

Edinburgh International Festival Review: BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra/Donald Runnicles (****)

☒ The Usher Hall was packed on Sunday night, and there was a real sense of expectation in the air. This was, after all, a performance of Mahler's Second Symphony, the 'Resurrection', which depicts everything from birth to death and rebirth, and seemingly everything in between, in a monumental, 90-minute piece bringing together a huge orchestra, choir, organ and two solo singers. By the end, it feels more like a mini-opera than a symphony, and the emotional range is huge, from bleak despair in the funereal first movement to ecstatic elation in the closing moments.

Focus of attention, though, was conductor Donald Runnicles, who seemed entirely in his element in this grand, extravagant music. His first movement was hard-driven and unrelenting, at times overwhelming, but he also had a keen ear for the telling details in Mahler's rich orchestration. The towering, dissonant chords that herald the return of the opening music were shattering, but likewise he brought tenderness to the movement's glowing second theme.

It was in the symphony's middle movements, however, that the spell was somewhat broken, with a strangely subdued second movement, and a rather tame third movement that fell slightly short on obsessive energy and was far too well behaved. The hymn-like *Urlicht* fourth movement, given a sublimely rich yet clear reading by mezzo-soprano Karen Cargill, nevertheless lacked a bit of gravitas.

The hair-raising shriek of despair that opens the final

movement showed that things were back on track, though, and despite some surprisingly shaky offstage brass, Runnicles brought things to an overwhelming conclusion as chiming gongs and bells joined the choir, orchestra, organ and soloists to depict the soul's rebirth. The strings of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra glowed throughout, there were vivid solos from the woodwind and brass, and the Edinburgh Festival Chorus, impressively singing from memory, made a glorious sound.