

## Symphony No. 9 in D major (1908-1910)

### GUSTAV MAHLER (1860-1911)

85 minutes; piccolo, four flutes, four oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, three clarinets, bass clarinet, four bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps and strings.

"I don't choose what to compose. It chooses me," insisted Gustav Mahler. In the three towering works comprising the final phase of his creative life (*Das Lied von der Erde*, the Ninth Symphony and the unfinished Tenth Symphony), the Fate that had chosen to smite him was not just hinted at by the music, but was the very essence of its message. These late works were born in the shattering year of 1907, during which not one but three separate shocks befell the composer that crushed his happiness and hastened his early death at the age of fifty.

First, Mahler severed his stormy association with the Vienna Opera, over which he had presided for the preceding decade. Although, according to every report, he had raised the level of performance both on stage and in the orchestra pit to an unprecedentedly high level, he had also acquired many enemies in the process. A demoniacal worker and an unremitting perfectionist, he alienated performers through his criticisms when they could not achieve the standards he demanded. Against the continuing background of budgetary distress, hide-bound Viennese conservatism and muted but pervasive anti-Semitism, Mahler began to feel that his tenure had been a failure, and he resigned in March 1907.

The second blow landed early that summer, though premonitory quiverings had been heralding its arrival for several months. Dr. Friedrich Kovacs of Vienna diagnosed a serious heart condition in Mahler caused by subacute endocarditis, and advised him that all strenuous activity would have to cease if the disease were not to prove rapidly fatal. To Mahler, an avid swimmer and hiker, this was terrible news. Apart from the change in his daily schedule, however, this condition also forced the forty-six-year-old composer to face squarely up to his own mortality — something that had been a residual undercurrent in his life-long melancholia, but which now became Mahler's obsession.

Already shaken in his career and his physical well-being, the third fateful stroke numbed his family life. In July, his beloved four-year-old daughter, Maria, died of scarlet fever and diphtheria. Mahler, like Shakespeare's Brutus, was "sick of many griefs."

After the discovery of his heart condition, Mahler limited his physical exercise, carrying a pedometer with him so as not to exceed the prescribed number of daily steps. He refused, however, to abandon his work. He spent four winter seasons in New York conducting the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic, returning to Austria during the summers to compose. During the summer of 1909, he worked feverishly on his Symphony No. 9, a composition that took considerable courage on his part to complete, since he was superstitiously wary of ninth symphonies: Beethoven, Schubert, Bruckner and Dvorák had all died without getting past that number. In an attempt to skirt the problem, Mahler had not numbered the successor to his Eighth Symphony, but created it instead as a song cycle-symphony titled *Das Lied von der Erde* ("The Song of the Earth"). Since this new work would therefore actually be his *tenth* symphony, Mahler reasoned that "now the danger is past." The music, however, gives a different message — a message of farewell, of acceptance of mortality, and of the deep realization of the wondrous gift of life just when it seemed, because of its imminent loss, to be most precious to Mahler. "I am thirstier than ever for life, and I find the 'habit of living' sweeter than ever," he wrote in 1909 to his dear friend and disciple, the conductor Bruno Walter.

In addition to the personal leave-taking embodied in its notes, the Ninth Symphony, like all of Mahler's works, expands beyond the limits of the composer's daily life in two important directions — the communicative and the historical. Of all Mahler's symphonies, this one goes most directly to the listener's heart. It has a quality almost unmatched by any other music to turn our thoughts inward, to encourage us to examine the deepest and most secret recesses of our humanity.

The Ninth Symphony is a gesture of farewell in the historical sense, as well. Mahler, heir to two centuries of the greatest and most profound German music, knew that his works stood at the end of the hallowed tradition of symphonic music extending back through Brahms and Beethoven to Mozart and Haydn and Bach. He was also acutely aware that more than just this mode of artistic expression was waning. The forces that ignited World War I were already swinging into place in 1909, and Mahler was convinced that life as he knew it would be destroyed and would never come again. In the words of American musicologist Edward Downes, "The composer felt that the entire tradition, the works of the past he loved, the values by which he lived, even the sensitivity to perceive these things — were all sliding with him irretrievably into oblivion."

As did all of his sensitive European contemporaries, Mahler perceived around him a cracking of society, one that he felt was going to bring down the very political, social and artistic structures upon which he had built his life. He could not, of course, foretell his own calamities or the start of the Great War in 1914 that realized his vision, but he did bring to his last works a sense of portentous uneasiness and irreplaceable loss that mirror the era in which he lived. "Mahler's music expressed the intuitive forebodings of an artist listening to the distant rumblings of the future and, as such, formulating the apprehensions of the suppressed and inarticulate ... who found in him, the Austrian Jew, their most sympathetic spokesman," commented Hans Redlich. The overwhelming poignancy of Mahler's music arises from his juxtaposition of these cosmic concerns with the simple, personal joys of nature, family, love and the other essential values that nurture our humanity. As a testament to the ebbing of a great man's life, the art he cherished, and even the society in which he lived, Mahler's Ninth Symphony is among the most poignant works ever composed.

Bruno Walter, who led the premiere of the Ninth Symphony in Vienna a year after the composer's death, spoke also of the work's "prophetic significance in purely musical terms. Here Mahler stands once more upon the mysterious threshold beyond which lies a new unexplored province of the realm of music. Mahler's themes appear as ghostly symbols, reduced to bare outlines; the texture is thinned out, much as in some passages of the latest Beethoven; the independent melodic entities are projected bluntly against a vast empty horizon and clash with each other in harsh, portentous friction." The Ninth Symphony proved to be an enormous influence on Mahler's younger Viennese colleagues, especially Arnold Schoenberg, who followed its lead in creating a new musical style for the new century.

For all of its universal significance, however, the creation of the Ninth Symphony, like all of Mahler's music, was intimately bound up with his personal life. In her account of their years together, his wife, Alma, left a charming anecdote concerning the work's composition in the chapter dated "Christmas, 1910":

Our drawing-room [in New York City's Plaza Hotel] was a corner room. It had three enormous windows, one of which was a bow-window occupying the whole corner. Immediately below there was the Plaza, but the noise of its ceaseless traffic reached us only as a murmur. In front, we had a magnificent view over the vast Central Park, studded with lakes and ponds.

We often went for walks together that winter, or else I sent Mahler out alone with Gucki [i.e., Anna, the Mahlers' younger daughter]. It was good, too, that he should get to know his little girl, of whom he grew more and more fond. I could see them nearly the whole time from my ninth-floor window, walking together in Central Park and snowballing each other.

He always [revised and orchestrated] his compositions of the summer during the winter. This time it was the Ninth Symphony, for the Tenth was not completed and he had a superstitious fear of working on it. He played bits of *Das Lied von der Erde* to me almost daily during those last two years. One day while he was working, Gucki stood beside him, watching with engrossment. He was scratching out one note after another. "Papi," she said, "I wouldn't like to be a note." "Why not?" he asked. "Because then you might scratch me out and blow me away." He was so delighted that he came at once to tell me what she had said.

The formal structure of Mahler's Ninth Symphony is unusual. It comprises two fast, sardonic central movements flanked at beginning and end by massive *Adagio* statements. Each movement represents a particular kind of farewell. The first is a farewell to love, to intimacy, to spiritual pleasures. The second, a hard-edged *Ländler*, an Austrian peasant dance, could be either (or both) a farewell to the simple joys of country life or a modern evocation of that fearful Medieval omnipresence, the Dance of Death. The third movement, a mocking *Burleske*, leaves behind the tawdry attractions of the city and of sophisticated life. The stunning finale is a farewell to life itself.

Throughout his score, both in the musical notes and in the performance markings, Mahler left not mere indications of these meanings, but a trail of neon signposts. The ending is marked *ersterbend* ("dying away"); one section bears the legend *Freund Hein spielt auf* ("the Grim Reaper plays"), another *Wie ein schwerer Kondukt* ("like a somber funeral procession"); "O vanished days of youth, O scattered love ..." is scrawled at one point in the manuscript. It is the music, however, that most fully reflects Mahler's mind: the violent clashes of contrasting materials in the unique and complex structure of the first movement (the works of Beethoven's last years, such as the Piano Sonata, Op. 109, come to mind); the distorted and brittle dance of the second; the chaotic maelstrom of the third; the gradual slipping away of the delicate strands of melody — of life itself — in the finale. These tell us more about the feelings of the dying composer than could any written words.

"What one makes music from is still the whole — that is the feeling, thinking, breathing, suffering human being," Mahler told Bruno Walter. Mahler lived his life bravely, productively, wholly, right to the end. Walter, in his loving book on his mentor, wrote, "The music [of the Ninth Symphony] grew to be a tragically moving and noble epitome of the farewell feeling. A unique soaring between farewell sadness and a vision of Heavenly light, it lifts the Symphony into an atmosphere of celestial bliss."

©2010 Dr. Richard E. Rodda