

Mahler: Symphony no. 2 in C minor (“Resurrection”)

Mahler began work on his Second Symphony when he was twenty-seven, still a young man. Get the questions it raises and the solution it offers are not those of youth, but of maturity. The basic Faustian questions — *To what purpose do we live? Can artistic creation have meaning if life itself has none?* — Come to trouble almost every introspective artist around the midpoint of his life. For Mahler, the time for questioning the whole nature of being came earlier than for most, and the questions were abiding ones, to be grappled with anew in each successive symphony.

In a sense the Second Symphony marks the beginning of the search. The First Symphony is an end, not a beginning. It gloriously caps the youthful period of Mahler’s creative life, but its indomitable heroism was not really an answer to the questions that Mahler was asking. Indeed, it was the implications of the First Symphony’s program that led directly to the Second’s anguished search for ultimate meanings.

The precise nature of these questions, however, in the extraordinary musical form that they were to take, did not come to him at once. In fact, the gestation period for the Second Symphony was longer than that for any of his other works. The symphony began as an isolated symphonic movement in C minor, composed at furious speed and finished in 1888, just a few months after the First Symphony. It is certain that from the very beginning Mahler regarded this movement as the first movement of a symphony, but seven years were to pass before the nature and scope of that symphony would be clear to him.

Entitled *Todtenfeier* (Funeral Rites), The movement stood alone for several years, element of such anger, yearning and despair that it virtually defied any attempt at a continuation. And, indeed, with the artist-hero already dead and buried in the first movement, what sort of continuation would be possible? Mahler appears to have briefly considered the idea of presenting *Todtenfeier* to the world as a one movement symphonic poem but held back, convinced that it was to be part of something larger but he could not yet discern. He did, over the years, try the movement out at the piano for his friends, sometimes with disastrous results (the conductor Hans von Bülow covered his ears with his hands).

In the meantime, he became increasingly intrigued by the musical possibilities inherent in the folk like naïveté, mysticism and irony of L. Archim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano's collection of poems *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Youth's Magic Horn), published in the early years of the century. Mahler's Wunderhorn settings proliferated rapidly, in both piano and orchestra versions, until, in the summer of 1893, he tried the experiment of transforming one of the songs for voice and piano, *Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt* (The Sermon of Anthony of Padua to the Fishes), into a purely instrumental movement, and thus the 'Scherzo' was the second movement of the symphony to come in to being (another version of the song, for voice and orchestra, followed a few weeks later). At the same time he return to some sketches for a nostalgic, slightly sentimental 'Andante' which he had begun years before, and so another movement of the symphony was completed — well he was still unsure about the overall plan of the symphony, or, indeed, in what order to place these very disparate movements (at first he thought the 'Scherzo' should immediately follow the first movement, and even much later, when he had finally decided on a five movement plan, he thought of introducing the 'Andante' just before the finale). Now Mahler had three movements for his symphony, but was really no nearer the goal than he had been five years before, since he still like to finale, or even the idea for a finale,

that would gather up the threads of the proceeding movements and making a unified work out of them.

More months elapsed, until fate placed the solution in Mahler's lap through an incident which one would feel forced to reject as a bit of romantic apocrypha, were it not so thoroughly documented. February 1894 brought news of von Bülow's death in Cairo. This great conductor, whom Mahler admired above all others, had been the one musician whose approval would have meant most to Mahler, and that approval had been steadfastly withheld. For Mahler the conductor, von Bülow had praise enough, but in Mahler the composer he sensed the eminent collapse of the values which he cherished most. The music actually sickened him.* A month after the funeral and memorial service was held in Hamburg, and there, squirming in an overcrowded pew of the packed Michaelskirche, Mahler heard the choir intone of chorale setting a Friedrich Klopstock's hymn *Auferstehung*. As the opening words wafted down from the loft in the disembodied tones of a boys choir, Mahler knew that he had found his answer, '*You shall arise, yes, you shall arise, my dust, after a short rest.*' At mid-afternoon on the same day, a friend called him at home to find him bent over manuscript paper, already at work on the finale.

The progress of the symphony from darkness to light, from death to renewal, was now clear, although while working on the last movement Mahler continue to juggle the ordering of the others, and even added a fifth movement, the Wunderhorn song 'Urlicht' ('First Light'). He had written this song two years before, without, it would seem, any thought of including it in the symphony.

The work was finished at last on the 18 December 1894, and received its first complete performance, under the composer's direction, on the 13th December 1895. The audience, puzzled and a bit shocked at first, found itself drawn into the tormented

and ecstatic world of the peace as it progressed, and during the last few minutes of the finale there were reportedly scenes of men sobbing uncontrollably, of total strangers in bracing each other; one woman even left from her seat, knelt down in the aisle and clapped her hands in prayer. The critics, however, work implacable. The *Berliner Fremdenblatt* snarled the words of 'Urlicht': '*Man lies in greatest pain... How I wish I were in Heaven.*' 'Noise,' 'bombast,' 'cacophony,' '*a morbid taste for the ugly and the deformed*' — so wrote ever critic in Berlin. But a few of them, while decrying this assault on the holy Temple of Art, felt bound to admit that the Second Symphony, more than any other new music of the time (Strauss was in the ascendant), seemed to point the way for music's future.

The beleaguered compositional history of the Second Symphony makes its unity of vision seem all the more miraculous. It is one of those works that force us to speculate on the mysterious nature of the creative urge, the way in which unconscious forces seem to control events and guide the artist along a path which he himself does not see until, having reach the goal, he turns and looks back.

Mahler originally designated the opening movement as a funeral right, although he decided to omit the term in the published score. Morbidly personal and metaphysically supra-personal at the same time, it looks back in bitterness and grief on the struggle of the hero (specifically, of the Titan of the First Symphony), on a life devoted to the search for meaning, but in which all meaning seem to be negated by death. Now, as the mournings stand around the bier, they must ask themselves whether, after a life of struggle, there is anything else. Do we live after death, or is death the end, reducing our achievements to vanity, are striving to a pitiful thrashing? The medieval sequence 'Dies irae' haunts the movement as a spectre. Peace and repose are promised, as in the beautiful second theme in the strings, but consoling

hints like this are cut short by grim reminders of mortality. The progress of the movement is inexorable — it ends in annihilation.

By the movement end, all hope, all joy, all life forces have been obliterated. We see nothing but the void. Mahler invites us to stare into the face of emptiness, calling for a pause after the first movement of at least five minutes. And then follows the ‘Andante’, a minuet of Schubertian grace, slightly sentimental, tender, charming and, one thinks, incongruous. The graceful melody unfolds in the first section, ingeniously divided among the strings so that this becomes a spatial music (directionality of sound was a consideration for Mahler all the time, not just in writing for off-stage horns and the like). A contrasting section brings in expressive, equally nostalgic theme in the winds and whispering staccatos in the strings like a summer breeze. The minuet returns with greater contrapuntal elaboration and an even more finely spun texture. A few storm clouds appear but bring a threat no greater than a brief shower. At the minuet’s final appearance Mahler disrupts the theme’s regular phrasing with echoes in the winds, the ne plus ultra of naïveté.

So why is this movement here? The answer can only be found in retrospect is the ironic third movement unfolds, a sarcastic and ultimately despairing examination of the futility of human endeavor. From this vantage point we can see the second movement for what it is; an illusion, a dream of cosy Bierdermeier tranquility as in substantial as a verdant mirage in the Sahara. As mentioned above the ‘Scherzo’ is a purely orchestral revision and expansion of the Wunderhorn song *Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt*. In the song of St. Anthony, tired of sermonizing to an absent congregation, goes down to the river to preached the fish. Pike and Il and salmon and cod all listen attentively, mouth agape, not their heads piously, the claim the sermon as the best they’ve ever heard, and hasten home to resume their old vices; the carp to their gluttony, the pikes to their thieving, the eels to their whoring.

The poem has a gentle irony and folk humour, but Mahler's 'Scherzo' re-interprets the poem, with biting sarcasm, as a bitter parable. Running through the movement almost like a perpetuum mobile is an undulating theme in the strings, describing over and over the same melodic arc, moving upwards from its starting note in aimless fashion, starting around for a bit, and then returning to its starting pitch. In the course of the 'Scherzo' this endlessly repeated melodic motion acquires the force of a symbol, tracing the course of days in the life of man, doomed endlessly to repeat the same act, entertain the same aspirations, with an ever-growing sense for futility and meaninglessness. The circular Rondo form of the movement serves to underscore this. A contrasting, trio-like middle section seems briefly to offer some consolation, but each return of the main theme brings a greater sense of disgust and triviality, until near the end the tempo quickens, the motives run together in a frantic mêlée, and the orchestra comes together in a harrowing fortissimo, which Mahler once described as a scream of despair.

In the light of all this it would seem that there is no answer to the questions of the first movement. The 'Andante', with its vision of worldly serenity, proved to be an illusion; the 'Scherzo' manifested growing pessimism leading to despair. Yet with the very opening notes of the following movement, 'Urlicht,' Mahler begins to point to the way out of the dilemma. Without pause he moves from the hollowly resonating C at the end of the 'Scherzo' to the tonic D-flat that opens this song. The effect that of being suddenly lifted to an entirely new plane, from which, unencumbered by the rush of daily events, one's eyes can see clearly and penetrate two essential matters. Beginning as a chorale, the setting becomes urgent and impassioned only for a brief moment before the end. The tone throughout one is of nice, simple faith, in accord with the childlike diction of the poem. Mahler specifically stipulated that the singer of the song use *'the tone and vocal expression of a child who thinks he is in heaven.'*

The ray of hope which shines through in 'Urlicht' illumines the path to the gigantic finale. Mahler saw this path as leading from the despair and chaos of the 'Scherzo' (he opens the movement, again linked without pause to the preceding one, with an intensified version of the 'Scherzo's' '*scream of despair*'), through a vision of the Last Judgment, to the promise and sure knowledge of renewal after death and of the continuity of man's spiritual ascent through the ages.

The large-scale form of this movement is determined by its programmatic content to a degree quite uncommon in Mahler. Following the poetic idea the music falls into three large sections, and individual programmatic detail stand out in bold release. After the anguish of the opening a curious stillness descends — Erie and speaking of infinity, unlike anything heard so far in the work. Off-stage horns echo a call, '*the voice crying in the wilderness.*' The 'Dies irae' is heard in the winds above pizzicatos in the strings, with melodic continuation that points towards the resurrection theme of the closing chorus. The whole orchestra begins to come alive with the premonition of the voice in the wilderness. Another theme, later associated with the soloists' exhortation to faith, enters timidly and hesitatingly in the winds. One more time the 'Dies irae' appears, now in the brass, and what a moment before was still filled with foreboding is now calm and short, with even a trace of exaltation. The orchestra glories in its most ecstatic sonorities, preparing for the great mystery which is about to be revealed.

The awesome conclusion of the symphony is filled with apocalyptic Christian symbols, but divested of their customary meanings — looking back to Nietzsche's concept of the '*eternal return*' and forward to the pantheism which suffuses suffuses the Third Symphony (Mahler extensively rewrote and expanded Klopstock's hymn to bring it into accord with his own views). Lest another program annotator be accused of unacceptable exegetical license, perhaps the description of what follows should be

left to the composer himself. In a letter written in 1901 to his future wife, Alma Schindler, Mahler explain the theologically unorthodox 'Christian' conclusion of the work:

The earth quakes, the graves burst open, the dead arise and stream on in endless procession. The great and the little ones of the earth - kings and beggars, righteous and godless - all press on - the cry for mercy and forgiveness strikes faithfully on our ears. The wailing rises higher - our senses desert us, consciousness dies at the approach of the eternal spirit. That 'Last Trump' is heard - the trumpets of the Apocalypse ring out; in the eerie silence that follows we can just catch the distant, barely audible song of a nightingale, alas remulous echo of earthly life! A chorus of saints and heavenly beings softly breaks forth.

'You shall arise, surely you shall arise.' Then appears the glory of God! A wonderful, soft light penetrates us to the heart - all is holy calm!

And behold - it is no judgement - there are no sinners, no just. None is great, none is small. There is no punishment and no reward.

An overwhelming love lightens our being. We know and are.