

Some Reflections on Mahler's Symphony No. 5

by Benjamin Zander

In the last 30 years Mahler's symphonies have grown so phenomenally in popularity that there are probably not many listeners who are completely unfamiliar with them. Even taking into account normal fluctuations of taste, one finds it difficult to explain this phenomenal growth in popularity. What is it that makes Mahler's music so relevant, even irresistible, to our time, so vastly more appealing than that of his contemporaries (or even near-contemporaries) Wagner, Strauss, Sibelius, and Franck?

One thing that immediately sets Mahler's music apart is his orchestration. Though the orchestra he uses is huge, it very rarely plays with one voice. More often several independent instrumental strands form an intricate web of contrasting emotions, directions, and meanings. For instance, there is a passage in the second movement of the Fifth Symphony in which two horns sing a somber melodic line in dotted rhythm. At the same time there is a cackling motive in the woodwinds. Meanwhile the timpani and the double-basses play a funeral drumbeat figure and the cellos intone a scarcely audible countermelody in quarter-notes. As if all this weren't enough for the ear to take in, a solo violin and flute exchange brief anguished sighs with an English horn. Thus, in a single moment we are given a wide range of human emotions: despair, longing, aspiration, anguish, tenderness. And because these emotions are so inextricably woven together we experience keenly that sense of ambiguity, discontinuity, and ambivalence which is so characteristic of modern life and so prevalent in the music of later twentieth-century composers such as Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern. We have come, it would seem, as far as possible from the kind of music

which presents a single melody comfortably resting on the cushion of an accompaniment.

Of course Mahler was still a Romantic composer, committed to the liberation of man's spirit and to the sense of power and mystery in the natural world. And, in the true late-Romantic tradition, he also expressed the world-weary disillusionment of a post-religious age. But Mahler also stood at the turning point of modern culture. He lived at a time when profound unrest was felt most intensely throughout Europe, when the old order of aristocratic Vienna was disintegrating, when there was a widespread sense of dread and exhaustion, of imminent catastrophe. Mahler's music, better than any other, expresses all these qualities of his age.

We can understand the pessimism and bitterness we hear in his music even better if we look for a moment at the series of disasters that marked Mahler's life. As a Jew he felt ostracized from Viennese society. His childhood was fraught with violence (his father was brutally cruel to his delicate mother). Death stalked his family from early on (he lost seven brothers and sisters), as did poverty, illness, madness, and suicide.

Yet, paradoxically, Mahler was also a passionate lover of life; and in fact his obsession with suffering was intimately related to this equally intense instinct towards life. At the heart of his music lies a deep and dynamic struggle between innocence and experience, idealism and brutal reality, affirmation and denial. Though he was in part a Romantic and an idealist, he strode courageously into the twentieth century, riddled with doubt and perplexity, ill at ease in an unfriendly cosmos.

In each of his symphonies, indeed at every moment of all of them, Mahler seems to be searching for a resolution to these antinomies, for an identity and a language: it is this

quality of constant searching that, perhaps more than anything else, draws us so powerfully to his music.

Nowhere is this search more fascinatingly dramatized than in the Fifth Symphony. Just as Mahler stands poised between the Romantic and the modern periods, so his Fifth Symphony (composed 1901-02) stands at the mid-point of his career as a composer, holding elements of his earlier and later works in uneasy balance. Mahler himself, feeling suddenly bereft of the technique and the language he had employed in his earlier works, saw the Fifth Symphony as a leap into modernism. He revised the work over a span of six years and commented on the first version: "I cannot understand how I could have written so much like a beginner. Clearly the routine I had acquired in the first four symphonies deserted me altogether, as though a totally new message demanded a new technique." Two days before the premiere of the Fifth Symphony in October 1904, Mahler wrote home to his ailing wife, Alma: "Heavens, what is the public to make of this chaos in which new worlds are forever being engendered only to crumble into ruin the next moment? What are they to say to this primeval music, this foaming, roaring sea of sound, to these dancing stars, to these breathtaking iridescent and flashing breakers? Oh that I might give my symphony its first performance 50 years after my death."

As he was writing the Fifth, Mahler completed his last song using a text taken from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (*The Boy's Magic Horn*), a popular collection of folk verse upon which he had frequently drawn for his early song cycles and symphonies. As he turned away from the *Wunderhorn* as a source of inspiration, a certain "open" lyricism disappeared from Mahler's symphonies. Folk elements embodied in human voices no longer offered idealistic solutions to the problems raised by his works. The style of the Fifth is more severe and granitic than that of its predecessors, and polyphony-- so richly expressive of conflict-- is more pervasive than earlier. (Mahler had, incidentally

just acquired the complete edition of Bach's works and was greatly excited by what he found there.) The work's five movements are grouped into three sections:

Part I

Trauermarsch ("Funeral march"), C-sharp minor
Stürmisch bewegt ("Stormily agitated"), A minor

Part II

Scherzo, D major

Part III

Adagietto, F major
Rondo-- Finale, D major

The first movement-- a black death march marked "with measured pace; strict; like a funeral procession"-- reminds us that as a child Mahler lived near military barracks. (Similar reminders occur frequently in the other symphonies, as well as in the *Wunderhorn* songs: in the one about ghost soldiers, for example, or the one about the doomed drummer-boy-- the song on which Mahler was working as he was composing the Fifth.) The movement, like the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth, begins with one of those unforgettable gestures that make an indelible mark on one's musical memory: a solitary trumpet softly intoning a chilling, doom-laden fanfare. And it is worth noting that the fanfare recalls Beethoven's Fifth not only because it is unforgettable and because it suggests fate but also because it is almost identical rhythmically:

Example: 

This implacable refrain returns in varied guises throughout the movement. The funeral music-- by turns sad, poignant, violent, oppressive-- alternates with a middle section in which the trumpet screams its anguish over a brutally simple accompaniment and the violins lash downward with a grating chromatic figure. (Mahler marks the beginning of the section “impassioned, wild,” and in a footnote to the conductor he adds that the playing of the violins must be “at all times as vehement as possible!”)

Everywhere there are images of collapse, every attempt to rise up is followed by a falling away. The only real climax in the movement is marked “klegend” (“lamenting”) and is followed by a long arc of dying, the trumpet muttering its fanfare. Against an ominous roll on the bass drum, the procession halts and its burden appears to be slowly lowered into the ground. For the last time the trumpet plays its fanfare: first close by, then farther away, and finally in the extreme distance (so high and soft that it must be given instead to a flute). The movement ends with a final savage punctuation mark, half defiant yet half hopeless.

With the second movement, which is closely linked to the first in its expression of Mahler's tragic vision, suddenly the mode of ferocious protest is dominant (the movement is marked “stormily agitated, with the greatest vehemence”). Snapped chords, grotesque leaps of anguished minor ninths, shrill screams in the woodwinds, pounding eighth-notes-- these and other gestures of overpowering violence are everywhere. Just as the first movement was slow with a fast interruption, so in this movement the driven tempestuous music alternates with brief elegiac passages

specifically marked to be played in the same tempo as the earlier funeral march. Thus once again, as so often in Mahler, contrasting states are simultaneously evoked.

Towards the end of the movement the brasses, in a bravely affirmative D-major chorale, seem to signal a hope for salvation from lamenting and suffering. But victory's time has not yet come; the grand proclamation fades away into terrifying, isolated cries of despair. Yet somehow we know that it, and its key of D major, will return again.

Part II, the third movement, is a huge *Scherzo*, a Viennese dance movement of staggering invention and equivocal tone. We know that Mahler regarded Vienna's great past with deep affection and nostalgia. (When performing this symphony in concert I have often preceded it with Strauss's elegant *Emperor Waltzes*, which embody so perfectly the spirit of the city in the 1890s.) Vienna, after all, was the city of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, and Bruckner; the city of coffee-houses and the *Opernring*; the city of light-hearted gracious living. Yet for Mahler Vienna also meant anger and loss. He was the victim of intrigue, callousness, and spite. Poised between nostalgia for a glittering past and a horror of things to come, Mahler's Vienna was a city in which revolutionary ideas struggled for expression in a reactionary climate of opinion. The *Scherzo* of the Fifth Symphony takes the Viennese Waltz, which we know Mahler loved, and pushes it over the brink into a forced, merciless gaiety. A ghastly grimace seems frozen on the face of turn-of-the-century Vienna. Gone are the lilt and the glitter, the ecstatic elegance: they have become merely a mockery of themselves. Yet this movement is also emphatically a dance of life, totally different from Part I, with its insecure, hysterical, even despairing ruminations upon death. In the quieter sections the horns call to each other as across great spaces, evoking yet another of Mahler's haunted landscapes, a twilight world of ancient legend and enduring folk-memory.

Like Part I, Part III comprises two movements, linked both thematically and by mood. After the exhilarating *Scherzo*, the famous F-major *Adagietto* for harp and strings comes as a haven of peace, full of rapturous yearning and consolation. From the bustle and agitation of the streets and coffeehouses and the elegance of glittering ballrooms of Vienna, one is suddenly drawn into a more personal space.

Although for many this movement, detached as it often is from its context as film score or memorial music, has come to be seen as an expression of melancholy, full of images of nostalgia, dissolution, and decay, in the symphony the *Adagietto* precedes the most joyous and exuberant movement of Mahler's *oeuvre*. Mahler's close friend, the conductor Willem Mengelberg, characterized the *Adagietto* movement as "Love, a smile enters his life." Scrawled in the margin of Mengelberg's score to the Fifth is this note: "This *Adagietto* was Gustav Mahler's declaration of love to Alma! Instead of a letter he sent her this in manuscript: no accompanying words. She understood and wrote to him: he should come!!! Both told me this!" As an expression of love, rather than mourning, it makes a perfect transition to the celebration of joy in the *Finale*.

In a magical transition the horn and solo winds, playing fragments of folk-motives out of which the music to follow will grow, call back the listener from the hesitant inwardness of the *Adagietto* to the radiant, abundant D-major world of the *Finale*. It is a movement that masterfully combines the forms of sonata, rondo, and fugue in an exuberant affirmation of the very joy in creation.

But the triumph of the *Finale* is not arrived at through a gradual spiritual progression from the beginning of the work; it is not a synthesis of previous emotional experiences, as is the *Finale* of the Ninth. For the Fifth Symphony is, even more than most of Mahler's other works, a study in contrasts. The experience of anxiety and

mourning encountered in Part I is genuine and is examined unflinchingly; but the joy and vitality of Part III is no less genuine and no less directly faced and explored. In this work Mahler presents himself as both fragmented and courageous: fragmented in the sharp juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated moods and statements, both within the contrapuntal writing and between the movements; courageous because of the daring with which he examines, without denial or proffered solutions, the full extent of human experience. The liberating discovery that one experience is as valid as another, and therefore does not need to be reconciled with any other, is perhaps the most paradoxical aspect of this work and therefore possibly the aspect that most draws us to it today.

When the great brass chorale from the second movement returns in the *Finale*, this time in its full extension and as a gesture of triumph, we do not feel the security of an achieved synthesis but rather a structural bridge across the whole work, affirming rather than denying the irreconcilability of the disparate elements of darkness and light as its two ends.