

Mahler in our own times

“...the supreme value of Mahler’s work lies not in the novelty of its being intriguing, daring, adventurous or bizarre, but rather in the fact that this novelty was transfused into music that is beautiful, inspired and profound. That it possesses the lasting values of high creative artistry and deeply significant humanity; these keep it alive today, these guarantee its future.”

Bruno Walter, 1938

Mahler the Musician

Gustav Mahler was one of the most prodigiously gifted musicians who has ever lived. While he was a pianist of great natural ability, he made his name as the leading light among a whole generation of orchestral conductors. His protégés, such as Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer, were among the finest conductors of the twentieth century. Mahler was a formidable and charismatic presence on the podium. He possessed commanding authority and an acute ear. Players from the New York Philharmonic, reminiscing in a radio interview, did not hesitate to assert that he was a greater conductor than even Toscanini. It is fair to say that Mahler’s decade in charge of the Vienna Court Opera remains unparalleled in its history as a time of reform and innovation, of memorable productions and performances. Always, Mahler strove to realise the composer’s inner vision. To that end, his expectation that audiences should listen to music in revered silence still influences the habits of concert goers today.

Mahler was always destined for greatness and, had he not been a composer, he would still have been one of the most influential cultural figures of his day. He was one of the first celebrities of classical music known to the man in the street as well as the intelligentsia that was his natural milieu. But Mahler’s true calling was to be a composer, even if his time to compose was restricted to the summer holidays, when he could retreat to the countryside, putting his busy life as a manager and conductor behind him. As a composer he had pivotal influence on those around him. His friendship with the radical Arnold Schönberg placed him at the heart of the debate about the future of classical music. Even when another friend, Richard Strauss, condemned Schönberg’s atonal innovations as madness, Mahler retained the respect of both men and rose above the fray. His taste was broad. He absorbed the great musical masterpieces from Bach to Wagner, as well as much of the music of his own time by figures as varied as Puccini, Rachmaninov, Debussy, Busoni and even Elgar. He was also familiar with popular music; the fairy-tale operas of Humperdinck, the operettas of Lehár and Lortzing, as well as the waltzes, polkas and marches of the Strauss family. He always recalled fondly the Czech folk music and marching military bands of his childhood.

But what makes Mahler’s music so distinctive and remarkable? His composing technique was formidable. He could write music of beguiling simplicity or dazzling complexity. His lyrical gifts, his harmonic invention and contrapuntal skills were unsurpassed. His forms were innovative and bold. He wrote massive sonata and rondo forms, multi-episodic scherzos filled with waltzes and rustic dances. There were songs, songs without words, military marches and funeral marches; forms and styles bound together in ways which emulated, yet also defied classical norms. Mahler’s innovations reached into all

areas of music. He employed a huge orchestra, adding unusual instruments such as cowbells, sleigh-bells, wooden clappers, hammers and gongs. He introduced the guitar, the mandolin, the tenor horn and the post horn into the symphony orchestra. Mahler created an orchestral sound that is at times spiky and lean-textured, at other times, lush and extravagant. In his hands, every instrument of the orchestra is capable of virtuosic expression. Instruments are combined with the intimate delicacy of chamber music or to create piercingly intense climaxes. Mahler created multi-layered musical collages using off-stage instruments and bands that paralleled the experiments of the American composer, Charles Ives. Human voices also appear in Mahler's symphonies, as he brought song and symphony together. But, if this technical mastery was to be more than display, he needed a higher purpose, and Mahler undoubtedly possessed such a purpose.

Mahler the visionary

Examining Mahler's life, we are struck by his messianic sense of mission and passionate belief in the power of music. He revered Beethoven and Wagner as gods, for they behaved with disdain for ordinary things and had supreme belief in their own genius. In composing and conducting music, Mahler would make no compromise with his ideals, but in reaching positions of power and influence, he felt no such scruple. Mahler was fiercely competitive and ambitious; an egotist or even a tyrant when it suited him. He knew he was gifted; he knew he had vision; he knew he would have a revolutionary impact on the musical world.

Mahler adopted Beethoven's idealistic symphonic model, characterised by elemental rhetoric and the triumph of order over chaos. But Mahler fused the genre with the spontaneous lyricism and intimate narrative of song. This causes conflict in his music, because the formal restrictions of the symphony struggle to contain his lyrical material. Mahler was challenging the hallowed tradition of the classical symphony. The formal conservatism of Brahms was not for him; rather he cultivated a Wagnerian scale of ambition. After *The Ring* and *Parsifal*, the symphony too had to carry the mythic and philosophical vision of a prophet pronouncing upon the profound questions of life. There is something of Nietzsche's Zarathustra in the young Mahler; an iconoclastic superman who retreats to the mountains to see ecstatic visions, returning to denounce the hypocrisies of conventional morality. But Mahler was never a true Nietzschean. He distanced himself from Nietzsche's polemic against the Christian God. He wanted and needed to believe in a being greater than himself as a source of spiritual nurture and moral order. Mahler was all too aware of his own frailties and too sympathetic to ordinary folk to be any kind of superman.

Mahler lived for his art, and so the question arises - what is the relationship between his life and music? The music is not a direct expression of Mahler's feelings, like some therapeutic confession, but it is certainly Mahler's voice that speaks to us like a prophet bearing witness. He tells us to change our way of being in the world. To accuse Mahler of self-obsession because he used his personal experience as a source for his music is to misunderstand him. He placed himself in the role of an archetypal hero who faces life's battles on our behalf. Like many romantic artists, subjective experience was the

foundation of his art, from which he could shape more universal ideas to suit his creative purpose. By this approach, Mahler greatly extended the range of musical expression, as he explored the human condition with forensic perceptiveness. He thus created a new kind of musical narrative, expressing the interior dialogue of the human mind. Some hear in his symphonies a voice like the narrator in a novel; a presence which binds together an array of characters, events and multiple perspectives. Indeed, there is a strong literary aspect to Mahler's work in its story-telling forms, in the texts he set and the many literary associations from which the music is at times derived.

Yet in Mahler's music the narrator is not always able to speak freely. The traditional architecture of classical music imposes an external order on the stream of feeling. Traditional forms such as sonata, scherzo and rondo jar with Mahler's expressive ambition. This impinges upon every detail of the music, as the subjective voice intrudes upon ordinary expectation, creating discontinuities and asymmetries of form, chromatic distortions of both melody and harmony. But why does Mahler's subversion of musical convention matter? Could he not simply break free of these constraints? But music reflects its times and, in the cultural melting-pot of modernity which Vienna had become, every surface was being stripped away and old truths were being transformed or discovered anew. Conventions that lack substance are a tyranny, but to dismiss all conventions leads to anarchy. The same problem faces us today, as we are confronted by false and sentimental imagery in a society dominated by the politician's propaganda, the salesman's marketing hyperbolae and the distortions of the news media. Where a culture has become decadent and fragmented, truth is hard to find. Values have to be unpicked and reformulated.

Mahler lived a life more like our own than those of previous generations, and his status as an outsider is crucial to our empathy for him. As a Jew from the Czech provinces, he always felt compelled to question the establishment culture around him in order to assimilate it. He had to discover the meaning of traditions and conventions for himself. Mahler's music tries to reconstruct meaning from the ruins of the past. It seeks to encompass what opposes and what does not belong. In this, it reflects our experience of modern living. We look upon a neatly proportioned classical building, while next to it is an irregular neo-gothic church surrounded by a commercial office made from glass and steel. Faced with such incoherence, the attempt to find meaning seems futile, but Mahler tries to unite such disparate things. He asks, what do such paradoxes say about us and our longing for certainties? To be human was, for Mahler, to acknowledge our incompleteness and to express the longing for transcendence which attends such awareness. He portrays the tensions between hope and reality, between the sublime and the mundane; feelings often perceived in Mahler's characteristically ironical tone. The slow movement of the First Symphony is a well-known example. The children's round, *Bruder Martin* becomes a gloomy funeral march in the minor key. A street-band intrudes with grotesque cheerfulness. We are confused until we realise that a huntsman has died, and his former prey carry his coffin in raucous jubilation. Man's animal instincts have taken revenge upon what had sought dominion over them. In that irony Mahler exposes the repressive attitudes of the society around him. The finger of accusation is pointed at the audience, who are cast as the crime's chief perpetrators

and also its unwitting victims. Mahler holds up a mirror to our souls, and irony is the truth we do not want to see.

Nature, God and Transcendence

If we wish to understand Mahler, we must recognise that his music expresses a state of relatedness to Nature. He spent much of his leisure-time walking in the mountains and his composing-huts were always isolated from human life. From the depiction of dawn that opens the First Symphony to the grotesque rustic dances of his last works, Nature is a defining presence. Birdsong and forest murmurs suffuse his music, so that often it sounds like a natural landscape. At times, Mahler seems to speak for Nature, as if the composer is a vessel of an impersonal force, as if the boundary between the music's subjective voice and the natural world has become porous. For Mahler, this was to glimpse the heaven "below"; a return to an earthly paradise, and the naïve Wunderhorn poems provided a perfect source for such daydreams. Equally though, the subject can feel alienated from Nature, resulting in a storm of sentimental emotions and a sense of loss and longing in confrontation with the brutal reality of death. Nature can be a source of fear as well as consolation. She is both a generous and potentially cruel Mother. Mahler sensed, long before it was generally understood, that our relationship with the natural world is out of kilter; that the consequent tensions in us, as individuals and as a society, threaten calamity. Yet, in the face of this foreboding, for Mahler, Nature remained sacred; a refuge and inspiration, stirring a longing for lost innocence or awakening the soul's desire for eternity. In Nature, Mahler felt a divine presence. It was the well-spring of his creative life.

Mahler was greatly influenced by the pessimistic philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, who believed that the life-force was a blind, impersonal Will which, for the most part, tormented Man. Our only escape from this fate was, according to Schopenhauer, through detachment and resignation. However, music was a special consolation, because he believed it to be our only means to discern the Will directly, allowing us some relief from its relentless drive. Mahler shared Schopenhauer's view that music was an important source of spiritual understanding, and he also shared some of Schopenhauer's pessimism. Yet ultimately Mahler did not agree with his bleak worldview, because he intuited something more than a blind Will at work in Nature and the human psyche. For Mahler, Nature brought the consolation of Eros; a growing awareness of the mysterious unity of Creation.

Mahler's Ninth and Tenth Symphonies and *Das Lied von der Erde - The Song of the Earth*, deal with this essential conflict between Man's blind will to live and his hunger for meaning. They provide paradigms for transforming the inner life. In these last works, Mahler's existential quest reaches a climax in a way that is unexpected. We are not presented with cataclysm or victorious jubilation. Instead, he depicts resignation to spiritual calm, taking distance from the struggle of life against death. The romantic hero gives up his battle, taking refuge from the world to face his mortality. After all his striving, Mahler embraced Eastern mysticism; a Taoist philosophy of acceptance and inner detachment. But this was not the cool intellectual objectivity advocated by

Schopenhauer. Mahler's transcendence was hard won by knowing what it meant to suffer. Mahler learnt the lesson of inner acquiescence only slowly, for he had often railed against his God, as if he were Jacob wrestling with the angel. But God was not his real opponent. The angel was the demon in himself, the demon of his doubt and fears.

Despite his bouts of anxious scepticism, Mahler was not really sympathetic to the rationalist outlook, preferring to ally himself with the controversial German psychophysicist, Gustav Theodor Fechner. Fechner had investigated dreams and the paranormal in order to create a science of the soul. He coined the term, *die Tagesansicht - the Day View*; a perspective which asserts that all phenomena are manifestations of God. In Fechner's theoretical model, God is both spirit and matter, and the material world evolves from chaos to order through time. He believed that matter is an aspect of spirit; not separated from it. By contrast, according to Fechner, *die Nachtansicht - the Night View*, describes the pessimistic stance of scientific materialism which lacks any transcendental dimension. It was Fechner's *Day View* which helped Mahler interpret his experience. He was drawn to Fechner's belief that Nature was always evolving to a higher level and that evil was simply resistance to that evolution. Such a positive perspective contradicted many of the radical ideas of the times. Darwinism and Marxism gave credence to a deterministic, impersonal Universe in which life struggles blindly for survival, while people compete for wealth and power. By comparison, Mahler's Nature-worship and striving for transcendence resisted such attitudes. He clung to the authenticity of his subjective feeling, even when confronted by materialism and collective cynicism. It is this which explains our contemporary interest in Mahler's music. He speaks of meaning in a world where science has disenchanted spirit; where empty banalities and displays of power achieve high prominence. Mahler holds out the possibility of transcendence to a culture which has succumbed to disbelief.

There are some who think that the moments of transcendence in Mahler's music lack substance. For all the noise of his symphonic triumphs, they are coloured by a pervasive irony. Something is longed for, but never attained. But this is to intellectualise his music and the way we listen to it. Mahler does at times evoke a fairy-tale idealism that seems implausible, but it is never insincere; rather it shows the gap between inner aspiration and outer reality. In this tension Mahler expressed his longing to regain something lost; to reach out to what was beyond him. He strove to grasp the ultimate interconnectedness of things, even if his symphonies could never sustain that unity as a consistent outcome. Consequently, his music unfolds along a crooked path. The triumph of the Fifth Symphony is followed by the despair of the Sixth. The visionary Eighth collapses into the worldly torment of *The Song of the Earth*. The transcendent aspects of Mahler's music win us over, but another voice remains full of doubt. This is true to our experience, for the symphonies present the vicissitudes of a human life and the contradictions of a real human personality. When the music stops, often a question remains. At the end of *The Song of the Earth*, the music merges with silence, as if music is not enough. Or is music all there is? Is music as close as we can get to a spiritual reality? This is the puzzle which Mahler's symphonies try to resolve; the paradox of his

all-inclusive “true-to-life” ambition. As Mahler instructed the young Sibelius, “The symphony must be like the world, it must embrace everything.”

When Mahler plays with our emotions, there is clear purpose in it. By donning the mask of a minstrel, a child, a hero or a sage, he means us to see the world through those eyes and thus differently. While his evocation of childlike states is often condemned as disingenuous or savagely ironic, Mahler wants us to understand that faith, spontaneity and wonder can only be rediscovered through the sensibility of a child. This is never suggested glibly, since alongside the innocent picture is also the spectre of death. The child’s view of heaven at the end of the Fourth Symphony is profoundly questioned by the *Kindertotenlieder - Songs on the Deaths of Children*. Innocence is vulnerable to human acts of power and hostile fate, and Mahler knew this too well from the untimely loss of his own siblings. He identified with the hapless drummer boys of the Wunderhorn poems, whose dreams of adventure and heroic deeds are dashed by forced marches and an ignominious end. In this awareness, Mahler anticipated the slaughter of the First World War, when a generation of youth were sent to lose their lives without purpose or dignity. His call to value innocence was a warning, not an escape into fantasy.

We should not be surprised by the contradictions of such multiple perspectives, because this was the era of Freud and the discovery of the archetypal characters buried in the unconscious which influence human personality. Vienna was a city of masks and hidden tensions, where the social price of mass-immigration and industrialisation were suppressed behind a façade of officialdom and bourgeois respectability. Mahler’s music shows us what was lurking behind that façade. The Seventh Symphony’s three middle movements explore the tension between feeling and the conventions of sexual love, but as they are experienced in the night-time realm of dreams. The work’s finale is marked *Allegro ordinario*; a festive public celebration of the daytime world. The contrast makes the point, for the audience may enjoy the finale so long as the tensions in the rest of the symphony are forgotten. At the work’s close, Mahler attempts to integrate some of the dark material, and it nearly spoils the party. But he is not always passing judgement. Sometimes he presents human life as “just so”, as if such dualities can only be resolved by accepting them. Adopting a position of such ambivalence was a radical innovation, but not a deception, as some critics have implied. Mahler’s aim was to reveal truth; to show his audience a more honest way of being.

Music can only ever provide a representation of inner reality but, as a means of spiritual education, it can still lead us to inner truth. Yet, if we dismiss that spiritual realm as speculation, music loses its power to renew us. It is only a beautiful illusion. Mahler clung to the belief that the life of the soul is real and wanted his music to speak of that deep Nature within. But he struggled with his fear and doubts, because his intellect could not always make the leap of faith. The sceptical mind goes looking, and the more it looks, the harder the answer is to find. The first *Nachtmusik* from the Seventh Symphony depicts exactly this predicament. The protagonist is unsure what he is looking for. He is only aware that something teasingly invites him to search. What is real, what is illusion, what is blind fear or false hope? A comical game of hide and seek ensues, so that when the searching hero hears the mysterious sound of distant cowbells, for a

fleeting moment the call of the spirit seems true. But the question occurs - can this really be so? And by following this intuition, will there be a dead-end or conflict with others? The existence of a spiritual dimension is not the only issue here. At times, Mahler doubted whether the prompts of the soul could ever be realised in an over-rational, patriarchal society.

Mahler's music and ideas developed throughout his life and, even if their substance changed very little, experience led him to refine and deepen his musical expression. In the early works, Nature and life are full of promise, but the prospect of death casts a shadow of doubt. Mahler's music is full of youthful striving and heroic ambition, as he sought the heaven which is "above" through ceaseless aspiration. In mid-life, there was a tempering of this approach. He started to question his striving, to look at life for what it is; as something finite, both light and dark. By the time of the late works, confronted by his own mortality, Mahler had moved from questioning to acceptance, realising that Nature is a place of belonging with the power to renew and restore. Thus, Mahler came full circle, and Nature had fulfilled the promise he had felt all along. In the Rückert Song, *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen - I am lost to the world*, written as early as 1901, Mahler expresses transcendence as now and within, not hidden in some remote realm beyond the stars. The state of inwardness contains the answer, and Mahler said of the song, "It is my very self!"

Mahler's significance for contemporary culture

Mahler's influence as a composer was split between the two camps of twentieth century music. There were the progressive atonalists led by Schönberg, and there were the more conservative figures who continued to write tonal music, such as Zemlinsky, Franz Schmidt and Erich Korngold. Schönberg and his followers claimed Mahler as an anti-establishment figure protesting against a corrupt culture. His bold and fragmented orchestration, his dense musical thought and dissonant harmony were interpreted as evidence of the gradual dissolution of the old tonal music. Berg and Webern were devoted to Mahler as the unofficial patron of their Second Viennese School. Berg especially was temperamentally close to Mahler, and his music retains Mahler's lyricism and expressive candour. But, in truth, after Mahler, the Viennese symphonic tradition was largely spent, and the genre only thrived away from its first great centre. Beyond Vienna, the symphony remained an aspiration for any composer trying to prove their credentials on the international stage. Sibelius, Nielsen and Elgar were prime examples, although none of them owed anything directly to Mahler.

Yet Mahler could still provide a model for those who wished to transgress musical boundaries, while bowing discretely to a living symphonic tradition. The Russian symphonist, Dmitri Shostakovich, found in Mahler's narrative forms a basis for his own epic style, developing a language which combined expressionist intensity and bitter irony. He amplified Mahler's sense of alienation from the collective, portraying the existential agony of the individual trapped in an authoritarian society. But Shostakovich lacks any transcendence, treading close to the nihilism which Mahler tried so hard to avoid. The American, Leonard Bernstein; another Jewish composer-conductor of great

charisma, wrote symphonies in a style that, like Mahler, mixed the popular and the classical. He was also one of the finest of all Mahler conductors. Benjamin Britten also admired Mahler for his craftsmanship and formal innovations. In his *Sinfonia da Requiem*, the *Spring Symphony* and even in the opera, *Peter Grimes*, Mahler's influence can clearly be heard. Mahler was also a source of fascination to those composers after 1945 who wanted to engage politically on the left, such as the symphonist, Hans Werner Henze, and the more avant-garde, Luciano Berio. Berio's *Sinfonia* (1967) adds further layers of Mahlerian self-awareness to the chattering ironies of the Scherzo from the *Resurrection* Symphony, using electronics, montage techniques and superimposed vocalisations. Even an arch-experimenter like Stockhausen seized upon Mahler's interdependency of life and work and took it to a new extreme. In the contemporary world, such figures are lauded and rarely treated as the outcasts which they aspire to become. Mahler provides a template for artists who are fierce critics of the status quo yet remain embedded in the cultural establishment.

Mahler's impact on wider culture has been less obviously extensive, despite the parallels drawn by Times' music critic, William Mann, in 1963 with a song by Lennon and McCartney. However, Mahler's ability to encompass popular genres within the framework of the classical symphony may have encouraged those musicians developing progressive rock music to integrate aspects of classical music and orchestral instrumentation into their work. Mahler has had more influence upon film music. A flock of musically gifted immigrants including Max Steiner and Erich Korngold fled Central Europe for the USA before the Second World War and brought with them the musical language of late-Romanticism. The colours of the Mahlerian orchestral palette, his grand expressive gestures and episodic montages were soon heard on the soundtracks of countless Hollywood films from the thirties onwards. More recently, Ken Russell's *Mahler* (1974) used extracts from the symphonies in a scurrilous fantasy encouraging the view that the composer was a morbid neurotic. It is largely dated, surrealistic satire, although the image of Cosima Wagner dressed as a Nazi Valkyrie making Mahler eat a raw pig cannot easily be forgotten.

Mahler provides an archetypal image for a "nutty" professor; an intense, gawky intellectual with wild hair and little round glasses. This seems incompatible with his undoubted attractiveness to women, his life as a family man and his passion for outdoor activities. So where has the distorted image come from? It is a caricature partly inspired by his wife's rather one-sided reminiscences, portraying him as egocentric and insensitive. It is an image further fuelled by the many hostile and anti-Semitic critics of Mahler's day. The pattern has continued, even inadvertently. The author, Thomas Mann, revered Mahler as one of the most creative minds of his age. In his tale of fatal infatuation, *Death in Venice* (1912), written just after composer's death, Mann modelled the appearance of his main character, the world-weary writer, Gustav von Aschenbach, on Mahler. In 1971, when the Italian director, Luchino Visconti, made a film of the novella, he seized upon the Mahlerian associations, turning von Aschenbach into a composer and using Mahler's music for the soundtrack. The success of the movie transformed the Fifth Symphony's *Adagietto* into a piece of popular super-kitsch, associated with sunlight on the Venetian lagoon and the gyrations of an androgynous

youth. While this produced a sumptuous cinematic experience, it did Mahler no favours by suggesting he was at heart a decadent. The distortion continued in Willy Russell's *Educating Rita* (1983), where Maureen Lipman plays Trish; an intellectual who lives for art rather than real life. She indulges an obsessive passion for the Sixth Symphony, before attempting suicide. Mahler is presented as synonymous with destructive neurosis, yet had Trish listened to the Rückert Songs, perhaps the outcome would have been different. Similarly, in Woody Allen's film, *Husbands and Wives* (1992), about two dysfunctional married couples, the Ninth Symphony is heard at a concert; scene of an anxious date. Afterwards, the couple exchanges banal comments about the work's demanding length. Mahler is a badge of cultural sophistication, as the two lovers try to impress each other. Allen implies that Mahler's long-winded theatricality predicts the likely course of their liaison. The cliché of Mahler's neurosis has long been over-stated and neglects the richness of his personality. His music reveals its depth only to those who can face themselves. Otherwise its length is all there is to talk about.

In our own times, many composers claim Mahler as a source of inspiration, and his influence is proving seminal, precisely because he felt both affection and antagonism towards his audience. This suggests dialogue rather than the hostility and fear which have been the norm in the post-war period. Mahler's growing popularity has helped to rescue musical culture from a serious falling-out; an ideological dispute which allowed power politics to infect musical life and which alienated the mainstream public from new music. With some healing of the rift between tonal and atonal composers, Mahler has become a model for any composer who wants to address an audience but has no wish to pander directly to popular taste. Chief among them is the Austrian composer, Kurt Schwertsik who first resisted the onslaught of extreme modernism, before identifying with socialist politics and environmentalism. His music has many Viennese fingerprints, being heterogenous, expressively tonal and wittily neo-classical. His colleague from the so-called Third Viennese School, H.K. Gruber, has also created music with surrealistic humour that seemingly grows out of Mahlerian irony and which sometimes employs a kind of cabaret style. Both composers are indebted to Kurt Weill, the musical collaborator of the left-wing playwright, Bertholt Brecht. Weill successfully blended popular and classical idioms but avoided Mahler's titanic ambition.

There are few serious and successful composers of classical music today who would not acknowledge the importance of Mahler as a figure straddling many opposing aesthetic stances. He can be many things to many people, but he represents a fine example for any artist who aspires to a high level of technical accomplishment and intellectual thoroughness, regardless of musical idiom or tradition. In the music of Philip Sawyers, a contemporary British composer, the influence of Mahler is profoundly felt. The symphony continues in his hands to be a vast psychological landscape where spiritual and emotional conflicts can be resolved, where thematic opposites can find synthesis. The music of another dedicated Mahlerian, David Matthews, also encompasses a wide emotional range. His nine symphonies have the sweep of a grand musical journey that is also a personal pilgrimage, one which follows the same kind of path towards spiritual and creative maturity as that laid out by Mahler.

Mahler and us

If an average listener feels intimidated that, without a deep knowledge of nineteenth century history, philosophy and music, they cannot appreciate Mahler's music, this would be wrong. His music expresses itself with great eloquence and visceral immediacy. When Mahler is being ironical, we can hear it easily enough. His subtler ambiguities are perhaps harder to grasp, and we can be confused by them, but this should not prevent the music from gripping us. Mahler's music works at many levels, and the power of his distinctive voice can carry us through. His symphonic works strive for cohesion and emotional resolution, and that struggle for meaning and finality persists, even if we cannot follow every detail and even if we are, in the end, left with a question mark. Mahler's excesses, his extravagant rhetoric and wilful persistence can be sources of irritation, but the energy and conviction of his music, its range of expression, from intimate confession to public celebration, mean that listening is always memorable and moving. The music feels real to us precisely because it is not pure and abstract but depicts how a real modern person constructs their identity and finds meaning from the complex stream of their perceptions, thoughts and memories. Mahler lived out the conflict between rational idealism; the fruit of The Enlightenment, and a longing for true Nature; the call of the romantic spirit. It is a conflict we experience vividly today, as ancient landscapes are destroyed in pursuit of economic development. The human struggle for survival has been greatly enhanced by science and technology, but it must be balanced with a respect for Nature which grows out of a sense of its spiritual value. Mahler articulates this truth with a relevance which cries out to us.

At a moment in history, when we appear to have become obsessed with theory, system and process, Mahler's music is refreshingly difficult to categorise. Today, for composers and the public, the orthodoxies of modernism or the anarchy of post-modernism seem to be the only choices on offer. This seems an unsatisfactory situation; an all or nothing scenario. Mahler offers us a way out of this impasse. His great achievement is to retain contact with a mainstream music-loving public, even if, at times, he can barely conceal his hostility towards them or is tempted to have a joke at their expense. But this represents a much more positive relationship between the individual and the collective; the channels of communication are open, the tension is creative, ambivalence does not lead to alienation. It is therefore not surprising that audiences of today respond to Mahler's doubt-ridden truth-seeking with enthusiasm, while they dismiss the specious orthodoxies of many other contemporary cultural movements. Mahler's relevance to those currently involved in creative endeavour rests upon his integrity which allowed him to transcend the collapsing values of his time. He questioned orthodoxy but did not dismiss it. He stripped conventions bare to rediscover unchanging universal truths buried in the confusion of a godless age.

Mahler is now accepted as part of our musical culture. He is the archetypal God-seeker struggling to hold on to spiritual values in a materialistic age. In his music, there is nostalgia for a lost paradise, presented to us as a fairy-tale world or the golden age of the Viennese "classical" symphony or some idyllic representation of Nature. But there is also an apocalyptic sensibility; the rhetoric of a prophet who warns the world of

impending doom. Mahler expresses the intimacy and inwardness of a man at prayer, alternately praising the God of beauty and angrily questioning His inexplicable cruelty. In Mahler, doubt must always be overcome; an opposing force which manifests itself in anxiety and the probing scepticism of a highly developed intellect. But he set thinking aside and learned to accept fate by stilling his restless ego.

If we want to understand Mahler, we must not confine him to a particular cultural movement. He was too much of a dreamer to be a modernist, too self-aware to be a romantic; just as he was too subjective to be a classicist and too rooted in tradition to be a post-modernist. He defies explanation in such terms. Mahler is more of an Orpheus for the modern age, seeking to rescue Eurydice from the underworld; to save the soul of Man from the darkness of rational materialism and the relentless forward tread of modernity. He clung to what he always felt, but struggled to believe, that a composer should sing with the voice of true Nature. From the stark witness of the bone flute in *Das klagende Lied* to his expression of enduring love at the close of the Tenth Symphony, Mahler gave voice to his muse. For him, music was a miraculous gift. As he wrote in *Das klagende Lied*, it is “*a song so beautiful that whoever hears it may wish to die*”. Mahler’s life was devoted to the pursuit of such beauty, and his struggle for meaning is also clearly our own. He shows us the limitations of a restless, technologically advanced, patriarchal culture and, at the same time, reassures us, because he ultimately found timeless truths hidden beneath modernity’s unyielding veneer. Mahler has thus given us something of immeasurable worth, for his music envisions an age of Eros, when the feminine qualities of compassion and healing may yet release us from our spiritual confusion.

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