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## AI as good as Mahler? Austrian orchestra performs symphony with twist

**C**an artificial intelligence turn out symphonies to match one of the greats of classical music? That was the question posed by one unusual orchestra performance in the Austrian city of Linz on Friday, in which Gustav Mahler's unfinished Symphony No.10 was played—immediately followed by six minutes of “Mahleresque” music written by software. The project's creator says that the two are clearly distinguishable but not everyone in the audience agreed.

“I couldn't really feel the difference... I believe it was really well done,” Maria Jose Sanchez Varela, 34, a sci-

ence and philosophy researcher from Mexico, told AFP. The performance was part of Linz's Ars Electronica Festival, which aims to highlight connections between science, art and technology. The brains behind the pioneering performance was AI researcher and composer Ali Nikrang, who works at the Ars Electronica Futurelab research centre affiliated with the festival. He used the open-source AI software MuseNet to write the music.

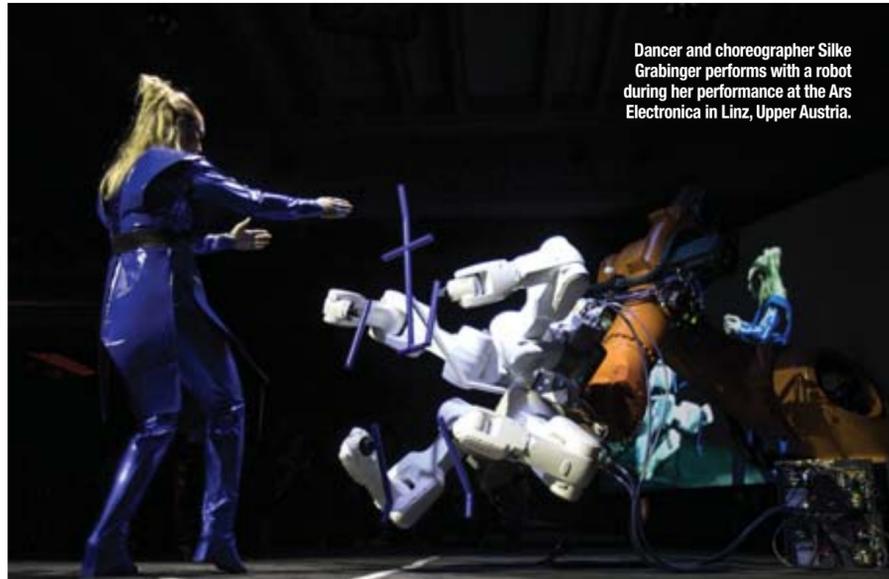
“It all sounds like music, there are emotions, but someone who really knows Mahler will notice immediately that it is not Mahler,” Nikrang told AFP, admitting



Markus Poschner, conductor of the Bruckner Orchestra Linz performs during the 'Mahler Unfinished Project' at the Ars Electronica in Linz, Upper Austria. — AFP photos



AI researcher and composer Ali Nikrang poses at the Ars Electronica in Linz, Upper Austria.



Dancer and choreographer Silke Grabinger performs with a robot during her performance at the Ars Electronica in Linz, Upper Austria.

Mahler's typical “harmonic expressions” were not quite there yet. He said AI learned from “data from the past, from data left to us by Mahler” so it may be able to create an exact copy of Mahler, but it still could not come up with a “concept” or overall theme for the music the way the classical composer himself did.

But Nikrang says that AI has nevertheless made great strides. Working with the first 10 notes of Mahler's Symphony No. 10, the software gave him four suggested segments, out of which he chose one, following which it continued giving him four more segments and so on. In all, Nikrang evaluated a few dozen pieces before choosing what spectators heard on Friday.

“All the suggestions were quite good... That is not obvious with AI, at least given the state of the technology five months ago” Nikrang said, adding that MuseNet had enabled a jump in quality. Christine Schoepf, the Ars Electronica festival's co-director, said that back when she took part in the very first edition 40 years ago, “of course we couldn't have guessed what would happen with AI”. “The fact it would progress in such quick steps wasn't foreseeable,” she said.

### Lacking emotional depth

Experts say the project highlights interesting questions. “This is of course really exciting,” said Aljoscha Burchardt of the German Research Center for Artificial Intelligence (DFKI). “One wonders whether the machines are so smart that they can accomplish great

music, or whether the music wasn't such a great accomplishment after all?,” Burchardt asks. “Maybe the pieces followed a graspable logic that in the past only very good composers knew, and now a machine can do it. That's the question,” he told AFP.

With computers churning out work at a speed composers cannot compete with, prices could drop, but on the other hand—just as in other fields where “hand-made” commands more prestige—artists who write their music without software could be able to charge a premium, Burchardt said. Machines also still needed humans to guide them, Austrian music expert Christian Scheib said. “Even with highly-complex AI, it depends on the artistic quality and skills of the respective composer,” he told AFP.

And of course, AI isn't yet able to explain its projects to journalists either. As Nikrang predicted, some spectators noticed when AI took over the composition in Friday night's performance. One of them, Manuela Klaut, said: “I somehow thought suddenly: ‘Ah, it is getting a bit more arbitrary’ or something like that.” But she admitted that it was hard to pinpoint what exactly changed, and the overall performance was still “great”. “I felt slightly that the emotional depth that you have in a Mahler composition was missing, maybe also the melancholy,” the 39-year-old from Germany said.—AFP

## Weinstein looms as Toronto fest talks Oscar lobbying, sexism

**S**usan Sarandon knows what it takes to win an Oscar, but on Friday the veteran US actress blasted Hollywood for only handing out statuettes to stars backed by “the Harvey Weinstems of this world.” Speaking at the Toronto International Film Festival for the world premiere of “Blackbird,” the Academy Award-winning star said Oscars glory is only possible today with vast amounts of money and lobbying. “Honestly, film now has become so corporate to get an Oscar,” she said. “When I got nominated five times and won once, you didn't have to spend.”

“That would never happen now,” she said, pointing to the six-month-long campaigns for nominations that have become commonplace, including VIP screenings, brunches and other “opinion-maker things.” Sarandon, 72, won an Academy for 1995's “Dead Man Walking,” after four previous nominations. In recent years the Toronto festival has been a key step on the journey to Oscar glory, with recent Best Picture winners including “Green Book” and “The Shape of Water” emerging as frontrunners.

Sarandon admitted she would love to win for “Blackbird,” in which she plays a terminally ill mother ending her own life, but said: “I take it with a grain of salt because I know that it's up against, you know, whatever Meryl Streep is doing this year.” But she added that outstanding performers in smaller films do not stand a chance because they don't have the means to “compete with some of these films that the Harvey Weinstems of the world are pushing.”

Before his spectacular downfall, Weinstein was seen as a master Oscars lobbyist with enormous clout across town. Tales are legion of the lengths the Miramax mogul would go to in order to earn improbable wins for the likes of “Shakespeare in Love” and “The Artist.” His reign came to an abrupt end when he was accused of harassment and assault by more than 80 women, including stars such

as Angelina Jolie and Ashley Judd. The original accusations against him were a catalyst for America's #MeToo movement. Weinstein has always insisted his sexual relationships were consensual.

### Drug the bad guys

Elsewhere in Toronto, the makers of “Hustlers”—a film about New York strippers who turned the tables on wealthy Wall Street executives, also premiering at the festival—said their jobs still involved “pitching to primarily white men.” “I don't know what's changed yet, to be honest,” director Lorene Scafaria told a panel discussion Friday. “I hope some things have gotten better as a result of the #MeToo movement and #TimesUp. “I certainly hope that some people have adjusted their behavior and their thinking. But we've got thousands of years (of sexism) before this movie was made.”

Producer Elaine Goldsmith-Thomas said procuring funding for the female-dominated film, starring Jennifer Lopez, Constance Wu and Cardi B, had been problematic, with the end result shot for \$20.7 million in just 29 days. The film, which premieres Saturday, is based on the real-life story of a group of strippers and sex workers who scammed businessmen out of vast sums, including slipping drugs into their drinks before swiping their cards.

Potential financial backers for the film had asked for changes to be made, including presenting the male “victims” as villains by inventing criminal back stories. “The note they gave us was ‘It's great, could they drug the bad guys? Make one of the guys a rapist and drug him?’” said Goldsmith-Thomas. She said a fellow female producer had asked: “If we were making ‘The Wolf of Wall Street’ would you have said to Leonardo DiCaprio ‘just scam the bad people?’” TIFF, North America's largest movie festival, runs until September 15.—AFP

## Polanski's Dreyfus

drama favorite to win Venice film festival

**R**oman Polanski's film about the Dreyfus Affair—in which he was accused of drawing parallels between himself and the persecuted French Jewish army officer—has won the critics' prize at the Venice film festival, making it a favorite to lift the top award yesterday. If the official jury were to make the same choice it would cause an outcry, with feminists already furious the veteran maker of “Rosemary's Baby” was allowed to compete at the festival.

Polanski, 86, has been shunned by Hollywood for decades after he was convicted of drugging and raping a 13-year-old girl. The last two winners of the Golden Lion—“Roma” and “The Shape of Water”—have gone on to lift the best picture Oscar, and the festival was also the launch pad for “La La Land” and “Birdman”.

The three men and three women of the Fipresci jury of international critics said they were won over by Polanski's “rigorous and elegant” direction and “the powerful dialogue and exceptional performances by all of the actors”. However, Polanski's “An Officer and a Spy” has stiff competition from the taut divorce drama “Marriage Story”, which features Adam Driver and Scarlett Johansson at their best, and Joaquin Phoenix's bravura turn in “The Joker”—which has set the Internet abuzz.

### Obscene

While some critics found Polanski's inferred comparison with Dreyfus “obscene”, others admired the artistry of the Polish auteur and Holocaust survivor. Oscar winner Jean (“The Artist”) Dujardin's fine performance as the military prosecutor who becomes convinced of Dreyfus' innocence may be rewarded if the jury balks at crowning Polanski. Its head, Argentinian director Lucrecia Martel, had to make an embarrassing about-turn after boycotting a gala dinner for Polanski, only to be forced to clarify that she was not prejudiced against his film. In a year fraught with controversy over sexual politics, festival director Alberto Barbera was also accused of being “tone deaf” for his inclusion of a Black Lives Matter drama by the American Nate Parker, who was embroiled in a rape trial while at university, as well as the director's cut of Gasper Noe's 2002 rape shocker “Irreversible”. Barbera added further fuel to the fire by saying he “wished he had got” Woody Allen's latest, “A Rainy Day in New York”.

Politics were everywhere on the Lido. The Russo brothers—the makers of “Avengers: Endgame”, the biggest grossing film in history—won plaudits for “Mosul”, the first Hollywood action film shot entirely in Arabic. South African film “Moffie” was hailed for getting to the roots of “toxic masculinity” in the country just as thousands of women were taking to the streets there to protest against male violence.

### Red carpet protest

Climate change and anti-cruise ship protesters invaded the red carpet on Saturday before the screening of the art world thriller “The Burnt Orange Heresy” starring the Rolling Stones' Mick Jagger. Only hours before his fellow rock “dinosaur”, Pink Floyd songwriter Roger Waters, had urged young people to revolt to save the planet as he lambasted populist leaders including US President Donald Trump, Britain's Boris Johnson and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro for trying to destroy it.

They were all “sociopaths”, he told AFP. “If we do not resist the neo-liberal and neo-fascist forces that are tearing the planet apart there will not be anything left for our children and their children,” the veteran star declared. Ukrainian director Sergei Loznitsa warned about the dangerous rise of Stalin nostalgia as he premiered his new documentary of long-lost archive footage of the Soviet dictator's “grandiose, terrifying and grotesque” funeral.—AFP

French and Italy critics in particular were wowed



Members of Venice's 'No Big Ships' Committee (No Grandi Navi) and people stage a protest against the cruise ships that sail in the Venice lagoon, outside the Festival Palace (Palazzo del Cinema) during the 76th Venice Film Festival at Venice Lido. — AFP photos

## Anti-cruise ship protesters target Venice film festival

**S**everal hundred protesters demanding the authorities ban huge cruise ships they say threaten one of the world's most historic cities targeted the Venice film festival Saturday to make their point. Between 300 and 400 protesters gathered in front of the main marquee where the glittering closing ceremonies of the film festival will be held later in the day. They carried banners denouncing the impact the massive ships are having on Venice and its environment as well as the threat of global climate change.

In particular, they say the boats sailing through the lagoon are eroding the very foundations of the city. “The ‘Venice Climate Camp’ has sounded the alarm. The message is clear, the earth is burning. The

time has come to mobilize, to take serious measures, to ensure social and climate justice,” the organizers said on their website.

“So, let us make Venice a symbol of the struggle against climate change, let us use the film festival as a sounding board.” The festival attracts global attention, especially so with the award of the prizes watched over by stars, celebrities and hundreds of journalists. Venice is one of the most visited cities in the world but the sight of giant cruise ships so close to its invaluable historic inheritance has sparked uproar.—AFP



Actors Sam Neill, left, Susan Sarandon, center, and Rainn Wilson arrive for the premiere of 'Blackbird' during the Toronto International Film Festival in Toronto, Ontario. — AFP