

PROGRAM NOTES

by Pam Davis

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Symphony No. 2, “Resurrection” (1894)

A depiction of hope after crushing despair, this symphony is one of the vastest in the repertoire. It was performed in New Orleans at the opening of the Mahalia Jackson Theater for the Performing Arts after Hurricane Katrina. It was also televised two days after John F. Kennedy’s assassination, about which Leonard Bernstein, (who conducted the performance by the New York Philharmonic), stated that he chose the work over other more standard memorial pieces because of “its visionary concept of hope and triumph over worldly pain.”

Although now an icon among composers, Mahler was not always universally admired. He dealt with widespread harsh criticism of his compositions. Indeed, when he played the first movement of this symphony for conductor and pianist Hans von Bülow, his friend covered his ears and remarked “If what I have just heard is still music, then I no longer understand anything about music.” Mahler was so distressed that he told his friend Richard Strauss that he wasn’t sure he should continue composing. Ironically, it was a few years later at von Bülow’s funeral service that Mahler conceived the long-elusive path that the final movement would take.

He had written the first movement in 1888 as a sort of sequel to the first symphony, the burial of the hero. The second and third movements were not composed until 1893. He knew he wanted to end the work with a chorus, but hadn’t found the right text. At von Bülow’s memorial service in February of 1894, a children’s choir sang Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock’s “Auferstehn, ja auferstehn wirst du” (Rise again, yes, you will rise again). This became the inspiration for Mahler: “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 ...” He utilized the song, added some verses of his own and assembled the massive finale. Inserting “Urlicht” (Primal Light) as the fourth movement, the symphony was finally completed, although Mahler would continue to add revisions.

Mahler had conflicting and changing relationships with descriptive programs in his music. He was quoted repeatedly as saying that the music should stand on its own, and yet when pressed he provided programmatic explanations of the movements, included here. Later, in his third symphony, he started out with titles for each of the six movements, but later removed them.

I. Allegro maestoso

I have named the first movement ‘Funeral Rites’. We are standing beside the coffin of a beloved man...it is the hero of my first symphony whom I bear to the grave...At the same time there are great questions: ‘What next? Why did you live? Why did you suffer? Is it all nothing but a huge, terrible joke? Or has this life of ours a meaning? We must answer these questions in some way, if we want to go on living...and this answer I give in the final movement.

Opening with string tremolos, the cellos and basses set up the funeral march instigated by the woodwinds, joined by ominous brass. A serene rising melody in the violins foreshadows the conclusion of the symphony, followed by more persistent dark drama. The coda features repetitive falling figures.

II. *Andante moderato*

The second and third movements are conceived as an interlude. The second is a memory – a moment of bliss from the life of this hero...the image of a long-forgotten hour of happiness, which now enters the soul like a shaft of light – you could almost forget that which has just happened,

Mahler called for a long pause between the first and second movements, perhaps because of the startling contrast between the preceding funeral march and this charming country waltz. Simple and innocent, a cello countermelody punctuates this memory of happier times. Gentle pizzicato strings add to the delightful mood.

III. *In ruhig fließender Bewegung (with quietly flowing movement)*

But when you awake from this blissful dream and have to return to the confusion of life, it can easily happen that this ever moving, never-resting, incomprehensible bustle of existence becomes horrible to you...Life strikes you as meaningless, a frightful ghost, from which you perhaps start away with a cry of disgust!

In this instrumental version of a song from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, the strings create the flowing movement with slurred lines of moving eighth notes. Soon a tipsy-sounding St. Anthony of Padua sermonizes to the fish. A menacing Klezmer-style clarinet waltz-like melody precedes the out-of-nowhere eruption of what Mahler called a “cry of despair”. Things spiral nearly out of control before returning to fragments of the flowing lines.

IV. *“Urlicht” (Primal Light)*

Fourth movement – the stirring voice of simple faith soothes our ears.

Marked “very solemn but simple”, this movement is an adaptation of another song from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, but this time sung. It serves as an introduction to the massive closing movement. A hymn-like brass chorale predicts the finale’s resurrection theme.

Primal Light from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*

O little red rose!
Man lies in the greatest need.
Man lies in the greatest suffering.
How I would rather be in heaven!
I came upon a broad road.
There came an angel and wanted to turn me away.
Ah no! I would not let myself be turned away!
I am from God and shall return to God!
The loving God will grant me a little light,
Which will light me into that eternal blissful life!

V. *Im Tempo des Scherzos (In the tempo of the scherzo)*

We are confronted once more with terrifying questions. A voice is heard crying aloud: 'The end of all living things is come – the Last Judgment is at hand'...the earth quakes, the graves burst open, the dead arise and stream on in endless procession...The cry for mercy and forgiveness strikes fearfully in our ears. The wailing rises higher – our senses desert us, consciousness fails at the approach of the eternal spirit. The last trumpet is heard... We can just catch the distant, barely audible song of a nightingale, last tremulous echo of earthly life... And behold! It is no judgment... There is no punishment and no reward. Just an overwhelming love illuminates our being. We know, and are.

Mahler called this movement a "bold piece of massive construction". It explodes out of the plaintive fourth movement. Several ideas from previous movements are reintroduced and varied, along with new material, including a brass treatment of the medieval Dies Irae. Drama is heightened by off-stage trumpets, horns, and percussion. Ominous and triumphant statements seem to challenge each other. The triumphant prevails. The atmosphere clears as the chorus finally enters with a sublime sound, eventually joined by the soloists singing Mahler's words. We are finally led to a glorious conclusion of the rising lines and a final massive chord.

Resurrection

Arise, yes, you will arise from the dead,
My dust, after a short rest!
Eternal life
Will be given you by Him who called you,
To bloom again you are sown,
The lord of the harvest goes
And gathers the sheaves,
Us who have died.

-Friedrich Klopstock

Oh believe, my heart, O believe:
Nothing will be lost to you!
Everything is yours that you desired,
Yours what you loved, struggled for,
Oh believe, you were not born in vain,
Have not lived in vain, suffered in vain!
What was created must perish,
What has perished must rise again.
Tremble no more!
Prepare yourself to live!
Oh sorrow all-penetrating!
I have been wrested away from you!
O Death, all-conquering!
Now are you conquered!
With wings that I won

In the passionate strivings of love
I shall mount
To the light to which no sight has penetrated.
I shall die so as to live!
Arise, yes, you will arise from the dead,
My heart, in an instant!
What you have conquered,
Will bear you to God.

- ♪ WORLD EVENTS: Novelist Robert Louis Stevenson dies, author Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*) is born, Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* premieres
- ♪ FIRST PERFORMANCE: December 13, 1895, in Berlin, the composer conducting
- ♪ MOST RECENT SSO PERFORMANCE: February 2015, Kyle Wiley Pickett conducting