Symphonic Rebirth
by René Spencer Saller

"The term symphony," Gustav Mahler said after finishing his Symphony No. 2 in C minor, "means creating a world with all the technical means available. The constantly new and changing content determines its own form."

For Mahler, who sweated over drafts of his so-called "Resurrection" Symphony for six years before producing the final version, letting content assume its own form wasn't as simple as it might sound. Weary of the well-worn formal procedures that Classicism had codified over the past century-plus, the Austrian composer and conductor challenged himself to find new modes of symphonic self-expression.

One constant preoccupation: the fusion of song and symphony. His first five symphonies resonate with his contemporaneous Lieder cycles to a degree too profound to be coincidental. As a young man during the bloodless (and fundamentally ridiculous) War of the Romantics, Mahler aligned himself with the "Progressive" Wagnerians and their program music, not the Brahmsian classicists, or "Conservatives," who advocated for absolute music, stripped of all extramusical content. But the line between absolute and programmatic music was always blurrier than partisans acknowledged, and composers often felt conflicted about choosing one side over the other. Mahler certainly did. All of his first three symphonies had detailed programs at some point in their gestations—programs that he later withdrew and disavowed. He wanted his music to stand on its own.

In a letter to his wife Alma, he questioned the point of a program, especially for something as monumental and original as his Second Symphony: "It gives only a superficial indication, all that any program can do for a musical work, let alone this one, which is so much all of a piece that it can no more be explained than the world itself. —I'm quite sure that if God were asked to draw up a program of the world he created he could never do it. — At best it would be a 'revelation' that would say as little about the nature of God and life as my analysis says about my C-minor Symphony."

And yet he did provide at least two somewhat informal programs, albeit reluctantly, in early 1896 and again a few months later. In a letter to the critic Max Marschalk, he justified his reluctance to make the meaning too explicit: "The original aim of this work was never to describe an event in detail; rather, it concerns a feeling. Its spiritual message is clearly expressed in the words of the final chorus.... The parallel between life and music is perhaps deeper and more extensive than can be drawn at present. Yet I ask no one to follow me along this track, and I leave the interpretation of details to the imagination of each individual listener."

He attempted another explanation in 1901, prompted by none other than King Albert of Saxony after a performance of the Second Symphony in Dresden.

The stories Mahler told a critic, a confidante, and a king vary somewhat in their details, but they all entail the struggles of a hero who dies and then experiences a kind of spiritual rebirth. In an early version of Mahler's notes for the Second Symphony, he said that it was a funeral for the hero of the First Symphony, "The Titan." Indeed, in 1888, when he composed the first movement of the Second Symphony, he referred to it as "Todtenfeier," or "Funeral Rites," and at one point he even considered turning it into a freestanding symphonic poem.

Religion and "Resurrection"

Whereas his First Symphony delves into the mysteries and miseries of human existence, Mahler's Second Symphony deals with death and what follows it; hence its nickname, "Resurrection." It's worth mentioning that Mahler, who was born into a large and borderline-impoverished Jewish family, was still technically Jewish at the time of its composition. His interest in spiritual aspects of Christianity predates his formal conversion to Catholicism, in 1897, when he was 37 years old. Part of the reason he needed to make his faith a matter of public record was pragmatic: the ever-worsening anti-Semitism of late-19th-century Austria made it impossible for a Jewish man to land the most prestigious conducting positions, especially in Vienna, where Richard Wagner's proto-Nazi widow Cosima (illegitimate daughter of Franz Liszt and former wife of legendary conductor Hans von Bülow) still exerted enormous influence.

More to the point, the meaning of "Resurrection" in Mahler's Second Symphony shouldn't be limited to the word's specific theological connotations. Instead, "Resurrection" can apply to the composer's evolving views on creative and spiritual renewal, or rebirth. Intellectually curious, Mahler was drawn to metaphysics, philosophy, cosmology, psychoanalysis, and literature. He never used the nickname "Resurrection" himself, although his included texts, the lyrics to the symphony's embedded songs, allude to distinctly Christian concepts, such as heaven, angels, and eternal life. "Rise again, yes, you will rise again," the singers exclaim at the end of the symphony, singing Mahler's own verses. "My heart, in the twinkling of an eye!/What you have conquered/Will bear you to God!"

And yet the symphony also asks many questions that transcend the details of Christian doctrine: Do our lives matter? Why must we suffer? Will we be healed? The more we ponder these unanswerable questions, the more it makes sense that Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony was chosen in 2011 for a concert by the New York Philharmonic, led by Alan Gilbert, to commemorate the lives lost to terrorism 10 years earlier, on September 11, 2001.

Birth of a Maestro

Mahler accepted his first paid conducting gig at age 20, presiding over third-rate operettas at a spa in Upper Austria. From this point on, the ambitious and cash-strapped composer spent his entire life as a professional conductor, holding posts in Ljubljana, Kassel, Prague, Leipzig, Budapest, Hamburg, Vienna, and New York City. From the podium he was as brilliant as he was demanding, responding to the orchestra with an almost frenzied energy. He was widely considered among the greatest conductors in the world, and his exacting, emotionally incisive interpretations of other composers' great works inspired a new generation of dedicated maestros.

By the time Mahler began his Second Symphony, in 1888, he was already quite well-regarded as a conductor, if not as famous as he would later become. As a composer, however, his reputation left much to be desired. The disastrous premiere of his First Symphony took place in

late 1889, an experience that may have led him to second-guess his Second even more than usual.

Because of his grueling conducting schedule, Mahler usually waited until the summer to work on his original compositions, typically at a rural lakeside retreat, where he could burn off his frustrations by swimming, hiking, and cycling. If he couldn't finish a piece in a single summer, he generally had to put off working on it until the following summer, since he was so busy during the performance season. His Second Symphony fits this pattern.

Funereal Forms

In 1891, Mahler played an early version of the first movement, then titled "Todtenfeier," for his influential colleague Hans von Bülow. Clamping his hands over his ears, his expression pained, the legendary German conductor and pianist insisted on listening to the entire work and then exclaimed, "If what I have heard is still music, then I no longer understand anything about music!" Mahler was disappointed by the reaction, but undeterred. He wrote the second and third movements, experimenting with different versions and changing their order.

Ironically, it was Bülow who inadvertently assisted Mahler in completing the symphony. On February 12, 1894, the older man died in Cairo, Egypt, where he had gone in a last-ditch attempt to improve his health. At the memorial service, Mahler suddenly figured out a way to resolve the formal questions that had been dogging him for the past six years. He described this epiphany in a letter to the conductor Anton Seidl:

"I had long contemplated bringing in the choir in the last movement, and only the fear that it would be taken as a formal imitation of Beethoven [his Ninth Symphony] made me hesitate again and again. Then Bülow died, and I went to the memorial service. —The mood in which I sat and pondered on the departed was utterly in the spirit of what I was working on at the time. —Then the choir, up in the organ-loft, intoned Klopstock's *Resurrection* chorale. —It flashed on me like lightning, and everything became plain and clear in my mind! It was the flash that all creative artists wait for—'conceiving by the Holy Ghost'! What I then experienced had now to be expressed in sound. And yet—if

I had not already borne the work within me—how could I have had that experience?"

Just a few months after Bülow's parting gift, Mahler finished his Second Symphony. A fair copy of the complete score is dated December 28, 1894. (Ever the perfectionist, Mahler revised the scoring again in 1903 and made a few additional tweaks in 1909.) The premiere took place on December 13, 1895, in Berlin, with the composer himself leading the Berlin Philharmonic. Almost exactly 13 years later, at Carnegie Hall, Mahler led the New York Symphony (which would later become the New York Philharmonic) in the U.S. premiere. Despite its daunting instrumental and vocal requirements, the Second remains among Mahler's most widely performed works.

Momentous Moments
Cast in five movements that occupy about an hour and a half, Symphony No. 2 calls for a notably huge orchestra, even by the post-Wagnerian standards of the age. For instance, Mahler requests no fewer than ten horns and between eight and ten trumpets (most other large symphonies manage to get by with four of each). In addition to sumptuously appointed wind, brass, and percussion sections, Mahler's Second Symphony calls for an organ, two offstage brass and percussion ensembles, seven timpani (played by three timpanists), and, as he specifies in the score, "the largest possible contingent of strings." If that's not daunting enough, there's also a mixed choir, plus two solo singers, a soprano and a mezzo-soprano (sometimes an alto).

1. Allegro maestoso (mit durchaus ernstem und feierlichem Ausdruck)
As previously mentioned, this opening movement was initially titled "Funeral Rites" and originally completed in 1888. (As was his habit, Mahler revised it several times after "completing" it.) The second-to-longest of the four sections, the majestic Allegro begins with low strings playing an ominous, choppy quasi-march. In the score Mahler instructs the cellists and double-bassists to play not only loudly but also "ferociously." The opening movement is set in C minor, the same key that Beethoven chose for his immortal *Eroica*, the template for the symphonic funeral march. A lyrical secondary theme, carried by horns and winds, establishes a structure that's mostly consistent with the conventions of late Romantic sonata-allegro form.

2. Andante moderato (sehr gemächlich)
Largely composed in the summer of 1893, along with the third movement, the Andante moderato is a delightful, Haydnesque idyll, replete with lilting cellos, festive bravura, and lively, scampering rhythms. It's such a jarring contrast to the first movement that Mahler insisted on a long pause, preferably lasting a few minutes, between the first and second movement.

3. In ruhiger fließender Bewegung
In English translation, the title of the third movement means "In quietly flowing motion," a fair description of this dreamy, scherzo-like interlude. A magically twisty clarinet melody slips through skittery cross-currents of pizzicato and bowed strings; trumpets and harps collude in lambent rhapsodies. An expansion of a song about Saint Anthony of Padua's sermon to the fishes, this movement represents another fruitful pilfering from Mahler's settings of German folk poetry, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*.

4. "Urlicht" (sehr feierlich, aber schlicht)
The fourth movement, like the third, includes a song from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn.* Composed in 1892 and orchestrated the following year, "Urlicht" is usually translated in English to "primal light." Mahler scored it for mezzo-soprano or contralto, and its radiant innocence transforms a simple declaration of faith into a passionate soliloquy. Listen to the winds curling around the singer's voice; they seem to complete her thoughts, in the same way that birdsong bends the night sky toward morning:
"I am from God, I want to return to God.
The loving God will grant me a little light,
Will light my way to blissful life eternal and bright."

5. Im Tempo des Scherzo (wild herausfahrend)
Composed in the spring and summer of 1894, when Mahler also revised the first movement, the finale compiles themes from earlier movements. The longest of the five movements, it is also a diptych of sorts: the first part is purely instrumental, and the second part is dominated by the chorus and soloists. (The mezzo-soprano is joined by a soprano soloist.)

The first two stanzas of the text for the choral segment were penned by German poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, whose "Resurrection" music Mahler heard at Bülow's memorial service and cited as an inspiration.

Mahler wrote the remaining verses himself. His lines touch on divine judgment, as well as other Christian concepts, but his tone is far from doleful or didactic. Instead, he stresses self-discipline and compassion, the recognition of our common humanity through shared suffering. He gives voice to our collective hope as mortal beings in a vast universe:

"I will die to be alive!
Arise, you will arise,
My heart, within a moment!
What you have conquered,
To God, to God it will bear you up."

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