

OPENING NIGHT: BREATHTAKING MAHLER AND GOOD PROGRAM NOTES

By Jeff Wall

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Symphony No. 1 in D major, “Titan”

Reduced orchestration for Chamber Orchestra by Yoon Jae Lee

“The First [Symphony] has not yet been grasped by anyone who has not lived with me.”

Gustav Mahler, c.1901, undated letter to the author of a monograph on his works

Said no one else ever. But Mahler’s conviction that his First Symphony was a hard sell is borne out in a 1906 letter to a conductor proposing to perform his music in Paris: “On no account would I advise the First; it is very hard to understand. Even the Sixth or Fifth would be preferable.” Today these statements are eyebrow raising; nobody has been living with Mahler for well over a century now, and his First Symphony is now his most frequently performed. So obviously times have changed.

What happened was 50 years of growing respect for Mahler the composer. During his lifetime and after Mahler was principally known as one of the greatest conductors of his day—after holding posts of increasing importance in opera houses from small towns to Prague, Leipzig, Budapest and Hamburg, in 1897 he assumed the Directorship of the Vienna Imperial Opera, considered the prize of Europe—and that of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra in 1898. Following his tenure in Vienna he crossed the Atlantic to join the Metropolitan Opera, becoming conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra the next year. However, his 45 songs and 10 massive symphonies (including the ‘song-symphony’ *The Song of the Earth*) were met with hostility, at first dismissed as ‘conductor music’—the large body of technically competent but forgettable works produced by music directors everywhere—and later rejected as outrageously modern and insufferably long. Modernism, of course, is perishable, and it soon moved far beyond what upset Mahler’s audiences. Length is a challenge that can be overcome with study and familiarity, and the publication of Mahler’s scores, along with the mid-century advent of long-playing recordings, made his music increasingly accessible to a broader public. By 1971 Mahler was on the soundtrack of an award-winning film (*Death in Venice*), and his symphonies had become standard orchestral repertory.

Mahler’s path to his First Symphony was long and difficult, however. After studies in piano and composition at the Vienna Conservatory he was obliged in 1880 to take up conducting—for which he had had no training—to earn a living. Increasing success meant less time for composition; yet he still completed his first substantial work that year, the cantata *Das klagende Lied* (Song of Lamentation), along with three songs, one of which would inspire the horn theme of the symphony’s scherzo. Over the next four years Mahler advanced his conducting career, but it was not until 1884 with some incidental music for a play that the First Symphony began to

take shape: an episode (entitled *Blumine*—poetically, ‘flowers’) was eventually repurposed as its second movement. The year ended with *Songs of a Wayfarer*, four songs with piano written for a soprano with whom Mahler was in love; two of these contributed themes to the first and third movements of his symphony. In fact, in constructing his whole first movement from the melody of a song Mahler made musical history. But work in the theatre and completion of an unfinished opera by Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826) occupied him over much of the next two years, and it was spring of 1888 before the First Symphony was finished in four-hand piano score: he wrote to his parents that his emotions “became so powerful in me that they gushed forth like an impetuous torrent...at a single blow all the floodgates were opened within me!”

The emotions Mahler was referring to flowed from a torrid love affair he was having with the wife of Weber’s grandson, which nearly resulted in the couple running away together (she stood him up at the train station). And truthfully, as with also the *Wayfarer Songs*, love affairs were a frequent spur to Mahler’s inspiration (indeed, his reputation for such entanglements occasionally interfered with his employment prospects). In the case of the First Symphony he explained to a critic, “The symphony goes far beyond the love affair on which it is based...which preceded it in the emotional life of its creator. The external event was only the occasion—so cannot be the subject of the work...As I find it trite to try to invent music to fit a programme, I regard it as unsatisfactory and unfruitful to try to make programme notes for a piece of music.” This was hindsight: after the unenthusiastic reception of the nascent First Symphony under the title “Symphonic Poem” at its 1889 debut in Budapest, Mahler—who was undecided whether to call his five-movement piece a symphony or a symphonic poem— had been persuaded to add suggestive titles to each movement of what he now termed *Titan: Tone Poem in Symphonic Form*, in reference to German author Jean Paul’s eponymous novel. This revised version, which sported a paragraph-long explanation of the fourth movement Funeral March, fared better in 1893 with its audience in Hamburg—but less so with the critics and even less so in Weimar the following year. So, for the 1896 Berlin premiere, Mahler again revised the work, excised the titles, dropped *Blumine* altogether, and called it just *Symphony in D Major*. To no avail, however— the Funeral March, now the symphony’s third movement, was still booed and the critics were unrelenting. This remained the pattern for subsequent performances in Vienna (1900) and elsewhere. Mahler’s comment after the Vienna concert was more resigned than anguished: “The First Symphony is and will always remain my child of sorrow!”

The difficulties that audiences—and critics—had with the work stem from several sources. One objection was perceived dissonant harmony; another was the sheer volume in the last movement of the largest orchestra yet employed in a symphony. Still another was the satire and parody in the Funeral March, which were an unfamiliar—and for many, an unwelcome—presence in the concert hall. And there was a fourth, unpleasant factor contributing to the negative reception of Mahler’s works: the widespread and systemic anti-Semitism then prevalent in Europe. Later, Mahler was obliged to convert to Catholicism to accept the Directorship of the Imperial Opera, which however did not eliminate this element of antagonism toward his music.

Today, what was considered outrageous dissonance in the 1890s passes unnoticed; orchestral volume is dwarfed by amplifiers; and satire and parody are held in check only by lawyers. However, what remains confusing about Mahler's First Symphony is defining the so-called meaning of the piece—what did the cuckoos, the children's songs, the startling outburst of the last movement and other oddities mean? And here is the problem: he gave three very different answers to that question.

The first version was that the symphony is based upon the experience of a love affair, as quoted above. Next came the descriptions in the vaguely programmatic titles and notes issued for the 1893 Hamburg performance. Subsequently suppressed from the published score, they were nonetheless even elaborated in a long letter to a prominent critic prior to the Vienna premiere in 1900, in which an imagined strong hero delights in nature in the first movement (ending with his laughter in the solo timpani); who voyages the world in the second movement; who witnesses a funeral procession in the third movement and reflects bitterly on the all the sorrow in the world—and which buffeting sorrow he suffers in the Finale, at last triumphing over death, in Mahler's description, to "a great victorious chorale!"

The third answer Mahler gave is that there is no programme beyond his own "obscure feelings" stemming from real life experiences that opened a gate "into the 'other world'... in which things no longer fall apart in time and space".

O-kaayyy....

So the inquiring mind must make a choice. Some who have opted for love see in the four movements a pattern of spring-like joy in a fresh love; the adventure of shared experiences; the bitter death of the affair; and the anger and tormented memories afterward, ending in either reconciliation or the incredible relief of deliverance. Others accept the narrative and try to make the music fit. And the rest must forget about Jean Paul, simply take the music as it is and enjoy it until the gate opens into the other world—which seems to be what Mahler actually wanted. Or perhaps, as Hemingway had it, "There is no one thing that is true—it is all true."

A few musical and textual details are relevant. That the cuckoo in the introduction sings a lower second note than your average cuckoo clock is because the *Wayfarer* song Mahler later quotes as his main theme begins with these two notes. The original song does evoke Spring in that the traveller describes a morning walk in a dewy, sunny field amidst cheery birdcalls and bright flowers. The timpani 'laughter' at the end is a nine-fold repetition of the same two 'cuckoo' notes.

In the Scherzo the suave and elegant Trio is based on a rustic Austrian dance called a *ländler*. Is this Love? Or Adventure?

The third movement was the most contentious in the symphony, requiring the most clarification; Mahler described it as "A Funeral March in the Manner of Callot". Jacques Callot was a 17th century French artist renowned for his etchings, and in particular a whimsical one entitled "The

Huntsman's Funeral", in which weeping forest animals transport a casket bearing his shotgun while carrying torches and playing instruments. This was a familiar illustration in Austrian children's books, and so Mahler began with a familiar children's round, *Brother Martin* (*Frère Jacques* to us) grotesquely transposed into the minor key and dryly given to a solo double bass in a very high register. This irony either went completely over the heads of his listeners, or provoked outrage at such impertinence in the serious forum of symphonic music, or both. A second melody with a distinct klezmer cast, is a parody of the (apparently miserable) village bands the composer himself heard as a child and corresponds to Callot's bestial musicians. Again, the sarcasm fell flat in audiences expecting a spiritual—or at least anodyne—experience in the slow movement of a symphony. And a third theme, taken from the last *Wayfarer* song and scored for three solo violins, strikes a painfully nostalgic tone of regret, perhaps more suited to a man recalling a lost love—as in the song—than to a hunter's mourners.

The Finale, which explodes on the heels of the procession (the score directs 'immediately'), was entitled *From the Inferno*, a reference to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, with the added note that it follows the march "like the last despairing cry of a wounded heart." Whether the heart is the hero's or Mahler's is a fair question. The middle section both recalls the first movement and foreshadows the conclusion: the protagonist is deluded that he has won his battle—but not yet! When he does, the horn section is requested in the score to deliver the final chorale theme standing up—a very effective if theatrical gesture that strengthens and directs attention to the triumphal hymn.

Finally, Mahler never stopped believing in his First Symphony: in a letter to his wife in 1903, after a rehearsal with a well-prepared orchestra in Poland, he wrote, "Sometimes it sent shivers down my spine. Damn it all, where do people keep their ears and their hearts if they can't hear *that!*"

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