Masterpiece 1 – Mahler's Titan **October 21, 2023**

Piano Concerto No. 2 in B^b Major, op. 19--Ludwig van Beethoven

Of Beethoven's five concertos for piano, the last three stand as immeasurably significant contributions to the genre. The first two are youthful works, No. 1 having been composed in 1795, three years after his removal from Bonn to Vienna. No. 2 was begun even earlier, around 1788, while he was still in Bonn, and only seventeen years old. When Beethoven moved to Vienna, it was with high hopes to establish himself as a pianist and composer and so he studied with a several eminent teachers and composers: Haydn, Albrechtsberger, and Salieri (yes, that Salieri!) most notably. But, his early reputation in that city was understandably achieved not as a composer, nor as an acclaimed public performer as pianist. Rather, he—through adroit social connections with the music-loving Viennese aristocracy—established an enviable reputation as a salon pianist *nonpareil.* Public concerts were not common in Vienna then, but the capacious palaces of the nobility were teeming with private performances, and Beethoven soon wowed them all with his talent—especially with his superb skills as an improviser at the keyboard.

During his youth in Bonn, he had been active as a composer, producing student works, but no opus 1, yet. In fact, he published no works at all during the first three years in Vienna, finally in August 1795 offering to the public his opus 1, a set of three piano trios. They were a natural outgrowth of his active life in chamber music before the aristocracy. Eventually, he first met the general public as a pianist on 29 March 1795—most likely performing his unpublished B^b major piano concerto, begun some years earlier back in Bonn. Since beginning it some seven years previous, he understandably had thoroughly revised and reworked it before its première.

Of his five piano concertos, the first three have long been characterized to one degree or another as "Mozartian," but that is without question no criticism at all. Mozart is responsible for the creation of the mature piano concerto, and his stand with the operas as his very best works. Moreover, it was folly to relegate "Mozartian" to the powdered wigs and knee breeches school, standing pale before the putative profundities of popular ideas about "romanticism." Rather, the technical innovations and emotional gravitas of Mozart's piano concertos—especially the ones from 1785 on—lead smoothly towards musical romanticism and Beethoven's last three piano concertos. Moreover, why would a talented young composer like Beethoven not use as models, ideas from a contemporary such as that of Mozart?

The B^b concerto is cast in the usual three movements, but reduces the full classical orchestration by omitting clarinets, trumpets, and timpani. The first movement begins immediately with the first theme, with the orchestra conventionally revealing both of the main themes before the soloist gets a crack at them—staying in the main key of B^b in order to reserve the honor of the usual key change for the soloist. Three emphatic punctuations herald the second theme. When the soloist finally enters, it coyly begins

with a brief play on the second theme, before an energetic descending scale brings on the dramatic first theme. After an interesting harmonic diversion, a closing idea soon brings on the development, which really doesn't last long. It's straightforward to follow all of the little snippets of the various themes as the soloist and orchestra toss them back and forth. Soon, the orchestra clearly marks the recap with the rhythmic theme from the very opening. But, a real musical treat comes after the brief recapitulation, in the marvelous cadenza that Beethoven composed as part of the major revision that he made to the concerto before the première in 1795. While the opening of the movement is full of the graceful sounds and figures of late Haydn and Mozart, so familiar to our ears, the cadenza is an eye-opening peer into the mature Beethoven that we know so well. Thorough development of short motives from the themes, powerful dramatic gestures, virtuosic figures, and surging passages of tight counterpoint—all make the cadenza practically a miniature composition that reminds us of so much of the future master. (He obviously was keen to exercise his new mastery of counterpoint that stemmed from his recent lessons with the esteemed teacher of the art, Albrechtsberger.) At the cadenza's conclusion, the orchestra provides a brief and rather gentle tag.

The second movement is an early and perfect example of Beethoven's inimitable lyrical gift. The central idea is a typical example of his penchant for simple hymn-like tunes, but woven all around with tender arabesques. Despite his youth, his mature musicality and imagination lead through a series of melodic and harmonic excursions, always new, yet unified and cohesive.

The last movement, as one might expect, following tradition, a rondo, and a vivacious, bubbling affair it is. A rondo is simply a movement built around a clear-cut idea, but with one or more sections that provide a bit of contrast, with the main section returning after each diversion. In this case, Beethoven provides two contrasting sections—one that appears twice, and one that is heard only once in the middle. The latter is easy to spot, as it's in a minor key. The seven brief sections fly by, driven by sparkling, finger-tangling figurations. Beethoven is known for his sense of humor—albeit generally, strictly a musical one--for he notoriously was rather dour with actual people. And so, in the last iteration of the main idea, just when it sounds like that we're "heading for the barn," the composer abruptly inserts a very short, gentle little idea in the very "wrong" key of G major. Everyone wonders where this has come from, but all is quickly righted, the key of B^b returns, and the movement ends quietly with just a few light notes.

Beethoven may have later slightly dismissed this delightful concerto as "not my best work," but it is nevertheless a musical gift. It clearly shows what a virtuoso and a master improviser the teenage composer already was when he penned it to show his stuff to the hometown audience in Bonn. That, and the depth of feeling that we have come to know in the mature works.

Symphony No. 1 in D Major--Gustav Mahler

The symphonies of Gustav Mahler pose a multiplicity of challenges: difficulties of execution and perception of meaning; flouting of technical conventions; structural cohesion; novel inclusion of trivialities; psychological ambiguities—the list goes on and on. And it was so from the outset. Upon hearing Mahler's first symphony in Vienna in 1900, the esteemed Viennese music critic, Eduard Hanslick, said that it "...belongs to a

type of music that in my own view is not music at all." And that comment is typical of the reception of his large-scale works until the end of the composer's troubled life.

He composed only symphonies, songs, and orchestral song cycles—there are no works for keyboard, chamber music, or operas. His nine completed symphonies are large works, whose length is made possible by an innate mastery of musical architecture, an extension of tonality to its limits, and a constant delay of musical and psychological resolution. His melodies can seem trivial—or long, spun out affairs that seemingly take forever to reach conclusion. It is not without much exaggeration when pundits observe that almost all of his music appears to be based upon marches or waltzes—powerful musical imagery from his impressionable childhood. That, and a deep love/fear of nature constitute some of the surface imagery that is found throughout his art.

His first four symphonies are often grouped together, united by the important part that vocal solos and choral sections play in them. These four symphonies are closely associated with his many song settings of the poetry of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, and are rife with folk-like melodies. *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (the Boy's Magic Horn), an important document of early German romanticism, is a collection of hundreds of German folk poems and songs published very early in the nineteenth century by the poets, von Arnim and Brentano. The collection's appeal is fostered by the variety of basic emotions and subject matter in it (children's songs, soldiers, animals, love, death, nature--tragic to humorous) and their association with a burgeoning interest in simple reflections of the "folk." Mahler, like almost all other German-speaking people, fell completely for them—it would be difficult, indeed, to over-emphasize their importance in his musical psyche. They fitted perfectly his predilection for simple reference to "nature and life" without the aid of high literary art. And by extension—regardless of the source of his extra-musical inspiration—Mahler is fundamentally a composer of songs. Song is his natural voice; it speaks directly from the core of his being, and a very useful way of considering his other focus—the symphony—is simply as the redoubled effort in resources writ large to sing his essential song. He was the first composer to integrate his songs into his symphonies so essentially. None of his distinguished predecessors would have even considered the idea. For Mahler, they were simply two different aspects of his musical psyche. Thus, there should be no surprise in the symphonies—especially the first group of them—for him to marshal songs to join the unprecedented orchestral colors and forces of his large orchestras.

His first major composition was the song cycle, *Songs of a Wayfarer*, completed in 1885. He probably made initial plans for his first symphony around the same time. After a brief twelve months conducting in Prague, he completed the symphony in March 1888, when he was twenty-seven years old, and wrapping up his first season as a busy young conductor for the Leipzig Opera. Apparently, most of it was done in about six weeks of frenzied work that spring. In his words, "…it came out of me like a mountain torrent." It surely is minimally cynical to observe that at this very time he was immersed in a passionate and fruitless love affair with a married woman with three children, Marion von Weber—it was a rather nasty, doomed affair.

The symphony early on led somewhat of a checkered life: the work initially and significantly he dubbed not a symphony, but variously as a "tone poem" and "symphonic poem." (Obviously wanting to make clear the extra-musical ideas fundamental to it.) But, seeing that it was not at all similar in form to the great tone poems of Smetana, Liszt,

and Strauss, he settled on the more conventional title, "Symphony No. 1." The appellation "Titan" for the work is rather controversial, and is tied up in the confusing accounts of Mahler's attitude toward a "program," or story, for musical works in general, and his compositions, specifically. The great author Jean Paul was Mahler's favorite writer, and for the first two or three performances he allowed the title of Jean Paul's novel of individual struggle to be associated with the symphony. This was at the same time that "tone poem" was his genre choice, as well as the inclusion of the famous "*Blumine*" movement as the second movement of a five-movement work. Finally, he wrote a few words of possible extra-musical descriptions for each movement. He soon adamantly threw the whole lot out: "Titan," "*Blumine*" movement, "tone poem," and the so-called program. His whole career he was contradictory and ambiguous about his true feelings on "program notes," but he was clearly eschewing them here. So, by 1896 what we are left with is 1) Symphony No. 1 is the title, 2) no "Titan" nickname, 3) four movements that do not include "*Blumine*," and 4) no program to stimulate our imagination as to what it's all about. Whew! Having said all of that, it is clear that Mahler's original words on the associated ideas can be helpful.

The symphony is not only long, it's big, too. The instrumentation calls for multiple instruments in every section, including four flutes, four oboes, seven horns, five trumpets, four trombones, and two timpanists. The incorporation of two of his songs as important elements is significant—so early on, the significance of imagery and song was fundamental in his approach to the otherwise august reputation of the symphony as an essay for orchestra couched in the musical abstraction of, say, the string quartet. It received its first performance about a year after its completion, in Budapest (typically, by then he had already bailed out of his job in Leipzig, and had moved on to Hungary).

Mahler is on record as saying to his close friend, Natalie Bauer-Lechner that he generally had in mind the account of powerful, heroic individual whose suffering and struggles led to his demise. Notwithstanding Mahler's later vehement denial of programs for instrumental music, there is a bit of insight into the symphony in his initial "explanation" of the work. He described the first movement as about endless spring and the awakening of nature. That's clearly an optimistic beginning of life.

The first movement is a sprawling affair, with a multiplicity of themes, roughly in sonata form, but the latter is not particularly clear to the average listener. Rather, the most is gained by simply enjoying the way interesting and attractive ideas are bandied about and juxtaposed. It opens with a mysterious, shimmering gossamer in the strings, followed by a descending figure of melodic fourths in the woodwinds—a rather well-known figure in musical history. A distant trumpet fanfare is followed by a gentle, bucolic horn motif. The evocation of nature concludes with a "cuckoo" call in the solo clarinet. Finally, the main body begins with the material from the beginning and a jaunty little march-like ascending scale in the violoncellos—a quotation from his *Songs of a Wayfarer:* "I Went This Morning Over the Field." It perfectly fits the mood, for the text of the song celebrates the beauty and wonder of nature. A long development of all that we've heard so far ensues, including a delightful array of keys, that ends in a gloomy, foreboding F minor. It gradually builds a sinister momentum that ends with a triumphant gushing forth of a delirious D major. The recapitulation then begins with the fanfare in the horns leading the way to the riotously happy ending.

Traditionally, a slow movement would follow, but Mahler chooses to put his scherzo next. It's a virile, thumping one, in the style of an Austrian *Ländler,* with prominent French horns. Because it was somewhat reminiscent of the scherzos of Bruckner, Mahler fine-tuned it a bit to avoid that comparison. His earlier programmatic characterization was: "Set with full sails." That's rather ambiguous, but one might observe that the boisterous nature of the movement is in keeping with a tempestuous youth plunging into life with the confidence of a sailing ship running hard before the wind. In keeping with musical traditions, a more lyrical middle section provides a respite from the driving main idea.

The third movement of this first symphonic effort is a funeral march—not a typical preoccupation for a young composer in his twenties. And this one is right out of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*—ostensibly an image familiar to most German and Austrians: a hunter's funeral, replete with a procession of cute animals (ironically honoring their deadly pursuer). Mahler's earlier characterization was that the trudging march was "…in the manner of Callot." The latter was a seventeenth-century French printmaker with a penchant for rather sordid and grotesque subject matter.

Despite the return to more traditional musical approaches in the second movement, and in this one, as well, Mahler nevertheless shocked just about everyone with the first theme here. It's a mournful version of the universal "Frère Jacques" in a minor key, and astoundingly, given to the solo double bass. Since it's a round, other instruments soon join in, including a march-like countermelody in the oboe. All this alone is grotesque enough for most folks, but then! Mahler brings an obvious allusion to a traditional Jewish klezmer band, played by the winds, later by all. This rather "in your face" cheekiness took some chutzpah, considering the antisemiticism that Mahler faced all his life. That kind of specific reference to Jewish musical memes probably hadn't be heard in mainstream European music since Halevy's opera, *La Juive* (1828). After a brief return of the "Frère Jacques," there is a refreshing diversion to G major, with a lush, happy tune from his *Songs of a Wayfarer*: "The Two Blue Eyes of My Beloved." This soon gives way to the closing section, a return to all of the material heard so far, cleverly woven in and out together. It ends as it began, with the soft, funereal trudging of the timpani.

The serenity of the end of the third movement is obliterated by nothing less than a shriek of utter despair that begins the last movement, led by a startling cymbal crash. This is the longest and most involved of all the movements, with a multiplicity of themes, extended development, and copious references to material from the previous movements. The first theme is a sturdy, march-like affair, appearing first in the brass. When the second theme arrives, a most lyrical one it is, in the best of Mahler's searching, soaring string lines. The development is long, varied, and chock-a-block with the familiar tunes and fragments thereof heard so far. Notable is the appearance in the horn section of the initial descending melodic fourths heard at the opening of the first movement. There are quotes of other material from the first movement, including "The Two Blue Eyes of My Beloved" from the *Songs of a Wayfarer.* An extended recapitulation continues with wide-ranging use of a plethora of all the familiar melodies heard so far. Finally, stentorian proclamations of the opening fanfare lead to a powerful conclusion, ending with two abrupt, enigmatic hammer strokes. Draw your own conclusions of its meaning—musical or psychological.

Few major composers have ever languished so long in obscurity or disrepute, only to rise up and take what appears to be a permanent place in the pantheon of the great. A younger generation of musicians finds it hard to imagine a musical world in which Gustav Mahler does not stand near their center. Art lives a robust life of its own in the psyches of its creators, but in the case of Mahler, his music clearly reflects the realities of the turmoil of his inner being more than in almost all major composers. It's all laid out in the score.

--Wm. E. Runyan

©2023 William E. Runyan