Gustav Mahler & Romanticism

Vincent Santini
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State University of New York at New Paltz

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I Introduction

On the 18th of May, 1911, Gustav Mahler (b. 1860) succumbed to a failing heart. Beside him was his wife, Alma. She watched as, in a daze, the famed conductor drew his finger about the bed, as if conducting right then. With bulged eyes, he cried "Mozart! Mozart!" and breathed his last breath[1]. That is how the world of Western music perceived Gustav Mahler upon his death: a well-respected, sought-after conductor taken too soon; he conducted until the very end, with his final concert held in Carnegie Hall in February of 1911, mere months before bacterial endocarditis would take him.

It wasn't until decades later that the name Gustav Mahler could usher with it the connotations of immense orchestras, blaring trumpets and lifted horn-bells, tapestries of heart-wrenching emotional melodies, and comically large hammers. Mahler as a composer was unknown in his day, and though he composed from a young age in his spare time, it wasn't until later in his life that concert programs started to feature his works at all, to mixed reviews. His First Symphony in D Major, titled *Titan*, was harshly criticized upon its premiere, but it undoubtably laid the groundwork for the gargantuan symphonic output that Mahler would bring in the last twenty years of his life[2].

This should not be surprising. Thirty years before Mahler's birth, the death of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827) signified a transitory time between the Classical Period (c.1750 – 1830) and the so-called Romantic Period (c.1830 – 1910). The works of Beethoven were at the forefront of the transformation music was undergoing during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Music once held significant religious importance, particularly in Catholicism, with uncountable manuscripts written in worship of God's glory; music itself was divine, and above all else served to glorify Him. But music was becoming more accessible, more diverse within the Western classical umbrella, and composers were growing more experimental.

[1] Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Erinnerungen und Briefe,* trans. Basil Creighton (New York: The Viking Press, 1946), 185.

[2] Stephen Johnson, "Mahler, Gustav," *Classical Music BBCMusic,* February 25, 2023.

Beethoven was the strongest catalyst of this shift for his time, composing music that managed to explore the complexities of human emotion in ways rivaled by very few; as Deborah Lynn Smith puts it in her 1980 master's thesis: "...the works of Beethoven... contained an intangible 'extra', a type of expressiveness lacking in music of the classical period" [3]. This is the embodiment of Romanticism. Beethoven laid a strong foundation for the composers of the nineteenth century to build upon and explore this new stylistic movement, but few came close to rivaling his ability to capture the absolute breadth of the individual's emotional experience of the world through music- until Mahler. The symphonies of Gustav Mahler are the capstone achievement of the Romantic Period; his contributions to music and the unique passion he imbued in his works solidifies him among the greats that came before him. Bach defined Baroque. Mozart defined Classical. Beethoven certainly defined the early nineteenth century and set the stage for Romanticism, and it was Mahler who brought it to its complete realization.

II Romanticism

Background

The titular movement of the Romantic Period was not unique to music. It was a movement that was particularly prominent in British and French paintings, sketches, and other visual arts. Despite the differences in media, the movement saw radical changes developing in the music world, too.

Romanticism saw drastic shifts in composition of paintings, with increased focus on individual subjects. Artists strived to convey the intricacies of human emotions in the single instant of time captured on canvas. In an essay on Romanticism, Kathryn Galitz exemplifies the movement's goals:

> This interest in the individual and subjective... is mirrored in the Romantic ap-

[3]Deborah Lynn Smith, "Gustav Mahler and his relationship to the problem of nineteenth century program music," *The University of British Columbia* (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1980), 6.

> proach to portraiture. Traditionally, records of individual likeness, portraits became vehicles for expressing a range of psychological and emotional states in the hands of Romantic painters. Gericault probed...the darker side of childhood in his unconventional portrayals of children. In his portrait of Alfred Dedreux... a young boy of about five or six, the child appears intensely serious, more adult than childlike, while the dark clouds in the background convey an unsettling, ominous quality[4].

These shifts in approach to visual media in Romanticism are strikingly, though unsurprisingly similar to the shifts made in music; a focus on the individual and nature rather than the many and the divine. Accomplishing this in music is rather different from art, of course. The Romantic Period saw the overall growth of music in scale and depth; orchestrations swelled and programmatic music became rather popular, if not controversial. That is, music that invites the listener to explore an extra-musical meaning of the composition through its tone, structure, or other musical features.

The War of the Romantics

Composers of the mid-to-late nineteenth century had the ghost of a musical master looming just over their shoulder: Ludwig van Beethoven. Would music continue to progress? Or had Beethoven set such an immutable standard– such a high bar– that it was foolish to do anything but return to and study his forms? If this tumultuous time was the start of a fire, Romanticism and the implications of program music poured the gasoline.

A great schism was formed among composers, and analysis of the conflict can be boiled down to two notable examples of the Romantic Period, both of whom were well-established in the musical world before Mahler was even born: Franz Liszt, and Johannes Brahms. Liszt was a prominent composer and pianist who published his support for a movement toward "new music, 'humanistic music' "[5] and was an advocate for the growing popularity of programmatic music.

[4]Kathryn Calley Galitz, "Romanticism," *The Met,* October 2004.
[5]Paul Henry Láng, "Liszt and the Romantic Movement," *The Musical Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (July 1936): 316.

Brahms, on the other hand, was a staunch classicalist and can be credited with the revival of the forms favored by Beethoven such as string quartets and the symphony itself; being "two generations removed from Beethoven... he felt enough distance to compose in those hallowed forms"[6].

Though calling the debaccal a 'war' is inflammatory and overblown, there were real stances being taken on the state of music at the time, which led to some harshly penned words. In 1860, Brahms and other conservatives of this movement signed a publication which flamed Liszt and other members of the New German School, claiming they "regard everything great and sacred which the musical talent of our people has created up to now as mere fertiliser for the rank, miserable weeds growing from Liszt-like fantasias"[7].

Mahler, it can be argued, aligned with the ideals of Liszt and the New German School as a late-romantic composer. He rose to the composition space long after the so-called *War of the Romantics* had died off to a simmering conflict, but still saw repercussions for attempting to adopt program music as a new form. His early symphonic works showed his interest in narrativism in his music, as many of these huge compositions involve deeper themes and intentions that Mahler clearly expressed during their writing, but he was quick to retract these narratives in official publications[8]. Despite mixed feelings on designating his works as programmatic, it is exceedingly clear that many of Mahler's works exhibit this merge of the musical with the narrational– as personal to Mahler as those narratives may be– which is in line with the progressive notion that music was heading in this direction. And yet, Mahler still embraced Beethovian tradition in his progressiveness, as his symphonies evoke a very similar *humanistic* quality. In this way, Mahler could be seen drawing upon both aspects of the romantic conflict, synthesizing a perfected view of Romanticism that the conservative composers of his time blinded themselves to.

[6]Russel Ger, "The War of the Romantics," *Russell Ger Conductor,* July 15, 2016.
[7]Rebecca Franks, "What was the War of the Romantics?," *Classical Music BBCMusic,* March 17, 2021.
[8]Stephen Hefling, "Mahler's 'Todtenfeier' and the Problem of Program Music," *19th-Century Music* 12, no. 1 (Summer 1988): 27.

As Smith explores in Mahler's relationship with Romanticism, his rather pessimistic attitude towards life in his early years parallels the themes of his much later works, particularly *Das Lied von der Erde* and his Ninth. "Das Lied deals with the loneliness of a wanderer who must leave earth and life forever, and his consolation in nature"[9].

Das Lied von der Erde was completed in 1909, just two years before Mahler's death, and the circumstances surrounding this piece's composition already give credence to why Mahler might embrace weaving deeper narratives, greater purposes into his pieces. The Summer of 1907 was certainly still raw in the minds of the Mahlers; an illness befell both of their children, which resulted in the death of their first child, three-year-old Maria Anna Mahler. Not long after, Mahler was formally diagnosed with a defective heart[10].

These tragedies likely reignited Mahler's desire to accomplish something deeper with his later music; this return to 'narrativism' in his music– his symphonies, particularly– creates a noticeable gap in which the first three symphonies can be argued to be programmatic in nature. The Fourth marks Mahler's "turning away from the written program"[11], the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh can be considered "absolute music"- there is no indication of a programmatic narrative to these "middle symphonies"[12]-and from the Eighth (completed in 1906, premiered in 1910) onward, Mahler seemed to return to this idea of composing with an underlying meaning in mind.

To analyze Mahler's symphonic handling of narrative, highlight his rapid maturation as a composer, and to ultimately see why Mahler's symphonies are a quintessential example of Romanticism, we will focus down and analyze a microcosm of Mahler's massive catalogue of symphonic works. That is, his First Symphony in D Major *'Titan'*, and his Second Symphony in C Minor *'Resurrection'*.

[9]Deborah Lynn Smith, "Gustav Mahler and his relationship to the problem of nineteenth century program music," *The University of British Columbia* (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1980), 10.

[10]Deryck V Cooke, "Gustav Mahler: Austian Composer," *Britannica,* July 20, 1998.

[11]Deborah Lynn Smith, "Gustav Mahler and his relationship to the problem of nineteenth century program music," *The University of British Columbia* (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1980), 14.

[12]Deborah Lynn Smith, "Gustav Mahler and his relationship to the problem of nineteenth century program music," *The University of British Columbia* (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1980), 15.

III The First & The Second

The First was composed between 1887 and 1888, completed to be premiered on November 20, 1889. Mahler himself conducted its first performance, and it was advertised not as a typical symphony, but as a symphonic poem[13]. This kind of language is indicative of tone poems and programmatic music, of course.

The structure Mahler initially intended for the First was a very odd and poetic departure from the typical symphony. Whereas the typical symphony is structured as four movements: A fast movement (usually sonata form), a slow movement, a 'dance' movement (in 3), and a fast finale, Mahler broke his First into five movements, separated further into two distinct 'parts'. It was as if he was structuring this symphony- this musical work- as a book, with chapters and sections. This is in line with the romantic idea of merging the arts.

The symphony's structure as of the premiere was as follows[14]:

Part I: From the Days of Youth

- Mvt. 1 *Spring Without End*
- Mvt. 2 *Flora*
- Mvt. 3 *Under Full Sail*

Part II: Human Comedy

- Mvt. 4 *Funeral March in the Manner of Callot*
- Mvt. 5 *From Inferno to Paradise*

We can see how Mahler was attempting to increase the scale of his compositions from the very start of his symphonies. To so boldly declare this 'Mahlerian' structure and forge his own path away from the standard form is a testament to Mahler's confidence– perhaps his ego– in his abilities to compose and create new ideas.

[13]Marianne Williams Tobias, "Symphony No.1 in D Major ('Titan')," *Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra,* 2017.
[14]Marianne Williams Tobias, "Symphony No.1 in D Major ('Titan')," *Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra,* 2017.

This structure also provides a clear narrative; there is commentary here on the beauty of nature; the 'days of youth' moniker is likely meant to call upon memories of childhood innocence and wonder in exploring the world. The last two movements have darker implications; it seems that we should now contemplate mortality after recalling our 'glory days' and reflect on our limited time on Earth.

This original version of the First was not well received by critics. In fact, it was so poorly received, that Mahler had several edits done to his First that it ultimately was revised into a form that is expected of a symphony, although it retains much of its personality. Even a close friend of Mahler, Viktor von Herzfeld, remarked negatively on the First's premiere: "All of our great conductors... have themselves eventually recognized, or have proved, that they were not composers... this is true of Mahler also"[15].

But even though Mahler appeared to have revised the First into a more palatable piece, with a more 'proper' four-movement structure:

- Mvt. 1 *Langsam*
- Mvt. 2 *Kräftig bewegt*
- Mvt. 3 *Feierlich und gemessen*
- Mvt. 4 *Stürmisch bewegt*

Was it really no longer programmatic? Mahler would likely object to that term, but there was certainly still a narrative playing out in his mind- images of nature still fill the concert hall with the iconic first movement; "This note is held like a backdrop against which different birdcalls (the clarinet cuckoo) emerge, and Mahler explained 'This sounds of nature, not music"'[16].

The final movement gives the clearest hint that the First is at least in part programmatic. It embodies a 'character' that Mahler refers to as "the hero"[17] in his letters. If there were to be a plainer description of what Mahler had in mind for an overarching narrative of the First– and

[15]Marianne Williams Tobias, "Symphony No.1 in D Major ('Titan')," *Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra,* 2017.
[16]Marianne Williams Tobias, "Symphony No.1 in D Major ('Titan')," *Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra,* 2017.
[17]Marianne Williams Tobias, "Symphony No.1 in D Major ('Titan')," *Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra,* 2017.

as we'll see, the Second– it would be in that of a letter from Mahler to Natalie Bauer-Lechner: "...and if you want to know, it is the hero of my D-major [First] Symphony whom I am bearing to the grave, and whose life I, from a lofty vantage point, reflect in a clear mirror"[18]. This refers to the first movement of the Second Symphony being a 'funeral march,' in which this Hero character from the First is being put to rest. We also see that, plainly, Mahler has admitted that this Hero is himself, an important detail when considering the structure and implications of the Second.

IV The Second

Structure

Overlapping and almost immediately following the completion of the First in 1889 was the composition of Mahler's Second. This symphony took significantly longer for Mahler to complete, with its premiere taking place on December 13, 1895.

Mahler's Second Symphony, *'Resurrection',* is one of his longest and most ambitious works from his early symphonic career; performances average 80-90 minutes as compared to the First's 40-minute runtime. It strikes a balance in structure between the First's original and final format:

- Mvt. 1 *Allegro maestoso*
- Mvt. 2 *Andante moderato*
- Mvt. 3 *"In ruhig fließender Bewegung" (With quietly flowing movement)*
- Mvt. 4 *"Urlicht" (Primal light)*
- Mvt. 5 *"Im Tempo des Scherzos" (In the tempo of the scherzo*[19]*)*

Compared to the standard structure, the second movement is a dance (albeit a slow dance), the third movement is a scherzo, and the *Urlicht* can be seen as an introduction to the finale, the

[18]Stephen E Hefling, "Mahler's 'Todtenfeier' and the Problem of Program Music," *19th-Century Music* 12, No. 1 (Summer, 1988): 27.

[19]Referring to the third movement.

monstrous fifth movement, which occupies a third of the piece's runtime. Mahler was very vague about tempo markings; we see that the fifth movement is labeled as *im Tempo des Scherzos*, an example of how Mahler viewed the numerical tempo as less important than the relationships of tempi between each movement[20].

Dies Irae

Upon first listen, one might miss the sheer number of motifs and themes Mahler introduces in the first movement that return later in the symphony. These motifs are the groundwork for the underlying narrative Mahler has written out. With the confirmation of the first movement's meaning as a funeral march for the Hero, we can derive Mahler's philosophy as the piece continues and these motifs develop. Tracking every single motif's importance throughout the Second would be tiresome and, while informative, unnecessary to see Mahler's Romanticism.

Instead, we will focus on one of the most important motifs in the entire piece: the quote of the *Dies Irae* chant. Famously symbolic of death in Western music, Mahler has modified the chant into his own melody. It is introduced in the first movement during the development section of the sonata, and is developed to completion in the fifth movement.

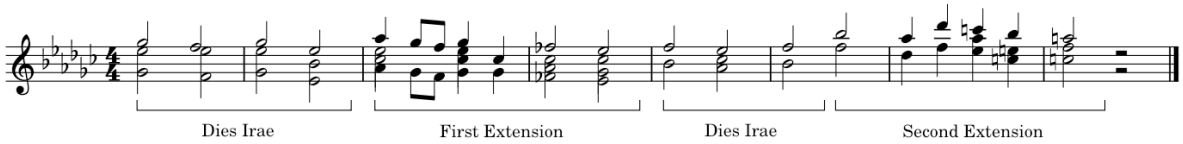

Figure 1: Mahler's Dies Irae

The *Dies Irae* originated as a Gregorian chant and has deeply religious connotations; the original poem describes the Day of Judgement. Mahler takes this solemn hymn of death, and extends it. The first extension to the antecedent phrase adds rich harmonic colors with

[20]Gilbert E. Kaplan, "How Mahler Performed his Second Symphony," *The Musical Times* 127, no. 1718 (May 1986): 267.

the addition of a II♭ – VI cadence (in E♭ minor) that evokes a sense of uncertainty, which is transfigured in the consequent phrase to end in an unapologetic F major fanfare. We will revisit this soon.

Religion in the Second

One might step back and wonder: *"Romantic ideals say we should be focusing on the individual; why is Mahler invoking religion in this piece?"* In fact, the very title of the symphony implies a religious subject: the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is not until the third movement that one might start to glimpse Mahler's true intentions with the Second and its relation to religion. The scherzo was composed separate to the Second, and in line with his programmatic inclinations, it is based on the German folk poem *'Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt',* or 'St. Anthony of Padua Preaches to the Fish. The poem fit so well to the Second, serving as a proper scherzo (literally meaning 'joke'), that Mahler decided to implement it into the symphony. The poem is the tale of St. Anthony, a preacher whose congregation does not take his gospel to heart, so he goes to preach to the fish. He finds the fish seem to listen to him, but once the sermon concludes, they go about their own business just the same as the congregation did.[21]. Mahler is clearly critiquing Christianity in this movement, and one can even hear the influence of Jewish klezmer music in the bombastic main theme; at this point, we can be confident that this symphony is *not* married to Christian faith.

The movement reaches a dramatic climax in a single moment, which Mahler referred to as the "death shriek"[22]. This can be interpreted in many ways, but Mahler was certainly not praising religion here. Romanticism is all about shifting away from religion to focus on the self, and this is Mahler's way of showing that; religion is dying, the world is growing more secular,

[21]Matthew Hodge, "The Mahler Symphonies Guided Tour – Symphony No. 2: Movement III," *The Relentless Pursuit of Cold Shivers,* November 13, 2016.

[22]Judd, Timothy. "Mahler's 'Resurrection' Symphony: Music from Another World." *Listener's Club,* March 15, 2023.

and for many, that means that the meaning of life is dying. What could possibly fill the void it leaves behind?

The fourth movement, *Urlicht,* is the shortest of the symphony, yet it is the most important to understanding how Mahler will handle the questions asked by the third movement. A vocalist is heard for the first time in the piece: an alto soloist. She laments the suffering of Man in a world without God, and so concludes that she would much rather be granted entry to Heaven than to toil on Earth[23].

Finally, Mahler steps in and answers this naïve conclusion as the fifth movement begins with another Death Shriek. This massive finale is Mahler's answer to all questions asked in the first four movements, and several motifs make their reappearances throughout the development of this movement.

We will simplify our analysis by once again focusing on Mahler's Dies Irae, as it returns in full force in its own section of the fifth movement, the famous brass chorale. Whereas the first quote of the Dies Irae was timid by comparison, hidden among other instruments in the tragedy of the first movement, it is now on full display, quoted in full by a chorus of trombones. The trumpets enter and everything swells to a triumphant climax. With a new perspective on how Mahler views religion, the Dies Irae gains new meaning; it is not a hymn of death Mahler has transformed on account of religious faith and glory to God, it is a hymn of death that has been reborn to symbolize the perserverance of human spirit.

Parallels to Beethoven's Ninth are inevitable in the final fifteen minutes, as a choir is introduced to finalize Mahler's message, though it would be facetious to believe Mahler was doing this with the intent of bolstering himself as Beethoven's equal. Mahler's choice of text, implementation and orchestration of the finale are wholly unique and unlike anything to come before it.

To conclude our analysis of the Second, we will look at the final lyrics of the symphony,

[23]Karen, "Mahler 'Resurrection' Translation," *The Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra,* November 13, 2013.

written by Mahler himself. With all we have learned from the previous movements, a clear picture of Mahler's philosophy is painted:

"O believe:
You were not born in vain,
Have not lived in vain, nor suffered!"

"In love's ardent struggle,
I shall fly upwards
To that light to which no eye has penetrated!"

"I shall die so as to live!"

"Rise again,
Yes, you will rise again,
My heart, in the twinkling of an eye!"

"What you have conquered
Will bear you to God!"[24]

Knowing these are Mahler's own words makes them all the more impactful, as he validates the struggles of Man regardless of what has happened in their life. The purpose religion once served– the meaning of life it once gave– is not lost, it is born again by every person in everything they conquer; it is that perserverance which creates purpose, and the spirit of Man is resurrected from those struggles.

Through this final message, Mahler has embodied the ideals of Romanticism as we have explored a more humanistic alternative to the idea of devotion and faith to religion. In the process, Mahler has also embodied technical and orchestral ideals, as he shows clear improvement and skill in his handling of motif development, as well as the unique implementation of an entire chorus into the finale.

V Conclusion

Mahler's Second is just one of eight (arguably nine) other symphonies that stand tall at the end of the nineteenth century, the culmination of Romanticism as a movement in Western music. In the case of his later symphonies and *Das Lied von der Erde*, they even serve as a bridge to the new century's defining characteristics. As the capstone of the Romantic Period, Mahler's greatness as a symphonic composer is shown in every aspect of his 'Ressurection' symphony; it encapsulates

[24]Karen, "Mahler 'Resurrection' Translation," *The Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra,* November 13, 2013.

not only Mahler's own attitudes toward mortality and life, but opens itself to the listener to take whatever meaning they wish from it in order to provide a unique, empowering perspective. Its rapid composition following his First also highlights Mahler's maturation as a composer, and the reception of the Second in comparison to the First reflects Mahler's improvements in the handling of tone, themes, and his desire to modify the standard symphonic form, which he continued to do in his later symphonies.

The fact that Mahler's compositions were not appreciated during his time did not appear to hinder his ability to compose, if for no one then for himself. And it was in this raw, unfiltered setting where he could tap into what made his music unique: his life experience. Drawing on the uncertainty of death and the glory of the human spirit, Gustav Mahler's music is the epitome of Romanticism and its complex portrayal of the individual.

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