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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Mahler in Radiant Focus

Philharmonie de Paris, 04.09.2026 [ENA]

The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra's return to the Philharmonie de Paris under Yannick Nézet-Séguin offered a programme conceived with uncommon intelligence: two contrasting but deeply related explorations of colour, lyricism, and inwardness. Kaija Saariaho's vocal world, entrusted to Joyce DiDonato, met Gustav Mahler's Fourth Symphony, perhaps the composer's most transparent, poised, and deceptively serene orchestral statement. The result was an evening of extraordinary refinement, shaped by the Met Orchestra's unmistakable technical polish and Nézet-Séguin's gift for combining structural clarity with a highly responsive sense of musical atmosphere. The Philharmonie's calendar presents the concert as a pairing of DiDonato in Saariaho with Mahler's "most Mozartian" symphony, an apt description of a programme in which luminous surface continually gives way to mystery.

Joyce DiDonato's contribution formed the emotional centre of the evening. Few singers today unite such verbal intelligence, stylistic range, and communicative immediacy. In Saariaho's music, where line, timbre, silence, and harmonic colour become inseparable, DiDonato brought an almost instrumental precision to the shaping of sound. Her voice moved effortlessly from focused, speech-like intensity to floating lyricism, always attentive to the expressive weight of individual words and vowels. She did not approach the score as an abstract contemporary exercise. Instead, she made it feel psychologically direct: music of vulnerability, wonder, and fragile self-discovery.

Saariaho's writing places unusual demands on a singer because it asks for vocal beauty without conventional display. The expressive drama lies in the shifting relation between the voice and the orchestra—the way a phrase may appear to emerge from the instrumental texture, dissolve into it, or resist it. DiDonato's command of colour was therefore essential. She allowed the darkest lower register to retain clarity, released the upper voice with a glinting, almost weightless brilliance, and created transitions of dynamic and emotional perspective with remarkable naturalness. The performance was not simply beautifully sung; it was vividly inhabited.

Nézet-Séguin proved an ideal collaborator in this repertoire. His conducting showed the same acute attentiveness to breathing and phrase that characterises his finest work in opera. With the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, he created an orchestral environment of remarkable transparency, allowing Saariaho's finely calibrated sonorities to register without becoming clinical. The strings could shimmer without losing warmth; wind solos appeared like small flashes of colour; and the brass, used with restraint, added depth

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rather than weight. The conductor's control of balance ensured that DiDonato remained integrated into the musical fabric while never being covered by it.

After Saariaho's inward, sensuous sound world, Mahler's Fourth Symphony arrived not as a stylistic rupture but as a change of light. Its opening sleigh bells and buoyant rhythms can suggest innocence, but Nézet-Séguin resisted any temptation to turn the symphony into a postcard of Viennese charm. His reading recognised that Mahler's most "Mozartian" symphony is also one of his most unsettling. Beneath its classical proportions, bright orchestration, and apparent simplicity lies a world in which childhood, nostalgia, irony, and metaphysical longing constantly intersect.

The Met Orchestra responded with exceptional finesse. The string playing had sheen and pliancy rather than mass; the woodwinds were characterful and alert; and the brass offered grandeur without heaviness. Most impressive was the ensemble's sense of chamber-music responsiveness. Mahler's Fourth demands a particular kind of discipline: its transparent textures expose every gesture, while its expressive intensity depends on an ability to make small details speak. Nézet-Séguin shaped the first movement with elegance and elastic rhythm, allowing the music's folk-inflected vitality to coexist with its flashes of strangeness.

The second movement, with its scordatura violin and spectral dance character, was handled with an especially fine sense of theatrical perspective. It was neither grotesquely exaggerated nor smoothed into politeness. The solo violin's altered tuning created precisely the desired sense of a world slightly displaced from its axis: recognisable, charming, but faintly uncanny. In the Adagio, Nézet-Séguin found the stillness that Mahler requires without allowing the music to lose direction. The movement unfolded in long, patiently sustained arcs, its climaxes arising organically from the score rather than being imposed upon it.

The final movement, "Das himmlische Leben," brought the programme's vocal and symphonic ideas into a final, luminous focus. Here Mahler imagines heaven through a childlike voice, but the innocence is never simplistic. The music is tender, playful, earthly, and strangely elusive. The performance captured the movement's essential duality: its surface charm and its deeper awareness that paradise is a human invention, shaped by hunger, memory, and longing.

This was an evening in which artistic excellence served a larger musical idea. DiDonato's Saariaho revealed the voice as an instrument of colour, thought, and emotional discovery; Nézet-Séguin and the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra revealed Mahler's Fourth as a symphony of radiant precision and hidden depth. Together, they created a programme that was not merely polished or impressive, but genuinely illuminating.

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