Gustav Mahler
Symphony No. 9

GUSTAV MAHLER WAS BORN IN KALISCHE (KALISTE) NEAR THE MORAVIAN BORDER OF BOHEMIA ON JULY 7, 1860, AND DIED IN VIENNA ON MAY 18, 1911. HE BEGAN HIS NINTH SYMPHONY IN THE LATE SPRING OF 1909, FINISHED THE ORCHESTRAL DRAFT THAT FALL, AND, ON APRIL 1, 1910, WAS ABLE TO REPORT TO HIS FRIEND AND FORMER ASSISTANT BRUNO WALTER THAT THE SCORE, “A VERY POSITIVE ENRICHMENT OF MY LITTLE FAMILY,” WAS COMPLETE. IT WAS WALTER WHO CONDUCTED THE FIRST PERFORMANCE, ON JUNE 26, 1912, WITH THE VIENNA PHILHARMONIC. THE FIRST UNITED STATES PERFORMANCES WERE GIVEN BY THE BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, SERGE KOUSSEVITZKY CONDUCTING, ON OCTOBER 16 AND 17, 1931.

THE SCORE CALLS FOR FOUR FLUTES AND PICCOLO, THREE OBOES AND ENGLISH HORN, FOUR CLARINETS (FOURTH DOUBLING E-FLAT CLARINET) AND BASS CLARINET, FOUR BASSOONS (THIRD DOUBLING CONTRABASSOON), FOUR HORNS, THREE TRUMPETS, THREE TROMBONES, BASS TUBA, TIMPANI, CYMBALS, BASS DRUM, TAM-TAM, TRIANGLE, GLOCKENSPIEL, LOW-PITCHED CHIMES, TWO HARPS, AND STRINGS. (MAHLER’S AUTOGRAPH HAS ONLY A SINGLE HARP; THE DECISION TO DIVIDE THE PART BETWEEN TWO PLAYERS WAS BRUNO WALTER’S.)

The Ninth Symphony is the last score Mahler completed. Some dark part of him would have wanted it so, for, with Beethoven’s Ninth and Bruckner’s unfinished Ninth in mind, he entertained a deep-rooted superstition about symphonies and the number nine. He had even tried to deceive the counting gods by calling Das Lied von der Erde (The Song of the Earth), the work that followed the Eighth Symphony, “a symphony for contralto (or baritone), tenor, and orchestra,” but not giving it a number. Das Lied von der Erde is, therefore, a secret Ninth Symphony, while the official Ninth is “really” the Tenth. But there was also the side to Mahler that caused him, for all his fascination with death, always to choose life. That was the Mahler who was more interested in writing music than in flirting with his superstitions or his penchant for morbid fancy. That was also the Mahler who, within days of completing the Ninth Symphony, plunged with tempestuous energy into the task of composing a Tenth, a task on which he had made significant progress when he died of a streptococcal blood infection seven weeks before his fifty-first birthday.

The Ninth was also the last of Mahler’s completed scores to be presented to the public, something that has surely contributed to the tradition of reading the work as the composer’s farewell to life. The gestures of dissolution and parting with which this symphony ends are of an annihilating poignancy matched not even by Mahler himself. Nonetheless, it is well to understand that Mahler cannot have meant this as an actual farewell. To insist on reading it thus is to indulge in a sentimentality that weakens the stab of this music. Mahler’s symphonies fall into groups whose members share points of view and even material details, each piece being more richly understood in the context of its group. The Second, Third, and Fourth symphonies, for example, are all tied to Mahler’s love for and work on the Romantic anthology of folk poetry called Des Knaben Wunderhorn (The Boy’s Magic Horn). The Ninth is part of a trilogy that begins with Das Lied von der Erde and leads to the unfinished Symphony No. 10. It is in some respects commentary upon and extension of the song-symphony, while the Tenth both quotes Das Lied von der Erde and further explores certain ideas and features of the Ninth.

Mahler wrote the Ninth Symphony in the midst of the whirlwind that was the last chapter of his not very long life. That chapter began in 1907. Four momentous things happened that year. On March 17, Mahler resigned the Artistic Directorship of the Vienna Court Opera, bringing to a close a ten-year term whose achievement has become legend. Mahler was, however, drained by the struggles and tempests that were the price of that achievement, worn down by anti-Semitic attacks on himself and his young protégé Bruno Walter, and feeling the need to give more time to the composition and performance of his own music. He was not, however, able either to resist the lure of the podium nor to do without his income as a conductor, and on June 5, he signed a contract with the Metropolitan Opera in New York, where he would make his debut conducting Tristan und Isolde on New Year’s Day 1908.
On July 5, his daughter Maria, four-and-a-half, died at the end of a two-week battle with scarlet fever and diphtheria, just hours after an emergency tracheotomy had been performed at the Mahlers’ summer house at Maiernigg in Carinthia. A few days after the funeral, a physician who had come to examine Mahler’s exhausted wife and her seriously ill mother, responding to the composer’s half-joking “as long as you’re here you might as well have a look at me too,” discovered that things were not as they should be with Mahler’s heart. Most biographies report a diagnosis of subacute bacterial endocarditis. Recent interpretation of the evidence suggests that what was discovered was a defect in the mitral valve, presumably stemming either from Mahler’s family history or rheumatic fever. Subacute bacterial endocarditis would be a result of this defect, but would probably have developed no earlier than the fall of 1910. It is not a condition Mahler would have been likely to survive for four years. Beginning with Mahler’s widow, biographers have tended to dramatize the account of Mahler’s physical condition after the summer of 1907.

In any event, Mahler, that dedicated hiker, cyclist, and swimmer, to say nothing of fiery conductor, was put on a regimen of depressingly restricted activity. Still, what happened from 1907 until 1911 is not the life story of an invalid. 1907: Concerts in Saint Petersburg and Helsingfors (Helsinki) and Mahler’s meeting with Sibelius; the last opera performance (Fidelio) and the last concert (his own Symphony No. 2) in Vienna; departure for New York. 1908: Performances at the Metropolitan Opera at the beginning and end of the year; concerts with the New York Symphony; the premiere in Prague of the three-year-old Symphony No. 7; the composition that summer of Das Lied von der Erde. 1909: The termination of his association with the Met and the start of a three-year contract with the dilapidated New York Philharmonic; work on the Symphony No. 9. 1910: Concerts with the Philharmonic in New York and other American cities; engagements in Paris and Rome; the triumphant premiere in Munich of the Symphony No. 8 (written in the summer of 1906); the completion of the Ninth Symphony, followed immediately by extensive and concentrated work on the Tenth, and a meeting at Leyden with Freud. 1911: The last New York Philharmonic concert on February 21, including the premiere of Busoni’s Berceuse élégiaque—A Man’s Cradle Song at his Mother’s Coffin; the onset of a streptococcal blood infection; unsuccessful serum treatment in Paris, and, on May 18, death in a Vienna sanatorium.

In his Ninth Symphony, Mahler returns to a four-movement design for the first time since the Sixth Symphony of 1903-05. The First and the Fourth are both four-movement symphonies. The First, however, was a five-movement work for the first six years of its existence, while the Fourth is of a special design where the last movement is a brief song-epilogue. If the four movements of the revised First Symphony and of the Sixth still correspond to those of the normal Classical and Romantic symphony, Mahler is clearly after another aim altogether in the Ninth. He begins with a very large movement whose basic tempo is semi-slow but which tends to spill over into allegro. Next comes a double intermezzo in the form of a vividly contrasted pair of scherzos, a set of Landlers and a Burleske. The finale is an Adagio whose weight and span approach those of the first movement.

Deryck Cooke proposed that the formal model Mahler had in mind was Tchaikovsky’s Pathétique, and the correspondences are indeed clear—big first movements alternating between slow and fast, beginning and ending quietly; the Landlers and Tchaikovsky’s gimpy 5/4 waltz; the Burleske and Tchaikovsky’s brilliant march; the two Adagio finales. History added another parallel in that each symphony was its composer’s inadvertent farewell to work and to life. The Pathétique was new music when Mahler began his Ninth Symphony, just sixteen years old, and Mahler remembered gratefully Tchaikovsky’s admiration of his Eugene Onegin performances in Hamburg in 1891.*

As for the first movement, it is surely Mahler’s greatest achievement in symphonic composition. Shortly before Mahler was born, Wagner wrote to Mathilde Wesendonck: “I should now like to call my deepest and most subtle art the art of transition, for the whole fabric of my art is based upon such transitions.” The composer Richard Swift has pointed out that it was “with a powerful feeling of recognition” that Mahler first read the Wagner-Wesendonck correspondence in 1904, remarking to his wife upon its “transcendent and superhuman” nature. The Ninth’s first movement is the high point of Mahler’s own practice in the deep and subtle art of transition, of organic expansion, of continuous variation.

In deep quiet, cellos and horn set a rhythmic frame. The notes are oddly, disconcertingly placed in the time flow; Leonard Bernstein suggested that their halting rhythm represents, or perhaps reflects, the
irregular pulse of Mahler’s own faltering heart. Cellos and horn play the same pitch, A, and it will be more than fifty measures—more than three minutes of playing time—before we meet a bar in which A is not a crucial component, and then it takes a violent deceptive cadence to wrench the music in another direction. The harp begins a kind of tolling about that low A, while a stopped horn projects another thought, also with A as its point of departure and in a variant of the faltering-pulse rhythm. The accompaniment becomes denser, though it always remains transparent, with each detail highly individual. All this prepares a melody which the second violins build up step by step, full of literal or subtly varied repetitions.

We soon hear that the melody is in fact a duet, for the horn re-emerges with thoughts of its own on the material. Listening still more closely, we can notice that the accompanying figures in the harp, the clarinet, and the elaborately divided lower strings are using the same vocabulary too—the same intervals and the same rhythmic patterns. Do the accompaniments reflect the melody much as good servants take on something of their masters’ style, or is the melody—or better, the melodic complex—the expansion of the elements that make up the ever-present, ever-changing background? Before this melody is done growing, the first violins have replaced the horn as the seconds’ duet partner, while the clarinet (anticipated by the English horn) and the cellos cross the border, turning from accompanists into singers. In this beginning you have a miraculous example of Mahler’s inspired art of transition, so painstakingly worked (as we can tell from the orchestral draft, which has been published in facsimile by Universal Edition, Vienna) and so convincing in its appearance of utter spontaneity and natural growth. The transitions, moreover, exist in two dimensions—horizontal, as the melody proceeds through time from one event to the next, and vertical, in the integration of the melodic strands and their accompaniments. This long opening melody keep returning, always with new details of shape and texture, and its D major presence is the soil in which the movement is rooted. Another element of which we become intensely aware is the stepwise descent through a third. Mahler marks this “Lebewohl” (“Farewell”) in his sketches, and he is alluding to Beethoven, whose Farewell Sonata, Opus 81a, begins with exactly this gesture. Mahler even emulates the way Beethoven makes the phrase overlap with itself to create poignant dissonances.

The most persistent element of contrast comes in the form of an impassioned, thrusting theme in minor, whose stormy character is new but whose intervals, rhythms, and accompaniments continue the patterns established earlier. In Mahler’s harmonic design, the corresponding “opposition” to D major is a pull toward the flat side, sometimes to D minor, more often and more powerfully all the way over to B-flat minor. The “faltering pulse” and the harp tollings persist; dramatic abruptions shatter the long-breathed, seamless continuities; urgent trumpet signals mark towering climaxes. From one of these high points the music plunges into sudden quiet and the slowest tempo so far. The coda is virtually chamber music with simultaneous monologues of all but dissociated instruments—flute, oboe, violin, piccolo, horn, just a few strands of cellos and basses to begin with. The intervals between events become wider—it is as though the music continued, but beyond our hearing—until at last silence wins out over sound. With the completion of this immense and wonderfully poised arch, about one third of the great symphony is done.

The second movement returns us forcefully to earth. Mahler always had a love for the vernacular, and here is one more of his fantastical explorations of dance music. He shows us three kinds: a Landler in C, leisurely, clumsy, heavy-footed, coarse (the adjectives are Mahler’s); something much quicker and more waltz-like in slightly soured E major (and taken over almost literally by Shostakovich in the scherzo of his Fifth Symphony); and another Landler, this one in F, the slowest of these three musics, gentle, lilting, sentimental. These tunes, tempos, and characters lend themselves to delightful combinations and interchanges. This movement, too, finishes in a disintegrating coda, but the effect here is toward an intriguing mixture of the ghostly and the cute.

Where the second movement was expansive and leisurely, the third, which Mahler styles Burleske and which he wants played “very defiantly,” is music of violent urgency. The first four measures, which take about three seconds to play, hurl three distinct motifs at us. That sort of concentration is fair warning of what is to follow. Mahler inscribed the autograph “to my brothers in Apollo,” connecting this reference to the leader of the muses to the virtuosic display of contrapuntal craft unleashed here. A contrasting Trio brings a march and even some amiability—also, later, a twisted reminiscence of one of the exuberant march tunes in the Third Symphony’s first movement. Most surprising, and deeply touching as well, is the trumpet’s shining D major transformation of one of the Burleske’s most jagged themes into a melody of
tenderly consoling warmth. It is, however, the fierce music, returning now at still greater speed and in yet more ferocious temper, that brings this movement to its crashing final cadence.

Now Mahler builds an Adagio to balance and, as it were, to complete the first movement. He begins with a great cry of violins, harmonically close to the A minor we have just left, and leading surprisingly into distant D-flat major. In his earlier four-movement symphonies he had ended in the original keys; here, as is more often his preference, he takes the conclusion to another key. In the optimistic No. 5 he goes up half a step from C-sharp to D, but for this wrenching close he goes down by the same interval, from D to D-flat.

With D-flat major clearly established as home, all the strings, who are adjured to play with big tone, sound a richly textured hymn. Their song is interrupted for a moment by a quiet, virtually unaccompanied phrase of a single bassoon, but impassioned declamation in the choral style immediately resumes. That other world, however, insists on its rights, and Mahler gives us passages of a ghostly and hollow music, very high and very low. Between the two extremes there is a great chasm. The two musics alternate, the hymnic song being more intense and urgent at each of its returns. We hear echoes of Das Lied von der Erde and phrases from the Burleske.

Here, too, disintegration begins. All instruments but the strings fall silent. Cellos sing a phrase which they can scarcely bear to let go. Then, after a great stillness, the music seems to draw breath to begin again, even slower than before: Adagissimo, slow, and ppp to the end, Mahler warns. As though with infinite regret, with almost every trace of physicality removed, muted strings recall moments of their—and our—journey. The first violins, alone unmuted among their colleagues, remember something from still longer ago, the Kindertotenlieder, those laments on the deaths of children that Mahler, to his wife’s horror, had written two years before death took his daughter Maria. “Der Tag ist schön auf jenen Höh’n!”—the day is so lovely on those heights.

“Might this not,” asks Mahler’s biographer Michael Kennedy, “be his requiem for his daughter, dead only two years when he began to compose it, and for his long-dead brothers and sisters...?” More and more, the music recedes, a kind of polyphony to the last, the cellos and second violins gently firm, the first violins and violas softly afloat. Grief gives way to peace, music and silence become one.

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