped by Wait Chapel on Jan. 31 to treat Winston-Salem audiences to what was probably one of the finest orchestral performances here in several years. The concert, sponsored by the Artists Series, drew a nearly capacity audience in spite of the daunting weather.

Although the Philharmonic has been without a music director since the retirement of Carlo Maria Giulini last year, it does not appear to have slipped from its position as one of the premier American orchestras. Its performance here under the direction of principal guest conductor Michael Tilson Thomas was undeniably that of a superb ensemble of musicians.

The program leaned heavily on the romantic, consisting of the Saint-Saens A minor cello concerto and Mahler's fifth symphony. Although one might have wished for a more classical concerto to balance the Mahler, all reservations proved unnecessary. Even listeners of the most Mozartean tastes must have been won over by the refined elegance and thoughtful reserve which cellist Ronald Leonard brought to his performance of the Saint-Saens.

Leonard has been the principal cellist of the Philharmonic since 1975, and has won critical acclaim as both a soloist and chamber music performer. His sparkling performance here was in every way worthy of his fine reputation.

With a charming lyric sense, Leonard captured the elegance of line which is so essential to French music in general and Saint-Saens in particular. He played gracefully through all the difficult shifts, octaves and harmonies of this virtuosic concerto. Even in his most impassioned phrases, his playing

never strayed near the muddy sonorities to which cellos often succumb. Rather, he brought to the cello a facile grace which one usually associates only with its more agile cousin, the violin.

Unfortunately, Michael Tilson Thomas' conducting of this piece was somewhat lacking in the reserved elegance which Leonard demonstrated. Thomas gave an inappropriately showy and athletic performance, which was perhaps more directed towards pleasing the audience than accompanying the soloist. Nevertheless, the orchestra played charmingly, and the woodwinds were particularly delightful with their chirpy staccatos and delicate sighs.

The Mahler was a perfect showcase for the individually superb players of the Philharmonic. Although Mahler's symphonies are scored for very large orchestras, rarely do all 150 musicians play at once. Rather, the music continually shifts from one small group of instruments to another, highlighting a soloist here, a section there, in a manner reminiscent of the changing colors of a kaleidoscope.

In music such as this, it is as much the individual players who create the musical experience as the conductor. The Los Angeles carried off this challenge with stunning success, from the powerful battle-call of trumpeter Thomas Stevens in the opening bars to the ominous pianissimo of percussionist Mitchell Peters, whose rumbles floated off the stage more as a nervousness in the air than an audible sound.

The Philharmonic's brass section was particularly stunning in this work. Their opening fortissimo chords powerfully foreshadowed the battle that was to come, and they sustained this driving intensity until the

triumphant closing bars. Special mention goes to hornist William Lane, whose impressive solo playing pervaded the entire scherzo.

The angelic (not to say sugary) sonority of the strings and harp in the fourth movement provided a welcome calm after the storm of the brass. This tranquil "Addagietto" movement, which is sometimes performed as an independent piece, was a poignant journey into the misty, sentimental side of Mahler's soul.

Thomas gave an absorbing and passionate performance throughout the Mahler. The same energy and drama which seemed misplaced in the Saint-Saens created a profoundly moving — and sometimes frightening — experience in this work. Thomas carried the audience with him through the tortured world of Mahler's soul. From ecstatic frenzy to quiet desperation, from tranquil resignation to raging bombast, Thomas rejoiced and suffered with the music and thus made it his own.

Although Thomas' performance was a supremely emotional one (as it must be in this music) there was evidence that a brilliant and articulate thinker was at work here as well. This young conductor, who at the age of 39 has reached international stature, is unquestionably endowed with extraordinary gifts. If he also has a unfortunate taste for the showy and flamboyant, one must admit that he is not the first gifted performer to do so.

A final round of applause goes in appreciation to the Artists Series and its director David Levy. It is not every college campus that can bring a world-class orchestra to its doorstep, and Wake Forest is extremely fortunate to have such an opportunity. We eagerly await the encores to come!