

# Mahler's Ninth Symphony:

personal valediction or Faustian transformation?

by

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## Introduction: a tapestry of meaning

To understand Gustav Mahler, we have to enter his world, a world shaped by the extraordinary events of his life, but also by the tensions of the historical moment, when values were being widely questioned, and when the pace of social change was breathless. During the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Europe was transformed by rapid industrialisation, which created an increasingly urban society, no longer dependent on the cycles of Nature which had defined human culture for millennia. There was also a growing breach with Christianity, the continent's primary form of religion. Darwin's Theory of Evolution, first proposed in *The Origin of Species* (1859), had suggested that man was descended from the apes. This dealt a severe blow to the credibility of the traditional bible story, which told how God created the world in seven days, including the first man and woman, before expelling them from paradise for disobeying his wish that they should not eat from the Tree of Knowledge.

According to the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Christianity's problem was not just its lack of credibility, but that the whole Christian myth had become mired in institutional dogma.<sup>1</sup> Feelings of guilt and shame had turned people into a sheep-like herd, unable to function as free individuals. Nietzsche believed that the culture could be reinvigorated by the tragic spirit of Dionysus, a figure from Greek mythology associated with wine, wildness and blood sacrifice. This pagan deity could challenge the prevailing rationalism of the times by breaking down the puritanical attitudes that were stultifying human potential. According to Nietzsche, the spirit of Apollo, the sun god, had European culture in its grip, valuing intellectual knowledge over instinctive nous, resulting in moral attitudes that were too abstract and rulebound. Apollo's dominance had created a hypocritical society built on the repression of instinctive drives, the exploitation of Nature and mass conformity. In his *Thus spake Zarathustra* (1885), Nietzsche presented the Dionysian 'Superman' as a visionary individual, who places himself above the herd-like masses. He undoubtedly had himself in mind, but also creative geniuses such as the poet Goethe (1749-1832) and Nietzsche's early mentor, Richard Wagner (1813-83).

Under the rule of Apollo, progress was defined by conventional virtue, rationalism, democratic politics and the authority of academia. This led to the debunking of the myths and superstitions of religion and created what we would recognise as the modern world. Many influential thinkers of the day adopted a

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche's contempt for the Christian faith was partly a reaction against his father, who was a Lutheran Pastor, but he also cast himself in the role of a Messianic redeemer. Despite his harsh polemic, he admired Christ as a true individual. His main critique was the way in which Christianity had reduced people to following the herd, who felt only disgust towards their bodily appetites and desires. "*The Christian faith, from the beginning, is sacrifice - the sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of spirit. It is at the same time subjection, self-derision, and self-mutilation.*" **Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future**, Leipzig 1886.

more literal, materialistic understanding of the world, amidst a climate of increasing scepticism, which allowed little space for mystical belief or metaphysical speculation. For artists, this loss of the collective mythic imagination led to a hyper-individualistic response. The romantic movement began to develop as a counterculture, encouraging many artists to seek refuge amidst the sublime beauty of Nature. The romantics began to explore the vast hidden depths of the human psyche as a rich source of creativity and even spiritual renewal. They had only to dream, and all things were possible, yet often their idealistic fantasies served merely to emphasise the tragic reality of human existence. As the romantics grew increasingly aware of the destructive forces that lurked in the human mind, so their art became more tragic in nature. Richard Wagner was in the forefront of diagnosing humanity's ills in his *Ring Cycle* (1874), a sequence of four ambitious operatic works based on Nordic mythology, which revealed the tragic consequences of humanity's lust for power. It was a perspective very much aligned with Nietzsche's long essay, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), which presented tragic art as the only means to renew the culture.<sup>2</sup>



*Goethe in 1828 by J.K. Stieler*

It is worth exploring at this point the potent influence on the German romantic movement of the poet, philosopher and theorist, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. This man of many gifts combined mysticism with enlightenment rationalism, displaying a relentless appetite for life and knowledge. He was Christian in spirit, yet suspicious of church dogmas, remaining open to ancient pagan ideas and medieval symbolism, which found expression through his membership of the Masonic movement. His greatest work is *Faust*, a tragedy written in two parts (1808 & 1832); a classic text for German speakers, telling the tale of the alchemist Heinrich Faust, who makes a pact with the devil in a moment of despair. He rises to a position of great worldly power, only to pay the forfeit with the loss of his life, when he feels he has reached a condition that cannot be bettered. But the play's second part ends in redemption because, having fallen into the depths, Gretchen, the woman he wronged, returns to show that love is the greater force. Goethe's brilliant mythic representation of a fallen man returning to the bosom of Nature, where he discovers divine love at the heart of creation, became an archetype for leading figures such as Wagner, Nietzsche and Mahler. Artists could easily identify with Faust as a nihilistic intellectual longing for faith; not as conventional belief, but as a deep spiritual knowledge learned through life-experience. By embracing the totality of good and evil, light and dark, the human soul slowly grows until it is fit for heaven. For Mahler, there was no greater truth than this. In his worldview, the two great drivers of existence were the Eternal Masculine, which means striving for self-improvement, and the Eternal Feminine, which inspires spiritual growth through a feeling for beauty and love.

Goethe's assertion that an 'enlightened Man' could be in league with the devil, therefore in need of redemption, foreshadowed many of the contradictions of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The period saw the advent of Idealism in philosophy and art, as well as Utopian visions of a new society based on advances in science, technology and medicine. It was believed that moral progress would redeem humanity from those base motives and enforced constraints which caused millions to be trapped in poverty, ignorance and despair.

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<sup>2</sup> '...art approaches, as a redeeming and healing enchantress; she alone may transform these horrible reflections on the terror and absurdity of existence into representations with which man may live. These are the representation of the sublime as the artistic conquest of the awful, and of the comic as the artistic release from the nausea of the absurd.' Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, Chapter 7, Leipzig 1872.

Such idealism had already awoken a spirit of revolution that was leading to the collapse of the old hierarchical order. In 1789, there was the shock of the French Revolution, while 1848 witnessed insurrection across Europe. The tensions between ordinary people and their imperial or national masters continued to bubble and boil, culminating in the conflagration of the First World War in 1914.

In this context, we can understand why Mahler was so preoccupied with resolving the opposition between mysticism and reason, subjective fantasy and objective truth, spirit and matter. This was the monumental task he set himself. He read Goethe, Kant, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (among many others) in the hope of solving the riddles of human existence. Music was Mahler's preferred milieu for this discourse, because it was a language of feeling, capable of expressing transcendence and allowing the individual's interior world to manifest as a psychological narrative. In music's highest forms, such as the symphony, it was able to transform chaos into order and create harmony from the shards of human experience. Mahler believed music could give voice to mankind's highest ethical aspirations and deepest longing for contact with the divine. Truth and beauty, so often foes, could as music be woven into a tapestry of meaning, providing answers to the great questions of our existence. Music could speak soul to soul, stirring compassion through the shared experience of human suffering. Mahler sought nothing less than to take his listeners on a Faustian journey, transforming them from self-seeking materialists into angels with wings.

How then did Mahler present these riddles of existence in musical terms? A good example is found in a pair of songs which many of you will know. *Das himmlische Leben* (The Heavenly Life, 1892), which would later become the finale of his Fourth Symphony, and *Das irdische Leben* (The Earthly Life, 1892-3) both originate from the anthology *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*; a collection of medieval folk poems and allegories published in 1805, which had a profound influence on the German romantic movement. The songs present two contrasted views of human existence. In the first, the heavenly life is a bountiful feast, where nobody takes the devouring of living creatures as food very seriously. The Lamb of Christ is sacrificed and eaten without conscience. All suffering is resolved in the beatific smile of St. Ursula, who acts as a pure spiritual mother, full of love and joyfulness. The human protagonist remains like a child, living in the moment, blissfully unaware of the brutality of death or the guilt associated with conscious being.

Ex. [Das himmlische Leben](#) (Right click the links and open a new tab to avoid closing the document after each example.)

In the song's grisly companion, *Das irdische Leben*, earthly life is sheer misery. The child is needy, even starving to death. Its mother keeps promising that she will bake bread but, by the time it is ready, it is too late. The child, like so many of Mahler's siblings and his own daughter Maria, dies. Nothing justifies this fate. The song's accompaniment spins relentlessly like the millstones that crush corn seeds to flour. It is as if life grinds us to dust before we have a chance to grow. The child lacks not only food, but any kind of love or nurture from a mother who has nothing but excuses to give.

Ex. [Das irdische Leben](#)

These songs tell us that, for Mahler, the riddle is not the egotistical question – why must I die? Rather he asks – why does a loving God, capable of nurture, joy and abundance permit such terrible suffering? Why must a young life end unfulfilled? The death of a child seems to go against any sense of decent value, serving only to stir anger and nihilistic despair. This formulation of the problem of human existence reminds us of the chapter entitled 'Rebellion' in Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879), in which the nihilistic intellectual, Ivan, explains to his brother, Alyosha, who is a devoted monk, his reasons

for wanting to 'return his ticket' for life. Ivan lists countless examples of child abuse to prove that life is cruel, and that humanity deserves only contempt. Alyosha responds to his brother's cynicism with a kiss of compassion, dismissing his one-sided factual assessment and sensing the deep wounds which lay behind it.<sup>3</sup> Dostoyevsky was Mahler's favourite author, and especially this novel impressed him, because it addresses the same existential puzzles which preoccupied the composer. In his musical works, Mahler created a similar opposition between the coldly analytical nihilist and the warm-hearted man of faith. By articulating this inner conflict as the dialectic tension of a symphony, Mahler was able through music to stage a public debate about these fundamental philosophical questions. Is faith justified by experience? Does rationalism inevitably rob us of the enchantment that makes life worthwhile? These questions undoubtedly occur in all of Mahler's major works, but they are presented with no greater poignancy and brutal honesty than in his Ninth Symphony.

## I. Unravelling the tapestry threads

Most of us will be familiar with the unique complexity and ambiguity of Mahler's music. It is at times infuriatingly discursive, yet also tightly organised and coherently symphonic. We are not sure whether we are following a purely musical argument, or something governed by hidden narratives, philosophical ideas and explanatory programmes. As part of this complex tapestry of meaning, Mahler sometimes makes specific references to the music of others and frequently quotes from his own works. Are these references intentional? Is Mahler paying homage to revered figures and iconic works or mocking them in some way? He is often hailed as the first composer to use irony as a technique, placing his music in inverted commas, but we also know that he had an earthy, Germanic sense of humour, and we are sometimes just meant to laugh with genuine affection rather than moral judgement.

If the meaning is not clear, there is always a danger that we may project our own fantasies which may have nothing to do with Mahler. But let us assume that Mahler wanted us to follow the clues in his music, and that a mixture of knowledge, experience and intuition should be enough to reveal its secrets. We have sources in the form of the texts that he used, occasional annotations in the manuscripts, as well as the utterances he made to others. If, from these, we can build up a coherent narrative, then Mahler's ingenious and often perplexing web of sound can be shown to make sense.

For Mahler, the symphony is a narrative illustrating a flow of consciousness. But this is never literally autobiographical as we might find in Richard Strauss's tone poems *Ein Heldenleben* (1899) or the *Sinfonia Domestica* (1904). While Strauss is imaginatively pictorial, we sense the grandiose and extroverted narrative of a bourgeois man confident to tell us about his success as an artist, rather than probing his psyche for hidden motivations. Mahler is by comparison introverted and reflective, using his inner experience as source material for metaphysical speculations about the human condition. He conceives his narrative like a novel by Dostoyevsky. A series of contrasted tableaux draw us into a psychological thriller,

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<sup>3</sup> 'I don't want harmony. Love for humanity, I don't want it. I would rather be left with unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it is beyond our means to pay so much to receive it. So I hasten to give back my entrance ticket and, if I am an honest man, I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It is not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return Him the ticket.' Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett, The Lowell Press, New York 1912.

which will investigate who or what has murdered the soul, and how it can be restored to life. Mahler then sets the fairy tale world of romantic fantasy against the myth-shattering power of the rational mind, so that the argument is often heated. The human individual stands alone, pitted against the overpowering archetypal forces of Nature which operate on a cosmic scale. It is touch and go whether the individual, without the support of institutional religion or a clear tribal identity, shunning the polite conventions of a bourgeois life, will be able to stand his ground.

Before examining the Ninth Symphony in detail, it is necessary first to categorise Mahler's techniques of musical reference, and how these can help solve his philosophical puzzles. At the simplest level, everything Mahler writes in the score can be a clue to intention, including those perplexing instructions he gives to players and conductors. He uses German words that are unusual in a musical context. One such practice is to label a passage (or even a single note) with the word *Keck!* This means cheeky or perky, and we know immediately that Mahler is being humorous and ironic. He wishes that musicians should override their conditioning to play art-music as beautifully as they can. The performer must develop an actor's capacity for characterisation, denying any wish to create an idealised sound world. For example, in the Ninth Symphony's *Ländler* movement, Mahler requires that the music be played *Etwas täppisch und sehr derb*, meaning 'somewhat clumsy (or tapping) and very coarse'. The peasants dancing in this movement are not the idealised projections of urban fantasy, but rough-edged people of the kind Mahler would have known as a child. Again, Mahler wants to suspend the instinct to idealise and beautify the musical content. And yet he is also seeking musical precision and virtuosity at an unprecedented level, posing many questions about how a musician should play the notes in the score.

Mahler often quotes from his own music. Specifically, he liked to allude to songs drawn from his settings of texts from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, or from specific cycles – *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer) the *Rückertlieder* and *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs on the deaths of children). Whole movements in the earlier symphonies are constructed from such songs. The Scherzo from the Second Symphony, for instance, is an elaborated orchestral version of the song *Fischpredigt* (*St. Antony's sermon to the fishes*). Sometimes songs are imported complete, as in the *Urlicht* (Primeval Light) movement of the same work. When this happens, we must engage with the texts, relating them to the broader narrative of the work. Mahler's intention was in these instances clearly conscious, and we are meant to treat the song as articulating an idea or generating a narrative which goes beyond the music itself.

Sometimes Mahler also references music from previous symphonies. The sombre fanfare that opens the Fifth is lifted from the moment in the Fourth's first movement where the spirit of childlike glee collapses into panic.

Ex. [Mahler Fourth Symphony, first movement](#)

Fate intrudes and disrupts the musical flow, using a technique that Mahler will also use in the Ninth. But why the musical reference between the Fourth and the Fifth? A live audience is unlikely to notice the link but, while this will not impair their engagement with the music, it reveals an important fact about Mahler's symphonies. They narrate one single unfolding spiritual development and interconnect in myriad ways. We cannot understand a symphony fully unless we see it in the broader context of adjacent and similar works. In the Fourth Symphony, the trumpet's fanfare signals the impending threat of mortality, acting as a summons to confront the meaning of our lives in a vast and potentially meaningless cosmos. But, in the background, we can also hear the sound of sleighbells, the fool's cap, first presented in the work's opening

bars. We may wonder then how serious this is all meant to be. Is this collapse of confidence the result of an irrational or even justified fear, or is some kind of trickster at work, making us the unfortunate victims of a celestial joke? Heart and head are unable to agree.

Mahler also alludes to works by other composers, although the extent to which these are consciously made is not always certain. The reference may not be just thematic, but also about ambition, form and musical architecture. The Beethovenian symphonic model lies behind many of Mahler's structural and narrative templates. The progress from darkness to light in Beethoven's Fifth provides a model for Mahler's own Fifth and Seventh Symphonies, while the introduction of vocal and choral movements in Mahler's Second, Third and Fourth Symphonies owes a debt to Beethoven's Ninth. The Pastoral Symphony was also highly influential on Mahler with its five movements, Nature-painting and transformational narrative. But real significance derives not from adherence to the source but from how Mahler alters his musical models. The Rondo Finales of the Fifth and Seventh Symphonies bring us light, but in the form of the hustle and bustle of daytime activity. Unlike the Beethoven, these finales ultimately equivocate. In the Rondo of the Fifth, the blissful intimacy of the famous Adagietto is put through the mangle, and the *Wunderhorn* song, *Lob des hohen Verstands* (In praise of high intellect), which provides the main thematic material, depicts a singing competition between a cuckoo and a nightingale judged by an ass. The movement thus seems to mock the world of critics and partisan camps contending for prestige and power in the musical world. Meanwhile, in the Rondo of the Seventh, the dark shadows of the work's nocturnal heart persist as an irritant until almost the very end.

The existence of a background model, such as Beethoven's Fifth, allows Mahler to invert it with powerful effect, as in the tragic denouement of the Sixth Symphony. Inversion is also subtly present in Mahler's Eighth. Compared to Beethoven's Ninth, Mahler's great Choral Symphony does not end in a shout of collective joy but with the glorious redemption of an individual man. Yet the effect of hearing many exultant voices in the *Chorus Mysticus* suggests a grand spiritual ambition that is still derived from Beethoven, the first composer to express idealism in music.

Other references in Mahler to Bruckner, Berlioz, Wagner, Liszt, Bizet and myriad others may be no more than unconscious reminiscences showing us that Mahler was bound to a particular musical tradition and thoroughly familiar with the operatic and symphonic repertoire of the period. Yet there has to be a warning here. When, for example, Mahler alludes to a work such as Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* Symphony (1893), which shares a similar movement structure to Mahler's Ninth, it does not guarantee a specific extra-musical meaning. We have to look at the context. Does this association make us change our view of the work? In this instance, we can say that Mahler has alluded to another tragic symphony famous for ending in utter defeat, and he must surely have absorbed the dramatic transitions between movements which allow Tchaikovsky to grip the listener's attention. But we should also note that Mahler's Ninth does not end with the same sense of nihilistic despair, while his middle movements go well beyond Tchaikovsky's subversion of conventional symphonic structure.

Sometimes, as we listen to Mahler, we find ourselves making a connection that only we can hear, yet it may still be valid for our own understanding. We are now entering the realm of subjective speculation, of course, not fact, but such a 'hunch' may still unlock an insight. While spotting quotations is always a good game to play, we may find that others are not easily persuaded that a reference is anything more than coincidence, or we may exaggerate the significance of what is in effect a common cliché of the musical language. In addition, Mahler's musical fingerprints can be found on every note that he composed, so that

finding characteristic melodic gestures, rhythmic quirks and other musical techniques may have no special meaning beyond telling us that we are listening to Mahler's unique personal voice.

Finally, we have to accept that in Mahler's work, there may be multiple sources, which may be musical, literary or drawn from his personal experience. The symbolism associated with the death of children provides a good example. Mahler had endured infant mortality at first hand, but also through the poetry of Friederich Rückert and the writings of Dostoyevsky. When Mahler wrote his song cycle, the *Kindertotenlieder*, experience and imagination came together, creating a thematic well for his subsequent symphonic works from which he could draw. But the musical symbols extend in meaning beyond their original source. As we know by now, the deaths of children, in Mahler's imaginative world, also represent lost innocence, thwarted potential and the essentially tragic nature of human existence. Mahler's symbols thus gather meaning into clusters, held together by dreamlike narratives which do not conform to a single interpretation. Rather these gathered images generate fields of meaning which are not fully conceptualised, and the music derives from deeply reflected memory, addressing feeling rather than intellect.

So, in making judgements about meaning in Mahler's music, we have to accept a degree of uncertainty. The best we can do is to apply some tests of authenticity, so that any subjective response is kept in bounds. A musical reference must:

- be more than our own purely subjective response
- be audible and recognisable by reasonably informed listeners
- make sense in the musical and narrative context
- reflect Mahler's wider belief-system
- never be restricted by a single interpretation

The question of conscious or unconscious intent matters less, if we apply these principles, and if we accept that there is no need to draw closed conclusions. The richness of this music comes from its ambiguity, allowing it to function as any combination of the pictorial, symbolic or philosophical. The music may include and yet transcend all of them. This reflects our experience of consciousness in real time. Meaning is fluid, and our sense of reality is not as fixed as we like to imagine. The flow – between subject and object, inner and outer perception, between spirit and matter – is dynamic and creative. Only the ego attaches to and projects upon something we believe to be permanently fixed. Music can express purposeful ambiguity as no other artform and, in Mahler's hands, music allows us to intuit a more complete sense of reality.



## II. Mahler's Ninth Symphony – biographical context

We can now begin to address the question before us. To what extent is Mahler's Ninth and last completed symphony a personal valediction, or is there something more than a heart-rending 'farewell to life' expressed by its compelling narrative? To resolve this question, we need to examine the events of Mahler's life in the period that precedes the symphony's composition during the summer of 1909.



The events that lead us to the Ninth began to unfold in 1907, a fateful time for Mahler and his family. At the start of the year, Mahler was in the prime of life. Aged forty-six, he was the most famous conductor in the world, holding Europe's most prestigious musical position as Director of the Vienna Imperial Opera. He had a beautiful wife, Alma, who was almost twenty years his junior. She had given birth to two daughters whom Mahler adored. The composer had also just completed his Eighth Symphony, a grand choral work that was full of optimism. Outwardly, his life could not have seemed better. But then, as the summer advanced, his beloved elder daughter Maria (affectionately known as Putzi) contracted scarlet fever and diphtheria. Within a matter of weeks, on 11 July, the four-year old was dead.

Afterwards, Mahler could barely speak of the trauma, which included having to witness a tracheotomy performed on the little girl to assist her breathing. The experience must have been a bitter reminder of the many siblings Mahler had lost during childhood. Eight of his thirteen siblings had died in childbirth or at a young age, while his brother Otto, also a gifted musician, committed suicide in 1895. Even by the standards of the time, this was a terrible burden of grief and suffering for one person to bear, and it represents a familiarity with the death of infants which we would mostly not recognise in the modern world.

Mahler's preoccupation with child mortality was thus longstanding, even before he lost his own daughter. Indeed, between 1901-4, he composed a song cycle on the subject, his *Songs on the Deaths of Children*, setting texts by Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866), a poet and orientalist who himself had lost two daughters to scarlet fever. Despite their intense beauty and poignancy, with hindsight, these songs can seem morbid and dangerously prophetic. But, for Mahler, the suffering of innocents lay at the heart of his lifelong quest for meaning. He needed to find significance in these short unfulfilled lives, if he were to make sense of his own privileged existence. Success had burdened him with survivor guilt, adding to an incessant drive to prove himself, as if he were compensating for the un-lived potential of his siblings.

In the wake of the tragic loss of his daughter Maria in July 1907, Mahler was himself diagnosed with a long-term heart condition which, while falling short of an immediate death sentence, reminded him that his days were numbered. He was obliged to curtail activities that were physically exhausting, including the long walks that had always sustained him. The once visionary superman, with boundless energy and a will of iron, was suddenly an invalid. Yet, it is worth noting that this was not the first time Mahler had been seriously ill. During 1900, after a bowel haemorrhage which required surgery, Mahler had, for a moment, feared that his life was over. We can hear the impact of that brush with death in the contrast between the boisterous humour of the Fourth Symphony and the tempestuous funeral march that opens the Fifth. A new visceral edge was apparent in his music after 1900, which allowed him to express dark emotions with greater intensity and to dispense with sung texts or elaborate programmes to explain himself. Later,

the Ninth Symphony would emerge as among his most disciplined and concise symphonic music, also lacking any programmatic description and with few overt clues as to its precise meaning.

But, returning to 1907, there were yet further troubles for Mahler. Throughout the course of the year, his position as Director of the Vienna Opera grew increasingly untenable. The press attacked him relentlessly, motivated often by antisemitic spite. There were constant intrigues among musicians who despised his authoritarian ways. After ten years in the post, Mahler had made many enemies who tried to resist his radical reforms. In April 1907, Mahler agreed with his immediate superior within the imperial government, Prince Montenuovo, that he would resign, although this news was not at this point made public. By August of that year, the conductor Felix Mottl was available to take over, and Mahler's departure was soon public knowledge. He made his final appearance at the Vienna Opera on 15 October in a performance of his favourite stage work, Beethoven's *Fidelio*. Not surprisingly, it is a work about liberation from tyranny and the sacrificial love of a devoted wife.

While Mahler's exit from the Vienna Opera was deeply wounding, he was now free to pursue a career as a conductor in the United States, and he wished also to concentrate more on composition. He would soon be saying 'Farewell' to Vienna; a city of bitter-sweet memories but which was his spiritual home. It had nurtured and confounded him as an artist. Its cultural importance had enhanced his reputation, as he had in turn maintained the City's unrivalled central position in the world of classical music.

The events of 1907 had left Mahler in an anxious and exhausted condition, facing a rupture with the past. After a spectacular 'farewell' performance of the 'Resurrection Symphony', Mahler and his wife left Vienna, travelling by ship from Cherbourg to New York in December of that difficult year. New York was fast becoming the world's first truly modern city, characterised by technological innovations, limitless ambition, extreme wealth and luxury. The Mahlers lodged in a suite at the Hotel Majestic on the fringes of Central Park, surrounded by the increasingly lofty skyline of Manhattan.

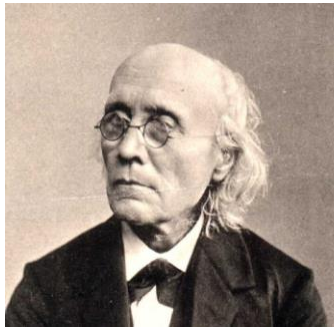


*Hotel Majestic, Central Park, New York City  
(demolished in 1929)*

Here was the 'New World' as Europeans imagined it, a place of unprecedented opportunity and fresh starts. Like Dvořák before him, Mahler's reaction was ambivalent. The sense of renewed purpose he found in the United States was revivifying, but the brashness and naked commercialism of the culture was alien. It stirred homesickness in Mahler, awakening a longing for what was now far distant, so that we can imagine him recalling his past life in Vienna and viewing his provincial family roots with a sentimental glow. He would have felt nostalgia for the poverty and passions of his student days, when he was a member of the radical Pan-

German Pernerstorfer Group with its allegiance to Wagner and Nietzsche. What had his life become? His former socialist idealism, born from his wish that all should have justice and opportunity, had faded away. Now he was living in a luxury hotel suite in the wealthiest city in the world, where he was treated like royalty. Had Mahler forgotten his humble roots and youthful passion?

Mahler's wish to reconnect with his past was symptomatic of his feeling uprooted, and his homesickness influenced the music that he wrote during this period. After returning to Austria in the spring of 1908, the Mahler family took up residence in the lake resort of Toblach for the summer. They had abandoned their



G. T. Fechner

former villa at Maiernigg, because of its association with the death of their daughter, Maria. With a sense of calm restored, it was during these months that Mahler began to sketch a new work, a symphonic song cycle based on German translations of ancient Chinese poetry. It would become *Das Lied von der Erde*, The Song of the Earth. Mahler's thoughts once again turned to mortality, seeking to live at peace with the prospect of death, speculating also on the reality of the afterlife. The writings of the German psychophysicist and philosopher G.T. Fechner (1801-87) encouraged Mahler to believe that, after death, the soul would be able to move freely through the natural landscape. There would be a dissolving of the separation

between spirit and matter, which Fechner believed were two aspects of the same reality. Seeking to recover the idealism of his youth, in September 1908, Mahler travelled to Moravia, near his hometown, to complete the work, before departing for another short season in the United States.

It was not long after Mahler's second trip to America that he decided to contact an old friend from his student days, Siegfried Lipiner<sup>4</sup> (1856-1911), someone of whom his wife Alma did not approve. However, Lipiner had been an important figure in Mahler's early spiritual development during the late 1870s, when they were both members of the radical Pan-German Pernerstorfer group. At this time, Lipiner had introduced Mahler to Nietzsche's iconoclastic writings, as well as the mystical philosophy of his former teacher, G. T. Fechner. Since that time, whenever Mahler faced personal crisis, he had sought Lipiner's counsel, including after his near fatal haemorrhage in 1900. In the Spring of 1909, as Mahler again struggled with the prospect of his own demise, he once more sought the spiritual counsel of his mentor. By this time, Lipiner was himself terminally ill, but Mahler considered him a man of firm faith and profound insight, able to discuss life after death.



Siegfried Lipiner

The nature of these conversations indicates what was on the composer's mind as he began writing the Ninth Symphony that summer, and Lipiner's ideas about spirituality were a significant influence upon the form and content of the work. Indeed, from the very start of Mahler's career, Lipiner had provided him with a template for being a creative artist, convincing Mahler that art could come to the rescue of religious belief. Indeed, in 1878 Lipiner had even discussed the issue face to face with Wagner who, at that stage of his life, was re-considering matters of faith and the purpose of art, culminating in his festival opera *Parsifal* (1882). Lipiner found much to admire in the work, since he had previously advocated that the

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<sup>4</sup> For more information about the importance of Lipiner's relationship with Mahler, see Caroline A. Kita, **Jewish Difference and the Arts in Vienna: Composing Compassion in Music and Biblical Theater**, Indiana University Press, 2019, and her article **Myth, Metaphysics and Cosmic Drama: The Legacy of Faust in Lipiner's Hippolytos and Mahler's Eighth Symphony**, Monatshefte, Volume 105, Number 4, Winter 2013, University of Wisconsin.

artist should be a priestly figure ministering divine wisdom to the masses, using tragic art to awaken spiritual awareness, compassion and cultural change.

By contrast, Nietzsche considered *Parsifal* to be a betrayal of Wagner's status as the principal 'Dionysian' artist of his day, peddling instead pseudo-religious theatre to a cult following. But Lipiner did not agree with Nietzsche's aggressive attack on both Wagner and the Christian religion, even if he had reservations about Wagner's antisemitic posturing. Lipiner, like Mahler, was Jewish by origin, although he developed an unorthodox Christian faith. In Lipiner's view, the God of the Old Testament was judgemental and unsympathetic towards his human followers. It was the figure of Christ who had transformed the image of God into that of a loving father willing to share in human suffering. Abandoning his Jewish roots and not wishing to follow Catholic dogma, Lipiner wanted tragic art to become the bridge between the free-thinking individual and the universal truths of the great religions.

During the Spring of 1909, Mahler's friend and protégé, the conductor Bruno Walter, acted as a go-between to set up several meetings between Mahler and Lipiner. The pair had been estranged due to a rift in 1902, in part caused by Alma's intolerance of Mahler's friends from his earlier life. The conversations between Mahler and his old friend were immediately therapeutic, as Walter observed:

*He [Mahler] could no longer free himself through art from the metaphysical questioning which occupied him ever more urgently and more disturbingly. A questioning search for God, for the meaning and goal of our existence, and for the reason for the unspeakable suffering in the whole of creation, darkened his soul. He took this crisis of the heart... to his dearest friend, the poet Siegfried Lipiner. Trivial causes had separated the friends for years; he now forcefully sought him out and demanded that this clear and lofty spirit should share with him the certainty of the view of the world in which he found peace. The joy with which Mahler spoke to me of those conversations will always be to me a happy and touching memory.<sup>5</sup>*

Life here imitates art, since the last song of *Das Lied von der Erde, Der Abschied* (The Farewell) concerns the final meeting of two friends before death separates them. This intimate moment also proves to be an axis of profound transformation when Nature's renewing powers cleanse the weary soul from grief and suffering. By the time of his meetings with Lipiner, *Das Lied* was a finished work, and Mahler was already contemplating writing a Ninth Symphony. It is a tale frequently told that Mahler wrote *Das Lied* merely to 'give the hounds of heaven the slip', fearing that he was tempting fate to write a work following in the footsteps of Beethoven, Schubert and Bruckner, all of whom wrote nine symphonies then died. One wonders if such a story is true, or whether this is merely an example of Mahler's ironical humour. He, of all people, knew that fate could not be cheated. Perhaps encouraged by Lipiner, he felt at last able to overcome any fear, and could therefore proceed with his own Ninth Symphony. In a letter to Bruno Walter from around this time, Mahler wrote:

*There is so much, too much I could say about myself that I cannot even try to begin, I have gone through so much during the last year and a half that I can scarcely speak of it. How can I attempt to describe such an overwhelming crisis? I can see everything in such a new light; am so much in transformation that it would not surprise me to find myself in a new body (like Faust in the final scene). I am more avid for life than ever...strange, when I hear music – even when I myself am conducting it – I hear quite definite answers to all my questions and am wholly clear and sure. Or, in reality, I seem to feel clearly there are no questions at all.*

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<sup>5</sup> Bruno Walter, **Gustav Mahler, Recollection and Reflection**, Vienna 1936, revised 1958, trans. Lotte Walter Lindt

By the end of the summer, the Ninth Symphony was completed in short score, and we know that the Adagio Finale was fully orchestrated in September 1909. The middle movements gave Mahler more trouble, and he may have drawn them together while in the USA later in the year. The work would not be performed in Mahler's lifetime, but its completion marked a distinct moment of recovery from the traumas of 1907. In the US, that autumn, Mahler began socialising again and exploring New York, including a visit to the famous medium Madame Palladino for a séance, during which Mahler was struck by a mandolin on the forehead. His fascination with death continued, although his wife reports that his initial curiosity about such ghostly phenomena declined into scepticism as his rational mind took over.



*Bruno Walter 1912*

Mahler had grand plans to expand his repertoire and to restructure the New York Philharmonic; hardly the actions of a man contemplating an imminent end. His statements about the Ninth Symphony at that time did not suggest that he was writing a last work that would be different from all that had gone before. Indeed, he compared the work to one of his most conservative and concise works, the Fourth Symphony, a point we shall explore later. Mahler was soon also planning a Tenth Symphony, and he gave the first performance of the mighty Eighth in Munich in September 1910. By that time, Mahler was suffering from bacterial infections due to his long-term heart condition. They caused him constant sore throats that slowly were weakening him. His marriage too was in further trouble, as Alma began an affair with the young architect Walter Gropius. There was to be one more trip to the US, before illness and exhaustion caught up with Mahler. He made a weary final journey back to Vienna, where he died on 18 May 1911.

## Part II: The music of Mahler's Ninth Symphony

### i. Andante Comodo

The Ninth Symphony received a posthumous performance by the Vienna Philharmonic under the baton of Bruno Walter in June 1913, where it made a striking impression on those still mourning the composer's loss. Alban Berg attended the premiere and had also examined the piano arrangement prior to the performance. He considered the first movement to be the finest Mahler ever composed. He wrote to his wife Helene:

*...The first movement is the most glorious thing Mahler ever wrote. It expresses an extraordinary love of this Earth, for Nature; the longing to live on it in peace, to enjoy it completely, to the very heart of one's being, before death comes, as irresistibly it does. The whole movement is based on a premonition of death, which is constantly recurring. All earthly dreams end here; that is why the tenderest passages are followed by tremendous climaxes like new eruptions of a volcano. This, of course, is most obvious in the place where the premonition of death becomes certain knowledge, where, in the most profound and anguished love of life, death breaks in 'with the utmost power'; with the blood-curdling viola and the violin solo, and those sounds of chivalry: death in knight's armour. After that, further resistance is useless, and what follows seems to me a kind of resignation – but always thinking of 'the Beyond', which appears in the misterioso passage, as if in the very thin air above the mountains.... And once more, for the last time, Mahler turns toward the Earth – no longer to face battle and do great deeds, from which he, as it were, shakes himself free, just as he did in Das Lied von der Erde...becoming solely and totally at one with Nature...<sup>6</sup>*

Berg heard in the music Mahler's struggle with death, represented as a hero battling a formidable dark opponent. Mortality's shadow also prevents the full enjoyment of life. At the moment of greatest crisis, when death seems to shatter everything, in Berg's words, Mahler 'shakes himself free', as if spiritually transformed. Here is a link to the Faustian imagery of the Eighth Symphony. The alchemy of inner transformation relies upon human suffering to strip away all that is superfluous, as we are reshaped by the redemptive power of divine love. Berg observes little distinction between the ecstatic release at the end of *Das Lied von der Erde* and the peaceful resolution of the Ninth's first movement. He imagines in both works that Mahler regains a full appetite for earthly existence, although he hints that this appetite is somehow purer than before. The Ninth Symphony, of course, does not end with its first movement, but with an Adagio finale often considered to be stoical and resigned to death, rather than looking to 'the Beyond', as Berg describes it.

It is easy to infer from the death-haunted quality of these late pieces that Mahler was in valedictory mood, solely preoccupied with his own imminent end. Yet, from his earliest works, Mahler's metaphysical outlook remained surprisingly consistent. He had developed a sophisticated belief-system during his student days in the late 1870s, and the events of his life did little to alter it. He was certainly challenged by personal upheavals, but writing music often saved him by restoring psychological order and reaffirming his values. Mahler's personal experience, if anything, deepened his beliefs by testing them. So, while mortality and hostile fate concerned Mahler, in his music they are paradoxically harbingers of spiritual transformation. We can observe this in the Fourth Symphony which confronts infantile fears to arrive at

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<sup>6</sup> Alban Berg, **Letters to his wife**, Faber & Faber, London 1971, edited and translated by Bernard Brun

a child's view of heaven. In the work's slow movement, death is changed from the bogey-man fiddler, 'Freund Hein', who scares children in the work's scherzo, into a source of serene sleep. Mahler told his friend Bruno Walter that in the slow movement, he had wanted to depict a medieval tomb upon which was a carved figure of the departed in a state of eternal rest. Death is here not associated with horror but with release from life's difficulties and uncertainties. Even a work as grim in content as the song cycle *Kindertotenlieder* leads to transcendence. The light of a dead child's soul becomes a pointer towards the heavenly realm, so that the music ends with a consoling lullaby.

Taking a lead from Alban Berg, the first movement of the Ninth can be characterised as a conflict between the joy of being and the fear of non-being. The movement's grand architecture and heroic striving remind us of the tragic finale of the Sixth Symphony, with its two (or sometimes three) hammer blows of fate. In the Ninth, we first hear a subdued and syncopated fate motif, from which emerge long stretches of slow march music in the manner of Wagner's *Parsifal*. Yet many commentators have identified the lilting theme that develops out of this understated opening to be derived from the Viennese waltz, *Freut euch des Lebens* (Enjoy Life!) by Johann Strauss II.

Ex. [Opening of the Andante Commodo](#) (1.12-3.02)

The flow of lyrical material is soon interrupted by sinister fanfares that lead to a bitter struggle; a pattern that occurs three times. On each occasion, the fate motif returns with increasing force, until the imagined hero is defeated. There are no hammer blows in the Ninth, although the dramatic technique has much the same effect.

Compared to the Sixth's finale, which is much more episodic in its symmetries and thematic groupings, the first movement of the Ninth achieves a remarkable seamless fluency. Its fate motto is more succinct than the comparable figure in the Sixth, thus easier to integrate and develop as part of the movement's motivic tapestry, while the slower general tempo allows for smoother transitions, a technique learnt from Wagner.



Fate motif, Symphony No.6



Fate motif, Symphony No.9



Funereal tread, Symphony No.7

But the most striking difference between the Sixth's finale and the Ninth's first movement is how they end. In the Sixth, the defeat of the hero feels permanent, and the mournful final bars conclude with a brutal statement of the work's fate motif. In the Ninth, the moment of crisis is transformative, and the slow march recapitulates with increasing purpose, before the movement ends in the serenity of death.

There has been much discussion about the origins of the fate motif in the opening bars of the Ninth Symphony. Leonard Bernstein states in his famous Harvard lecture of 1973<sup>7</sup>, *'the opening bars of this symphony are an imitation of the arrhythmia of his [Mahler's] failing heartbeat.* ' I am not convinced, since the beat is hesitant but not irregular. The figure has more in common with the dotted rhythm at the opening of Mahler's Seventh Symphony (See above), which conveys a funereal tread with a minimal gesture. The Ninth's first movement similarly grows out of compact and malleable musical ideas - the syncopated fate motto, a pentatonic bell-like harp motif, and a sighing appoggiatura which seems to invite that the word *Leb'wohl* (farewell) should be attached to it. Indeed, Mahler scribbled *Leb'wohl* twice in the final manuscript (at bar 436), although it is noteworthy that he did not place any such emotive comments at the movement's start. We should not assume that this motive has a fixed meaning, for we can also associate it with the ecstatic conclusion of *Das Lied von der Erde*, where the melodic gesture feels consoling and is sung to the word *'Ewig'* (forever).

However, I am going to make a radical suggestion as to the possible origin of the motivic seeds in these opening bars, namely the fourth and fifth vocal movements of the Third Symphony. In that work, Mahler's atmospheric setting of Nietzsche's *Midnight Song* from his *Also sprach Zarathustra* forms the fourth movement. After a mysterious introduction, the solo voice sings *'O Mensch!'* (Oh Man) on a solemnly chanted A. The orchestral accompaniment with its extreme high and low pitches implies a vast space, an abyss below and the infinite heavens above. Human existence is held in the tension between these opposites. The voice then shifts to an F-sharp falling to an E, issuing a warning to humankind, *'Gib' Acht'* (Take heed). Nietzsche's poem goes on to tell us how humanity must inevitably suffer before we can know the eternal joy that wills our existence.

[Midnight Song, Symphony No.3](#) (59.56- 1.01.52)

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<sup>7</sup> Leonard Bernstein's six Harvard lectures, **The Unanswered Question**, were given during 1973 in his role as the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry. One lecture focused on Mahler's Ninth Symphony in which Bernstein stated, *'Mahler saw three kinds of death. First his own, imminent death, of which he was intensely aware...And second, he saw the death of tonality, which for him meant the death of music itself, the music as he knew it and loved it...His third and most important vision: the death of society, of our Faustian culture.'* However, this pessimistic analysis was not entirely justified. I can find little to suggest that the symphony anticipates the death of tonality, since the musical language is firmly rooted in the traditional use of keys. The evidence also supports a more nuanced view of these late works and their sense of finality. While Faustian striving may cease at the end of the Ninth, for Mahler, such a moment of repose was a springboard to further creative endeavour. The whole lecture can be read here: [Bernstein on Mahler's Ninth](#)



Mahler 9 - Andante Commodo

Leb-wohl

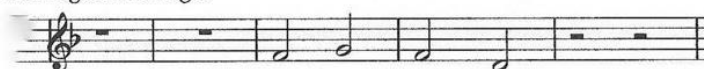


Mahler 3, Midnight Song

Gib Acht



Es sungen drei Engel Bimm Bamm Bimm Bamm



These pitches are the same as the fate motto and the sighing 'Leb'wohl' (farewell) motive from which the first movement of the Ninth grows. The melodic fragment played by the harp, in response to the fate motif is also a familiar Mahlerian fingerprint, reminding us of the morning bells that ring out 'Bimm, Bamm' sung by angelic children's voices in the Third Symphony. *Es sungen drei Engeln'* (Three angels sang) is the vocal movement that follows Nietzsche's dark night of the soul, which depicts the awakening of faith and a penitential plea for forgiveness.<sup>8</sup>

Ex. [Es sungen drei Engeln](#) (1.09.14-1.10.20)

Indeed, bell-like sounds become more important as the first movement of the Ninth unfolds, reminding us we are being called to the spiritual path. At the journey's beginning, Mahler hints by the subtlest of means that humanity should 'Take Heed', since our longing for eternal joy will lead us to much pain and suffering. This invitation to a fateful rite of passage inevitably reminds us of Wagner's *Parsifal*, and Mahler would surely have wanted us to make that connection. At various points in the movement, we hear echoes of the opera, especially the work's recurrent slow march music and the sound of bells. recalling the famous 'Verwandlung' (Transformation) music from Act 1. This stirring orchestral episode anticipates Parsifal's journey to enlightenment and kingship, as something preordained and mystically led. Just before this music is heard in the opera, Parsifal describes how he feels that he is travelling a great distance and yet is hardly moving. He has left the realm of earthly matter. Gurnemanz, his guardian, explains 'Here, time becomes space', suggesting that in the deep psyche, time no longer exists, and it is here that our spiritual destiny is revealed.

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<sup>8</sup> Mahler's setting of the *Midnight Song* refrains from any literal tolling of the midnight bell by contrast with Richard Strauss's Nietzschean tone-poem, *Also sprach Zarathustra*. It is worth noting Nietzsche's ambivalence towards bells. There is the infamous aphorism 628 in **Human, All too Human**, where the sound of bells reminds him of the insignificance of the human life and the childish fiction of religion. But he was also aware that the bell could provide passage to the infinite. In Chapter 58 of **Thus spake Zarathustra**, The Great Longing, he writes 'O my soul, I have given thee new names and gay-coloured playthings, I have called thee "Fate" and "the Circuit of circuits" and "the Navel-string of time" and "the Azure bell."' He thus identifies the blue of the cloudless heavens with a bell-like resonance, symbolising transcendence and the soul's longing for eternity.

Ex. [Parsifal, Act 1](#) (59.42-1.04.48)

In the first movement of the Ninth, after the third and most devastating attack by the dark opponent, Mahler finally signals that the battle is over. He instructs the orchestra to play *Schwer wie ein Kondukt* – heavily, like a funeral procession. The hero is being buried, as so often in Mahler, but the inference is again that a transformation is taking place. At this moment, we hear the real sound of bells, echoing the passage in Act III of *Parsifal* when Gurnemanz hears the bells that tell him the appointed hour has come, when Parsifal must heal Amfortas, the wounded leader of the knights of the Holy Grail, and then assume his role as their new King.

Ex. [Parsifal, Act 3](#) (3.29.06-3.33.42)

In the symphony, we know at last where we are going, marching inexorably towards the greatest transformation of all, as death is overcome and even celebrated.

Ex. [Mahler 9, Andante Commodo, recapitulation](#) (18.05-20.46)

But, as Berg observed, the final *misterioso* section of the movement is a return to Nature, now revealed to be full of numinous meaning. Birdsong and forest murmurs weave a complex backdrop of counterpoint, while the human presence becomes sweet and tender. There are resonances here with the Good Friday Music from the final act of *Parsifal*, where Wagner associates the renewal of Spring with the Easter story. As Mahler's music draws us towards the sleep of death, its final note stands out. The distinctive colouring of a high cello harmonic and piccolo glimmer like a distant star restored to the vastness of the cosmos.

Ex. [Mahler 9, Andante Commodo, ending](#) (24.00- close)

If we draw all this imagery together, we have the depiction of a human life, from the first stirrings of consciousness to its end, framed by ineluctable fate. The music speaks prophetically of the necessity of human suffering, although it is our longing for joy that draws us towards the divine light. When death comes, it is at first a terrible blow but also marks a transition to another level of being. As the ego relinquishes its control, the organic wholeness of Nature becomes more and more apparent. Like Parsifal's wanderings, Mahler's Faustian journey comprises a series of tests which, once endured, bring healing and a restored relationship to the spiritual realm. In the Ninth's first movement, Mahler restates what he had already shown in his Third Symphony, that suffering is the winter that precedes spring, leading us step by step towards a compassionate God who is alive in Nature.

## ii. *Im Tempo eines gemächlichen Ländlers* (In the tempo of a leisurely of rustic dance)

After such a lengthy, dramatic and apparently complete first movement, the question occurs, why did Mahler need to write anything more? But we must remember that this is a symphony, and a symphony is a dialectical form which demands that tensions are generated and resolved. Using *Parsifal* as a model, the Ninth's first movement has narrated a struggle with primitive fears in the human psyche. The story is told as a myth, outside of time and the material world. But now, in the symphony's two middle movements, the listener is wrenched back into the real world, as Mahler presents an alternative narrative, one which silences soulful and mythic voices, and which offers the listener no spiritual comfort. It is as if Ivan Karamazov has entered the room to destroy any vestige of hope and good feeling.

In the Ländler movement, which begins in an apparently simple C major, we might initially believe that we have been transported to some prelapsarian world, where peasants sing and dance, content in a rural landscape far away from the fleshpots of Vienna. But, as this complex movement unfolds, nothing is what it seems. Very soon, the complex rhythms, irregular accents and chromatic inflections start to disrupt any sense of the picturesque. What appears quaint becomes increasingly vulgar and grotesque. The movement develops two groups of country dances contrasted by a slower more waltz-like episode. Everything is subject to tortuous development, infusing the thematic material with greater subjectivity and sentimentality. The sighing appoggiatura figure from the first movement makes an appearance at bar 219 as the music assumes a schmalzier tone.

Ex. [Ländler, sighing motif](#) (30.48-32.21)

Once again, we are invited to feel an ambiguous mixture of delight and foreboding. Eventually, the chattering counterpoints and chromatic harmonies simply smash the movement to pieces, so that it ends in disintegration, fleeting gestures of dance-like movement that can find no fluency.

Ex. [Ländler, final bars of coda](#) (39.09-close)

The technique is not new. We have heard this kind of sardonic fragmentation in the shadowy Scherzo from the Seventh Symphony. As there, in the Ninth, the satirical tone, which anticipates the sound world of Shostakovich, embeds itself, achieving a kind of normality. But the distortion is like an addiction that demands greater and greater intensity to maintain the same shocking impact. The rootless whole tone harmonies and octave displacements generate manic intensity, demanding that musicians play with great virtuosity and physical effort. Yet, while Mahler wants the music to be played correctly, he does not want it to sound beautiful. He undermines the basic tenet of art music, that it should aspire to an aesthetic ideal. The forces unleashed threaten to break the symphony as a form of ordered expression.

### **iii. Rondo Burleske**

Matters do not improve in the Rondo Burleske. We know that Mahler dedicated the movement to ‘my friends in Apollo’, by which he meant the world of critics, academics and other conservative commentators who wilfully misrepresented him. Could this movement also be Mahler’s revenge upon those who ousted him from the Vienna Opera? If so, he portrays them as aggressive and fanatical, destroying the beautiful, and mocking anything spiritual or reflective. Reference to Apollo might immediately make us think of Nietzsche. As enemies of Dionysus, Mahler accuses his detractors of lacking a true understanding of music as a medium of the tragic sensibility. We know from his conversations with Siegfried Lipiner over the years that Mahler was committed to creating Dionysian art to purge fear and awaken compassion among the masses. But the risk here is that this savage music infects us with its brutality and scathing cynicism.

From the very start of the Rondo, which is in effect a quick march, we hear a mash-up of fragments from Mahler’s own music, as well as references to the popular music of the day. The opening bars conflate the Scherzo of the Fifth Symphony and the same work’s angry second movement which, like the Rondo Burleske, is in the key of A minor.

Ex. [Mahler, Fifth Symphony, Scherzo](#) (0.00-0.30)

Ex. [Mahler, Fifth Symphony, 2nd movement](#) (0.00-1.15)

In the Burleske itself, there are plenty of unprepared dissonances as the counterpoints collide, exaggerated by the brittle and brutal orchestration, so that nothing seems to cohere or even attempts to seek harmony.

Ex. [Rondo Burleske, opening](#) (41.07-43.03)

Mahler had already used contrapuntal texture to depict the hustle and bustle of the world. The Scherzo of the Second Symphony is a good example. Here the contrapuntal lines at times sound like a Brandenburg Concerto, so that the impact on modern ears is rather tame. Mahler wanted to convey a feeling of something motoric that prevents subjective feeling, reflection and inner stillness. He described the movement as a depiction of the ‘ever-moving, never-resting, never comprehensible bustle of existence.’ If, in the Second Symphony, Mahler’s instinct to make music beautiful prevented him from expressing a true sense of spiritual emptiness, in the Rondo Burleske, he holds nothing back, so that the world’s noise and fury silence the soul with violent intensity.

As the movement progresses, we hear a badly distorted version of the *Weibermarsch* or Women’s March from Franz Lehár’s *Die Lustige Witwe* - The Merry Widow (1905), a frivolous operetta which Mahler had secretly enjoyed. But the march is an ensemble piece during which a group of men express their confusion about women, who never seem to be pleased. The telling phrase is ‘*Niemals kennt doch an Seele und Leib*’ – ‘One never knows them body and soul’. Mahler might even have been thinking of Alma, but the key point is the absence of a grand narrative, the cosmic dimension of Eternal Masculine and Eternal Feminine, which has been reduced to the trivia of ordinary human relations.

I have also spotted among the thematic fragments a hint of a picturesque work by the French composer, Chabrier. The *Danse Villageoise* is from his *Suite Pastorale*, a popular orchestral work from the late 1880s.

Ex. [Chabrier, Danse Villageoise](#) (0.00-1.35)

One may or may not hear a clear link with the Mahler in this instance, and we would be right to ask why would Mahler reference such a slight work? But, once again, we sense that the bourgeois attitude to Nature, which treats it as merely picturesque, is being exposed. It is the absence of deeper meaning that justifies its inclusion, as Mahler adds to his list of humanity's failings. Art can elevate and elucidate, but it can equally be used to blunt our awareness and to provide a respectable veneer which covers shallowness and vanity. It is as if Mahler's Third Symphony were to consist only of its pretty flower minuet, while excluding the elemental struggles of its first movement and the vision of divine love at its end.

Indeed, in the Rondo, there are snippets from the Third Symphony, specifically its scherzo which depicts the animals of the forest in a movement based on the Wunderhorn song *Ablösung im Sommer* – Summer Relief. The song relates a story in which a nightingale happily offers to take over the task of singing during the summer, because the cuckoo has exhausted itself and died. The song has a mocking tone, telling us that Nature only develops because creatures become victims in the evolutionary struggle for survival. This unconscious cruelty in Nature, which Darwin had observed after the death of his own daughter, leads us to doubt the existence of a loving deity. Was Mahler even recalling how he had been replaced at the Vienna Opera with ruthless efficiency to the delight of his rivals and opponents? Nature's ruthless bloodlust exists in human society as competitiveness and a lack of sensitivity. Mahler's spiritual mentor, Siegfried Lipiner, had much to say on this point in his play *Adam*, which Mahler greatly admired. It retells the myth of Cain and Abel, history's first sibling rivals, as a psychological allegory of repression and lost innocence.

Out of the Rondo's contrapuntal chaos a short chorale figure emerges, which we might recognise as a minor key version of the 'Ewig, Ewig' melody from the *Chorus Mysticus* of the Eighth Symphony.

The image contains two musical staves. The top staff is in G major, 4/4 time, and shows the melody for 'Ewig, Ewig' with lyrics 'Ew - ig, Ew - ig' above the notes. The bottom staff is in G major, 4/4 time, and is labeled 'Horns' above the staff and 'ff' below it. It shows a horn line with a characteristic turn.

**Chorus Mysticus, 8<sup>th</sup> Symphony**

**Bars 312-315, Rondo Burleske, 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony**

The cosmic dimension will not be suppressed, and there is at last a halt to the frenzy. A fragile melody with a characteristic turn is heard. In context, it seems powerless and naïve, and its presence is short-lived. And yet, this theme will dominate the work's Adagio finale, when the soul will finally be allowed to speak its truth without interruption.

Ex. [Rondo Burleske, transition to lyrical episode](#) (46.25-49.02)

For now, the mocking voices return, pulling faces and offering some insulting remarks in one of Mahler's most unusual passages of music. Now the race is to the finish. With demonic intensity and increasing speed, the music carries us away. And this may be Mahler's point, that the pace and complexity of modernity (perhaps as he had witnessed it in New York in the autumn of 1909) assaults the soul and separates us from the true path towards the divine. These movements pull us along on their own terms. We are invited to join the dance of life, innocently enough at first, but we are soon dragged down into ugliness and banality, until we find ourselves in a dance of death. In the Rondo, our ears are filled by dissonance and chaos, destroying the finer feelings and pathos experienced in the first movement. Mahler seems to ask – to what purpose is all this frenetic activity which takes us away from our true selves? Unable to resist the general competition for survival and power, we lose our deep desire for spiritual completion and transcendence.

These two middle movements have destroyed the wisdom and heroic struggle of the first movement in a tidal wave of cynicism and negativity. Where can this symphony now go? We sense a choice has to be made, as we hover over the abyss. Such a Rondo in any previous symphony might have been the last word, summarising and concluding the work as a whole. We might then feel trapped in the destructive cycle of unconscious Nature, struggling unceasingly and indiscriminately for survival. But, as so often in Mahler, the collapse into cynicism is also an alarm call. We have been here before, at the end of the slow movement of the First Symphony, where cynicism and mockery undermine the idyll of the scherzo that precedes it. But this time, the work of transformation has already been done in the Ninth's first movement, and it is the cynical and negative voices that will lose their authority.

#### **iv. Adagio**

As we reach the denouement of this epic work, it is worth recalling that it was always Mahler's ambition to create tragic art, because its strong emotional effect could change the awareness of his listeners. That does not mean that every work must end in despair, far from it. But every work confronts the darkest aspects of human existence on the path towards catharsis and spiritual transformation. Catharsis leads to purification and clarity of perception because the fear which obscures understanding is purged. In its place, compassion awakes – a sympathy for others who, like us, must endure the challenges of the human condition over which there is no control. The Greek God associated with such tragedy, as Nietzsche so often reminds us, is Dionysus, whose cult included ritualistic practices celebrating dark, irrational forces by drinking wine and through blood sacrifice. Dionysus was associated with ecstatic, trance-like states and even madness, so that romantic artists found him an attractive symbol. Dionysus was also an intermediary between the living and the dead. For this reason, Christ, the 'true vine', is often characterised as a manifestation of Dionysus, offering himself as a blood sacrifice to redeem humanity.

Such connections would not have been lost on Mahler, whose religious ideas were strongly influenced by his friend, the philosopher and poet, Siegfried Lipiner. You will recall that Mahler met several times with Lipiner in the Spring of 1909 to discuss the composer's anxiety after the terrible events of 1907. We know little about these confessional sessions, although Mahler found them a source of genuine consolation. But

there is one source that may tell us what passed between them, because in the summer of 1910, Lipiner wrote a poem for Mahler's fiftieth birthday<sup>9</sup>. It concerned the afterlife, and Bruno Walter observed:

*Lipiner put the essence of these talks into a poem entitled 'Der Musiker spricht' ['The Musician Speaks'] and presented it to Mahler on his fiftieth birthday. But even this source could not finally slake his thirst. 'What Lipiner says about it is wonderfully deep and true,' he said to me, 'but you have to be Lipiner to find certainty and peace in it.' He resigned himself: he could do so, after all, in the thought that his serious heart disease would soon open to him the gate through which he would pass to clarity and peace.*

In the poem, Lipiner expresses the view that while light is the goal and motivating force of Creation, periods of darkness are needed for repose and gestation, by which living things are transformed. Lipiner's ideas were greatly influenced by Goethe's tragic drama *Faust*, about which Lipiner was an expert. Faust is ultimately redeemed by love, despite his pact with the devil, implying that humanity must experience and even welcome evil in order to know the good. Light and darkness belong together, derived ultimately from the same divine source.

Lipiner had also made his name in his younger days as a devotee of Wagner and Nietzsche. He had even met with Wagner to discuss art and religion, daring to contradict the great man. Lipiner, unlike Nietzsche, clung to traditional religious ideas despite rejecting institutional forms of worship. In his view, art could rescue religion from the materialists and the dogmatists, who approached religious matters too literally. The spirit of Dionysus was needed to restore the efficacy of Christian symbols, and this he believed could be achieved through art.

In the 1890s, Lipiner wrote a play called *Adam*, which greatly impressed Mahler. It retells aspects of the Genesis story, specifically the rivalry between Adam's sons, Kane and Abel. Lipiner uses the story to explain that Nature's cruelty is part of God's plan, a form of Dionysian blood sacrifice, necessary to renew and transform the natural world according to the divine will. Because Nature is a pantheistic unity, suffused with symbolic meaning and signals from the beyond, it provides hints about what happens to us when we die. According to Lipiner, the darkness of death must inevitably lead to rebirth of the light, because Nature contains the opposites and constantly moves between them. For him, art was a means to express and renew religious belief outside of the institutional control of the church. While, like Mahler, Lipiner was Jewish in origin, he developed strong Christian sympathies, believing Christ to be the transforming symbol that could redeem humanity. Wagner's *Parsifal* stands out in this regard as an expression of Christian values, although Lipiner had severe reservations about Wagner's antisemitic posturing.

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<sup>9</sup> Walter gives a full account of how the poem came to be and regarding Mahler's attachment to it in his autobiography, **Theme and Variations**, translated by James Galston, New York 1946. *'About five days later, I received a poem from him, written in his own, firm hand, and entitled The Musician Speaks. It was his contribution to Mahler's birthday. Written in free verse, it represented Lipiner's last answer to Mahler's fundamental problem, discussed by the two friends on many an occasion: the question of immortality...I succeeded in having them meet again in Lipiner's office in the Parliament building. On that occasion, Mahler was as happy and insatiable in asking questions as Lipiner was kind and prolific in asking counter-questions and answering. When we had left, Mahler said to me, "How fine that was! One feels like sitting at his feet a boy, learning." Lipiner's poem had an overwhelming effect on Mahler. "I think it is the most beautiful poem that has ever been written," he said with his childlike extravagance. He always carried the poem about with him. Mahler, wavering all the time between conviction and doubt, clung to Lipiner's pronouncement of a continuation of our being after death as to the dogma of a man who knew. It is deeply touching to think that the poet's last greeting to the musician was those prophetic words, holding out to the searching the promise of eternal life, that both men were already on its threshold at the time, and that it will have reunited them soon thereafter.'*

I wanted to remind you of this philosophical background, because it tells us what was in Mahler's mind around the time that he conceived the Ninth Symphony, and because it repudiates the often-repeated opinion that Mahler's Ninth is a work of religious scepticism, ending in gloomy resignation to death. Let us now explore the work's finale.

The movement opens with a rhetorical sweep in the violins characterised by a turn which makes a link to the lyrical episode of the previous movement. The gesture indicates that the composer is about to speak now dressed in his priestly garb. The audience holds its breath, wondering what is about to be said. A judgement has to be made. Which of these conflicting narratives is going to prevail - the testimony of the innocent believer or the hardened cynic? Are we to enter the joyful world of 'The heavenly Life' or the dystopia of 'The earthly Life'? The musical response to this dilemma is a heartfelt plea for forgiveness, peace and reconciliation; a hymn of thanks and an elegy for all those in Mahler's life who had passed away, particularly those many lost children, including his daughter, Maria.

Ex. [Adagio, main theme](#) (54.00-55.38)

The sources for this moving music are many and varied, with much of the thematic material taken from the lyrical section of the Rondo Burleske, including the 'Ewig, Ewig- chorale. We can also hear a Brucknerian tone, and the violin introduction is related to the opening of the Adagio from Bruckner's unfinished Ninth Symphony. Mahler admired his former teacher whose music embodies a child-like Christian faith. The obvious melodic reference to the opening of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No.26 in E-flat – 'the Farewell', has been noted many times, not just because of the shared three-note falling motif. The distinctive harmony is also derived from the Beethoven, although the whole-tone harmonic shifts are already familiar from Mahler's Ländler movement.

Ex. [Beethoven, 'Farewell' Sonata No.26, introduction](#) (0.00-1.32)

For all the valedictory sadness of this movement, there is also a sense of an emotional burden being shared and released. Where in the previous two movements, the emphasis has been on dismemberment, discursive development and non-integration of material, now motivic details and chromatic inflections cohere and seek to resolve harmoniously. The similarity of this opening chorale-like passage to the well-known funeral hymn, *Abide with Me*, will occur to most modern listeners, but it is impossible to be sure that Mahler would have been aware of it. Yet, as a musical allusion, it fits the elegiac context and offers exactly the kind of spiritual comfort which Mahler had in mind. Regardless of the validity of this connection, there is an undeniably ecclesiastical atmosphere, as a congregation sings, united in grief.

The Adagio movement is in the form of a set of free double variations, in which quasi-religious thematic material is contrasted with modal passages reminiscent of the oriental colours which are found in *Das Lied von der Erde*. We can sense that Mahler intends here a fusion of art and conventional religion along the lines suggested by Lipiner. The movement's reflective episodes suggest a state of deep inwardness, lacking any kind of heroic impetus, but also detached from all human contact. These episodes belong to the same sound world as Mahler's beautiful Rückert setting, '*Ich bin der Welt ab'handen gekommen*' – I am dead to the world.

Because this is Mahler, his faith cannot go untested. At first, grief and sadness are contained by the hymn-like material but, as the movement continues, these emotions threaten to overwhelm the hard-won stability. As the moment of crisis approaches, a quotation from the fourth song of the *Kindertotenlieder*



(Wenn dein Mütterlein) is heard in the violins (bar 110). It is the moment when the poet believes he has glimpsed the souls of his dead children in the beyond, symbolised by the light of the heavenly sun catching the hill tops.

*Wir holen sie ein auf jenen Höh'n, im Sonnenschein, der Tag ist schön auf jenen Höh'n.*  
We'll go to meet them on those hills, In the sunlight, the day is fine on those hills

Ex. [Kindertotenlieder, IV. Oft denk' ich, sie sind nur ausgegangen!](#) (19.28-20.29)

At this point in the Adagio, longing for the eternal has turned into an insatiable hunger, a strong desire to end grief and restore contact with those who have been taken away. As the music rises to a climax, we hear the 'Ewig, ewig' theme from the Eighth Symphony played by the horns. Once again, Mahler leaves us hovering over the abyss, as the fate motif from the first movement returns in the violins. But this time there is no collapse into despair, but the announcement of a great spiritual victory.

Ex. [Adagio, crisis and apotheosis](#) (1.06.37-1.09.01)

At one level, we can hear this moment in the symphony as a defiant Nietzschean 'yes' to life, despite the scorn and bitterness, the incomprehensible cruelties and injustices. One can ignore the religious aspect and, instead of a hymn to the healing power of divine love, simply perceive gratitude for the gift of a human life. It is a plausible reading, and probably the received view, but it fails to consider important aspects of Mahler's belief-system and various ideas embedded in the music.

We can further explore the religious meaning of the Ninth Symphony, because of remarks Mahler made to Bruno Walter suggesting the work was close in meaning to his Fourth, a comment that at first impression makes little sense. But both works have four movements, including a scherzo with an ironical tone and invoking a degree of deliberate coarseness. The slow movements of the two works have many similarities. Both are in the form of double variations, contrasting serene stillness with lament and longing. At the end of the Fourth's slow movement, we enter through the gates of heaven in an unexpected glimpse of divine glory.

Ex. [Symphony No.4, Andante - opening of the Gates of Heaven](#) (45.00-48.10)

This surely parallels the moment of spiritual victory in the Ninth, representing a moment of grace in response to humanity's hunger to reach out to the divine. In both slow movements, there follows an unwinding of tension towards stillness. But the two movements differ in one crucial respect. In the Fourth, Mahler modulates from E major to a dominant chord of G major, played at high pitch, as if rising to ethereal heights. In the Ninth, the opposite occurs, the music descends to a state of earthly repose on a D-flat major chord in low register. The coda of the Fourth Symphony gestures towards a beyond which is out of reach in the heavens above, while the Ninth moves towards a more tangible heaven that seems to exist within the human subject. The fleeting reference at bar 158 to the sunlit uplands theme from the *Kindertotenlieder* in this context now feels like a memory floating away rather than a yearning desire.

Ex. [Adagio, closing section](#) (1.12.41-1.17.55)

We might ask what kind of heaven is this? The denouement of the symphony does not try to convey an answer, for Mahler is truly not ready to die in the way that commentators such as Leonard Bernstein have been so eager to claim. Indeed, this music suggests a man ready to return to life fortified by spiritual

knowledge that has released him from fear. Yes, there is still a profound sense of farewell – of a man leaving Vienna, facing illness and mortality, someone wanting to resolve past experiences of loss, including those countless dead siblings and his daughter, Maria. But the ending of this symphony represents a moment of profound catharsis, and the question about what happens next is answered by the silence after the final cadence. We can aptly quote the line from *Das himmlische Leben* that says:

*Kein Musik is ja nicht auf Erde, Die unserer verglichen kann werden*  
No music exists on Earth, which can be compared to ours

The only valid response to the ineffable, Mahler suggests, is to remain silent, so we must imagine for ourselves what fills the silence. Does, for instance, the D-flat/C-sharp tonal axis of the Adagio become a leading note in D major? This would take us back to the work's opening to start the cycle again, echoing Nietzsche's law of eternal recurrence, which states that we are condemned endlessly to repeat our lives. But we can also turn to Lipiner's poem, *The Musician Speaks*, for some hints about Mahler's intention. Lipiner tells us that any moment of dark repose prepares a counter movement towards the light, and music can provide a metaphor for how we will exist in the afterlife. For him, music is the very essence of a liberated consciousness, because it is not bound by time, space or matter. An extract from the poem reveals how the beauty of music humbles the divine, and how the musician steals 'love from God's lips.' In the manner of Orpheus, music is able to soothe the anger of the gods, thus shining a light of hope for humanity. The composer is then like Dionysus, making sacrifice to that end. By the poem's final lines, the identification with music is complete. The composer has become his own melody, and melody the path to the divine light.

*...The melody! As on a still pond,  
The swan's neck bends and nestles softly,  
Here, there, it rests upon the soft shoulder,  
Then flies upward in a slender white shimmer:  
And so you, Enchantress from an alien land!  
Not by the spirits, but to the spirits sent!  
You miracle, which to dissolve all sorrow  
Took love itself from God's lips!  
How it divides and joins and lovingly entwines,  
And sanctifies the interplay of time!  
The spirit laughs -- who accomplished this?  
The proud God he himself worships.  
The flashing, the wild army keeps still,  
Then it gnashes, it rumbles -- it restrains itself no more.  
The entire swarm follows, follows the melody!  
The entire universe circles round in the great dance.  
That ray from ray and spark from sparks can fly,  
That melody upon melody can bloom from melody!  
But it - higher, brighter - so that infinity  
opens wide to longing!  
What is it, O melody, that pulls you upward?  
Tell me, what is it that your decree promises?*

*And no matter what - with you, with you thither,  
O you, the leader of the dancing spirits!  
Down that radiant, that ringing path -  
I too am in the circle dance! I too am a sound!<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> The complete poem is here [Der Musiker spricht - Siegfried Lipiner](#) in a translation by Nicollette Driggers and Richard Gray.