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# MAHLER - SYMPHONY NO.7

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*On the Threshold of Eros or How to feel at home in  
an imperfect world*



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## ***On the Threshold of Eros or How to feel at home in an imperfect world***

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Historicist narratives are not much in fashion these days, and just as well for Mahler who defies any such simplistic cultural analysis. His work has its own evolutionary path, even if it is obviously rooted in the cross-currents of its own times. For many years, Mahler has been treated as a transitional figure, standing between the grand musical metaphysics of Richard Wagner and the revolutionary modernism of Arnold Schoenberg. According to this theory, Mahler's early period is full of Romantic fantasy and naïve idealism. His middle-period (including the Seventh Symphony) marks the advent of modernist realism, while his late works anticipate the harmonic experiments of the Second Viennese School. Of course, Mahler's Eighth Symphony, notorious for its reactionary musical language, has to be excluded from this sequence as an aberration.

Like many such narratives, there is a grain of truth in it, but it fails to acknowledge the consistency of Mahler's preoccupations from his youthful cantata *Das klagende Lied* to his unfinished Tenth Symphony. Not only the Eighth, but the Seventh Symphony too is problematic by this account. The Seventh draws on material from the early Wunderhorn period and, while it is true that the Seventh is technically adventurous, its loose reliance on the structural formula of the Fifth Symphony has left many critics to doubt its originality. Worst of all, its jubilant Rondo Finale, which repudiates the tragedy of the Sixth Symphony, has confounded just about everyone. It would be easy enough to throw one's hands in the air and say that, for all its innovations, the Seventh is no more than a masterly display of compositional technique. But we underestimate Mahler at our peril, and I hope to show that the Seventh Symphony is not only the necessary response to the Sixth's tragic denouement, but that it also provides a convincing psychological bridge to the visionary mysticism of the Eighth.

Mahler's Seventh Symphony was written in the years 1904-5, when the composer was to all appearances in his prime, as Director of the Vienna Court Opera and also

married to the beautiful and talented socialite, Alma Schindler. She had born their first child, Maria in 1902, and a second child, Anna, followed in 1904. Yet the Sixth Symphony, written during the two years prior to the Seventh had shown no evidence of this domestic and professional stability. Instead, it dramatised a profound existential crisis, releasing a sense of foreboding in the composer which began to block his creativity. Consequently, the Seventh Symphony had a particularly awkward gestation. At first, things progressed well. According to Alma, the writings of Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff (1788-1857) gave Mahler the idea for two nocturnal Andante movements. Eichendorff was a German poet and novelist from the first half of the nineteenth century. A Catholic conservative, his texts are full of humour and quaint fantasy, distinctive for blurring the boundaries between Man and Nature. The characters in his stories act spontaneously on their feelings with often comical results, although these are usually favourably resolved. Mahler's two Nachtmusiken or Nocturnes inspired by Eichendorff were destined to become the second and fourth movements of the Seventh Symphony. However, the rest of the work remained elusive, until there was a breakthrough. Mahler recalled the moment in a letter to his wife some years later:

*'One summer earlier [1905], I had planned to finish the Seventh, whose two Andantes were already complete...in the end I gave up and came home, convinced the summer was going to be wasted...I got into the boat to have myself rowed across...With the first stroke of the oar, the theme (or rather the rhythm and the type) of the introduction to the first movement came to me, and in four weeks the first, third and fifth movements were fully finished.'*

The Symphony was in effect composed inside out, but this should not make us think of the work as cobbled from fragments. On first impression, the Seventh reveals a very clear structure. It is a five-movement arch-form with symmetries around its central axis; a densely wrought scherzo. The contrast of night and day defines its narrative structure, although the bulk of the symphony inhabits darkness. Around the day-night symbolism develops the possibility of several responses. We may perceive a temporal progression from night to day, measured in real time and potentially endlessly repeated as a recurrent cycle. Or, we can perceive an architecture that stands outside of time, juxtaposing the opposites of night and day as a single transcendent symbol of divine wholeness. But there is also a third way

in which we can understand the structure, that is as a synthesis of the temporal and eternal, in which the distinction between them narrows, if not entirely disappears.

It is hard for us as highly educated modern people to grasp how sharply defined our worldview is compared to pre-Enlightenment times. With the advance of rationalism and science, the differences between object and subject, mind and body, civilisation and Nature, even good and evil, have grown more absolute. Our ways of thinking have polarised, as we have abandoned mythical and symbolic ways of experiencing the world around us. This widening of the opposites informs even our more ordinary perceptions, like the difference between night and day.

The forces which brought this schism to pass are complex, but we can say that the French Revolution of 1789 was a crucial turning point. After that, for the radical mind nothing was sacred, if it stood in the way of social progress or individual freedom. It was a time when extraordinary geniuses, new godlike men, could emerge from the masses, defying common morality and challenging the status quo. Napoleon Bonaparte was such a man, driving history dynamically forwards. It was the age of the revolutionary hero who would conquer the old order, including Mother Nature herself, deemed perhaps the most regressive force of all. Nature had to be objectified, mastered and exploited for wealth and progress. With hindsight, we now recognise that this new idealism was not the dawn of a Utopian age, but led to social upheaval, imperial wars and catastrophic damage to the natural environment.

This intensification of human consciousness was often at the expense of those who were lowly and marginal in society. The ruthless leader looked down on the ordinary man and the peasant as an expendable resource. The scientist dismissed superstition and common belief as foolish. Nature was rendered object under the investigative gaze. Mahler's symphonies explore the tensions between these opposing radical and conservative outlooks. On the one hand, Mahler was very much part of the new dynamic vision of humanity, but his optimism was tempered by a gloomy meditative streak, because the interior life had little part to play in these extrovert aspirations. Mahler liked to be alone in Nature, communing in the forest or on the mountain-peak, where he felt there was as much to learn as from any philosophical tract or scientific theory. He sought knowledge in unfashionable

places - in fairy stories and folk poems, in the sensibility of children and in medieval symbolism. These irrational sources went side by side with reading Kant, Schopenhauer, Wagner and Nietzsche. But the tensions between the progressive and traditional perspectives were as destabilising for Mahler as they were for the society around him. It was a fault-line which needed resolution and, in that sense, Mahler's mid-life crisis went in parallel with Europe's inexorable slide towards war.

The German philosopher, Theodor Adorno, greatly admired the finale of Mahler's Sixth Symphony. He claimed it as pre-eminent in Mahler's oeuvre because it 'shatters the spell of affirmative illusion'. Indeed, the symphony goes further than that. At times, it is as if it has declared war on life itself. The symphony's first movement alludes to Schumann's *Manfred Overture*, hinting at the work's dark origins. Byron's Manfred feels cursed because he has transgressed not just against the laws of society, but against Nature itself. He represents a state of extreme existential alienation, finding no solace in conventional religion or human love. During the course of the Sixth Symphony, we sense that the Promethean hero of the Enlightenment is turning against himself with suicidal intent, inviting to be struck by those famous hammer blows of fate. Mahler may even have been alluding to Nietzsche's text, *Twilight of the Idols* with its subtitle - *how to philosophise with a hammer*. In this tract, Nietzsche allies himself with the great leaders of history, including Julius Caesar and Napoleon, expressing his distaste for rational moral codes and the Christian Church. But the philosophical hammer, it occurs to me, is part of the problem because, when everything has been smashed, what is left? At the end of the Sixth, Mahler is compelled like Nietzsche to pronounce the death of the Judaeo-Christian God. But the transgressor-hero meets his end too. The Greek Chorus of trombones in the symphony's final bars mourns the death of the tribal God and the individualistic Superman. The symphony's failure to achieve transcendence leads to nihilism; a catastrophe from which there appears to be no escape.

How do you follow the end of everything, or is this not quite the end of everything? The Seventh Symphony carries the burden of resolving this crisis and, if a new worldview is to be constructed, it will have to be based on very different premises. But where or to whom could Mahler turn? Like many educated German-speakers, Mahler was very familiar with the works of Goethe (1749-1832) and specifically his masterpiece, *Faust*. Goethe provided Mahler with a model for his development as

an artist; an influence testified by his monumental setting of the final scene from *Faust Part II* in the Eighth Symphony. Faust was the medieval scholar and alchemist who made a pact with the devil, but significantly for Mahler, Goethe's version of the story explores the psychological fault-lines of a man driven by a restless spirit of enquiry which leads him to a state of suicidal depression.

Aside his affinity with Goethe, there are other reasons to believe that, at the beginning of the Seventh Symphony, Mahler may have had Faust in mind. A letter to Alma from 1908 refers to a planned concert programme in which three Wagner works would be followed by the Seventh Symphony. As it happens, the programme was never performed, but the three works by Wagner offer us clues to the conceptual plan of the Seventh. (5) The opening work was to be Wagner's *Faust Overture*, followed by the *Siegfried Idyll* and finishing with the Prelude to *Die Meistersinger*. The *Faust Overture* was a relatively early work by Wagner, which begins with a depiction of Faust's gloomy state of mind in the play's opening scenes. The overture is also inscribed with a quotation from Goethe's text:

*The indwelling spirit  
Whose temple is my heart, who rules its powers,  
Can stir the bosom to its lowest depths,  
But has no power to move external nature,  
And therefore is existence burdensome,  
And death desirable, and life detested.*

At the beginning of the Seventh Symphony, we hardly need the Wagnerian model to recognise a similar mood of Faustian despair. Faust's desperate thoughts supply a range of images which seem relevant to the Seventh Symphony. We discover Faust experimenting with the occult because the pursuit of conventional knowledge has proven futile. Brightening the light of consciousness has failed him, so that Faust turns to the darkness hoping to learn the mysteries of Nature. He catches sight of a representation of the Macrocosm - the hexagram of the totality which also contains the physical form of man. The symbol stirs delight in him, but also deepens his longing to know the secrets of the Universe. This symbol is associated with the light of the moon, and Faust more than suspects that this new source of truth will turn out to be both nocturnal and feminine:

*O, may you look, full moon that shines,  
On my pain for this last time:  
So many midnights from my desk,  
I have seen you, keeping watch:  
When over my books and paper,  
Saddest friend, you appear!  
Ah! If on the mountain height  
I might stand in your sweet light,  
Float with spirits in mountain caves,  
Swim the meadows in twilight' waves,  
Free from the smoke of knowledge too,  
Bathe in your health-giving dew!*

Faust's rejection of rationalism leads us to another figure who profoundly influenced Mahler. That is Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801-87), the nineteenth century German scientist and philosopher who warned against the cult of reason, labelling the materialist outlook as *Die Nachtansicht* or *The Nightview*. He believed that the *Nightview* could only lead to despair and nihilism. Mahler read Fechner's writings enthusiastically, recommending his book *Zend-Avesta* to others. To give it its full title, *Zend-Avesta or the things of heaven and the beyond from the perspective of the observation of Nature* laid out Fechner's belief in the afterlife and in a divine consciousness which pervades all creation. He wanted to escape the mind-body dualism created by Enlightenment thinkers such as Descartes and Kant. In Fechner's opinion, spirit and matter exist as two aspects of the same divine consciousness, and this was empirically verifiable because Nature is complicit in creating symbols which human beings can recognise and imitate. He also believed that because humanity is an expression of the divine, suffering and error must always be temporary, since Nature draws us inevitably towards completion and higher awareness. Fechner believed that our senses and intellect are directly connected to the spiritual realm, therefore entirely suited to divine knowledge and revelation. This optimism does not imply that earthly existence is any sort of paradise, but it does offer the encouragement that the forces of life are on our side. By this understanding, the splits between matter and spirit, mind and body, the material and the ideal, are overcome, and this outlook Fechner called *Die Tagesansicht* – *The Dayview*.

It is fair to say that Mahler vacillated between the 'either-or' dualistic perceptions of the Nightview and the holistic embrace of the Dayview. This is aptly illustrated in Mahler's matching pair of Wunderhorn songs, *Das irdische Leben* – The Earthly Life, and *Das himmlische Leben* - the Heavenly Life. The mood of these two songs could not at first appear more different. In The Earthly Life, a scratching *moto perpetuo* is like a treadmill, as a starving child pleads for food from its mother. The meal never arrives and the child dies. Spiritual hunger and the crushing of innocence are presented as the common human lot. But, in the second song, *The Heavenly Life* we seem to be offered a more consoling perspective. But is this scene really very different?

*Saint John drains the blood of the little lamb!*

*Herod, the butcher looks out for it!*

*We lead a patient, innocent, a lovable lamb to its death!*

*Saint Luke slaughters the ox without giving it thought or mind!*

Food is aplenty, but at a price. The saints feast on innocence, the Lamb of Christ, along with King Herod. This vision of heaven contains the same brutality which is experienced on Earth. Yet the music is undoubtedly humorous and ultimately even serene in tone. Devouring innocence is shrugged off as just one of those things. We are invited to smile with St. Ursula, who was herself cruelly martyred. Mahler infers that there is a way of being which transcends the harsh truths of the human condition, but which does not airbrush them from reality. Call it Eros, compassion, divine knowledge or instinctive wisdom, but it prevents us from falling into cynicism and despair, allowing us to be in this world, yet defined by something beyond it; to be simultaneously temporal and eternal.

After the crisis of the Sixth Symphony, Mahler knew that he had to distance himself from the dark forces which had brought down his symphonic hero. The ambition of the Seventh is no less than to confront and tame them. Mahler found similar tensions in the music of Richard Wagner whose Music Dramas, specifically *Tristan* and *The Ring Cycle*, explore the tempestuous relationship between the archetypal and the human. In these works, mortal Man is very much the victim of the divine, and Mahler must have felt that this aspect of the Wagnerian aesthetic, derived mainly from Schopenhauer, was another problem which the Seventh Symphony had to address. He needed to domesticate Wagner's musical metaphysics and

escape the hypnotic allure of Tristan and Isolde's all-or-nothing emotional extremes. Indeed, even Wagner grew weary of these passions, taking refuge in his only comic opera, *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg*. The cobbler-poet Hans Sachs, surely a mouthpiece for Wagner himself, repudiates the troubled world of Tristan and Isolde, telling the anxious Eva:

*'My child of Tristan and Isolde, I know a sad tale:  
Hans Sachs was clever and rejected King Mark's misfortune.'*

At this stage, it may be helpful to summarise my main points, before we look at the symphony in detail:

- The end of the Sixth Symphony represents not only the demise of traditional belief, but also the collapse of the post-Enlightenment cult of the heroic individual and rational scepticism. Mahler peers into the void of Fechner's Nightview and finds no answers there.
- At the start of the Seventh Symphony, Mahler wants to repudiate the Nightview and embrace the Dayview, but he must first confront his scepticism, seeking meaning through experience rather than intellectual understanding. Above all he must redefine his relationship with Nature, which requires him to dim the light of consciousness and embark on a journey into darkness.
- Mahler also identifies with Goethe's Faust who faced a collapse of hope because conventional knowledge had led him to suicidal depression. Faust decides to live life to the full and thereby learn the secrets of the Universe, looking deep into the meaning of his subjective experience as a microcosm of the totality.
- After the crisis of the Sixth Symphony, Mahler is not seeking heavenly perfection, rather he is seeking a wisdom which reveals meaning in the imperfections of earthly existence. How does a man deal with the cosmic forces in and around him? Wagner often depicted these archetypal energies overwhelming and victimising ordinary mortals, and Mahler's Sixth Symphony also ends in this way. In the Seventh, Mahler asks - how can these forces be diminished to a more human scale?

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According to Mahler's own account, after a period of failing inspiration, the composition of the first movement of the Seventh Symphony was triggered while rowing across a lake. However, the sound of oars is not what most of us would first imagine on hearing the low B minor chord with added sixth which opens the work. The dotted rhythm of these opening bars has a funereal tread, heralding the entry of an angular tenor horn theme. 'Here nature roars,' said Mahler, and while the music is certainly fierce, it also yearns for form and resolution. A wildly irregular march theme emerges from the slow introduction, as if Mahler, following the example of Faust, has summoned his own Earth Spirit. The movement's progress remains unstable, swinging between wilful exuberance and gloomy introspection, as if Faustian crisis must always be answered by Dionysian energies which run out of control.

Yet the movement's most striking passage could not provide a greater contrast with these polarities. In the B major episode at the movement's heart, something miraculous happens. A vision of beauty emerges unexpectedly out of the forest murmurs. In terms of Sonata form, this is highly unconventional, but as a psychological narrative it makes sense. The poet Novalis described night as 'the mighty womb of revelations'; a medium of prophecy which awakens our longing for the infinite. Eichendorff also considered night to be a crucible of erotic love and other irrational experiences. In his short story *Das Marmorbild* - the Marble Statue, we find a remarkable parallel to Mahler's visionary episode in the first movement of the Seventh. Under cover of darkness, the story's chief protagonist Florio seeks a mysterious woman whom he has glimpsed in the forest:

*Thus in thought, Florio walked on for a long time, until he unexpectedly arrived at a large lake, encircled by lofty trees. The moon, having just appeared over the tree-tops, clearly illuminated a marble statue of Venus that stood on a stone close to the water's edge, as if the goddess had just this moment surfaced from the waves, and now, herself enchanted, was beholding the reflection of her own beauty radiated by the intoxicated water-surface between the stars that gently blossomed out of the depths. Several swans described their uniform circles around the reflection in silence; a soft rustling passed through the trees.*

*Florio stood and stared, rooted to the spot, for that statue appeared to him like a loved one, long-sought and suddenly recognised; like a marvellous flower that had*

*grown up out of the spring dawn and dreamy silence of his earliest youth. The longer he looked, the more strongly did he feel that it was slowly opening its soulful eyes, that the lips were about to move with a greeting, that life was blooming like a delightful song, bringing warmth as it rose up the lovely limbs. He kept his eyes shut for a long time with bedazzlement, yearning and delight.*

Florio has witnessed the presence of the Goddess. His love for an individual woman has connected him to the impersonal archetypal realm. In the same way, in the Mahler, we are suddenly gifted a vision of overwhelming beauty. And, if we doubt that Mahler wanted us to imagine the Goddess at this moment, we need only compare the musical material with that which accompanies the Mater Gloriosa in the Eighth Symphony. The goddess opens her arms to receive Faust's soul to the heavenly realm. But, as so often in Mahler, the goal in the Seventh is glimpsed, but not yet attained, for the vision collapses into the miasma of the movement's slow introduction. In Eichendorff's text, delight soon turns to horror. The Goddess enchants, but she also terrifies:

*...with boundless silence the statue of Venus, so dreadfully white and motionless, was giving him an almost terrifying stare from its stone orbits. Then a horror, deeper than any he had ever known, came over the youth. He quickly left the place and hurried through the gardens and vineyards, running faster and faster, never pausing for breath, towards the restful town; for the very rustling of the trees struck his ears as an audible, comprehensible whispering, and the tall, ghostly poplars seemed to be stretching out their shadows in pursuit.*

Human contact with the numinous realm unleashes panic, and this is how the first movement of the Seventh Symphony ends. The fires of spiritual transformation are lit, so that Nature not only roars in her birth pains, but sweeps all before her in terror and ecstasy.

These vital energies threaten to destroy the human individual, unless he can learn to resist them. The central part of the Seventh Symphony, its three inner movements, explore the wild energies of sexual desire to make them more personal and civilised. Eichendorff once again provides a pathway for that investigation. While Mahler made no secret of the Eichendorffian origins of the two nocturne movements, he did not reference specific texts. However, it is not difficult to identify passages in Eichendorff which neatly parallel the music, so that for

example, in the first *Nachtmusik*, we find ourselves immediately located in Eichendorff's novella *Ahnung und Gegenwart* – Presentiment and Presence:

*“Countless wood-birds twittered to each other in merry confusion – in the midst of his slumber it sometimes seemed as if he heard horns from out of the distance.”*

Yet Eichendorff provides only a point of departure, and Mahler weaves a complex narrative around these forest murmurs, transforming the movement into a witty commentary on the perplexities of Eros. Nothing is quite what it seems. We can imagine the story. It is dusk. A soldier wanders in the forest, drawn here and there by the mysterious sounds of twittering birds, echoing horns and distant cowbells. The cowbells may suggest a herd of cattle, but they could equally be the tintinnabulations of a fairy-tale land or even from heaven itself. The soldier is enchanted and confused. He stumbles upon a Spanish gypsy woman who dances seductively before him. Eichendorff's poem *“To a dancer”* may provide a source:

*“Castanets swing merrily, I see you, animal child, with your loose black ringlets, playing in the mild summer wind....”*

The dancer tempts the soldier in the guise of a softly whispering flute - a seductive 'come hither', but a trumpet calls him back to the barracks, and the tread of the march prevails. In resignation, the soldier realises that there is no choice. He must follow where his duty leads him. The parallels with Bizet's *Carmen* are undeniable. Don Jose is also tragically torn between desire and duty and, in the first *Nachtmusik*, Mahler alludes to that opera's Toreador's Song, as well as its famous Habanera. What is Eros in this context? A fantasy of unobtainable delight, a lost paradise or just blind nature leading a hapless victim to disappointment or even tragedy. But the music of the first *Nachtmusik* does not disturb us. The mood is melancholy rather than suicidal. The collapse of idealism is accepted with a shrug. This is the human condition, and we can just as well laugh at the soldier or feel compassion for him. His errors and delusions could as well be ours, when it comes to matters of love or spirituality.

Love may not be what it seems in this movement, but we still do not know what it is. Indeed, the movement ends suspended in mid-air; a deliberate anti-climax. We are reminded of the ephemeral revelation of the goddess in the work's first movement; an erotic tease on the grandest scale. Now the syndrome is played out on a more human level. The microcosm echoes the macrocosm, but the invitation

is to go yet deeper into the heart of darkness. The central movement of the Seventh is, as in the Fifth, a scherzo, but here conciseness is the defining feature rather than discursive grandeur. All sentiment is stripped away in a terrifying *danse macabre*. Its scurrying *moto perpetuo* suggests desperation and fear, reminiscent of the *Tarantella* from Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' quartet. Moments of innocence are answered only by mocking vulgarity. Life and death, beauty and ugliness here dance as partners, revealing a hideous truth - that life preys upon life. Butcher Herod and the saints must feast on the innocent lamb, if life is to continue. We are reminded too of the orgiastic visions of Goethe's *Walpurgisnacht*. Mephistopheles lures Faust into depravity, but self-disgust causes Faust to recall the fate of Gretchen, his beloved whom he has treated so badly. Mahler shows us a scene of similar degeneracy with the aim of shocking us into seeking a more humane kind of love; one in which tender regard for the other supplants the pursuit of appetite.

In the movement that follows, sexual desire is at last contained by sublimation, so that it becomes infused with spirituality, poetry and music. The Second *Nachtmusik*, the *Andante Amoroso*, evokes a fairy-tale world in which the redemptive presence of the Eternal Feminine seems just one short step away. It opens with a reassuring 'Once upon a time' motif, making what follows seem eternally recurrent – as if once and always. The movement is conceived on an intimate scale, scored without trumpets, trombones and drums. Cheerful chirping birds tell us that Nature is at her ease. The presence in the orchestra of solo violin, guitar and mandolin, as Herta Blaukopf has noted, is associated in Eichendorff's work with expressions of spontaneity. The poet reaches for an instrument to heighten the pleasure of the moment. His serenade is improvised – a natural effusion of tender love, as if art and nature have become one. We might well believe that Orpheus himself has appeared to tame the passions of the gods.

The movement's association with Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll* provides a further clue to its meaning. Wagner's inscription in the published score is a dedication to his wife Cosima, and it claims love as a threefold gift: a source of divine joy, of musical inspiration and of new life. All three are embodied in Siegfried, both the opera and the newly born child. It is Cosima, the beloved, who bears the gifts. The serenade, Mahler wants us to know, brings love, music and good living together, because they all originate in Eros, the binding force of Creation. The morbidity of the scherzo has no place here. Yet the second *Nachtmusik* is not an Arcadian fantasy. It is at times

elusive and discontinuous, for Mahler does not deny that infatuation raises false hopes or that too much desire destroys what it longs for. As in the First *Nachtmusik*, good humour prevails. Tristan and Isolde are not to be found here, nor is death anyone's secret lover. In the movement's serene coda, the minstrel fades dreamily into the landscape in music which surely anticipates the final bars of *Das Lied von der Erde*. Much like the Adagietto of the Fifth Symphony, the experience of intimacy in the Seventh is transformative. It fortifies the psyche for the hurly-burly of the outside world. Dreams, sleep and love restore us to face another day with a resilient smile.

In Eichendorff's novella *From the life of a good-for-nothing*, the protagonist stumbles from one comical adventure to another, before arriving, as if by chance, in Rome, the Eternal City. There he feels that he has reached his ultimate destination and can now return home - which happens to be Vienna which he spots amidst a horizon of mountains lit by the rising sun:

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*What dawn-lit figure this, that darts  
Across the heath from foreign parts? –  
I meet the mountains with my eyes  
And joyous laughter thrills my bones  
As I belt out in ringing tones  
The password and the battle-cry: Austria for ever!*

*With that, the land around me knows;  
Then stream and bird and woods all say  
Soft welcome in my country's way,  
The Danube flashes as it flows,  
St. Stephen's, distant many miles,  
Peers over the peaks, sees me, and smiles –  
And if that's not him, he'll soon be nigh:  
Austria for ever!*

A journey begun as a flight from adult responsibility has ended in a reaffirmation of tradition and belief, revealing that Vienna is mysteriously connected to the Eternal City of Rome through the binding presence of the Mother Church which acts as symbol of Eros. Discovering this connection grants the traveller renewed

purpose. Returning home in an Eichendorff novella means to restore a sense of belonging. Home is where Eros flourishes and identity is affirmed.

Eichendorff often ends his novellas with the rising sun, for his endings are also new beginnings. When we hear the trumpets and drums of Mahler's Rondo Finale in the Seventh, we too feel we are coming home after an exhausting emotional journey and that the light of dawn is reawakening the human world. This is daybreak in, let us assume, a fictional Vienna. The city springs to life filled by proletarian vitality. The music is jubilant in mood and has a processional structure reminiscent of the final scene of *Die Meistersinger*. The Volk come together to reaffirm their collective identity. Each episode of the Rondo is like a float or tableau passing by, revealing many aspects of a richly diverse community. After all, Vienna was a city of marches – military parades in their imperial pomp, Whitsunday Church processions and Labour Day marches organised by the city's workers. On such days, Mahler would have heard the church bells ringing, bands playing out of time and out of step, the streets would have been filled with cheers, banter and spontaneous fun. Mahler liked the noisy enthusiasm of ordinary folk, because they made him feel at home. By contrast, the divisive politics and machinations of the Opera House and Imperial Court left him frustrated and alienated. Mahler said that the Seventh Symphony asks, 'What's the world worth?' or more specifically, what is the price of ambition and power? He could well pose that question about his own life and career, wondering perhaps what had motivated his rapid ascent from the margins of society to its very centre. The cost for him was to be thrice homeless – a feeling that he did not belong.

Towards the end of the Symphony, despite the *Meistersinger* mood of celebration, paradox prevails. The first movement's Earth Spirit theme is brought back in an attempt to close the symphonic circle. Despite Mahler's inclusive vision, there seems to be no place for the primitive energy of the first movement. It sends the Rondo spinning out of control. Is this the fear that the wounded chromatic agonies of Tristan may return? Is this the diabolical voice of dissatisfaction, which asks - is this all there is? Negative memory and an uncertain future haunt the joy of the moment. Yet, in this Rondo Finale, Mahler tries neither to look back nor forward. Nor does he seek transcendence, but makes the most of what is, and with that embrace of 'the now', Mahler transforms his niggling doubts into the symphony's clinching gesture.

Before we hear the end of the Rondo Finale, I want you to listen to a brief recording of the bells of St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna as they ring out on a feast day. The cacophony of bells tells us that Heaven and Earth are united in common joy, and you will recognise these sounds, when we hear the symphony's conclusion. But, because Mahler's vision is inclusive, he throws cowbells into the mix. This is a feast day not only for the church-going establishment, but also for the peasant and the worker; may-be even for cattle and the animals of the forest!

How then can the Seventh Symphony be summarised? It marks the beginning of a process of psychological rebuilding, preparing the way for the Eighth Symphony's vision of redemptive Eros. The Finale of the Seventh, marked *Allegro ordinario*, is a riotous celebration of the down to earth, relishing its messy diversity. Gone are the lofty ambitions, the bombastic pronouncements and the histrionic crises which led to defeat in the Sixth. The Eternal Masculine, characterised by relentless striving, is held in check, and the Seventh Symphony commences the feminisation of Mahler's symphonic project. We might say - the age of the Nietzschean superman gives way to the age of the cobbler-poet. But let's be clear, the Seventh does not deny the possibility of transcendence, but shows that only the full acceptance of the limitations of incarnate being can provide a foundation for enduring spiritual growth. Thus, paradoxically, the vision of transcendence in the Eighth is the outcome of the Seventh's tempering of ambition.

In the first movement of the Eighth, humanity humbles itself before God and Creation. The chorus petitions God to infuse human senses with the fire of divine love – *Infunde amorem sensibus* - to grant the wisdom and energy to recreate the image of Heaven on Earth. No longer is Man the victim of the divine, but a recipient of Pentecostal blessing. We are reminded of Fechner's claim that our senses are natural receivers of the numinous, so that sensuality and desire must reside at the heart of our human identity. We will probably not all agree about the practical truth or validity of such an outlook, but in the Seventh Symphony, Mahler surely intended us to understand that divine Love is both the goal and the driving force of our existence.

## Notes

### Eichendorff texts

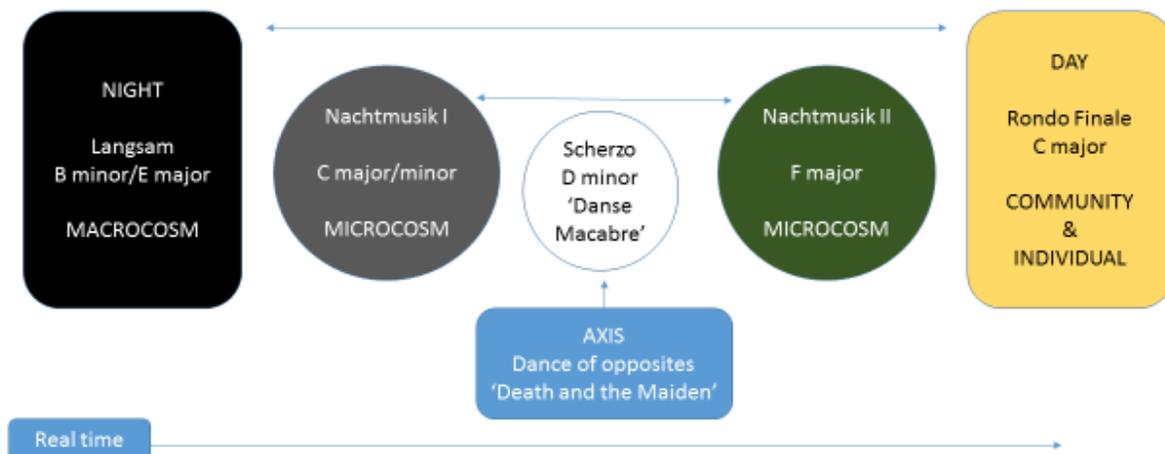
*Ahnung und Gegenwart* – Presentiment and Presence (1815)

*Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts* and *Das Marmorbild* -

From the life of a good-for-nothing & The Marble Statue (1826)

*Dichter und ihre Gesellen* – Poets and their companions (1834)

## The Seventh Symphony – arch-form and narrative structure



## The Symbol of the Macrocosm

