

Chorus of approval for Poschner's take on Mahler

Conductor Markus Poschner, one of Europe's rising stars, is bringing the Bruckner Orchestra Linz to the Usher Hall. 'It's all about attitude, about telling a story,' he tells **David Kettle**

He always takes players to their limits – to the screaming edges of their instruments." Munich-born conductor Markus Poschner is talking about composer Gustav Mahler, whose immense Second Symphony he brings to the Usher Hall to kick off a six-stop UK tour with his band, the Bruckner Orchestra Linz.

He's one of the rising conducting stars on the continent, lesser known in Britain (though the tour should help with that), but making significant waves in Germany and further afield. He was head of the Philharmonic and Opera House in Bremen for a decade from 2007, and also briefly Kapellmeister at Berlin's pioneering Komische Oper.

He's now heading towards the end of his first season in Linz, where, as he did in Bremen, he works across the Orchestra and Opera House. "We opened our season with Mahler's Second here in Linz," he continues. "We spent a lot of time creating our own interpretation of the piece, and we wanted to share it more widely."



Conductor Markus Poschner, main and left, leads the Bruckner Orchestra Linz, top left

that its true challenges lie elsewhere. "You can't just sit down and open your music and play," he explains. "It's all about attitude, about telling a story. For musicians, it's an immense challenge to get to understand what the piece means, not just what it looks like on the page."

In his view, the Bruckner Orchestra Linz has an unusually close connection with the composer. "We're the second biggest orchestra here in Austria, and we feel very familiar with Mahler's music. After all, he was born only about 150km north of Linz in Bohemia – it's only about an hour and a half by car. Playing his music is like coming home to us – the flexibility, the songfulness, the folk music traditions."

As for himself, Poschner stops short of identifying too strongly with Mahler when approaching the composer's music. "There's always a biographical side with Mahler: his music is deeply linked to his own life and its tragedies. That's a challenge, because obviously I'm not Mahler, so it's not possible to see the music through his eyes. That's maybe the Bernstein way – he always felt somewhat like a reincarnation of the composers he was conducting. But that's not my approach. I have the score, and I have to

Indeed, for all its length (getting on for 90 minutes) and the vast number of players it requires (huge orchestra, equally huge chorus, plus solo singers), Mahler's Second is nothing if not a crowd-pleaser – if a slightly unlikely one at that. Yes, it's demanding on the listener, but the rewards of its epic journey through life and death into the radiant afterlife – conjured in its famously overwhelming, transcendental conclusion – are just as extreme as the demands it makes on its players.

But despite those technical demands, Poschner explains

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To help the tour along – and no doubt to keep a lid on the costs of jetting in musicians from Austria – Poschner suggested a novel partnership. "You need a very, very good choir for Mahler's Second," he explains. "When we were discussing repertoire for the tour, we had the idea: could we join up with British choirs in a sort of joint venture? The best choirs are in Britain anyway – everyone knows that." In Edinburgh, orchestra and conductor are joined by the Leeds and Sheffield Philharmonic Chorus. "Of course it's tricky, because we don't have much time for rehearsal. But I like that kind of risk – the kind of creative energy it brings."

Despite all the talk of Mahler, the elephant in the room, of course, is Anton Bruckner – who gave the orchestra its name, and whose music, although absent from its Edinburgh concert, forms a central pillar of the ensemble's repertoire. "Bruckner is our godfather," says Poschner. "He was born in this city – well, in a tiny village about ten kilometres away. But he worked here for about 20 years, and he performed his first symphonies here." And there are intimate connections, he feels, between the orchestra's musical identity and Bruckner. "There's a style of music making here in Upper Austria, linked to our folk music, and also to our choral and church

traditions. You shouldn't tell a Viennese orchestra how to play a waltz, and in the same way, you shouldn't explain to an Upper Austrian orchestra how to play Bruckner."

All this talk of hardcore Germanic Romantic repertoire might lead you to believe it's Poschner's sole passion. Not a bit of it. He currently has feet in two contrasting European orchestras – Lugano's Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana alongside the Linz band – and a fierce commitment to opera, too. How does he manage to balance these responsibilities? "Well, it's a question of carefully organising my time!" he laughs. "But seriously, at the moment I'm trying to reduce other commitments and concentrate on the two orchestras. The Lugano orchestra is an entirely different job – it's almost a chamber orchestra, just 45 musicians, and the repertoire hardly overlaps with Linz." Opera is his other Linz responsibility. "I only do two productions a year here, however – more than that, I really can't manage." This season, however, he's been behind a well-received *Die Frau ohne Schatten* as well as a staging of Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust*.

And perhaps surprisingly, Poschner is also a recognised jazz pianist, although for a man with feet in two contrasting camps, he admits to detesting superficial mixings of genres. "I hate crossover!" he says. Why

is that? "I can't understand it – what is it, even? It's a totally grey thing, from my point of view – if you mix colours, you get grey, and it's the same with music. It looks so easy to get a jazz band and put it in the middle of a Mozart symphony, something like that. But it's not an easy job to mix things together – you can sometimes end up with some very crude ideas."

He's no purist either, however – although he feels connections ought only to be made on profounder, more challenging levels. "Every day I wonder about how to combine these different spheres of music – improvisation, composition, contemporary music, period music. I'm very inspired by Charlie Parker in that respect. He was asked what it was, the crazy style of music he was playing. He said: 'Oh – let's just call it music.' I think essentially it's all the same language, and it belongs together."

Mahler, Bruckner, opera, jazz and plenty more – Poschner is a fascinating, forthright figure with astonishingly broad interests. And despite his mistrust of superficial crossover, it's hard not to see his eclectic tastes informing and enriching one another.

● **Markus Poschner conducts the Bruckner Orchestra Linz in Mahler's Second Symphony at the Usher Hall, Edinburgh, on Sunday at 3pm, tickets from £12.50, www.usherhall.co.uk**