

Program Notes

Known more in his day as a conductor than a composer, Gustav Mahler nevertheless established his own niche in the world of classical music. Mahler's symphonies were rarely played for many years after his death until they began to see a resurgence of sorts in the early 1960s, brought on by the likes of Mitropoulos, Stokowski, and Bernstein. His compositions bridged the gap between the end of the Romantic era into the modernism of the 20th century.

Mahler was born to a humble family, of which prior (and some current) generations were street peddlers. As German-speaking Jews in Bohemia (then part of the Austrian Empire) he was a minority, but he took to music early on, discovering his grandparents' piano at age 4 and giving public concerts by the time he was 10. He attended the Vienna Conservatory, graduating in 1878. He was a devotee of Beethoven, Bruckner, Berlioz, and Wagner—but he was perhaps more fascinated by the theatrical element of Wagner than the music. He was acknowledged as a great conductor, but often battled with soloists and orchestral musicians, many of whom were offended by his rescoring of classical masterpieces (including the untouchable Ninth Symphony of Beethoven).

Mahler's writing is innovative first in the sheer forces of numbers he employed in his symphonies. Traditional orchestras have pairs of woodwinds (flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon), two or three trumpets, four horns, three trombones, and sometimes tuba, plus percussion and strings. Each section becomes a choir unto itself, with composers often using the same material presented differently to take advantage of the different instrumental textures and timbres. With Mahler, however, one often finds not two but three or four of every wind instrument—with flutes and piccolos; oboes and English horns; clarinets, soprano Eb clarinets, and bass clarinet; with bassoons and contrabassoon rounding out the lower register. Add six horns, trumpets, plus low brass and the orchestra has a resonance that dwarfs earlier orchestras of Beethoven, Brahms, and even Tchaikovsky. We then have multiple choirs—of not just winds and brass, but of specific instruments—horns, flutes, oboes, etc. This creates a new realm of possibilities for compositional ideas and textures.

Another innovative element in Mahler's music, particularly this symphony, is his usage of space and distance in sound. He employs multiple instances of offstage horns, trumpets, and percussion for different effects—more on that later. Rather than having players within an ensemble play more softly, we hear a different sound quality when players are placed offstage and we hear the effects of sound as it travels through distance. These effects also bring about the concept of theatricality—an element he greatly admired especially in Berlioz and Wagner.

The melodies, or themes, of the Second Symphony are largely taken from a collection of poems and folksongs called *Das Knaben Wunderhorn* ("The Boy's Magic Horn") published in 1805. Many of these poems were set to music as folk songs by Mahler. In particular he set four of them for voice and piano in 1892—two of these would be used later in the Second Symphony. The third movement Scherzo is derived from *Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt*, a poem about St. Anthony preaching to the fishes (who return to their earthly ways when the sermon is finished).

As is common with late-Romantic-era compositions, Mahler's symphonies have a strong programmatic connection to evoke a certain emotion or set of emotions. Known as "*The Resurrection Symphony*," Mahler's work refers to different stages in a man's

life. The turbulent opening movement sets the stage for conflict and unrest, with the primary melody in the woodwinds evoking a funeral march. Mahler's score calls for a five-minute pause between the first movement and the second—perhaps to allow the performers (and audience!) to catch their collective breath, but that pause is rarely observed today. The gentle, flowing ländler (a German folk dance) of the second movement is intended to depict happier times in the man's life, while the scherzo of the third movement is impish and rambling, with references to "Jewish music." However, the movement climaxes with a startling 'cry of despair'—a dramatic chord with ululating upper wind and string passages and powerful timpani rolls that gradually dissipates as the earlier melody returns ... only to return again in the final movement. It is notable that throughout the symphony, we hear references to the *Dies Irae* ("Day of Wrath"), the 13th-century Latin hymn that references the Last Judgment. This melody also figures prominently in Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, which was not lost on Mahler.

Movement four uses the melody from "*Urlicht*" (Primeval Light), another musical setting from *Das Knaben Wunderhorn*. The alto soloist enters here with sparse orchestral accompaniment. The music is deceptively gentle, as the meters are mixed to give emphasis to certain syllables and allow for reflection between phrases. This movement feeds seamlessly into the finale—which, at 40 minutes, is as long as the preceding movements combined. The fifth movement pulls together the themes from prior movements as well as a new theme, an ascending melody stated early in the strings, meant to represent the Resurrection. The source material for this is a musical setting of a Friedrich Klopstock poem (*Messias*) which was sung at the funeral of famed choirmaster Hans von Bulow, a mentor and friend to Mahler. The memorial service and singing by a youth choir gave Mahler inspiration for the finale.

There are a number of interesting programmatic elements to the Second Symphony, and one of the most debated is its Biblical ties. It is curious that Mahler, a Jew, should be so intrigued by the New Testament, but again perhaps it is the theatrical aspects and storytelling that appealed to him. The Last Judgment is depicted here, beginning with a trumpet blast (there are seven in the Book of Revelation). Each blast heralds a warning to those on earth to repent, and is followed by a variety of catastrophes.

The offstage parts were most likely intended by Mahler to symbolize the Apocalyptic trumpet blasts, as well as the four horns mentioned in the book. After an opening re-statement of the 'cry of despair' from the third movement, the horns are heard in a distant, soaring cry. This portends the earth splitting apart and graves opening as the Dead crawl forth. We hear a compelling melody in the strings, a harbinger of the melody sung later by the alto, against the backdrop of the offstage trumpets and drums, martial and crisp in contrast. This dichotomy continues as the drama heightens to the culmination of the offstage parts with birdsong onstage with flute and piccolo, distant horns sounding the call heard at the opening of the movement, and trumpets sounding their calls at different intervals and from different directions. Following this interlude, the chorus finally enters, singing, "Rise again, yes, rise again. With you my dust after a brief rest!" The finale builds from here until the full chorus proudly sings "Die shall I in order to live. Rise again, yes, rise again, With you, my heart, in an instant!"

Daniel Bruce