

Gustav Mahler (1860 - 1911): Symphony no 6 in A minor ('Tragic')

NOTE: The late Deryck Cooke's program note to Mahler's Sixth Symphony is beautifully written and insightful. But readers may be puzzled by his calling the Andante the "second" movement and the Scherzo the "third" movement. The order of Scherzo followed by Andante was Mahler's original composition. He later reversed the order of the middle movements, and the symphony has sometimes been published and performed with the movements in that order. I firmly believe, however, from both biographical considerations and the work's musical structure, that Mahler's original conception is vastly preferred. But out of a sense of fairness to both of the parties involved, we are presenting Cooke's marvelous note and Mahler's wondrous symphony as their respective authors originally meant them to be.

- Benjamin Zander

Symphony No. 6 in A minor, composed 1903-4; first performed in Essen, 1906, with Mahler conducting.

In this awe-inspiring masterpiece Mahler, for the only time, embraced the normal symphonic conception -- a four movement orchestral work centered on one key: A minor sonata-allegro, E flat andante, a minor scherzo, and rondo finale. Despite its large timescale (eighty minutes) and augmented orchestra (eight horns, six trumpets, four trombones), it is his most classical symphony. He provided no program, even withdrawing his original title *The Tragic* -- a name as general in its implications as 'Eroica' was to Beethoven.

There is something uniquely overwhelming about this particular symphony of Mahler, which may be due to its extremely personal inspiration. His wife, Alma, writing of the 'composing holidays' they spent with their two daughters, said:

After he had drafted the first movement, he came down from the wood to tell me he had tried to express me in a theme. 'Whether I've succeeded, I don't know; but you'll have to put up with it.' This is the great soaring theme of the first movement of the Sixth Symphony. In the third movement he represented unrhythmical games of the two little children, tottering in zigzags over the sand. Ominously, the childish voices became more and more tragic, and at the end died out in a whimper. In the last movement, he described himself and his downfall, or as he later said, his hero: 'It is the hero, on whom falls three blows of fate, the last of which fells him as a tree is felled.' Those were his words.

Not one of his works came as directly from his inmost heart as this. We both wept that day. The music and what it foretold touched us so deeply...

Again, when Mahler first heard the music, while preparing the Essen premiere, he was quite overcome.

None of his works moved him so deeply at its first hearing as this. We came to the last rehearsal, the dress rehearsal -- to the last movement with its three blows of fate. When it was over, Mahler walked up and down in the artists' room, sobbing, wringing his hands, unable to control himself...

Today we do not believe that composers 'foretell' their own fate in their music. Nevertheless, a year later, three blows did fall on Mahler, and the last one 'felled' him.

In the spring his resignation was demanded at the Vienna Opera; in July, his daughter Maria died, at the age of four; and a few days later, a doctor diagnosed Mahler's own fatal heart disease. Mahler was, of course, in Eliot's words already quoted, 'much possessed by death,' and he was superstitious about it: he later went so far as to delete the 'prophetic' final hammer-blow in the symphony's finale.

All this explains why Mahler called the Sixth his 'Tragic' Symphony. It might seem strange for him to give this title to one particular work, when he is so widely regarded as altogether a 'tragic' composer. Yet after all, six of his eleven symphonic works -- Nos. 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, and 8 -- culminate in a blaze of triumph in the major; another -- No. 4 -- dies away in blissful serenity, also in the major; and three others -- The Song of the Earth, No. 9 and No. 10 -- fade out in resigned reconciliation, once more in the major. The sixth alone offers no escape, ending starkly in the minor mode -- that essential tragic symphony of the nineteenth-century composer.

The work was, in fact, the first genuine tragic symphony to be written. The romantic concept of the heroic human struggle against fate, derived from Beethoven's Fifth, is its basis -- but Beethoven's struggle has a triumphant outcome, as have those in several of Mahler's own symphonies. The purely tragic concept was first hinted at in Brahms' Fourth, which ends sternly in the minor; but the fierce vitality of the conclusion precludes any idea of a tragic catastrophe. Tchaikovsky's Pathétique ends in utter darkness; but its mood of breast-beating despair is far removed from the objective universality of tragedy. In Mahler's Sixth, however, a truly tragic catastrophe, akin to those in Greek and Shakespearean drama, is presented with stark objectivity. And woven into it is a Hardy-like backcloth of nature, of mountain heights, far above human turmoil. This acts as a refuge in the slow movement, but in the first movement and the finale as a purely elemental world, indifferent to human suffering.

The work's unique character has been briefly and powerfully summed up by Bruno Walter:

...the Sixth is bleakly pessimistic: it reeks of the bitter cup of human life. In contrast with the Fifth, it says 'No,' above all in its last movement, where something resembling the inexorable strife of 'all against all' is translated into music. The mounting tension and climaxes of the last movement resemble, in their grim power, the mountainous waves of a sea that will overwhelm and destroy the ship; the work ends in hopelessness and the dark night of the soul. Non-placet is his verdict on this world; the 'other world' is not glimpsed for a moment.

Walter views the symphony as a personal statement, and, as we have seen, its inspiration was extremely personal; moreover, the music, as always with Mahler, is as personal as music can be. How then can the work possess the objective universality of tragedy? Simply in that here, as nowhere else in Mahler's symphonies, his personal expression of dread and doom and disaster is subjected to an iron classical control, in two separate ways. First, although Mahler's formal command is always greater than is generally realized, in the Sixth he did follow the traditional classical layout. Despite his characteristically vast time-scale and enormous orchestra, the symphony has neither vocal elements, nor direct quotations from songs, nor bird-calls, nor bugle-signals, nor passages in the popular style, nor any explicit program. And not only does it consist of the traditional four movements, but three of them -- the opening sonata movement with repeated exposition, the scherzo with trio, and the finale -- as all in the same key of A minor.

But all this in itself could not have guaranteed classical control. The second, complementary means to this end was the objectifying of the thematic material itself, most of which (as so often with Bruckner) looks back beyond romantic lyricism to the motivic methods of the classical symphony: not to the actual classical style -- the themes are too emotionally charged -- but to the classical clarity and concision. These elements of course are partly present in Mahler's other symphonies; and there are still exceptions here, such as the opening movement's expansive lyrical second subject (the 'Alma' theme), the song-like main melody of the *Andante moderato*, and certain almost impressionistic passages in the finale's introduction. Nevertheless, the classical side of Mahler's complex musical personality is concentrated into this work far more potently than into any of his others; and this notwithstanding the length at which the material is developed, especially in the finale, which is practically a symphony in itself.

A tramping rhythm generates the first subject -- a heroic-tragic march whose rock-like tonality is soon undermined by dissonance, until, after a bitter climax, it dies away with mutterings in the bass. Then follows the symphony's 'tragic' motto: a timpani march rhythm and (trumpets) a major triad fading to a minor one. After a quiet choral passage (wind over pizzicato strings), the violins swing the music into F major, for the surging second subject, whose rather sentimental melodic idiom is vitalized by passionate intensity. Reaching a tumultuous climax, it dies away tenderly. The development brings back the march more ominously, with grotesque woodwind trills and xylophone, but there is a sudden interruption -- a vision, as of a mountain summit far above earthly strife: shimmering streams of chords on tremolo do violins with faint woodwind calls, through which the motto and the chorale theme echo on muted brass. Distant cowbells are heard -- as Mahler once said, 'the last terrestrial sounds penetrating into the remote solitude of mountain peaks.' The music returns from the heights to resume the march of life, more confidently at first, but soon falling into the

grim strains of the first subject for the recapitulation. This is more or less regular; the coda, beginning in darkness, rises to a triumphant A major statement to the 'Alma' theme.

The Andante* is a remote and lonely pastoral movement. The quiet opening theme initiates a little rocking figure on flutes out of which a plaintive cor anglais melody appears. These three ideas are woven into pastoral moods of joy, yearning and deep heartache: the music passes through cloud and sunshine, at moments reaching the first movement's mountain peaks, but eventually ending in serene contentment.

The third movement returns to the battle of life with a vengeance, being the first of Mahler's 'horror' scherzos. A relentless, devilish, stamping dance begins, with pounding timpani, snarling trombones, and menacing woodwinds trills with xylophone (from the first movement). Out of this emerges a fragile, innocent F major trio: timid, hesitant, childlike phrases, stumbling in changing time signatures, like grave little toddlers at play (the marketing is 'old-fashioned'). The scherzo alternates twice with this trio, dwarfing it, and often submerging it with the aid of the symphony's motto theme; at last 'the childish voices become more and more tragic, and at the end die out in a whimper.'

The voluminous finale presents 'the hero on whom fall three blows of fate, the last of which fells him as a tree is felled;' for these three climactic moments, Mahler took the unprecedented step of introducing a sledge-hammer into the score. The slow introduction presents the main material: a questioning violin theme, soaring out of a dark impressionistic texture only to be beaten down by the motto theme; a lugubrious phrase for solo tuba; a searching march tune for solo horn; a somber brass chorale, which, on its second appearance, has a 'fate' motive in the bass, rising and falling in octaves, ninths and tenths. The main Allegro opens with a battling march based on the

tuba phrase; twice, over long periods, it wins through to a superhuman ‘all-or-nothing’ exultation; and twice the hammer-blow falls, the trombones blasting out the ‘fate’ theme, with trumpets blazing above it in stark two-part counterpoint. Once more the march sets off and rises to exultation; but this time it ends by going over into the opening music of the movement, for the questing violin theme to be beaten down by the motto as before. This is the moment for the third hammer-blow. The symphony ends with a doom-like coda -- a slow, subdued, grindingly dissonant fugato on the ‘fate’ theme by the trombones and tuba, and the final statement of the motto’s timpani rhythm with only the minor triad above it, fading into silence.

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