Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 1 in D Major

by Michael Steinberg

Mahler did most of the work on the symphony in February and March 1888, having begun to sketch it in earnest three years earlier and using material going back to the 1870s. He revised the score extensively on several occasions. The second and last edition published during his lifetime is dated 1906. Mahler himself conducted the first performance of the work, then called Symphonic Poem in Two Parts, with the Budapest Philharmonic on November 20, 1889.

Once, contemplating the failures of sympathy and understanding his First Symphony had met with at most of its early performances, Mahler lamented that while Beethoven had been able to start as a sort of modified Haydn or Mozart, and Wagner as Weber or Meyerbeer, he himself had the misfortune to be Gustav Mahler from the outset. He composed this symphony, surely the most original First after the Berlioz Fantastique, in high hopes of being understood, even imagining that it might earn him enough money so that he could abandon his rapidly expanding career as a conductor — a luxury that life would in fact never allow him.

But he enjoyed public success with the work only in Prague in 1898 and in Amsterdam five years later. The Viennese audience, musically reactionary and anti-Semitic to boot, what is singularly vile and its behavior, and even Mahler's future wife, Alma Schindler, whose devotion to the cause would in later years sometimes subordinate a concern for truth, fled that concert in anger and disgust. One critic

suggested that the work might have been meant as a parody of a symphony. No wonder that Mahler completing his Fourth Symphony in 1900, felt driven to mark its finale “Durchaus ohne Parodie!” (“With no trace of parody!”)

The Symphony No. 1 even puzzled its own composer. No other piece of Mahler’s Has so complicated history, and about no other did he change his mind so often and over so long a period. He transformed the total concept by canceling a whole movement, he made striking alterations in compositional in orchestral detail, and for some time he was unsure whether he was offering a symphonic poem, a program symphony, or just a symphony.

At the Budapest premiere, the work appeared as a “symphonic poem” whose two parts consisted of three and two movements, respectively. At that stage, the first movement was followed by a piece called Blumine. what is now the third movement was called à la pompes funèbres, but that was the only suggestion of anything programmatic. Nevertheless, the day before the premiere a newspaper article outlined a program whose source can only have been Mahler himself and which identifies the first three movements with spring, happy daydreams, and a wedding procession, the fourth as a funeral march representing the burial of the poet’s illusions, and the fifth as a hard-won progress to spiritual victory.

When Mahler revised the score in January 1893, he called it a symphony in five movements and two parts, also giving it the name of Titan – not, however, for the terrible and violent figures of Greek mythology, but for the eponymous novel by Jean Paul (Johann Paul Friedrich Richter, 1763-1825), a key figure in German literary Romanticism and one of Mahler’s favorite writers. The first part, From the Days of Youth, comprised three movements: Spring Without End, Blumine, and Under Full

Sail; the second, Commedia humana, consisted of two movements: Funeral March in the Manner of Callot and Dall'inferno al paradiso.

By the time the next performance came around – in Hamburg in October of the same year – Mahler announced the work as Titan, a Tone Poem in the Form of a Symphony. The first part was now called From the Days of Youth: Flower, Fruit, and Thorn pieces (this is part of the full title Siebenkäs, another of Jean Paul's novels), and Mahler added that the introduction represented "Nature's awakening from its long winter sleep." For the fourth movement, now titled Foundered!, he provided a long note to the effect that his inspiration had been the woodcut after the satirical drawing The Hunter's Funeral by Schubert's friend Moritz von Schwind. It depicts a torchlight procession of weeping deer, foxes, rabbits, and other forest animals bearing a hunter to his grave. Mahler says the music is "now ironic and merry, now uncanny and brooding. Upon which – immediately – Dall'inferno follows as the sudden despairing cry of a heart wounded to its depths."

Mahler retained most of that through the 1890s. Before the Vienna performance in 1900, he again leaked a program to a friendly critic, and it is a curious one. First comes rejection of Titan, as well as "all other titles and inscriptions, which, like all 'programs,' are always misinterpreted. [The composer] dislikes and discards them as 'anti-artistic' and 'anti-musical.'" There follows a scenario that reads much like an elaborated version of the original one for Budapest.

What had happened is that during the nineties, when Richard Strauss's Till Eulenspiegel, Also sprach Zarathustra, Don Quixote, and Ein Heldenleben had come out, program music had become a hot political issues in the musical world, one to take sides on. Mahler saw himself as living in a very different world from Strauss, and he

wished to establish a certain distance between himself and his colleague. At the same time, the extra-musical ideas that had originally informed his symphony would not disappear, and, somewhat uncomfortably and unconvincingly, he seemed not to be wanting to have it both ways. He found, moreover, that there was no pleasing the critics on this issue: in Berlin he was faulted for omitting the program and in Frankfurt for keeping it.

"I should like to stress that the symphony goes far beyond the love story on which it is based, or rather, which precedes it in the life of its creator," Mahler wrote. In that spirit, let me move on to the music, stopping just long enough to say that actually two love stories were involved, one in 1884 with Kassel Opera soprano Johanna Richter, which led to the composition of the Songs of a Wayfarer that Mahler quotes and uses in this symphony, and a more dangerous one in 1887 and 1888 with Marion von Weber, wife of the grandson of the composer of Der Freischütz. The first time the opening pianissimo A, seven octaves deep, was ever heard Mahler sat at the piano and the Webers stood on either side of him to play the notes that were beyond the reach of his hands.

Mahler writes "Wie ein Naturlaut" ("like the sound of nature") on that first page, and he instructed the conductor Franz Schalk, "The introduction to the first movement sounds of nature, not music!" In the manner discovered by Beethoven for the opening of his Ninth Symphony and imitated in countless ways throughout the nineteenth century, fragments detach themselves from the mist, become graspable, coalesce. Among these fragments are a pair of notes descending by a fourth, distant fanfares, a little cry of oboes, a cuckoo call (by the only cuckoo in the world who toots a fourth rather than a third), and a gentle horn melody.

Gradually the tempo quickens to arrive at the melody of the second of Mahler's Wayfarer songs. (One of the most characteristic, original, and forward-looking features of this movement is how much time Mahler spends not in tempo but en route from one speed to another). Mahler's wayfarer crosses the fields in the morning, rejoicing in the beauty of the world and hoping that this marks the beauty of his own happy times, only to see that no, spring can never, never bloom for him. But for Mahler the song is useful not only as an evocation but as a musical source, and he draws astounding riches from it by a process, as Erwin Stein put it, of constantly shuffling and reshuffling its figures like a deck of cards. The movement rises to one tremendous climax – to bring that into sharper focus was one of the chief tasks of Mahler's 1893 version – and the last page is wild. One of its most important constant features, however, is the one to which Mahler drew Schalk's attention in the letter already quoted: "In the first movement the greatest delicacy throughout (except in the big climax)."

The scherzo, whose indebtedness to Bruckner was acknowledged by Mahler himself, is the symphony's briefest and simplest movement, and also the only one that the first audiences could be counted on to like. Its opening idea comes from a fragment for piano duet that may go back as far as 1876, and the movement makes several allusions to the song "Hans und Grethe," whose earliest version was written in 1880. The trio, set in an F major that sounds very mellow in the A-major context of the scherzo itself, fascinatingly contrasts the simplicity of the rustic, super-Austrian material itself with the artfulness of its arrangement.

The funeral music that follows was what most upset the first audiences. The use of the vernacular material presented in slightly perverted form (the round we have all sung as "Frère Jacques," but set by Mahler in a lugubrious minor); the parodic, vulgar

music with its lachrymose oboes and trumpets; the boom-chick of bass drum with cymbal attached; the hiccupping violins; the appearance in the middle of all this of part of the last Wayfarer song, exquisitely scored for muted strings with a harp and a few soft woodwinds – people simply did not know what to make of this mixture, how to respond, whether to laugh or cry or both. They sensed that something irreverent was being done, something new and somehow ominous, that these collisions of the spooky, the gross, and the vulnerable were uncomfortably like life itself, and they were offended. Incidentally, the most famous detail of orchestration in the symphony, the bass solo that begins the round, was an afterthought: As late as 1893, the first statement of the "Frère Jacques" tune was more conventionally set for bass and cello in unison.

Mahler likened the opening of the finale to a bolt of lightning that rips from a black cloud. The ensuing violence is suspended for some magical minutes as Mahler gives us the gift – in the soft pillows of D-flat major – of one of his most inspired lyric melodies. Using and transforming material from the first movement, he takes us, in the terms of his various programs, on the path from annihilation to victory. In musical terms, he engages us in a struggle to regain D major, the main key of the symphony, but unheard since the first movement ended. When at last he re-enters that key, he does so by way of a stunning and violent coup de théâtre, only to withdraw from the sounds of victory and to show us the hollowness of that triumph. He then goes all the way back to the music that began the symphony and gathers strength for a second assault. This one does indeed open the doors to a renewed conquest of D major and a heroic ending. That achievement is celebrated in a hymn that evokes Handel's Hallelujah! and in which the horns, now on their feet, are instructed to drown out the rest of the orchestra, "even the trumpets."