

Concert 5

April 22, 2017

Symphony No. 2 in C Minor “Resurrection”—Gustav Mahler

When Gustav Mahler died in 1911, at the age of fifty-one, his years cut short by heart disease, by most measures he had enjoyed an enviable life and career. He was respected as one of the most effective and innovative of opera conductors; his leadership of some of the world’s most admired symphony orchestras had set new artistic standards; his songs and his symphonies were beginning to enjoy a modicum of success in respected artistic circles; and he was married to one of the most attractive, talented, and vivacious women in Europe. But, that is a sadly incomplete picture. In point of fact, after ten years of leading the musical life of the world’s most important musical city, he was hounded out of his tenure as conductor of the court opera and the Vienna Philharmonic by an unrelenting anti-Semitism of unprecedented virulence. The Viennese press attacked him without mercy, lampooning his conducting gestures and attributing every putative weakness to his Jewish background. His subsequent, brief career at the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic had soon grown stale as he succumbed to his fatal illness. Those who did not appreciate and understand his music held the majority, and he was roundly ridiculed for its general incomprehensibility, eccentricity, and wildly personal nature. His beloved little daughter, Maria, had died at the age of four from diphtheria. And, the passion of his life Alma Schindler Mahler, had repeatedly betrayed him in more than one deeply wounding fashion. Taken altogether, his life was a series of contradictions: profound successes, abysmal disappointments, and little in between. Music lovers have long taken an inordinate interest in the personal lives of composers to seek meaning in the abstract art of music—usually without success. 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 his inner being more than in almost all major composers. It’s all laid out in the score. Even in death, the hatred, incomprehension, and derision that had dogged him were still visited upon him. In the commentaries on his passing, Viennese newspapers variously characterized him as “. . . [a] Nibelung dwarf who came to power from the darkness of the pariahs . . . ,” and his music as “. . . one gigantic weed in the symphonic garden, a weed from which a new cross beam for the temple of disgusting indecency may be carved.” There was much worse.

To be sure, after his death, especially in the immediate years after World War I, his music was championed by a few determined admirers, largely from German-speaking countries, chief among them the legendary Bruno Walter, a long-time protégé. And, for a while, there were a few festivals in Europe dedicated to his music, but they were soon infrequent. The advent of the Third Reich sealed the fate of his compositions, and they disappeared from the repertoire. After the Second World War, the situation was not much better, owing to, obviously, the survival of most of the artistic establishment who had long opposed him and his music in Austria and Germany. And to be sure, the radical, *avant-garde* musical aesthetics of post-war Europe had little time for personal, gigantic and embarrassing artifacts of late Romanticism. Times had changed. And then, beginning around 1960—the centenary of his birth--there began a total transformation of the stature of Mahler and his music. Leonard Bernstein was, perhaps, his most ardent champion, along with Georg Solti and Bernard Haitink, all of whom recorded cycles of Mahler’s works—aided by the advent of 33rpm records (Mahler’s works are long, you know.) New, up to date, editions of his works were published, a variety of books came out, and a new

spate of Mahler festivals began. 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.

But, what is the real nature of his music, its style, and its creator that had elicited so much incomprehension and condemnation on the one hand, and such approbation and popularity, now? There are many legitimate answers. It's clear that we know the man through his music, and, indeed, his was a complex personality, but so are most top-echelon artists—Bruckner and his ilk excepted. Mahler was a man driven and dominated by his overt passions, there were few middle positions that he held. Possessed of deep fears and euphoric joys, he was acutely sensitive to the virtually kaleidoscopic fashion in which the world unexpectedly imposes itself upon us. The banal and the sublime juxtaposed—pathos to bathos—are familiar images. A well-known story recounted by Mahler from his childhood tells of his fleeing the house in despair from a typical battle between his brutish father and his mother, only to encounter the pedestrian scene of a barrel organist grinding out the utterly banal “Du lieber Augustin“ (The More We Get Together). His musical style, while not quite literally quoting familiar popular tunes, is characterized by musical motifs and themes that seem to be just that. He drew upon the commonplace, or its imitation, and used them as a musico-psychological foil to place the listener in the purgatory of the disparity between the inner and the outer self. The sublimity and beauty of many of his slow movements is the other side—and he enjoyed interrupting one mood unexpectedly for the crashing in of the other—like his life. That accounts for some of the frequent moods of parody and burlesque.

He loved passionately—life and people—but was driven by thoughts of death and its meaning, or lack thereof. And the latter was not a trivial endeavor. His library was full of difficult philosophical works on existence and its forms, and he conversed and corresponded with learned friends on the subject constantly. And while he could be the prisoner of his own irrational love, he was often blind to those who loved him deeply. He exalted humanity, but could be the cruelest of friend or musician. He once had to have a police escort home to escape a flute player whom he had treated viciously from the podium, whose friends planned to assault him in an alley. There are places in his music in which he clearly is possessed of an irrational fear of dæmonic forces that drive him into wild reaction. These elemental forces, complexities and contradictions filtered his perceptions of the world, shaped, and informed his art. It's all there.

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, as observed above, 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. Thus, there should be no surprise at all 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. Almost no resources were too unusual to help conjure his images in sound, and it must have seemed to audiences of the time that almost every resource was there!

Typically, Mahler's lifelong penchant was grandly to begin infatuations/commitments, and then to become disillusioned, then after a while dump the affair/job in frustration, and move on, apparently without regret. It nevertheless must have contributed to his inner turmoil. This flux of thought and behavior is reflected in his music, to be sure. This element is present in his compositions from the outset.

His first symphony—incidentally, not well received--was finished in 1888, when he was twenty-seven years old, and a busy young conductor for the Leipzig Opera. Then, as for the rest of his life, he had to squeeze his composing largely into the summer, between opera seasons. However dedicated he was to his compositions, he was always primarily known and hailed as one of the great conductors of his time. The first symphony incorporates two of his songs as essential elements; the work also initially and significantly he dubbed not a symphony, but variously as a "tone poem" and "symphonic poem." Soon, of course, simply "Symphony No. 1" sufficed, but the ambiguity speaks clearly to all of Mahler's music as bearing a deep inspiration in extra-musical imagery—not as just the musical architecture espoused by a significant body of composers of the genre. So, early on, the importance 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. 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, with a procession of cute animals (ironically honoring their pursuer). A small Jewish klezmer band adds to the eccentricity of the whole. So, our young hero begins his career with death as a focus.

He began work on his second symphony in 1888, pretty much as soon as he had finished the first, swiftly completing the first movement. At that juncture, he called it a tone poem, with the subtitle of "Funeral Rites." He confided to a friend that it more or less continued the funeral of the "hero" that had fallen in the first symphony. He wasn't sure for several years if it was to go on to be the first movement of a symphony, so didn't compose the next two movements until 1893. In the interim—tragedy struck. His father died in 1889, and his mother and sister later in the year. And, of course there was also his constant ill health—he was never well as an adult, suffering from migraine headaches, throat infections, and internal bleeding. And, as we well

know, an infection of his heart finally killed him. All part of a picture that informed much of his psyche and his art.

The shape of the last movement(s) eluded him until the services at the funeral of the great conductor, Hans von Bülow. At that event he heard a setting of a poem by the great German poet of the eighteenth century, Klopstock, entitled “The Resurrection.” Like a bolt of lightning, he saw that mighty metaphor as the focus of the last movement, bringing in—like Beethoven—an imposing chorus to help with the proceedings. Rapidly he worked, finishing the last movement in 1894, and quickly came up with a short movement to more or less introduce it, making for five movements in all.

The work is scored for a very large orchestra, including four flutes, four oboes, four bassoons, six horns (and four more “in the distance”), ten trumpets, four trombones, organ, and two harps. And if this isn’t enough, a large percussion section—including multiple snare drums and two bass drums-- is augmented with large bells and a bundle of switches (scratched on the bass drum). Finally, there is a soprano soloist, an alto soloist, and a large mixed choir. Big ideas require big resources.

Of course, there is a narrative of the general meaning that the composer had in mind for this monumental work of art. But, it is good to remember that Mahler had a decidedly checkered relationship with the idea of a “program” or specific narrative for various works. To some of his friends he would from time to time convey an account of the events or ideas that he had in mind as the music was spun out. And then, he would later vigorously deny such a thing, and denigrate the whole concept for serious musical art. Nevertheless, it is pellucidly clear that the “Resurrection” symphony has a thread of narrative to it, and that it is useful in following the long, often apparently rambling, sequence of vivid and contrasting events.

The first movement is substantial—even extravagant--and its mood is the aforementioned “funeral march.” In Mahler’s mind it apparently stood out as somewhat prefatory or introductory—he even called for a five-minute pause at the end of it (not generally observed, today). The form is a version of the traditional sonata form, but of more importance are the multiplicity of themes and some unusual key areas and relationships, all of which simply create interest for the listener as the composer explores the variety of moods that such a funereal affair could generate. Mahler once characterized the movement as reflections at the coffin of a man the mourners once loved—reflections over his sufferings, aspirations, extending ultimately to meaning of life, itself. A rumbling in the low strings opens the movement, not unlike other that of other important symphonies. They grow into jagged figures that set the tone of the funeral march. The main contrasting idea is a gentle ascending, stepwise figure, first heard in the strings. Its unexpected lyrical optimism may seem somewhat out of place in this funereal darkness until one remembers Mahler’s personality and the mood shifts common in late romantic art in general. They both tended to move quickly, unpredictably, to shattering juxtapositions of almost surrealistic contrasts: dark thoughts at a wedding; joyous memories at a funeral. The development partakes of a temptation of nineteenth-century composers—an illusion to the *Dies Irae* plainchant from the Catholic mass of the dead. You may remember it from, among others, Berlioz’ *Symphonie fantastique*.

The second movement also seems somewhat contradictory to our theme of death and resurrection, for it is a wistful Austrian waltz--a *Ländler*. The tempo is, indeed, “leisurely,” almost minuet-like. But, soon the orchestra softly breaks into a scampering theme that casts a shadow over the happy proceedings. It doesn’t last long, and the little dance resumes, this time with a winsome countermelody in the violoncellos. And so it goes: cheerful dancing alternating

with ominous interjections until the end. So, how does this fit into our narrative? Mahler related: we all have sunlit moments in our lives, when death seems comfortable far away in the future—necessary moments in the human delusion of our immortality. And so it is here.

Symphonies traditionally have scherzo movements, the third movement, here, serves that purpose. It is lifted almost *in toto* from the orchestral accompaniment to another of the contemporary *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* songs—“St. Anthony of Padua’s Sermon to the Fish.” This rather sarcastic song recounts the mediæval legends of St. Anthony, who, finding the church empty, goes to the seashore and preaches to the fish, each species of which is described in a rather humorous, tongue in cheek manner. Alas, after the sermon, the fish (like humans) remain unpersuaded. Swirling along, almost a *moto perpetuum*, the movement from time to time—using the small clarinets—evokes a bit of Jewish village band elements. A symbolic complication, to say the least. It’s a deadly real evocation of the confused thoughts of those confronted with the bustle of the experienced world after returning from the oppressive meditations at a graveside. Which is real? The threads of life become tangled. Mahler’s own metaphor is that of looking into a brilliant nocturnal ballroom, but the music is unheard. The swirling shapes are indistinct—and so: is the confusing, indistinct dance of life real? The mad, rather enigmatic, ending of this little dance from the ballroom of life makes clear the dilemma, punctuated from the depths at the very end by the contra-bassoon.

After three movements of death, despair, and examination of the unresolved existential questions of life, affirmative responses to the dilemma are now imminent. And, fittingly, Mahler turns, as he so often does in pivotal moments, to song. Entitled, “Urlicht” (Primæval Light), the fourth movement is a brief setting of a song from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. Here, Mahler uses all of his skill as composer to craft a dramatic musical and emotional turning point: The key is D^b major—a long way (to the ear, not the finger) from the C that ended the last movement, and it gives a breathtaking freshness to the soft entrance of the alto soloist and strings. A gorgeous chorale in the horns and trumpets ensues, which sets the sublime mood of the alto soloist’s plea for relief from worldly woes, and her return to God. A chorale-like passage it is, and when chorales are scored for brass, trombones and tuba are usual. But not here, this is a plea for resurrection—and for the English-speaking world, the “trumpet shall sound.” This brief interlude is the essence of Mahler’s very personal musical world, the world of his special gift for song, and its accompaniment—not the great length, the imposing orchestral resources, and the bombastic climaxes popularly held to be his *métier*. The Mahler detractor thinks of the latter; those who adore him, think of the former—the dazzling, deeply personal jewels that are his songs.

Primæval Light

O little red rose!
Man lies in greatest need!
Man lies in greatest pain!
How I would rather be in heaven.

There I came upon a broad path.
There a little angel came and wanted to turn me away.
Ah, no! I would not let myself be turned away!
I am from God, and will return to God!

The loving God will give me a glimmer of light,
Which will light my way into that eternal blissful life!

--- *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*

It's been a long musical and psychological journey, but the resurrection is almost at hand—well, after some more preparation for the big event. The last movement is a long one, the first half being an extensive orchestral inner reflection of the awe of the spectacle of the terror of the last judgment. It is episodic, with a variety of moods, keys, and tempos—all in the service of the kaleidoscope of the ultimate human experience on earth. What follows is silence, birdcalls, ominous horn and trumpet calls. Then, the chorus of humanity enters, recognizes mankind's redemption, and with the orchestra, rejoices to a triumph ending.

To begin: The last movement, following the fourth movement without pause, bursts opens with what could only be characterized as a huge shriek of horror. After a moment, in sudden stillness, but with frenzy in the lower strings, the triumphant, ascending (what else?) motif of hope is heard in the horns. In unaccompanied stillness, a distant horn slowly intones the portent of the coming cataclysm. Delicate, cascading woodwinds and *pianississimo* string trills continue the calmness, with the trombones ominously indicating that there is direness yet to come. What follows is a kind of Baroque texture, as the woodwinds allude to the “*Dies Irae*” derived theme over a walking bass—but woven into it is a theme of resurrection heard softly in the solo trombone (this will be heard later in the first entrance of the chorus). Horn calls signal, trombones threaten again, as we move to a section whose important idea is a kind “sighing” motive of two descending notes (flute and English Horn)—a common musical symbol from the eighteenth century, often signifying deep emotion. The answer to all of this comes in a magnificent brass chorale—chuck-a-block with themes that come to be so important.

The brass, so deeply optimistic, have not yet triumphed, however, and the harps and low percussion lead to more despair. An energetic march ensues—why, and to where? Embedded in it one can hear the pervasive, three-note “resurrection” theme, and other familiar ones, as well. They will all be important when the chorus enters. The march abruptly ends, and the solo trombone intones the “sighing” motive from before. That motive is worked out in a new section that clearly evokes the terror of the grisly images of the Apocalypse. But, as it must, it ends, and as it subsides with the familiar motive, there ensues a ghostly call for all humanity to arise, spooky horn calls, “birds of death,” and spectral trumpets call from the distance—obviously, something is afoot. And, of course it is—the chorus of humanity enters, in one of the glorious moments in music. The words speak for themselves:

Rise, yes, rise you will, my dust,
After a brief rest!
Immortal life! Immortal life
Will He who called you, give you!

A short orchestral interlude makes absolutely clear that things have now changed for all time. The chorus returns, led by the men, singing more of Klopstock's words, words that Mahler heard at von Bülow's funeral:

To bloom again were you sown!

The Lord of the harvest goes
And gathers us in like sheaves,
Those who died.

---Friedrich Klopstock

The full orchestra now resolutely and eloquently echoes these themes of resurrection. But, after the chorus and orchestra have made their affirmation, Mahler, represented by the soloists, becomes more personal. While there is much evidence of his deep spirituality, the precise nature of his religious views is complex. What is clear, though, is that he distanced himself from fine points of both Christianity and Judaism. His spirituality was embedded in a mystical belief in a God that transcends the theology of organized religion—but there is no doubt of his fervent certitude of belief in an omnipotent God. The mood of the poetry shifts, Mahler abandons Klopstock's text, and writes the rest of the testament of hope for immortality, himself. Mahler's words of deep, personal hopes and doubts, sung by the alto soloist, is accompanied by the motive of "doubt," again in the English Horn, with a halo of tremolo violas. Noteworthy, in view of Mahler's lifelong obsession with the idea of personal struggle, is the prominent solo in the violas at the word, "*gestritten*" (struggled). There, the viola part in the score is marked, "with passionate expression."

O believe, my heart, O believe:
To you nothing is lost!
Yours is, yes, yours, is what you longed for,
Yours, what you have loved,
What you have struggled for!

O believe,
You were not born in vain!
Have in vain, lived, suffered!

A *glissando* in the harp takes us back to the men of the chorus and trombones (a traditional combination in sacred music since the Renaissance) who reaffirm once more the conviction:

That which is created, must perish!
That which perishes, must rise again.

Prepare to stir!
Make yourself ready to live!

The soft, mysterious invocation of the men "to live" is answered in the superlative by an enthusiastic leap in the violins and the rising theme of triumph over death in the horns. And thus begins a glorious musical affirmative to mankind's—and a young Gustav Mahler, unsure of his theology, but sure in his hope and humanity—innate longing for eternal life. There surely is no other moment like it in musical art:

Oh pain! You all-pervading pain,
From you I have been wrenched away!
Death! You conqueror of all things,

Now, are you conquered!
With wings that I have won myself with difficulty,
In the fervent struggle of love,
I will ascend to the light,
Which no eye has pierced!
I will die in order to live!
Rise again, yes, rise again my heart, in an instant!
That which you have endured,
Will carry you to God!

---Gustav Mahler
(all translations by W. Runyan)

--Wm. E. Runyan

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