

## **Mahler - Reflections on the Ninth Symphony**

Whatever is said in the effort to describe any great musical work, one has the feeling that one is talking around the music rather than about it. Mahler understood this, and although he wrestled with the idea of writing “programmes” for his symphonies he came to deplore programme notes – not only as a distraction but also as a disruption of the listener’s experience. Words, as Mendelssohn said, are far less precise than music, and so the words one uses to describe a piece will always express the emotions conveyed by the piece less precisely than the piece itself. Yet here is what Alban Berg wrote about Mahler’s Ninth: “The whole [first] movement is permeated with the premonition of death...Again and again it crops up; all the elements of terrestrial dreaming culminate in it...most potently, of course, in the colossal passage [bar 308] where premonition becomes certainty – where in the midst of the highest power of almost painful joy in life, death itself is announced ‘with greatest force.’”

When an artist like Berg speaks in this way, who can question the appropriateness of at least attempting to make such observations? After all, a few pages after the section that Berg describes, Mahler himself writes in the score, over one of the most devastating and ominous passages in all music, the words “Wie ein schwerer Kondukt” – ie, like a grim funeral procession.

Certainly we have some sense that this is autobiographical music – Mahler himself said as much – and indeed, could it have been otherwise? After all, seven of his siblings died in childhood, and his own beloved four-year-old daughter Maria died of scarlet fever. Moreover, we know that he wrote the Ninth aware that he himself might die very soon. We also know that he struggled all his life – first as a Jew, then as a

Roman Catholic – with notions of spiritual salvation; that for him the likelihood that life was a grotesque and bitter struggle (or even a meaningless joke) was always in conflict with a deep sense of hope, piety, joy, and love.

We must recall that Mahler lived at a time when art was manifestly *personal*. The years before the First War were years of profound unrest in which a sense of dread and exhaustion permeated Europe, eliciting the paintings of Klimt, Beckmann, and Kokoschka, the writing of Kraus, Wedekind, and Hofmannsthal – works of art that reflected an obsession with analysis and transformation. It is hardly surprising that this particular man at this particular time should have written music wrung out of the deepest recesses of his complex personality and concerned with the great issues of life and death.

It is essential, then, that we allow ourselves to experience Mahler's Ninth in emotional terms – not merely as a self-indulgence, but because it is precisely in emotional terms that work unfolds structurally. The listener inevitably has great difficulty in grasping the structure of the first movement. Is it in sonata form? Well, it is- but I cannot say that this form can be more than dimly apprehended over the thirty-minute span of its length. For if one tries to analyze the movement in terms of traditional sonata structure, one becomes quickly confused. When the second theme – if that is what it is – enters at bar 29, it is not in the dominant, as we should expect, but rather in the tonic minor: and it is immediately followed by a restatement of the main theme in the tonic!

Is this, after all, a rondo? In fact, the movement keeps returning to the main theme and then veering off again into what sounds like the development. Thus while sonata form is certainly the background principle of the movement, it is virtually impossible to keep any sense of location while the music is being experienced dramatically. Even

the critics disagree about where the Development, Recapitulation, and Coda really begin. Another way must therefore be found to describe and experience the movement's structure.

There seem to be two kinds of music in the first movement: music that is gentle, harmonious, sublimely beautiful, and resolved; and music that is complex, dissonant, full of tension and unresolved. And the structure of the movement seems to set these two kinds of music against each other. The former kind may be said to represent hope, joy, the possibility of peace, spiritual meaning, and an acceptance of death, while the latter may be said to represent hate, anguish, suffering, doubt, confusion, and fear.

Musically speaking, the former is represented in the ardent, yearning, nostalgic harmonies of late-nineteenth-century Romantic style; the latter, in the tortured, involuted, contrapuntal, and often virtually atonal style of the early twentieth-century. In 1909, when the Ninth Symphony was composed, Mahler stood at the very dividing line between these two worlds: he was the culmination of the past and the harbinger of the future, the pinnacle of the Romantic era and the admirer and champion of the young Schoenberg, standard-bearer of the Second Viennese School. The Ninth Symphony, Mahler's last completed work, embodies this fundamental struggle between the two ages and depicts one man's struggle between hope and despair, meaning and chaos, joy and resignation in the face of his own death.

Seen in these terms, the structure is much easier to grasp. The first movement opens tentatively, expectant and yet sparse in a way that prefigures the style of Webern. Perhaps it conjures up images of the beginning of the world, through this opening, unlike that of Mahler's First Symphony with its sounds of awakening nature, is full of foreboding: the primal heart-beat, the ominous muted horn, the bell-like tolling of the harp, the sadder in the violas, and then the sublimely beautiful yearning and yet

peaceful second violin melody, with its twice-repeated falling second and its resolved D-major harmonies.

But all too soon this peace is disturbed, but the up-thrusting, dissonant melody in the first violins and by the bitter, syncopated trumpet motive.

This motive permeates the whole movement, and seems to work almost like a Wagnerian *Leitmotif* representing the forces of evil and despair.

Periodically, the music moves back towards D major and the nostalgic second-violin melody, as if trying to resolve the conflict and recreate the peace of the opening but every attempt is foiled, and each time the music veers off again into turmoil and dissonance. Each wrenching-away is more violent and more dissonant than the preceding one, just as each return to D major is a little more confident and prolonged. In the end – after the passage beginning at bar 308 that Berg indicated – the syncopated trumpet is finally tamed and transformed into the lovely D major horn duet, with its gently undulating harp accompaniment.

If we hadn't realized it before, it may now be clear that the two contrasting "themes" that encapsulate the two opposed types of music in this movement, the nostalgic D major second-violin melody and the dissonant trumpet motive, are in fact identical.

They represent two aspects of the same dilemma – despair is an inevitable accompaniment of hope and love – and they are finally resolved in the horn melody, which combines elements of each and takes us beyond both into a sublime reconciliation, a glimpse of bliss at the end of the movement.

This technique of thematic variation or transformation is one of the basic compositional modes of the Ninth, and Mahler's use of the technique is one of the

things that makes this symphony a crucial work in the history of music. By this time, in fact, Mahler is hardly writing themes of melodies at all. Rather, his music is composed with *motives*, as are Beethoven's late quartets and, more significantly, the early works of Schoenberg – for example the Five Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 16 (1909), which Mahler especially admired. To be sure, there *are* melodies in the Ninth. But they are constantly being transformed into one another; the basic motives are so freed from their melodic roots that each can repeatedly be made to form new melodies, which often differ in shape and character from the earlier ones.

Also, just as in Schoenberg, there is almost complete independence among the voices. In most eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century music, even in Brahms's most complex polyphony, there is usually a melody and an accompaniment, a hierarchy of importance among the voices. But in the first movement of Mahler's Ninth, especially in the sections depicting despair and chaos, there are virtually no subservient voices. What appear to be accompaniments turn out to be independent voices with a life of their own. And this is, of course, a most effective musical means of suggesting the radical disruption that the music is intended to convey. The orchestra is no longer used as a *tutti* instrument, but rather as a vast chamber group. In the Ninth the very nature of the large symphony orchestra is strained to its limits, and it was in fact this work that heralded the end of the large orchestra's reign as the supreme vehicle for extended major works. Only a couple years later, in 1912, came Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, after which the chamber group and chamber orchestra became natural means of expression for the most complex polyphony, as was the case in the baroque era.

With often as many as ten or eleven different voices to be heard at once, and with Mahler's painstakingly precise indications of phrasing and dynamics for each voice, often different from those for all the other voices, the Ninth makes extraordinary

demands on even the ablest orchestral players. Orchestra players are trained to play with one another, to blend their sonorities and dynamics into a balanced whole. They are discouraged from projecting their own character and personalities. But in this music that will not do; the players must be encouraged not to compromise the sharp oppositions, not to minimize the strangeness, even the ugliness that Mahler has written into his score.

This is why Mahler's music, and especially the Ninth Symphony, needs so much care in its preparation. By modern standards it seems as though Mahler, who was one of the greatest conductors of all time, had virtually infinite rehearsal time, and he was, by all accounts, uncompromising and even ruthless in his demands on his players. Obviously, no conducting gestures can possibly give the players all the information necessary to perform Mahler's Ninth as Mahler intended – especially since so much of that information is inherently contradictory. The ideal orchestra for the world would be one composed entirely of great individualists, each with the courage to play exactly what is he is given, regardless of what the others are doing. Each would then fulfill his role within the common tempo and rhythmic framework provided by the conductor, and all the varied elements of the music – the voice leading, the rhythms (with the constant pitting of threes against fours), the dynamics, the phrasing, the counterpoint – could be allowed to conspire against the whole without any one element overwhelming the others.

The overall form of the Ninth, with two huge slow movements flanking the two large *scherzi* in the middle, is the most unusual and presents its own problems. But I am convinced that it works – indeed, that it had to be as it is, given the content of the music.

In the traditional symphonic scheme, the first movement is dense, intellectual, and highly structured, with a slow movement, a light *scherzo*, and a brilliant finale following to provide welcome relief. But in Mahler's Ninth this traditional notion of symphonic form is turned inside out. The first movement is certainly as demanding as anyone can think of, and in addition it is so long, so intense, and so complete in itself that it seems almost to stand on its own, a self-sufficient work of art hardly needing any continuation or completion. But anyone who experiences the first movement in the emotional terms I outlined earlier, though he may momentarily feel as its end that some true reconciliation or conclusion has been reached and that no further music is necessary, must realize that the glimpse of bliss with which it closes is much too unstable to be trusted. There have been too many instances earlier in the movement where a similar bliss was apparently achieved and then lost again in yet another bout of anguish and turmoil.

So the "victories" won in the first movement have to be tested. That Mahler does so in two middle movements of such immense size and density is a measure of the dimensions of the struggle. These two movements are in fact so large and so complex, their energy so relentless, that they threaten to overbalance the structure of the whole work. But in the end they don't; in fact, I feel that they are perfectly judged. The effect and "meaning" of the last movement can be fully experienced only if we have already taken the awesome journey through the two middle movements. Without them our sense of transcendence, of fulfillment, would be much diminished: what makes the work's final effect so impressive and moving is one's knowledge of how hard-earned it is.

And it is hard-earned not only for the composer but also for the players and the audience. In fact, the length and difficulty of Mahler's Ninth are in themselves

elements of one's experience of the work. Any orchestra that found Mahler's Ninth easy, or any audience that was not overwhelmed by its length and complexity, would have missed the whole point. The struggle just to play the notes correctly, to sort out the complex rhythms, to realize in performance the intricate instructions that appear on every page, to render audible in their proper relation to one another all the various lines of the music – this is central to the experience of Mahler's Ninth. It must never be made to sound easy or glib or even comfortable.

In the second movement Mahler returns to the real world, the world of the Viennese dances he knew so well, the waltzes and the *Ländler*. But there is a profound difference between the spirit of this music and what we have come to recognize as the true *Ländler* spirit. Where are the charm, the elegance, the pretty melodies? Even the rubato is gone. This dance is a grim parody of the dance. Mahler's indication at the beginning of the movement, "Etwas tappish und sehr derb" (somewhat clumsy and very rough), shows that the true *Ländler* is here stiffened and chained, deprived of its characteristic lilt – a counterpart of the first movement's dissonance and rhythmic complexity. Again, it isn't as though Mahler wasn't perfectly capable of writing a conventionally charming Viennese *Ländler* – recall the marvellous one in the second movement of the Fourth Symphony! But he wanted the brusque, square, stilted manner of the movement, with its brief motivic bursts and their fragmented replies, to convey the feeling that the splendour and warmth of traditional Vienna have vanished, that only their shadow remains. The movement's overwhelming chromaticism and violent dynamic contrasts deepen our sense of confusion and alarm. As the dance works itself up into a frenzy of energy, the sedate Viennese dancers are transformed into a nightmarish band of revellers. Then, at the end, the opening *Ländler* themes return. But the rhythms are limp and the stamping feet seem stuck in place, unable to move. The dance of life is over, and its spectral fragments float around us as the



piccolo and contrabassoon join forces to bring the movement to its sad, grotesque conclusion.

Aside from the energy, the most amazing thing about the third movement – which Mahler marks *Rondo Burleske* – is its contrapuntal mastery. At first it may sound utterly chaotic, but gradually we realize that is a *tour de force* of controlled contrapuntal writing. With bitter irony, Mahler dedicated it to “my brothers in Apollo,” the contemporary academic critics who never tired of claiming he could not write counterpoint. The irony is compounded by the fact that his movement, which seems to suggest that life may only be a ghastly joke, is in fact a fugue, the musical form most closely associated with order! In the midst of this inferno, a brief interlude brings temporary relief, a moment of heart-rending tenderness that tentatively prefigures the courageous affirmation of the last movement.

The music of the fourth movement is not joyful or triumphant – Mahler has slipped from the radiant D major of the opening movement to a dark, sombre D-flat major – but the textures are rich and full, the counterpoint astonishingly opulent. True, the climaxes are never fulfilled and there are moments of extreme withdrawal – those bleak, passionless passages that Mahler marks to be played “ohne Ausdruck” (without expression) that are often scored for just a handful of instruments. But most of the movement has a confident sweep. Even the greatest moment of intensity at bar 118, which sounds at first so much like the struggling music of the first movement, seems to be saying something quite different: a moment of philosophical conquest, it reminds one of Donne’s “Death, thou shalt die!”. Then comes a great paean, a glorious chorale that for a moment suggests the whole work might end in a blaze of glory. Of course, we know that it must be otherwise: the chorale dissolves into an awkward, stratospheric passage for the violins, and we finally arrive at the incredible

ending, so quiet, so rapt, so utterly devoid of sentimentality or self-indulgence, so sparse and so restrained, the music lingers on and on as if it could not bear to take leave of us.

We seem to emerge from contemplating the reality of death not in a state of gloom, but with a sense of joy. Unlike Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*, a model for this symphony, it ends in major not in minor. It has none of the nihilism and cold sense of futility which is found in so much contemporary art. On the contrary, there is a deep attachment to joy. Despair and knowledge of suffering are turned into a discovering of the meaning and value of life.

Part of the reason the end is so moving is precisely because of the huge size of the piece – the vast orchestra, the universal struggle of it all. Suddenly, we are left with the utter loneliness of a solitary cello, the hushed breath of a suspended note in the violins, the final synopations in the violas.

“What one makes music from is still the whole – that is the feeling, thinking, breathing, suffering, human being,” wrote Mahler to Bruno Walter. If we didn't know that Mahler faced imminent death, we would still know that the music could not have been written except by one who is facing the ultimate test. But the silence at the end is not the silence of death itself, or ultimate withdrawal, but of acceptance – a peace that passes all understanding.

*Benjamin Zander*