

Program Notes - Symphony No. 2, "Resurrection"

It is hardly my intention to confuse the audience at a musical performance with technical remarks, and in my opinion it amounts to nothing else when one stuffs a 'program booklet' into the audience's hand, thereby forcing it to see rather than hear.

– Gustav Mahler, May 1894, declining a request for program notes to his Symphony No. 2

One may be forgiven for wanting to know what Mahler had in mind when he created his symphony with the loaded title "Resurrection." Is it about *The Resurrection*? Is it about life after death? In addition to the title, the symphony contains musical quotes from one of his songs, does that mean something? Didn't Mahler *always* have something in mind when he composed?

Inquiring minds wanted to know. But Mahler was not inclined to help. It seems.

Many of Mahler's symphonies feel as if they encompass, and eventually transcend, some kind of turmoil. And this fits well with what we know of the personal life of this emotional and often beleaguered man. His approach to symphonies continued the trend begun with Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (and continued by Bruckner); a symphony that begins in tension and builds to a dramatic resolution.

But Mahler's own words give the impression he had more in mind than that. According to his friend, violist Natalie Bauer-Lecher, he was often concerned,

If my work does not transmit the message and awaken the same response that prompted me to create, then I have created in vain!

To Mahler, his symphonies had content. Could they communicate successfully on their own with the desired effect, or did they require additional elucidation?

Mahler began conducting professionally in 1880 at age 20, and at the same time began to make a name for himself as a composer of lieder, or art songs. The cantata *Das Klagende Lied* (The Song of Lament) and the song cycle *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer) are two examples of Mahler's large-scale vocal works from that period.

By the late 1880's, Mahler began composing his first symphonies, while completing a new song cycle based on a collection of poems, called *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Lad's Magic Horn). Intriguingly, Mahler incorporated some of the music from his Wunderhorn songs into his symphonies. So clear is the link with those songs, his first four symphonies are known as his Wunderhorn Symphonies.

The texts for the Wunderhorn lieder were taken from a comprehensive anthology of German poems. All in all, Mahler set 24 of these poems to music over the 7-year period from 1892 - 1899. Three of those songs were recast as movements for his 2nd, 3rd, and 4th symphonies, while nine went into his volumes of *Lieder und Gesänge*. The 12 remaining were ultimately grouped as his famous song cycle *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. Their diverse content vary from charming, to the comical and cynical, and to the tragic. Later, Mahler would use melodies from three of the songs from the *Wunderhorn* cycle in his symphonies.

By quoting from his own lieder, was Mahler imparting some of their subject matter to the symphonic movements as a kind of program or narrative guide for the listener?

The symphonic legacy Mahler inherited was comprised of works intended to display form and compositional technique with little or no programmatic content; sometimes described as "music for its own sake."

By contrast, Richard Strauss, Mahler's contemporary and friend, wrote program music, commonly referred to as symphonic tone poems, overtly intended to tell a story. The music of Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*, for example, represents the chapters of the life of a hero: his youth, marriage, victories, and death. In the case of Strauss's tone poems (and those of Liszt, Respighi, Rimsky-Korsakov, and many others) there is an explicit program that the composer attempts to illustrate.

Was there a "message" in Mahler's Resurrection Symphony? He gave titles to his first two symphonies. This was not new; Haydn, Beethoven, and Mozart had similarly given titles to a few of their symphonies, as a kind of label. Were Mahler's titles mere labels? His first symphony was named for the novel *Titan*, by 19th century German Romantic writer Jean Paul. For his 2nd Symphony, Mahler used the title "Resurrection," which carries obvious associations.

But beyond that, the third movement quotes the melody of his Wunderhorn lied *St. Anthony of Padua Preaches to the Fish*, the fourth movement features a soloist singing to text from one of the other Wunderhorn poems, and the fifth movement uses soloists and a chorus, closing with the words from Friedrich Klopstock's chorale *Aufersteh'n* (Resurrection). One gets the impression that his symphonies have meaningful content that Mahler wants to impart to his listeners.

But if Mahler had something in mind, he didn't want to spell it out. An early admirer, Max Marschalk, asked Mahler to provide a verbal program to the Resurrection symphony. In his letter to Marschalk, Mahler emphatically declined,

I should regard my work as having completely failed, if I found it necessary to give people even an indication as to its mood-sequence. In my conception of the work, I was in no way concerned with the detailed setting forth of an event, but much rather a feeling.

And in a letter to music critic Max Kalbeck, Mahler is very consistent,

Beginning with Beethoven there exists no modern music which hasn't its inner program. But no music is worth anything when the listener has to be instructed as to what is experienced in it... A bit of mystery always remains – even for the creator!

The young admirer Marschalk was not to be put off by Mahler's refusal and continued to press for a program to the Resurrection Symphony. In a reply letter to Marschalk in 1896, the year after the symphony's premiere, Mahler appears unmovable, but alludes to that concept of a motivating inner program,

We find ourselves faced with the important question how, and indeed why, music should be interpreted in words at all. For myself I know that so long as I can sum up my experience in words, I can certainly not create music about it... Just as I find it insipid to invent music to a program, so I view it as unsatisfactory and unfruitful to wish to give a program to a piece of music. That does not alter the fact that the motive for the musical picture might after all be concrete enough to be clothed in words.

So it is all the more surprising to learn that same year Mahler indeed set down unexpectedly detailed explanations of the first three movements of the symphony,

I have named the first movement 'Funeral Rites'. We are standing beside the coffin of a beloved man... it is the hero of my first symphony whom I bear to the grave... At the same time there are great questions: 'What next? Why did you live? Why did you suffer? Is it all nothing but a huge, terrible joke? Or has this life of ours a meaning?' We must answer these questions in some way, if we want to go on living... and this answer I give in the final movement.

Mahler's symphony would seem to be based on a very detailed story and theme after all, which work themselves out through the course of the symphony; from the opening angry surges in the basses and repeated outbursts of the first movement burial scene, to some resolution in the final movement, which contains words that paint a picture of a life after death.

Mahler continues,

The second and third movements are conceived as an interlude. The second is a memory – a moment of bliss from the life of this hero... the image of a long-forgotten hour of happiness, which now enters the soul like a shaft of light – you could almost forget that which has just happened. That is the second movement.

The symphony's mood makes an emotionally contrasting transition. Musically, the second movement is one of Mahler's many lovely ländler, or country waltzes.

But when you awake from this wistful dream, and have to return to the confusion of life, it can easily happen that this ever moving, never-resting, incomprehensible bustle of existence becomes horrible to you... Life strikes you as meaningless, a frightful ghost, from which you perhaps start away with a cry of disgust! This is the third movement.

True to Mahler's description, the peaceful mood of the country waltz of the second movement is abruptly erased by a somewhat sinister, almost macabre, dance with death in the third.

Musically, Mahler shows the influence which Klezmer music had on him, most noticeably in the menacing clarinet writing of the waltz-like melody. But Mahler also ironically includes melodies from his Wunderhorn lied, *St. Anthony of Padua Preaches to the Fish* in this instrumental movement. That song relates how the various fish dutifully listen as St. Anthony preaches to them, only to swim away as ignorant, greedy, and sinful as before. Is that cynical message carried into the symphony on the back of the Wunderhorn melody?

What do we make of the contradictions between Mahler's repeated statements, on the one hand, that his symphonies should be experienced for the feelings they evoke and not for any program or narrative, and on the other hand, his habit of naming his symphonies, his use of material from his lieder, and that fairly detailed explanation of his Resurrection Symphony?

In 1897, one year after providing the above explanation of the Resurrection symphony, Mahler wrote a reply to a letter he received from Anton Seidl, Hungarian conductor and Music Director of the New York Philharmonic, discussing the Resurrection Symphony. In that letter Mahler comments,

You have quite precisely characterized my aims, in contrast to those of [Richard] Strauss. You say correctly that my 'music finally arrives at its program as a last ideal elucidation, whereas in Strauss the program is present as a given curriculum.' ... When I conceive a large musical structure, I always come to a point where I must bring in the word as the bearer of my musical ideas.

58 It seems that Mahler wanted to have it both ways. Those descriptions of the first three movements would appear to meet the criteria for “a given curriculum,” as there would be no way for listeners to divine that content from the music. Yet earlier, Mahler stated that he would judge his work a failure if he needed to provide that kind of guide.

In his letter to Seidl, Mahler says that he composes his symphonies to make us perceive something that he has in mind, which music alone cannot communicate, although he is not trying to be concrete with the listener’s experience, as Strauss was. Mahler had a feeling or experience he wanted to share, and his approach was to start with that experience, the inner program in *his* mind, but through music make us feel something, without our being told precisely what it is.

What was the experience Mahler had which motivated him, what was his “inner program?” In the same letter to Seidl, Mahler explained the inspiration for the final, choral, movement and his inner struggle with adding a chorus,

How I got the inspiration for this is profoundly significant for the nature of artistic creation. For a long time I turned over in my mind the inclusion of a chorus in the last movement, and only the fear that this might be considered a superficial imitation of Beethoven made me hesitate again and again. About this time, Bulow died...” [Mahler’s friend and mentor, the famed conductor and pianist Hans von Bulow] “...I was present at his memorial. The mood in which I sat there and thought of him who had passed away was exactly the spirit of the work which I was then mulling over. Then the chorus from the organ loft intoned Klopstock’s chorale ‘Aufersteh’n’! This struck me like a flash of lightning... What I had experienced at that moment, I now had to create in sound... So it always is with me: only when I experience do I compose – only when I compose do I experience!

Mahler had been composing his symphony with something in mind, but he did not know how to complete it and only later came to the “Resurrection” idea.

Four years later, in 1901, for a performance of the Second Symphony in Dresden, Mahler provided *additional* programmatic notes, for the fourth and fifth movements,

Fourth movement – the stirring voice of simple faith soothes our ears.

A succinct explanation for this heartfelt, even resigned, vocal movement, which makes use of text from a Wunderhorn poem “Urlicht” (Primeval Light).

Fifth movement: we are confronted once more with terrifying questions. A voice is heard crying aloud: ‘The end of all livings things is come – the Last Judgment is at hand’...the earth quakes, the graves burst open, the dead arise and stream on in endless procession... The cry for mercy and forgiveness strikes fearfully in our ears. The wailing rises higher - our senses desert us, consciousness fails at the approach of the eternal spirit. The last trumpet is heard... We can just catch the distant, barely audible song of a nightingale, a last tremulous echo of earthly life... And behold! It is no judgment... There is no punishment and no reward. Just an overwhelming love illuminates our being. We know, and are.

Thus, Mahler’s program emerges from his personal experiences with – and reactions to – loss. His inner program becomes the listener’s musical experience of a progression, not of story line, but of feelings – emotions brought about at the contemplation of mortality, both universal and personal.

By the time Mahler began to compose his Resurrection Symphony, he had lost both parents and two younger siblings. The process of grieving was all too familiar to him; from all-consuming anger and despair, to consoling memories, to bitterness at the futility of existence, to an acceptance of human vulnerability and transient happiness, and ultimately to a personal resurrection – a life after death – resuming one’s own life again.

On the day of the Dresden concert, Mahler again disparaged providing program notes. He wrote to his wife, Alma, comparing his program notes with God providing a program for creation,

It can only give a superficial indication, all that any program can do for a musical work... It leads directly to misunderstanding... and in the long run to such distortion that the work, and still more its creator, is utterly unrecognizable.

Listeners have to judge that assessment for themselves. But, Mahler eventually abandoned altogether the practice of providing any program notes for his works. It is left to us to experience their inner program through the music.

At the conclusion of his letter to conductor Anton Seidl, Mahler wrote,

A musician’s nature can hardly be expressed in words... It is the same with his goals, too. Like a somnambulist he wanders toward them – he doesn’t know which road he is following... but he walks toward the distant light, whether it be the eternal shining stars or a beguiling mirage.

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The Translations

(Ann. f. d. Dirig.): Alle Betonungen consequent durchführen.

URLICHT
From *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*

PRIMAL LIGHT
(From *The Youth's Magic Horn*)

O Röschen roth!
Der Mensch liegt in größter Noth!
Der Mensch liegt in größter Pein!
Je lieber möcht ich in Himmel sein!
Da kam ich auf einen breiten Weg;
Da kam ein Engelein und wollt' mich abweisen.
Ach nein! Ich ließ mich nicht abweisen:
Ich bin von Gott und will wieder zu Gott!
Der liebe Gott wird mir ein Lichtchen geben,
Wind leuchten mit bis in das ewig selig Leben!

Oh little red rose!
Man lies in the greatest need.
Man lies in the greatest suffering,
How much rather would I be in Heaven!
I came upon a broad road.
There came an angel and wanted to block my way.
Ah no! I did not let myself be turned away!
I am of Gods and to God I shall return.
Dear God will grant me a small light,
Will light my way to eternal, blissful life.

AUFERSTEH'N

RESURRECTION

Aufersteh'n, ja aufersteh'n wirst du,
Mein Staub, nach kurzer Ruh!
Unsterblich Leben
Wird der dich rief dir geben.
Wieder aufzublüh'n wirst du gesät!
Der Herr der Ernte geht
Und sammelt Garben
uns ein, die starben.

Arise, yes, you will arise from the dead,
My dust, after a short rest!
Eternal life
Will be given you by Him who called you.
To bloom again are you sown.
The lord of the harvest goes
And gathers the sheaves,
Us who have died.

—Friedrich Klopstock

—Friedrich Klopstock

O glaube, mein Herz, o glaube:
Es geht dir nichts verloren!
Dein ist, was du gesehnt!
Dein, was du geliebt, was du gestritten!
O glaube: Du wardst nicht umsonst geboren!
Hast nicht umsonst gelebt, gelitten!
Was entstanden ist, das muß vergehen!
Was vergangen, auferstehen!
Hör' auf zubeben!
Bereite dich zu leben!
O Schmerz! Du Alldurchdringer!
Dir bin ich entrungen!
O Tod! Du Allbezwinger!
Nun bist du bezwungen!
Mit Flügeln, die ich mir errungen
In heißem Liebesstreben
Werd' ich entschweben
Zum Licht, zu dem kein Aug' gedrungen!
Sterben werd' ich, um zu leben!
Aufersteh'n, ja aufersteh'n wirst du
Mein Herz, in einem Nu!
Was du geschlagen,
Zu Gott wird es dich tragen!

Oh believe, my heart, oh believe,
Nothing will be lost to you!
Everything is yours that you desired,
Yours what you loved, struggled for.
Oh believe, you were not born in vain,
Have not lived in vain, suffered in vain!
What was created must perish.
What has perished must rise again.
Tremble no more!
Prepare yourself to live!
Oh Sorrow all-penetrating!
I have been wrested away from you!
Oh Death, all-conquering!
Now you are conquered!
With wings that I won
In the passionate strivings of love
I shall mount
To the light to which no sight has penetrated.
I shall die, so as to live!
Arise, yes, you will arise from the dead,
My heart, in an instant!
What you have conquered
Will bear you to God.

—Gustav Mahler

—Gustav Mahler