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Music History 352

Draft One

*Das Lied von der Erde*: Dark is life, dark is death.

Perhaps the greatest music written by Mahler has also become the most talked about and rumored. With all the factors occurring around him, and his ever-present dealings with the subject of death, many stories have been conjured around this monumental work. Though in all fiction, there lies some truth and what remains of the stories surrounding this piece is a topic for music historians and theorists to constantly dissect. In observing the situations through which Mahler wrote this piece, stories from friends and family, the text of and the music itself, one can derive many answers and even more questions. The ultimate goal being however, to get an idea of what Gustav Mahler was trying to accomplish, how effectively he achieved his goals, and the impact that it had on the world.

To begin, an examination of Mahler's character can make light of future stories and analyzations. Mahler was always known to be an atypical person, withdrawn and at times self-absorbed. Alma Mahler, his wife, recalls a story of his childhood when his father took him for a walk in the woods but suddenly remembered something he had forgotten to do at home. He then told young Gustav to sit on a log and wait for him to return. At home, he got caught up in the "noise and tumult of family life" and hours later remembered his young boy he left sitting alone in the wilderness.

It was already twilight when the agitated father hurried back into the woods.

There, just where he had left him, he found the child sitting quietly on the log, his

eyes wide with dreamy contemplation, untouched by fear or doubt, even though he had been there for many hours before evening fell.

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She went on to say that this childhood image was how she always saw Mahler, that “The cloud of dreamy thoughtfulness that wrapped him in solitude never quite left him”. She also believed that if people found him hasty or nerve ridden, it was “surely no more than the startled reaction of one constantly being waked out of his inner dream.” (Mahler 26) It was also well documented that when the boy was asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, he responded, “A martyr!” (Mahler 25) These are all very interesting tales that become very relevant when examining *Das Lied von der Erde*, providing great insight into what might have been happening inside of Mahler during its composition.

Mahler’s name is always followed by words describing him as a discontent, disturbed human, but Alma said that it wasn’t so: “A certain taste for endowing artists’ lives with sentimentality has sought to mark Gustav Mahler as a greatly unhappy man. That is false.” (Mahler 26) Many remember Mahler as being self-confident and having a good sense of humor, and it is a well-documented fact that he was an active man who loved to be outdoors. Certain events did lead to unhappy periods, but Mahler, as will be later discussed, found ways through these times as well as any.

Facing all the challenges of a regular composer, through time Mahler began to enjoy success, financially and popularly. He worked through many theatres and opera houses until finally arriving at the Court Opera in Vienna, working the very prestigious position of director at the age of thirty-seven. Mahler made many drastic changes here to improve the quality of music. Throughout the preceding years his works had been

performed and were causing great amounts of controversy, but also gaining him recognition (Mahler 26-27). Eventually he was financially sound and began to achieve great fame as a composer. After enjoying success for a good period, he came to some drastic blows of fate that would cause him great despair, yet eventually more triumph.

Mahler had debuted in Vienna on May 11, 1897 to great acclaim, though this critical and popular support would not remain. His times were somewhat turbulent in his directorship there, not feeling that his ensemble was quite up to par, and after nearly a decade at his position, he tendered his resignation on March 31, 1907. There are two quotes by Mahler about his resignation that offer completely different perspectives on his leaving. The first is one of feeling unappreciated and choosing to leave on his own volition:

All things have their day and I have had mine and so has my work as the local opera director. I am no longer ‘news’ so far as Vienna is concerned. So I want to go at a point when I can still expect that, at a later date, the Viennese will learn to appreciate what I did for their theatre.”

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The second quote seems to be more Mahlerian in nature, as it is more tragic and deeply insightful. He was talking to his friend Bruno Walter while leaning forward in a chair:

“You see, that’s what they are now doing to me: if I wanted to remain seated, all I would have to do is lean back firmly and I could hold my place. But I am not offering any resistance, and so shall finally slide off.” (Mitchell 438) Though he had already made a deal to go to New York for several months with a giant salary of \$20,000, he was still deeply disturbed by his being forced, in a way, to resign.

The second blow occurred rather bizarrely in June of 1907, before his trip to the States. Mahler had returned to his summer home at Maiernigg on the Worthersee, where he had been going with his family for many years to retreat to the wilderness and write music. It was here, ironically, that he had written *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs on the Death of Children) in 1901. He confessed about this music that, “It hurt me to write them and I grieve for the world which will one day have to hear them, so sad in their content.” (Seckerson 88-89). Within three days of their return in 1907, Maria, his eldest daughter at the age of four whom they affectionately referred to as ‘Putzi’, began to show signs of scarlet fever and diphtheria. She suffered for about two weeks until finally she died (Seckerson 110). Alma Mahler recalls Gustav’s relationship with Putzi:

His love for that child was immeasurable: she was all *his!* Every morning he would bring her into his study, where they would both have intense and impassioned discussions about things that remained unknown to me, for I scrupulously avoided disturbing their solitude. And that child died.

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Needless to say, this was the most devastating blow to Mahler and his wife, but unfortunately it was not the last.

The death of Putzi had a terrible effect on both parents, but it was Alma that collapsed due to shock and exhaustion. Their doctor, Dr. Blumenthal, was summoned to check on Alma’s physical condition, and on his visit he decided to check on Gustav as well. Tragedy once struck again when Dr. Blumenthal noticed a worsening of the heart lesion that he had discovered a few months prior to this visit. He sent him to a specialist in Vienna, Professor Kovacs, who informed Mahler that if he were to stay alive, he would

have to conserve his strength (Seckerson 110). This spelled disaster for Mahler, an avid outdoorsman who looked upon his time exercising outside as the source of his creative inspiration. Mahler, nevertheless, pushed on and worked hard in New York to free his mind from all the terrible events that the year had already brought to him.

Mahler returned to Europe in the summer of 1908, and rather than live at Maiernigg, which he avoided for obvious emotional reasons, Alma found a farmhouse in the Dolomites near the village of Toblach which they moved into in June (Seckerson 118). Mahler's return to the country did not immediately bring him happiness. In a letter to Bruno Walter, Mahler wrote of his troubles:

For years I have grown used to taking strenuous exercise, to walking in forests and over mountains and boldly wresting my ideas from nature. I would sit at my desk only as a peasant brings in his harvest, to give shape to my sketches...Now I must avoid all effort, watch myself constantly, walk as little as possible...I have never been able to work only at my desk – I need outside exercise for my inner exercises...This is the greatest calamity I have ever known.

Seckerson 119

It was this restriction that forced Mahler to draw on new resources in order to complete his work. At this time of dramatic change in Mahler's physical and spiritual life, he remembered a set of poems given to him by a friend in the previous summer that perfectly complimented his new state of mind.

After the dreadful and infertile summer of 1907, Mahler made a return to Vienna in September for his final work at the Opera and someone gave him a copy of *Die chinesische Flöte* (The Chinese Flute). This was a collection of paraphrase-poems that

Hans Bethge had put together from earlier French and German translations of Chinese lyrics that consisted of eighty-three poems by thirty-eight different authors. Mahler selected seven of these and modified them in order to “constitute a poignant allegory of life and death” (Mitchell 439-440). “He retitled, rearranged, cut and added to the texts with such vigor that it is fair to call him co-author as well as composer of *Das Lied*” (Carr 190). These were the texts that would shape his work *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth), which he would compose in the summer of 1908 in a small shack near his house outside of Toblach.

Mahler was quite distant from the original ancient Chinese sources of the poetry, but the reflections of loneliness, love, the earth’s beauty, and the final farewell remained intact in the translations and sparked his creativity (Carr 190). It is quite a fortunate coincidence that such writings might find their way into his view at such a time in his life that they would be so perfectly suited to his cause, but to take some of the ideas of fate out of this coincidence, the Orient had become a trend in Europe. Attention had been growingly pointed towards the east since the French Jesuit missions to China in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century (Mitchell 440). Orientalism was in the air, from German poets such as Goethe and Ruckert composing Persian inspired lyrics to Asian motifs involved in the decoration of wealthy homes (Carr 190). As put by Jonathan Carr: “Wholly distinctive though it is, *Das Lied* was part of a trend.” (Carr 190) Still the fact remains that the texts were perfectly suited for Mahler’s intentions, and the way in which he used Bethge’s texts and the music to which he set them is what makes *Das Lied* “wholly distinctive”.

Mahler chose these texts because of the ancient Chinese poetry’s seemingly timeless imagery and the themes of rebirth abound in it, some ideas he was definitely in

tune with at the time and had always shown interest in. Mahler, since his student days, had been immersed in the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, who reflected many Buddhist views such as stilling the will to reduce suffering and of course mystical rebirth. He also awarded art, particularly music, a great role in the process, as it “prompts contemplative, will-less perception rather than material action.” (Mitchell 440-441)

Schopenhauer’s philosophies had also been embraced by Wagner and Nietzsche; Wagner in his Beethoven essay, which was highly regarded by Mahler, and Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*. This book deals with the topics of Dionysian abandon, the dark side of the will, and its opposite being Apollinian restraint and individuation (Mitchell 441). These topics are found all through *Das Lied* and are some of the primary elements of the piece. So it can be noted that Mahler’s interest in oriental mysticism had already been piqued before his discovery of *The Chinese Flute*, it just arrived at the perfect moment.

Many differing stories exist, a topic addressed earlier, about Mahler and his general mood while working on *Das Lied*. Some remember him as depressed while others remember him as good-humored and enjoyable. Regardless, there is something deeply tragic about *Das Lied* that embraces both sides of the emotional spectrum, so maybe the stories that do exist are true and that, at that period of time, both of these personalities existed within him. Only by examining quotes by him and about him, then observing recorded opinions about these can we begin to comprehend what he must have been like around these times.

The topic of Mahler’s fear of death is something that is largely discussed and debated. Mahler, having completed eight symphonies up to this point and having been diagnosed with his severe heart condition all adds up to coincidentally create a great

controversy. Beethoven, Schubert, and Bruckner had all died after completing nine symphonies, and Mahler wrote what is in effect his 'Ninth' but called it *Das Lied von der Erde*. Many think this to be a superstitious juggling of numbers, including Alma, when in actuality, it probably wasn't (Carr 179-180). He died only four years after his diagnosis, so fate was not ultimately cheated. He also went on immediately after completing this work to write a Ninth, rather than naming it his Tenth and ducking the issue altogether. On naming this work *Das Lied*, he seemed to have thought he was writing a song-cycle rather than a symphony, but as he proceeded he realized he had a unique mixture of both. He actually wrote two versions, one for voices and orchestra and one for voices and piano (Carr 180-182). These explanations are more factually based than the assumption that he was afraid of death. In fact, a letter to Bruno Walter from the summer of 1908 explains about his state of mind that, "you do not know what has been and still is going on within me; but it is certainly not that hypochondriac fear of death, as you suppose. I had already realized that I should have to die." (Carr 183) Walter explains this situation: "Death, towards whose mysteries his thought and perception had so often taken their flight, had suddenly come in sight." (Mitchell 439) What was most likely going on inside him was a fear of not being creative due to his inability to go for walks and physically exert himself, something that previous quotes have already identified as a source for his creativity. "How he must have dreaded that his efforts in the new, restricted circumstances would come to nothing." (Carr 184) But they did not amount to nothing, and as further documentation will prove, he knew that when he began his work.

Mahler, once again immersed in work on *Das Lied*, stopped obsessing about his physical woes. His letters began to reflect this newfound optimism. In a letter to Bruno Walter he wrote, “I have been hard at work (from which you can tell I am more or less ‘acclimatized’). I myself do not know what the whole thing could be called. I have been granted a time that was good, and I think it is the most personal thing I have done so far.” (Mahler 326) With the close reality of death, Mahler found his time alive more valuable, and in turn the music of *Das Lied* juxtaposes the bitterness of death and the ecstasy of life in perfect harmony (Seckerson 120).

Mahler, in writing *Das Lied*, used techniques such as the use of the pentatonic scale with unique harmonies that negate Western goal-oriented systems in order to portray his mood and the ancient Chinese texts. “The unique sound world of *Das Lied von der Erde* captures to perfection the distilled nature of Bethge’s texts with all the fragile transparency of an oriental water-color.” (Seckerson 120) It is quite a unique compositional technique that creates a very interesting texture. A closer inspection of the six movements reveals some of the methods he used to accomplish this goal.

*Das Lied* actually consists of two parts on a very broad scale. The first five movements serve as the first section and the last movement, “Der Abschied”, functions as the second, lasting about as the first five movements together. The first movement and the last movement serve as the “cornerstones” of the piece, reflecting the main issues of *Das Lied* while the inner movements are less complex and tragic (Mitchell 445). This is a fairly common structural practice for Mahler.

The first movement, ‘*Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde*’ (The Drinking Song of the Earth’s Sorrow), originally from the 8<sup>th</sup> Century poet Li-Tai-Po, immediately

jumps into the theme of the work as a whole. Mahler synthesized strophic song procedures with a kind of binary sonata form. Mahler has taken Bethge's text and condensed four stanzas into three, each ending with the quote "Dark is life, dark is death." Mahler uses rising modulations to intensify the text and eventually arrives at the tonic, a juxtaposition of 'a' and 'C' which is the central tonic to the whole piece, at the recapitulation. He employs the pentatonic scale and V-IV-I cadences to rid the music of the Western dominant-tonic polarity (Mitchell 447). The tenor voice is required to sing in his extremely highest register, causing him to sound strained, as Mahler intended for the portrayal of drunken man contemplating issues of mortality. The texture is composed of rising and falling themes and flutter-tongued flutes that create great terror, leading up to the vision of an ape on a tombstone. Amidst all the terror are images of spring that show brief hope, only to be knocked out immediately by the words "But thou, O man, how long then livest thou?/Not a hundred years canst thou delight In all the rotten trash of this earth." Mahler interestingly scrapped a piece of Bethge's text: "There is but one possession you can be sure of:/That is the grave, the grinning one, at the end." (Carr 190-191) This was an interesting edit, probably to foreshadow some of the future events. The Dionysian themes abound in this movement, but Apollo shall appear very soon.

The second movement, '*Der Einsame im Herbst*' (The Lonely One in Autumn), offers a bit of relief from the drunken first movement, but still no happiness. The nameless protagonist stands in solitary at the edge of a lake in autumn, contemplating nature's withdrawal from blossoming summer into the hibernal slumber of winter. Here a small chamber ensemble amidst the large orchestra paints a cool fall day by a chilly lake. The piece is rather strophic in structure and is in 'd' as a whole, but Mahler creates

a bit of exoticism by using the pentatonic scale along with a Chinese heptatonic scale that resembles the Lydian mode (Mitchell 451). Personal pain overshadows the universal calamity from the first movement. The last lines of the movement read “Sun of love, will you never shine again./And dry up, tenderly, my bitter tears?” The markings of this phrase go from “with great impetus” to “without expression”, leaving the question stuck in the tenor’s throat. The only notable change to the text was to the title, where he changed the word ‘*die*’, which is feminine, to ‘*der*’, masculine. This is to keep his male protagonist, whom some might think would be himself (Carr 191).

‘*Von der Jugend*’ (Of Youth) is the third movement of the piece that takes on a lighter tone, finally giving some relief. It is the shortest movement and also the simplest, with the text grouped into a 2+3+2 format represented by an ABA format. It is in the, again juxtaposed, keys of ‘Bb’ and ‘g’, the same relationship that prevails throughout *Das Lied* (Mitchell 453). This major/minor relationship is still given dissonance in that the # of the dominant of ‘g’ is not always preferred to the f natural (Hefling 266-267). This creates the kind of dissonance that Mahler is known for, straddling the border of tonality and atonality, which some think is more dissonant in the long run. It is still a rather dainty scene, with friends sitting around drinking near a pool that is crossed by an arched bridge, everything reflected in the water. It is, as the title implies, a reflection of youthful carelessness, and everything seems to lack substance, like the images reflected in the water (Carr 192). The original source of this poem is not known.

The fourth movement, ‘*Von der Schönheit*’ (Of Beauty), begins as a delicate scene by the water’s edge as well. It starts with young maidens picking lotus blossoms off of a riverbank. The peaceful scene is then interrupted when some young men ride by

on horseback. At this moment, Mahler lets his large orchestra off the leash, with what some believe to be the best horse music ever written and some of Mahler's most uproarious music (Mitchell 455). The form of this movement is an ABA format that works around the five stanzas that Mahler had condensed the original into with orchestral interludes containing this "frenzied" music (Mitchell 454). The horsemen pass and the piece comes to its closing, dying away with tremolos of unfulfilled yearning, which is reflected in the text (Carr 192). The somewhat serene movements start to head back toward the despair of the first movement in the fifth movement, '*Der Trunkene im Fruhling*' (The Drunkard in Spring).

The drunkard, Mahler's protagonist, begins drinking immediately in the fifth movement. "If life is but a dream, why then toil and fret?" (Carr 192) The drunkard drinks until he can no more, when a voice familiar to all of Mahler's symphonies arrives: the birdsong, which became increasingly stylized through all of Mahler's works, but always remained recognizable (Hefling 128). The bird of *Das Lied* arrives and lets the drunkard know that spring has come over night, but the drunkard does not respond as one would expect: "What does spring matter to me?! Let me be drunk!" These are the last words of the fifth movement, and the piece concludes in a giant 'A' major, the brightest sound so far in the piece. The form of this movement is a rather broad ABA form reminiscent of the previous two movements. All the thematic material in the fifth is also reminiscent in content and treatment to the overall piece perhaps to round off the first half (Mitchell 456-457). Also notable about this movement and the whole first half, "For the second time in *Das Lied*, spring comes and goes in a trice." (Carr 192)

*'Der Abschied'* (The Farewell) is the last movement and entire second half of *Das Lied*. Many view this movement as Mahler's own farewell and this might be true. This piece has been very thoroughly examined by many theorists and is very deep in content in both the text and the music.

*Der Abschied* is in a very long binary structure, with the two halves closely related through the use of several recurring musical segments: the introductory instrumental material, the recitatives, and three musical strophes. The keys of 'a' and 'C' remain fundamental to *Das Lied* as a whole and to this last movement. The finale begins in a cold 'c' and goes through a series of many unexpected modulations to end in the 'C' with its juxtaposed 'a'. The form, though not immediately recognizable is related to the first movement's sonata style building towards a climax, but in *Der Abschied*, gradually the goals are left behind, with the piece ending in its indefinable key (Mitchell 459).

Mahler dramatically altered Bethge's text's to achieve his goals in the finale. He merged two texts by two separate authors, and in doing this, he deconstructed the regular stanza forms and ends the piece on a more positive note than the original. Where Bethge ended the piece with the dispassionate "The earth is everywhere the same,/And eternal, eternal the white clouds...", Mahler changed this to "The dear earth everywhere/Blossoms in spring and grows green again!/Everywhere and forever the distance shines bright and blue!/For ever...for ever...". By looking at the drafts, it would seem that Mahler first wrote the music and changed the texts to suit it, rather than searching for a happy ending. No one knows, however, whether the text flowed directly from the music or whether he attached the music to the philosophical message (Carr 193).

Either way, they are perfectly suited for one another, and nowhere before has he captured inner feeling with music as well as in this finale.

Both musically and with the message of the text, *Der Abschied* is a struggle. The music is near chaotic, pushing polyphony to the breaking point, and during these moments, the texts have a duality about them as well. For instance, “The brook sings, full of melody, through the darkness”. The struggle eventually resolves, or dissolves, itself when after the phrase “My heart is still and awaits its hour!” the orchestra builds to a giant crescendo and then fades with the words “*Ewig...Ewig...*” repeating over the ambiguous ending as it fades into nothing (Carr 193-194). This famous “*ewig*” passage at the end is said to create “a new kind of temporal process that is neither incomplete (thereby contrasting to the perpetual incompleteness of cyclic nature) nor complete (thereby contrasting to the dreadful completeness of linear human experience).” (Greene 267). Benjamin Britten also commented on this ending:

The same harmonic progressions that Wagner used to color his essentially morbid love-scenes (his “*liebes*” is naturally followed by “*Tod*”) are used here to paint a serenity literally supernatural. I cannot understand it – it passes over me like a tidal wave – and that matters not a jot either, because it goes on for ever, even if it is never performed again – that final chord is printed on the atmosphere.”

(Carr 194)

Perhaps this is what Mahler was feeling during his writing, a supernatural serenity. The piece does fade into the atmosphere, a closing fitting the text like nothing before or after.

Mahler went on afterwards to compose a Ninth Symphony, and in the process of his Tenth, he died, satisfying his superstitions and thus furthering the stigma of his

predecessors. Though it was not his last piece, *Das Lied von der Erde* is essentially Mahler's farewell. Recalling the childhood story of Mahler's solitary time in the woods, Alma says: "Is not his farewell, *Das Lied von der Erde*, the ripe fruit of that far-off melancholy contemplation, the seed of it perhaps already germinating in the waiting child?" (Mahler 26) Perhaps this is the truth, Mahler's constant contemplations with mortality began in this child who grew to be a deeply introspective man, wrapped in inner thought. But here, Mahler said farewell not to life, but to his fear of its loss, as the earth will bloom again in spring.

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