Although renowned for her interpretations of a range of contemporary composers, Houston-area resident Sasha Cooke also professes a deep affinity for Gustav Mahler, whose music she labels “introspective” and “chamber-music-esque.”

“It’s about color and dynamic and nuance, and ensemble with the players,” says the mezzo-soprano. “He’s always kind of having conversations about what our purpose is here on Earth … it gets very cerebral and spiritual. I really like his music. It speaks to me.”

This weekend, Cooke was scheduled to join the Houston Symphony for Mahler’s “Songs of a Wayfarer,” completed in 1885 and dating to the fin de siècle composer’s mid-20s. The piece, roughly 16 minutes long, follows the singer through the wake of a wrenching romantic disappointment. Its four songs outline a range of emotions, from bitter heartbreak and white-hot anger to seeking comfort in nature and ultimately achieving a sort of bittersweet solace.

Although the performances were canceled in the aftermath of this week’s winter storm, Cooke has sung the piece several times before. To her, the journey goes well beyond the end of a relationship: The singer’s tribulations illuminate some basic truths, made vivid and immediate by Mahler’s exquisite score.

“Really, you as the performer can be thinking about a whole host of things,” she says. “I could be singing about being isolated right now as a singer in the pandemic. It’s really about more than love and a relationship — it’s about being human. And yet, there’s joy in it, too.”

Certainly her relationship with “Wayfarer” has changed over the years. Being a parent of two daughters “just makes you look at life differently,” she says.

“I think as you get older, you sort of accept the ups and downs of life,” adds Cooke. “Even this period now, I think it’s a nice reference point for the songs. To think, ‘You know what? This is rough, but this too shall pass and there are silver linings.’ Nothing is all good; everything comes with two sides.”

Cooke also enjoys singing Mahler for purely technical reasons. As a mezzo-soprano, her range falls within the middle of the musical staff, a sweet spot for enunciating clearly.

“You still have to sing high, still have to sing low,” she says, “but you just sort of stay in your middle, which I think a lot of composers like because you can understand the words there. It’s not about (hitting) some crazy high note; it’s about communication.”

In general, Cooke says she enjoys operatic roles as much as concerts and recitals, though operas do mean more time away from her family. She’s won Grammys for her work in John Adams’ “Doctor Atomic” and Mason Bates’ “The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs” and next year is scheduled to appear as Cherubino in the Metropolitan Opera’s “The Marriage of Figaro.”

Reflecting on her more memorable parts, Cooke mentions Joby Talbot’s “Everest,” in which she played the wife of Rob Hall, one of the climbers who perished on an expedition up the mountain in 1996. That was for Dallas Opera, which also cast her in next month’s world premiere of Talbot’s “The Diving Bell and the Butterfly,” which was recently canceled due to the pandemic.

There was also title role of English National Opera’s 2017 world premiere of Nico Muhly’s “Marnie,” which she describes as a “marathon.”

“I never left the stage,” Cooke says. “It was almost three hours of singing and 13 or 14 costumes, so all these quick changes in the wings. It was like sing-sing-sing-sing-sing, change for 10 seconds; sing-sing-sing-sing-sing, change for 30 seconds. That was a roller coaster, but it was so fun.”

Friday and Saturday would have been the first public performances in a solid year for Cooke, who grew up in College Station and spent her undergraduate years at Rice University. Although it won’t happen this weekend, whenever Cooke sings at Jones Hall she flashes back to when her parents used to drive her into Houston to see the orchestra perform.

“Every time I come and sing with the Houston Symphony, I’m reminded of that kid me,” she says, “and how crazy to think I’m on the other side of the stage.”

Chris Gray is a Galveston-based writer.