INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Does life have meaning? Mahler’s symphonic response

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Last month, I wrote about a piece of music, the “Miserere mei, Deus” by Allegri, that had been performed by the Grand Rapids Choir of Men and Boys.

Another piece that also has had special meaning for me was performed last weekend by the Grand Rapids Symphony, Mahler’s Symphony No. 2, the “Resurrection Symphony.”

David Lockington, who is retiring as music director after 18 years, chose to feature this piece for his final concert. He explained at the Upbeat lecture that most religions also address the question of what is the meaning of life? Is it all in vain?

Mahler was Jewish but converted to Catholicism, probably as a political act in order to receive an appointment in Vienna, where anti-Semitism was high.

His question was that of Job in the Hebrew Scriptures: “Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He comes forth like a flower, and withers; he flees like a shadow, and continues not. . . . If a man die, shall he live again?” (Job 14: 1-2, 14)

Nearly every religion addresses this issue and has some version of a life after death.

Whether it is reincarnation or a conscious continuation of one’s life, either in heaven or hell, religions seek to respond to this ultimate question of life’s meaning and whether it is found in this life or in the next.

The religious traditions span a wide swath of perspectives on this question, and to fully explore them would require a book, of which many have been written.

Christians consider the resurrection of the body central and celebrate it at Easter.

For Mahler, the clue to finishing his great symphony was at the funeral of the famous conductor and his mentor, Hans von Bülow, when he heard a children’s choir sing Klopstock’s “Resurrection Ode.”

Adding his own verses to what he heard, Mahler has the choir begin singing softly, “Aufersteh’n, ja aufersteh’n” (“Arise, yes, you will arise from the dead”).

The English translation continues:

My dust, after a short rest! Eternal life, will be given you by Him who called you.
Oh believe, You were not born in vain, Have not lived in vain, suffered in vain.
What was created must perish! What has perished must rise again!
Tremble no more! Prepare yourself to live!
Mahler’s resolution of this existential question provides an inspiring musical setting for this basic human quest. What is the meaning of life? Do we have a purpose? It can be approached via religion, through art and literature, or in this case through a powerful musical form.

For me, the music itself points to meaning and purpose far beyond what the words alone can contain.

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