

Program Notes for Tuesday, August 16

Alasdair Neale, Conductor

Mahler Symphony No. 1 in D Major
 Slowly, dragging – Very restrained throughout
 Agitated, but not too fast
 Solemn and measured, without dragging
 Stormily agitated

Symphony No. 1 in D Major (1884-1888, rev. 1889-1898) **Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)**

In March 1888, Mahler wrote about the creative momentum that carried him through the final stages of composition of his first symphony: "It became so overpowering, as it flowed out of me like a mountain river... For six weeks, I had nothing but my desk in front of me." But although the bulk of the work on the symphony was done in the first few months of 1888, the piece went through a lengthy gestation and an even longer period of revision before it was finally published in 1899. Mahler had a very busy conducting schedule, so it was rare for him to be able to find time for sustained composition outside of the summers. He spent a number of productive summers at a retreat in a sparse Steinbach inn where he passed each day in absolute quiet, engrossed in musical ideas. He kept the sole manuscript copies of his first and second symphonies in a suitcase that the inn workers were instructed to rescue first in case of fire.

Perhaps the primary cause for the long period of revision of the piece was Mahler's struggle to define the aesthetic underpinnings for not only this work, but for all of his music. Born a generation after Brahms and Wagner, Mahler came of age in the midst of the contentious debate which pitted "absolute" music, characterized by its allegiance to abstract form and sound structure, against "program" music, depicting a specific narrative or emotional journey. Mahler seemed to have one foot in each camp. He adhered to formal models for his music, although he modified them to suit his own expressive needs (as we heard in his Piano Quartet two nights ago). The very fact that he chose to write symphonies and not operas seems to place him squarely in the "absolutist" camp. At the same time, he admitted extra-musical influences for many of his symphonies, and, of course, his magnificent song cycles were programmatic by definition. In fact, he expressed the opinion that "no modern music, beginning with Beethoven, does exist without having its inner program." Still, he was unsure whether it was necessary or appropriate to reveal this program explicitly to the audience.

When the Symphony No. 1 was premiered in its original form in Budapest in 1889, Mahler opted against including any reference to the program of the piece, which was originally entitled *Symphonic Poem in Two Parts*, as if to hedge the association with pure, absolute music. The first part consisted of three movements, the first two of the symphony that we know today, plus a third movement (which Mahler later withdrew) inserted in between. The second part consisted of what are now the last two movements. The work received a lackluster reception, perhaps prompting Mahler to include a description of the program for its next performance in Hamburg in 1893, which read:

Part I. From the days of youth: Flowers, Fruit, and Thorns

1. Spring without end. The introduction depicts the awakening of nature at dawn from a long winter's slumber.
2. A chapter of flowers.
3. Under full-sail (*Scherzo*).

Part II. *Commedia umana*.

4. Stranded: A funeral march in the manner of Callot. The following may serve as an explanation for this movement, if necessary. The author received an overt suggestion for it from *A Hunter's Funeral Procession*, a pictorial parody that is well-known to all South German children and is taken from an old book of children's fairy tales. The animals of the forest escort the coffin of a deceased hunter to a gravesite. Rabbits carrying a flag follow a band of village musicians accompanied by music-making cats, toads, crows, etc.; stags, does, foxes, and other four-legged and feathered animals of the forest follow the procession in amusing poses. The movement in some ways expresses an ironic, humorous mood and in other ways expresses an eerie brooding mood. This is immediately followed up by –

5. *Dall'Inferno al Paradiso (allegro furioso)*, a sudden outburst of despair from a deeply sounded heart.

In addition, he called the work the "Titan" Symphony, named for a novel by the German Romantic Jean Paul Richter, and reworked the orchestration. The inclusion of the program did not measurably improve audience response, however, which remained resolutely mixed, as reported by Mahler after an 1894 performance in Weimar:

My symphony was received partly with furious opposition and partly with unbounded admiration. Opinions have clashed violently in the streets and drawing rooms in the nicest possible way! 'As long as the dogs bark, we know that we are galloping.' ... In the end, the orchestra was very pleased with the symphony and full understanding towards my conducting technique, thanks to a barrel of beer.

What really disturbed Mahler about these early performances was the audiences' too, too literal interpretation of the program. By the 1896 performance of the symphony in Berlin, Mahler had withdrawn the programmatic description and the title (as well as the extra movement), later writing, "No music is of any value if its pre-musical experiences first have to be reported to the listener, thus determining his own reactions.... Perish all programs! A residual mystery always remains – even for the creator himself!" In the end, it is up to each individual listener to determine the symphony's narrative; it is this personalized communication that makes music so inexplicable and powerful.

Beginning with an ethereal eight-octave orchestral A, the serene introduction unfolds slowly, with distant brass fanfares and bird calls over a sustained A pedal throughout. The main theme is a motto in falling fourths that will return throughout the piece. A clarinet birdcall suddenly leads into the main section of the movement with its jaunty, carefree theme in the low strings (drawn from an earlier Mahler song). The movement builds intensity, intermingling hunting horn calls and one of the most eerie harp lines in the literature, and reaching a furious climax. The frenetic ending is punctuated by timpani beats and a number of unexpected silences.

The second movement is a scherzo that begins with a peasant waltz that lilts to evoke the Austrian Ländler. Introduced by a solo horn, the middle section is less heavily accented, projecting a gentler waltz. The horn leads us back into the original theme.

The third movement is a macabre funeral march that created much controversy when first performed. The march is based on the minor key version of *Frère Jacques* (known to German audiences as *Bruder Martin*) played in a round with a solo bass, bassoon, cello and tuba as other instruments gradually enter, including the oboe with a prominent counter-melody. The march is broken up by two contrasting episodes: the first is a klezmer-like dance with prominent roles for the winds, and the second is a gentle, lyrical melody in the violins and flutes accompanied by steady harp arpeggios.

The last movement opens dramatically as if depicting a raging storm, and introduces a sweeping theme in the brass that is heroic, furious, and terrifying. After an episode of calm, the storm returns but gives

way to a triumphant brass fanfare that provides a heroic take on the falling fourths from the first movement. As if to solidify the connection, Mahler brings back the first movement material before the brass chorale ushers the movement to an exultant close.