

# Lecture One

## Introduction and Childhood

**Scope:** One of the most significant aspects of Mahler's life was his sense of alienation, brought on largely by his Jewish heritage and his critics' reaction to it. In fact, the tension created by the Czech, Germanic and Jewish culture of which Mahler was a part may be one of the elements that makes his work so striking and fascinating. As a child, Mahler built a fantasy world to which he retreated as a defense against abuse and loneliness. This ability to retreat reveals itself in the highly personal inner landscapes of Mahler's music. From the time he was quite young, he was entranced by music and became devoted to the piano from about the age of five.

### Outline

- I. A central fact of Mahler's life is his isolation and alienation. He was psychologically and culturally alone, the eternal outsider.
  - A. Mahler wrote, "I am thrice homeless, as a Bohemian in Austria, as an Austrian among Germans, as a Jew throughout the world, everywhere an intruder, never welcomed."
  - B. Mahler's "Jewishness" was held against him as a man, a conductor, and a composer, both during his lifetime and after.
  - C. On April 10, 1897, two days after the announcement of Mahler's appointment as conductor of the Vienna State Opera, the Viennese newspaper *Deutsche Zeitung* attacked what it called "the frightening Jewification of art in Vienna" and questioned whether a Jew could perform "our great music—our German opera" (Lea, 51).
  - D. Even reviews published later in Mahler's life echo these sentiments.
  - E. I might suggest that we find Mahler's music so unbelievably moving today because its angst; its uncontrollable extroversion, optimism, and pessimism; its sheer power and often schizophrenic emotional progressions are even more relevant to us than to the music's original audience. (**Musical selection:** Symphony No. 1, movement 4 conclusion [1888].)
  - F. Mahler's music is a mixture of brilliant, rich, irregularly changing harmonies; of extraordinary (often grotesque) juxtapositions of moods: tragedy, humor, farce, irony; constant, almost obsessive melodic activity; sudden, unexpected explosions of passion or rage that disappear as quickly as they come; strutting march music heard back-to-back with Viennese love music; and a pure, crystalline, overwhelming passion untempered by the "civilizing" effect of artistic control and

manipulation. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 5, movement 2 opening.)

- II. Mahler was born to Jewish parents in the Bohemian town of Kalischt in 1860, in what was then part of the Austrian Empire and is today the Czech Republic.
- A. Like so many emancipated Jews in their part of Europe, the Mahler family considered themselves assimilated Western European Jews. Typical of the Czech (Bohemian and Moravian) Jewish community, the Mahlers spoke German at home, not Yiddish, and moved in a cultural orbit that was distinctly Austrian/German.
  - B. While growing up, Mahler had little contact with Jewish religious practices. According to biographers Kurt and Herta Blaukopf, he was more familiar with Catholic religious practice than Jewish.
  - C. Little documentary evidence exists that Mahler considered his Jewish heritage as anything other than a burden to be overcome.
  - D. In February 1897, Mahler converted to Catholicism, not because he really cared about the religion, but because doing so was the only way he could secure the position of conductor and music director of the Vienna Opera.
    - 1. Whatever Mahler considered himself, those around him, especially in the artistic and political atmosphere in which he traveled, forever considered him a Jew, with all the attendant reserve, distrust, and sometimes outright hostility that accompanied that identification at the time.
    - 2. The anti-Semitic Viennese press played a large part in having Mahler drummed out of Vienna in 1907, ten years after his "shotgun conversion" to Catholicism.
    - 3. After his death, Mahler's music was condemned and banned by the Nazis as being both degenerate and Jewish.
  - E. In 1916, Max Brod published the first of his essays dealing with Mahler's music.
    - 1. Brod was a novelist, music critic, and Franz Kafka's editor. He was also, like Mahler, Kafka, and Freud, a Bohemian-born Jew who grew up in a German-speaking household.
    - 2. Brod's observations approach very nearly the heart and soul of Mahler's music and help to explain the basis of the anti-Semitic criticism directed toward him.
    - 3. Brod concluded that Mahler, like Heine and Mendelssohn, was culturally only partially German/Austrian.
    - 4. Those aspects of his music that seemed bizarre and arbitrary from the German perspective are in reality completely natural if we perceive Mahler as a Jewish artist of the emancipation and

cosmopolitan period who was, nevertheless, not entirely assimilated into German/Austrian culture.

5. Most of Mahler's contemporary German/Austrian critics argued that European music was essentially "Nordic" in structure and expressive content, meaning serious, metaphysical, idealistic, carefully structured, stylistically consistent, exalted, and "pure," and, therefore, superior to all other music. These critics maintained that no bridge could be built between "Nordic" and any other music and that the Jews exerted a destructive influence on Nordic culture.
  6. Max Brod pointed out that the tension between East and West, Germanic and Jewish culture, made the works of Mahler, Heine, and Kafka striking, different, and fascinating.
- F. Perhaps if Mahler had been a practicing Jew and hadn't been as culturally assimilated as he was, he wouldn't have felt as alienated as he did. But Mahler was a supreme individual and egotist; he considered himself an enlightened, cosmopolitan European, even as the community around him continued to stereotype him as "a Jew."
- G. Perhaps a more personal issue can also be found in Mahler's rejection of his heritage.
1. Mahler's sense of alienation, loneliness, and existential homelessness was part of his personality, almost from the very beginning.
  2. Without the fantasy world he created as a defense against childhood loneliness, the extraordinary and equally fantastic music-scapes of his adulthood could never have been created.
  3. As a young man, Mahler identified himself as Ahaseurus, the Wandering Jew. The figure of the homeless, lonely wanderer, searching but never finding, asking questions for which few answers exist, is a constant, basic theme in Mahler's letters and music.
- H. From the beginning of his compositional career to its end, from *The Songs of a Wayfarer* (1885) to *The Song of the Earth (Das Lied von der Erde)* (1909), Mahler's music is about the lonely, isolated individual "coping" with:
1. Romantic rejection (*The Songs of a Wayfarer*, 1885);
  2. The struggle between hope and despair (Symphony No. 1, 1888);
  3. The questions raised by death and redemption (Symphony No. 2, 1894);
  4. The relationship between the individual and nature (Symphony No. 3, 1896);
  5. The deaths of children (*Kindertotenlieder*, 1904);
  6. The grieving process (Symphony No. 5, 1902).

- I. Mahler's music asks many questions; by his late works, *The Song of the Earth* (1909) and the Symphony No. 9 (1910), very few answers can be found.
  - J. Mahler's "world"—the environment that shaped his soul, the core of his being, his music, and his relationships—was his inner life, his emotional landscape. Rarely do we encounter an artist who generated such a degree of his reality from a place entirely within himself. Incredibly, Mahler was able to unite the diversity of his world and his often tortured emotional makeup into rich and original music.
- III. Gustav Mahler was born on July 7, 1860, in the Bohemian village of Kalischt, roughly midway between Vienna and Prague.
- A. Bernard Mahler, Gustav's father, was a totally self-made man, ferociously ambitious, and a strict authoritarian who brutalized his wife and, on occasion, his children.
  - B. Gustav certainly learned from his father's example; he, too, was voraciously ambitious, unshakable in his convictions and will, and equally despotic (if not actually physically violent) as a conductor and husband.
  - C. Marie Hermann Mahler, Gustav's mother, was a quiet, affectionate, sickly, and not surprisingly, unhappy woman. She had a weak heart, suffered from migraines, and walked with a limp as a result of a clubfoot.
  - D. No physical ailment could compare to how Marie suffered as a result of the mortality rate of her children, which was ghastly even by the standards of the nineteenth century. Six Mahler children survived into adulthood, but in the twenty years between 1859 and 1879, the Mahlers buried eight sons.
- IV. When Mahler was a little more than four months old, his family, recently emancipated by imperial decree, moved to the nearby town of Iglau, in Moravia, where Bernard opened a distillery and modest tavern.
- A. Iglau was a bustling trading and mining town of 25,000, an oasis of German culture in a Slavic sea, a town that boasted a major music school and an extensive season of symphonic concerts and operas.
  - B. Despite his shortcomings, Bernard Mahler gave his children the comforts and education that he himself had never had. The Mahler apartment was spacious and comfortable, filled with books, curio cabinets, and a grand piano on which young Gustav practiced.
- V. Gustav was precocious and entranced by music from infancy.
- A. The Mahler home in Iglau was near a military barracks, and Gustav grew up fascinated by military marches, songs, and tattoos.

- B. In fact, we have difficulty finding a single symphonic work by Mahler that does not feature a march of some kind.
- C. Given Mahler's morbid inclinations, it should come as no surprise that many of his symphonic marches are funeral marches.
  - 1. First listen to the genuinely bizarre funeral march of Symphony No. 1. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 1, movement 3, Funeral March [1888].)
  - 2. Next hear the grisly and ghastly march of the dead in Symphony No. 2. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 2, movement 5, March of the Dead [1894].)
  - 3. Now, the numbed and agonized funeral march that initiates Symphony No. 5. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 5, movement 1, Funeral March [1902].)
  - 4. Finally, the inexorable march of fate and death that begins Symphony No. 6. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 6, movement 1, March of Fate.)
- D. Mahler's mature music continued to reflect, to the end of his life, the tragic experiences and environmental and musical influences of his childhood in Iglau.
- E. Mahler also developed a propensity, from the earliest age, to enter into a sort of dream or fantasy state for hours at a time to escape Bernhard's emotional and physical abuse.
- F. Mahler began taking music lessons around the age of five.
  - 1. The single-minded intensity with which he threw himself into the piano was nothing short of compulsive.
  - 2. Like so many families with a single-minded prodigy, the Mahler family's daily life, routines, and dreams of fortune soon began to revolve around Gustav's particular needs.
  - 3. Mahler made his first public appearance at the age of ten and, if he had wanted to, he could undoubtedly have made a career as a performing pianist. But Mahler had another musical interest, one that transcended even playing the piano: making up his own music and writing it down.

## Lecture Two

### Mahler the Conductor

**Scope:** Mahler began composing at age six, was sent to school in Prague at eleven, and experienced the death of his dear brother Ernest at age fifteen. Later in his fifteenth year, he went to the Vienna Conservatory to study music. There, he became enamored of the work Richard Wagner, which became a great influence on him. After graduating in 1878, Mahler composed *Das klagende Lied (The Song of Sorrow)*, based on an old folktale. In 1880, he began his conducting career at a small theater and realized that he had found a calling. He steadily moved up the ladder to larger theaters, where his audiences appreciated his attention to detail, but performers and musicians found him tyrannical. Ultimately, he replaced the ailing Artur Nikisch, the most famous conductor of the day, at the Neues Stadttheatre in Leipzig, then moved on to the position of music director and first conductor of the Royal Hungarian Opera in Budapest. He stayed in Budapest for three years, sometimes conducting as many as nineteen different operas a month.

### Outline

- I. Gustav Mahler began composing around the age of six. He entitled his first composition *Polka with Introductory Funeral March*. Even at six years old, because of the circumstances of his life and the ironic and morbid nature of his psyche, he was already writing music that juxtaposed the joy of dance with the ritual sadness of a funeral march.
- II. In 1871, partly because of Gustav's lackluster academic performance in elementary school, Bernard Mahler decided to send him to Prague to study at the Neustadte Gymnasium. Gustav was eleven years old.
  - A. Bernard arranged for his son to board in the house of a leather merchant named Moritz Grunefeld, who was a well-known lover of music and the father of eleven children.
  - B. The stay in Prague was a disaster. Gustav was not properly fed, his room was not heated, and various Grunefeld children "borrowed" some of his clothing and shoes. Gustav withdrew, more deeply than ever, into his dream world.
  - C. One incident at the Grunefeld's made a profound impression on young Mahler. He accidentally came upon Alfred Grunefeld who was then nineteen, having sex with a maid. Apparently mistaking the young woman's cries for distress, Gustav hurried to her "rescue." He was beaten by the couple and sworn to secrecy. According to one

biographer, "Mahler never recovered from this awkward and brutal introduction to the facts of life" (de La Grange, 24).

- D. To his credit, when Bernard Mahler found out what was going on in Prague, he took Gustav home to Iglau.
  - E. Gustav had been in Prague for eight months. Of the sixty-four students in his class at the Neustadt Gymnasium, he was ranked sixty-fourth.
  - F. In 1875, when Mahler was almost fifteen, his younger brother Ernst died of pericarditis (*Wassersucht*). Gustav was terrified by Ernst's illness and traumatized by his death.
- III. Later that same year, in September 1875, when Mahler was fifteen, Bernard gave his consent for Gustav to study music at the Vienna Conservatory.
- A. The Conservatory, founded in 1812 by Antonio Salieri, was the preeminent school of music in the German-speaking world.
  - B. Mahler had the support of the great Herr Doktor Professor Julius Epstein, who was astounded when he heard Gustav play.
    - 1. Julius Epstein (1832–1926) became Mahler's essential music teacher and his second father. Unlike Bernard, Epstein was a kind and gentle man who remained one of Mahler's best friends until Mahler's death in 1911.
    - 2. Mahler's harmony teacher was Robert Fuchs, who later told Mahler's wife, Alma, "Mahler always played truant and yet there was nothing he couldn't do."
    - 3. Alma recalled that Gustav was regarded as a "marvel" during his Conservatory days.
    - 4. Among Mahler's other classmates and friends at the Conservatory were Hans Rott and Hugo Wolf, the future master of *lieder* (art songs). Both would go mad and die in asylums.
  - C. Mahler's life in Vienna was hard. Like most provincial students, he lived in poverty.
  - D. Mahler wrote a good deal of music while he was at the Vienna Conservatory, but he destroyed most of it. Almost nothing from this period of his creative life survives.
    - 1. We know that Mahler was, like virtually everyone of his generation, powerfully influenced by the music of Richard Wagner and that his own music reflected that influence.
    - 2. We know that Mahler wrote a symphony, a work that received a cursory reading by the Conservatory Orchestra.
    - 3. By Mahler's own admission, we also know that he did not *complete* a single work while at the Conservatory, inevitably abandoning them after the first movement or two.
  - E. Accounts of Mahler as a Conservatory student offer conflicting descriptions of the young man. Acquaintances and classmates variously

remembered him as tyrannical and heartless, quiet and reserved, and patient and generous. Even at his tender age, he was a complex person of extremes.

- F. As a student of music in Vienna, Mahler had the opportunity to hear everyone and everything during his three years in the city, including Wagner and Brahms conducting and Liszt and Anton Rubinstein playing the piano.
- G. No one exerted a greater influence on the young Mahler than Richard Wagner. Despite his virulent anti-Semitism, Wagner represented to Mahler's generation all that was modern, progressive, and revolutionary in new music.

IV. Between 1878 and 1880, Mahler wrote *Das klagende Lied*, his first significant composition.

- A. Mahler graduated from the Vienna Conservatory in 1878. The previous year, he had given up the idea of becoming a professional pianist and, at this point in his life, at age eighteen, he had yet to conduct anything.
  - 1. For the next two years, while living on a small allowance from his family, Mahler wrote the cantata *Das klagende Lied* (*The Song of Sorrow*).
  - 2. This piece of music is probably the first one that Mahler actually finished. It is the earliest complete composition of his that has come down to us. It is also a major work by any standard.
- B. In 1878, Mahler was a vegetarian (because of Wagner's influence), a socialist, restless, unhappy, and in love (it would come to nothing) and, thus, tortured by his hormones.
- C. Mahler wrote the libretto for *Das klagende Lied* from an old folktale.
  - 1. The story is that two brothers seek to marry a queen. The younger of the two finds a red flower that will win her favor. The older brother kills the younger, steals the flower, and becomes engaged to the queen.
  - 2. A wandering minstrel finds one of the younger brother's bones and makes a flute out of it; the flute, when played, tells the story of the murder.
  - 3. The minstrel plays at the wedding and the guests are stunned and horrified when they hear the story of the murder. The castle falls and buries everyone.
  - 4. This story, about the death of a brother, was close to Mahler's heart. Mahler wrote his brother Ernst's name several times in the margin of the manuscript.
- D. We will sample the magnificent opening of the third and last part of *Das klagende Lied*, entitled "Hochzeitsstück" ("Wedding Piece").
  - 1. This celebratory, joyful music begins the day that will end with the revelation of fratricide and the destruction of the castle.

2. Be aware of Mahler's extraordinary compositional technique. Even at age eighteen, he handles the resources of a large chorus, vocal soloists, and orchestra quite well. (Musical selection: *Das klagende Lied*, part 3 opening.)
- E. *Das klagende Lied* is a brilliant work, a mixture of song, operatic choruses, and symphonic music. It is also, even at this early date, "vintage" Mahler.
1. Expressively, it is about sorrow and tragedy, Romantic-era motifs that Mahler inherited and, through the circumstances of his life and the nature of his personality, truly made his own.
  2. For Mahler, sorrow "made the man"; he praised it as the defining element of life and believed that sorrow endowed a person with emotional richness and depth.
- V. During the late spring of 1880, Mahler, tired of living in constant financial need, decided to make some money conducting. Despite the fact that he had never conducted, he determined that this was how composers made money and, indeed, work could be found for novice conductors at the small theaters that dotted the Austrian, Moravian, and Bohemian countryside.
- A. Because of his reputation as a pianist, Mahler managed to obtain a booking agent, Gustav Lowy (or Levi). Mr. Levi would be Mahler's agent (or impresario, as he called himself) for the next ten years.
- B. Mahler, the greatest conductor of his age, began his career in the tiny theater at the spa of Bad Hall in upper Austria.
- C. Within a few weeks, Mahler realized that he had found a calling.
1. Mahler claimed that he turned to conducting because he did not receive the Beethoven Composition Prize in December 1881 for *Das klagende Lied*. In reality, the prize was not an issue.
  2. Mahler craved stimulation, a performance venue for his gift of interpretation, the instant gratification of live performance, an outlet for his tyrannical will, a career path through which he could direct his extraordinary ambition, and the limelight. His career as a conductor gave him all of this and more.
  3. Mahler's need for activity could never have been satisfied by the relatively quiet life led by most contemporary composers. He would not have been the composer he was without the stimulation afforded by his career as a conductor.
- D. Mahler's next job was as conductor at the Landestheatre at Laibach, where he conducted his first opera, Giuseppe Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, on October 3, 1881.
1. Mahler learned on the job; his career and apprenticeship were one and the same.

2. From the beginning, Mahler's attention to detail and enthusiasm were noted by audiences and critics alike. No one seemed to notice that he was a complete beginner.
  3. On October 27, 1881, twenty-six days after conducting his first opera, Mahler conducted Mozart's *The Magic Flute* to rave reviews. The days of poverty were over.
- E. Mahler's next position, at the Stadttheatre in Olmutz (Moravia), was a disaster waiting to happen.
1. When Mahler assumed the position, in January of 1883, the theater was nearly bankrupt and in dire artistic straights.
  2. Mahler, with his enthusiasm and inflexibility regarding artistic mediocrity, managed to temporarily turn the company around.
  3. At Olmutz, while conducting a brilliant performance of *Carmen* from memory, Mahler came to the attention of both the Dresden and Kassel operas. These operations were significantly more important than the one at Olmutz.
- F. In October 1883, nine months after taking the job at Olmutz and three years after first picking up a baton, Mahler assumed the position of music and choral director of the Kassel Theater.
1. At that time, Kassel boasted a population of over 100,000; the Kassel Theater sat 1,600 and was used interchangeably for spoken theater and opera.
  2. Mahler's administrative duties at Kassel were considerable, but they were dwarfed by his problems with his "superiors" and the "professional musicians" with whom he worked.
  3. Mahler set out to reform the opera company and raise it to his ever-higher standards. Soloists, chorus, and orchestra found themselves rehearsing to the point of exhaustion.
  4. Biographer Henry Raynor sums up Mahler's conducting style at Kassel: "A small, pale tyrant with a merciless tongue gave them no quarter. Mahler won a following because he created a tension and excitement new to Kassel. The chorus and orchestra loathed him."
  5. Mahler, for his part, loathed the chorus and the orchestra in Kassel, with one notable exception: Joanna Richter, a soprano at the Kassel Theater, with whom Mahler fell deeply in love. Mahler claimed, "She is everything loveable in the world and I would give my last drop of blood for her" (de La Grange, 121).
  6. Mahler and Richter may have been lovers; if so, she would almost certainly have been his first. In any event, the affair was short and rapidly came to grief.
  7. Mahler's despair over his rejection inspired him to write six poems that portray the shame and pain he was dealt. Of these, four would soon be set to music as *The Songs of a Wayfarer*.

- VI. Mahler escaped from Kassel in 1885 at age twenty-five, taking a one-year position as assistant conductor at the Landestheatre in Prague.
- A. The following year, Mahler was engaged as one of three assistant conductors at the Neues Stadttheatre in Leipzig.
    1. Leipzig was the city of Johann Sebastian Bach, Felix Mendelssohn, the Gewandhaus Orchestra, and one of the newest opera houses in Europe.
    2. The orchestra, which Mahler called, "One of the finest in the world," consisted of seventy-six full-time professional musicians; the chorus had seventy singers, some of them world class.
    3. The theater stayed open all year and had a vast repertoire. A different work was performed almost every evening.
    4. The principal conductor at the Neues Stadttheatre was Artur Nikisch, the most famous and influential conductor of the day.
  - B. Although most of the conducting plums went to Nikisch that first fall in Leipzig, Mahler had his share of works to conduct. His disregard for "tradition" and scrupulous attention to detail made audiences and critics either love him or hate him.
  - C. Mahler's big break came in February of 1887, five months into his contract at Leipzig.
    1. Nikisch had fallen gravely ill. On February 6, 1887, without warning, Mahler had to conduct Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* and, three days later, Wagner's *Die Walküre (The Valkyries)*.
    2. The *Barber* was a huge success; *Die Walküre* was a triumph, with Mahler receiving sustained applause after each act and fifteen curtain calls at the conclusion of the performance.
  - D. The administrators of the Neues Stadttheatre decided that Mahler would replace Artur Nikisch for the remainder of the season.
    1. Mahler conducted seventeen *different* operas in March, sixteen *different* operas in April, and thirteen *different* operas in May!
    2. He crowned the season by conducting Wagner's *Ring* cycle to unanimous enthusiasm.
  - E. For all intents and purposes, Mahler's victory over his critics in Leipzig was complete, and his eventual fame and fortune as a conductor were guaranteed.
- VII. The other event of these Leipzig years was Mahler's completion of Carl Maria von Weber's opera *Die drei Pintos (The Three Pintos)*.
- A. Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826) was an extraordinary early-Romantic German composer, who died at the age of forty. Even as a young conductor, Mahler had developed a well-earned reputation as an interpreter of Weber's music.
  - B. Sometime during the 1886–1887 concert season, Mahler met von Weber's grandson, Baron Karl von Weber, who asked Mahler if would

he like to try to complete a comic opera begun by his grandfather but left unfinished at his death.

1. The task must have seemed daunting. Of the seventeen scenes in the libretto, Weber had sketched music for only seven, and his notation was illegible—no one had yet been able to decipher his peculiar system of musical shorthand.
  2. The orchestration was even more poverty stricken; only eighteen measures of the introduction were fully scored.
  3. At the same time, Mahler was busy conducting both his and Nikisch's repertoire at the opera house.
- C. After some initial indecision, Mahler took the project on and finished the opera in about four months. The twenty-three-year-old Richard Strauss was one of the first people to see the completed manuscript and, in a letter to the conductor Hans von Bülow, called it a "masterpiece."
- D. Mahler's reconstruction or recomposition of *Die drei Pintos* was a huge success; performances almost immediately took place across Europe and North America, and the publication of the score brought Mahler good money. His budding fame and finances were substantially improved at just the time he began composing again after a hiatus of three years.

VIII. Nikisch remained ill during the 1887–1888 season, which required Mahler to continue the duties of both the principal and first assistant conductor.

- A. During the season, he conducted over two hundred performances, presenting fifty-four different operas.
- B. In 1888, Mahler was appointed music director and first conductor of the Royal Hungarian Opera in Budapest.
1. This position was of major importance, involving choosing the repertoire, hiring and firing, and controlling a budget of one million florins.
  2. The appointment was a bombshell. Mahler was only twenty-eight years old, an unknown in Budapest, a "German," and a Jew.
  3. In Mahler's first speech to the opera orchestra and singers, he made his position known: "Discipline, work. Work, discipline."
- C. Mahler instituted Hungarian language performances, to the howls of the "guardians of tradition" but to the enduring affection of his audience. He also hired native Hungarian singers whenever possible.
- D. Mahler remained in Budapest for three years.
1. In 1891, he assumed the post of conductor at the Hamburg Stadttheatre, one of the oldest and most prestigious opera theaters in Europe.
  2. At the height of the season, Mahler was conducting nineteen different operas a month.

3. By this point of his career Mahler's mature conducting style was set: uncompromising, tireless, a merciless crusader against mediocrity with an extraordinary eye and ear for detail. Mahler would bring all these elements to his compositions.

## Lecture Three

### Early Songs and Symphony No. 1

**Scope:** Mahler's years in Budapest were quite successful, with the exception of a performance of his own Symphony No. 1 in 1889. Before the symphony, Mahler had composed many *lieder*, German Romantic songs in which the poetry and music rival the best opera. His *Songs of a Wayfarer* shows the emotional progression of a jilted lover attempting to deal with his rejection. In later works, Mahler identified certain moods and situations with melodies he had originally created in his songs. Parts of *Songs of a Wayfarer*, for example, reappear in Mahler's Symphony No. 1 to evoke the same emotions and expressive states that they had originally represented in a song.

In 1887, Mahler discovered a poetic anthology entitled *Des knaben Wunderhorn*, or *The Youth's Magic Horn*, which was to become one of his greatest inspirations. Later in 1887, Mahler began composing his Symphony No. 1, which focuses on the struggle between hope and despair.

#### Outline

- I. During his three-year stint as director of the Royal Hungarian Opera in Budapest, Mahler became the darling of the Hungarian musical world.
  - A. He put the opera theater back in the black, single-handedly created a school of Hungarian singing, performed everything from Wagner to Mozart to Bizet in Hungarian, and conducted performances that astonished audiences and critics alike.
  - B. Mahler experienced some hard times, too, during his tenure in Budapest. His parents died, first his father, then his mother, both of heart disease, followed by his twenty-six-year-old sister, Leopoldine, of meningitis in 1889.
  - C. Professionally, though, the Budapest years were marked by one success after another, with one glaring exception.
    1. In November 1889, Mahler secured a performance for his Symphony No. 1 (then entitled *Symphonic Poem*). He had begun this work in Kassel in 1884 and completed it in Budapest in 1888.
    2. The performance was not well received. Mahler later recalled that his friends in Budapest avoided him afterwards and he "went about like a leper or an outlaw." One critic wrote that although Mahler was a conductor of the first rank, he was not, and should not consider himself, a composer.

3. We can draw two conclusions from this episode. First, Budapest was a conservative town, unlikely to understand or appreciate a long, difficult new work on the first hearing.
  4. Second, Mahler's Symphony No. 1 is, indeed, a long, difficult, highly personal, and idiosyncratic work that flaunts tradition, plumbs heights and depths of pathos, and features musical juxtapositions that still startle to this day. The music was new, combining Mahler's Germanic training with his highly complex Czech/Jewish soul.
- II. At the heart of nineteenth-century German Romantic music—at the heart of Mahler's compositional impulse—is the song, or *lied*, a composition for voice and piano.
- A. Obviously, every musical culture has produced “songs,” accompanied vocal works, the content of which can run the gamut from simple romance to the most emotional expression and story telling.
  - B. Nineteenth-century German Romantic *lieder*, however, became an experimental art form, in which expressive German-language poetry was lavished with music that intensified and illustrated the meaning of the words to a level that rivaled the best opera.
    1. Such composers as Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, and Hugo Wolf wrote songs and groups of songs (song cycles) that, despite their brevity and miniscule performing forces (typically, piano and voice) rival in their intensity of feeling and description anything heard in the opera house.
    2. Mahler wrote many songs long before he wrote a single symphony. The German song tradition lies at the heart of his compositional craft; it is not an overstatement to say that Mahler's symphonies grow directly out of his songs.
  - C. We have already observed Mahler's first completed work, *Das klagende Lied (The Song of Sorrow)*. Despite its orchestral interludes, this work is just what its title says, an extended “song” of sorrow. Mahler, like many sensitive, artistic, “misunderstood” young people, considered himself a poet in his youth and wrote the libretto himself.
    1. As I mentioned, Mahler wrote a series of poems in 1884 at the end of his affair with the soprano Joanna Richter.
    2. Mahler almost immediately set four of these poems to music (for voice and piano). Together, these songs constitute the song cycle entitled *The Songs of a Wayfarer*.
    3. Mahler's cycle is modeled on Schubert's *Wintereisse*. In both works, the singers journey from the scene of their “rejection” to find peace (or, in Mahler's case, resignation), under a linden tree.
    4. Mahler's poetry, the text of the songs, is folk-like in sentiment and strophic in structure. The four songs trace an emotional progression

as the jilted lover seeks to deal with his rejection. The first song deals with melancholy, grief, and frank self-pity.

5. The second song is about denial; the third finally gives way to righteous anger; and the fourth ends, quietly and sadly, on a note of resignation. We will focus on the second song, the deeply moving *Ging heut' morgen übers Feld* ("I walked this morning over the field").
- D. *Ging heut' morgen übers Feld* is a "strophic" song; the poem has four verses, and we hear the same music, with important changes, four times. This song is about denial; the singer/jilted lover turns to nature for solace and consolation and, initially at least, seems to lose himself in nature. Slowly, however, emotional reality intrudes on his fantasy.
- E. While you listen to the song, note the following elements. (Musical selection: *Songs of a Wayfarer*, No. 2: *Ging heut' morgen übers Feld* [1884; orchestrated 1896].)
1. The sweet, rustic, almost folk-like spirit of the melody.
  2. The hint of sadness that begins during the third verse as the tempo begins to slow and the music quiets.
  3. The bittersweet heartbreak of the fourth verse, in particular, the incredible, sigh-like high note on "nimmer" ("never bloom for me").
  4. The gentle and lonely solo violin at the conclusion that both weeps for the singer and stands as a metaphor for his singularity and isolation.
- F. One of the most important things I can tell you about Mahler's music is that he came to identify certain moods, states of mind, and literary situations with melodies he had originally created for those moods and situations *in his songs*.
1. For example, the lilting, rustic melody Mahler created for *Ging heut' morgen übers Feld* represented, in Mahler's mind, the purity of nature, as well as the bittersweet nostalgia and unfulfilled yearning with which the song ends.
  2. For Mahler, the melody of this song took on in his mind's ear the meaning of the words that the melody set. Mahler would use those same melodies again in instrumental (nonvocal) works, if he wanted to evoke the mood and spirit that a particular melody originally represented in a song.
- G. Listen to the opening seconds of *Ging heut' morgen übers Feld*. (Musical selection: *Songs of a Wayfarer*, No. 2: *Ging heut' morgen übers Feld* [1884; orchestrated 1896].) Now listen to the first theme of the first movement of Mahler's Symphony No. 1. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 1, movement 1, theme 1 [1888].)

- H. Even though the symphony has no words, it is clear that Mahler is using this tune to evoke the same sense of beauty, nature, naiveté, and potential heartbreak that it explicitly evoked in the song.
  - I. Mahler's use of his song melodies, then, became a sort of personal musical iconography; his songs and song melodies became emotional leitmotifs that he often plugged directly into his symphonic works as he saw fit.
- III. In the fall of 1887, during Mahler's second season at Leipzig, he discovered the poetic anthology *Des knaben Wunderhorn*, or *The Youth's Magic Horn*, which had been published in 1808. The anthology is filled with German-language folk poetry. Mahler was enchanted; the poetry was a revelation for him. The anthology became Mahler's single greatest inspiration, both musical and poetic, until around 1900.
- A. As an example of this poetry we turn to "St. Anthony of Padua Preaches to the Fishes."
  - B. The poetic metaphor is obvious: people, like the fish, spend their dreary and useless lives swimming aimlessly about. They might listen to the words of a saint, they might even be temporarily moved by the words of a saint, but ultimately, they will return to their flawed, empty lives filled with sin and vice.
  - C. The music Mahler supplied to this text is suitably comic, almost circus-like in its mocking of the fish and, for that matter, St. Anthony. As you listen, note the following elements. (**Musical selection:** *St. Anthony of Padua Preaches to the Fishes*, from *Des knaben Wunderhorn*, voice and piano [1893].)
    - 1. Mahler marks the opening of the song "*mit Humor*" ("with humor").
    - 2. The perpetual "swimming" motion of the piano part is meant to represent the constant movement of the fish.
    - 3. The piano part is an equal partner to the voice, not only supplying the accompaniment but also presenting much of the thematic melodic material of the song.
    - 4. The lasting impression of the song, despite its humor, is of irony, almost bitterness, at the thoughtless absurdity of everyday life.
  - D. Between 1887 and 1901, Mahler set twenty-four poems from *The Youth's Magic Horn* to music. The pieces were originally written for voice and piano, but Mahler later orchestrated most of the songs, so today we might hear them in either version. (**Musical selection:** *St. Anthony of Padua Preaches to the Fishes*, from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, voice and orchestra [1893].)

- IV. Mahler composed his Symphony No. 1 between 1884 and 1888. He was thrilled to be composing again after a hiatus of three years.
- A. Mahler began his Symphony No. 1 in 1884 (in Kassel) and completed it in late May of 1888 (in Leipzig). Again, we are astounded by both the technical mastery and expressive originality Mahler manages in his “first” symphony.
  - B. Like all of Mahler’s symphonies, the first is a brilliant combination of program (storytelling) music, Romantic expressive *gestalt und angst und schmerz*, and classical formal clarity and structural integrity.
  - C. Mahler generally objected to writing descriptive “programs” of his works, although others did not. Because of the use of the melody from the song *Ging heut’ morgen übers Feld* in the first movement, Mahler’s contemporaries referred to the symphony as a “love story.” Mahler objected to so literal an interpretation, writing that the symphony was “greater than the love affair it is based on...”
  - D. Mahler’s friend Natalie Bauer-Lechner wrote: “[In his first symphony], all he had in mind was a powerfully heroic individual, his life and suffering, struggles and defeat at the hands of fate.” She continued:

"In the first movement, we are carried away by a Dionysian mood of jubilation, as yet unbroken and untroubled. With the first note, the long sustained A in harmonics, we are in the midst of Nature: in the forest, where the sunshine of the summer day quivers and glimmers through the branches."

(Musical selection: Symphony No. 1, movement 1, introduction opening [1888].)

- E. Bauer-Lechner also tells us that Mahler said: “The end of this movement will certainly not be understood by the audience; it will fall flat. My hero bursts into a roar of laughter and runs away. Certainly no one will ever discover the theme which the kettledrums play at the end!” By listening, can we divine the source material for the end of the first movement (and, indeed, for much of the symphony)?
  - 1. Listen to the timpani at the *end* of the first movement. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 1, movement 1, conclusion.)
  - 2. Listen to the beginning of the first movement. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 1, movement 1, introduction opening [stepladder fourths].)
  - 3. The melodic interval of a fourth is a basic thematic building block in the piece. That, in itself, is not all that significant; what is notable is how much musical use Mahler gets out of this simple interval.
  - 4. For example, the Triumphant March, the climax of the fourth movement, grows directly out of the “stepladder” fourths of the first movement. (Musical selections: [At the piano], Symphony

- No. 1, movement 1, introduction opening [stepladder fourths];  
Symphony No. 1, movement 4, Triumphant March.)
5. We find fourths everywhere. Early in the first movement, we meet a cuckoo bird. Typically in musical depictions, cuckoo birds sing a downward major third; Mahler's, of course, sings a downward fourth. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 1, movement 1, introduction, cuckoo in clarinet [A-E].)
  6. Where did the idea of using these fourths come from in the first place? From the beginning of the melody of *Ging heut' morgen übers Feld*, which Mahler intended to include in the symphony from the start. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 1, movement 1, theme 1: *Ging heut' morgen übers Feld*.)
  7. The second movement of the symphony begins with a brief introduction that consists entirely of the same falling/rising fourth (A-E) that began the first movement. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 1, movement 2, introduction opening.)
  8. The opening theme of this second movement grows directly out of the *Ging heut' morgen übers Feld* melody. (Musical selections: Symphony No. 1, movement 2, opening theme; [at the piano], *Ging heut'* and movement 2 theme relationship.)
  9. The dramatic opening theme of the fourth movement also grows out of the melody from *Ging heut' morgen übers Feld*. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 1, movement 4, opening theme; [at the piano], *Ging heut'* and movement 4 theme relationship.)
- F. Before we end this brief discussion, we must listen to the third movement, by far the most striking and controversial of this symphony.
1. Mahler's inspiration for this movement was a children's illustration by the artist Moritz von Schwind entitled *The Huntsman's Funeral*. The illustration depicts a torch-lit funeral procession of animals.
  2. To describe this bizarre scene, Mahler juxtaposes a series of musical events that are correspondingly bizarre.
  3. Mahler begins the movement with a funeral march, a dark, minor-mode version of the children's round *Frere Jacques* (or *Bruder Martin*, as Mahler knew it). Note that the movement begins with a solo double-bass playing high in its range—an orchestrational detail calculated to create an odd, ponderous effect and guaranteed to sound strained and nervous. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 1, movement 3, opening thematic entries.)
  4. Soon we hear a strange bit of melancholy and nostalgic dance music, replete with cymbals, drawn directly from the central and eastern European tradition of Jewish Klezmer dance music. (Musical selections: Symphony No. 1, movement 3, Klezmer; Klezmer Conservatory Band, *Dos freylekhe Shnayderl* [*The Happy Tailor*].)

5. This music both “places” the forested scene in the central European environment in which Mahler grew up and acknowledges the irony and bittersweet nature of life.
  6. Just moments after we hear the dance music and moments before the funeral march returns, Mahler inserts the music of his own song no. 4 from *The Songs of a Wayfarer*. Perhaps the message here is that we must resign ourselves to the sometimes arbitrary, sometimes brutal, sometimes wonderful aspects of life and to the inevitability of death.
  7. As the movement approaches its conclusion, we hear the strange, circus-like, herky-jerky music of celebration, followed by a hushed return to the conclusion of the funeral march. How unhappy are these animals at the huntsman’s death? (**Musical selection:** Symphony No. 1, movement 3, concluding celebration.)
- V. Mahler’s symphonic language is one of expressive exaggeration, musical juxtapositions, and inclusivity.
- A. Mahler’s famous dictum, “The symphony is the world; it must contain everything within it,” expresses his own musical and compositional philosophy.
  - B. No other composer’s music better describes the inner landscape and struggles of its creator, and no other composer manages to ask so many questions about the human condition in music as does Gustav Mahler.

## Lecture Four

### The *Wunderhorn* Symphonies

**Scope:** In 1893, after a hiatus of five years, Mahler returned to composing, beginning with his Symphony No. 2, the first of the so-called *Wunderhorn* symphonies. This second symphony is an ambitious work, tracing the progression of the death of an unnamed individual through stages of memory, bitterness at the folly of life, and the questions of faith and resurrection. Symphony No. 3, written almost immediately after the second, is a natural companion piece. It explores nature and the cosmos and the lives of plants, animals, people, and angels, culminating in a hymn to divine love. The Fourth Symphony is Mahler's "classical" symphony, addressing a child's innocent view of life and heaven without the intervening step of death.

#### Outline

- I. During the summer of 1893, just as he was finishing his second symphony, Mahler told his friend Natalie Bauer-Lechner: "My [first] two symphonies contain the inner aspect of my entire life; I have written into them everything I have experienced and endured—Truth and Poetry in music."
  - A. Natalie Bauer-Lechner was a violinist and Conservatory classmate of Mahler's. In 1890, recovering from a nasty divorce, she traveled to Budapest to visit Mahler.
  - B. The two became confidants for the next ten years, and Bauer-Lechner carefully transcribed their conversations day after day in a manuscript entitled *Mahleriana*.
  - C. No doubt Natalie fell in love with Gustav who, for his part, considered Natalie one of the boys. Sadly but predictably, their relationship broke off following Mahler's marriage in 1901.
  - D. Natalie Bauer-Lechner was one of the few people who understood and appreciated Mahler's music and compositional potential.
    1. Mahler seriously considered giving up composition in 1891, at the age of thirty-one.
    2. At this point of his life, Mahler had little time to compose and he had almost no success whatsoever in getting what music he had written performed, despite his extraordinary musical connections.

- II. As we know, Mahler did not give up composing; rather, he underwent a compositional renaissance in 1892, a rebirth spearheaded by the composition of songs with texts drawn from *Des knaben Wunderhorn*. These songs would form the backbones of his next three symphonies, which are often referred to as the *Wunderhorn* symphonies.
- A. During the summer of 1893, while on holiday at Steinbach, Mahler returned to symphonic composition for the first time in five years.
1. Drawing on musical materials sketched as far back as 1888 and working at a pace that genuinely endangered his health, Mahler composed his Symphony No. 2 in C Minor (“Resurrection”).
  2. Consciously modeled on Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9, Mahler’s Second Symphony is a huge, ambitious, five-movement work, in which the fourth movement is a song from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and the fifth is a grand and magnificent movement for vocal soloists and chorus.
  3. This last, choral, movement gave Mahler pause. He needed a text that was appropriate to the spirit of the other movements. On March 29, 1894, at Hans von Bülow’s funeral, Mahler heard a setting of Theodor Klopstock’s poetic ode, *Resurrection* (*Auferstehn*). It was a moment of inspiration.
  4. When he completed the symphony, Mahler was absolutely giddy with delight.
  5. As we previously discussed, Mahler hated writing programs to accompany his symphonies, but he made an exception to his own rule when he wrote a program for his second symphony at the request of his new wife, Alma. We’ll use the program Mahler prepared as we seek to understand the large-scale dramatic flow of his Symphony No. 2.
- B. Symphony No. 2, movement 1
1. “We are standing beside the coffin of a man beloved.” (Musical selection: Symphony No. 2, movement 1, opening funeral march.)
  2. “Is it all an empty dream, or has this life of ours, and our death, a meaning?” (Musical selection: Symphony No. 2, movement 1, recapitulation, resurrection theme/theme 3.)
- C. Note the following elements in this selection.
1. Quiet, funereal drums;
  2. Trumpet blast signaling a violent descent as the coffin is lowered into the grave; “All perishes that exists”;
  3. A five-minute pause, indicated before the start of the second movement. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 2, movement 1, conclusion.)
- D. Symphony No. 2, movement 2: “A blissful moment in his life and a mournful memory of youth and lost innocence.” (Musical selection: Symphony No. 2, movement 2, opening theme.)

- E. Symphony No. 2, movement 3: "The spirit of disbelief and negation has taken possession of him. Looking into the turmoil of appearances, he loses together with the clear eyes of childhood the sure foothold which love alone gives. He despairs of himself and God. The world and life become a witches' brew; disgust of existence in every form strikes him with an iron fist and drives him to despair." (**Musical selection:** Symphony No. 2, movement 3, opening.)
1. For this movement, Mahler created an extended orchestral version of the song *St. Anthony of Padua Preaches to the Fishes*.
  2. In his mind, the satiric and ironic metaphor of brainless, soulless fish (people), meandering mindlessly through their daily existence, fit perfectly the expressive image he wanted to create.
- F. Symphony No. 2, movement 4
1. "The mourning voice of ingenuous belief sounds in our ears. I am from God and will return to God! God will give me a candle to light me to the bliss of eternal life."
  2. Mahler offers here another song from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, entitled *Urlicht*, or *Primordial Light*.
  3. The movement is scored for alto singer and orchestra; the alto singer, because of her low vocal range, becomes everyperson. (**Musical selection:** Symphony No. 2, movement 4, verse 1; Symphony No. 2, movement 4, verse 3.)
  4. The ethereal, twilight world the music creates sets the stage for the explosive and magnificent fifth movement.
- G. Symphony No. 2, movement 5
1. "We are again confronted by terrifying questions." (**Musical selection:** Symphony No. 2, movement 5, measures 1–26.)
  2. "The great and the little ones of the earth—kings and beggars, righteous and godless—all press on; the cry for mercy and forgiveness strikes fearfully on our ears. The wailing rises higher—our senses desert us; consciousness dies at the approach of the eternal spirit..." (**Musical selection:** Symphony No. 2, movement 5, measures 192–225.)
  3. "A chorus of saints and heavenly beings softly breaks forth..." (**Musical selection:** Symphony No. 2, movement 5, measures 448–471.)
  4. "Then appears the glory of God! A wondrous, soft light penetrates us to the heart—all is holy calm! And behold—there is no judgment. There are no sinners, no just. None is great, none is small. There is no punishment and no reward. An overwhelming love lightens our being. We know and are." (**Musical selection:** Symphony No. 2, movement 5, verse 8, measures 712–end.)

- III. The premiere of Mahler's Symphony No. 2, in Berlin on December 13, 1895, offered him one of the few unadulterated triumphs of his compositional life.
- A. The Berlin audience was tremendously moved by the performance.
  - B. A 1910 Parisian performance of the same symphony elicited different results. According to Alma Mahler, Debussy, Dukas, and Pierné, walked out during the second movement.
  - C. Mahler's Symphony No. 2 is a philosophical tract, a spiritual and emotional journey that documented Mahler's pan-religious belief structure as it existed in 1894.
    1. This belief system is neither Jewish nor Christian; the message of the symphony seems to have more in common with various Indian and Eastern religious philosophies than European.
    2. Like Beethoven's Symphonies Nos. 5 and 9, Mahler's Second is a "catharsis" symphony—it begins darkly and tragically in minor and achieves, ultimately, major-mode triumph in its finale.
- IV. Mahler's Symphony No. 3, written almost immediately after the Second, in 1895–1896, is the natural companion piece to No. 2.
- A. Mahler's Third is, like the second, a massive piece in six movements, scored for large orchestra, vocal soloist, and chorus.
  - B. The third also uses a song from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* to explore nature and the cosmos, evolution, the seasons, and the lives of plants and animals, people and angels. It culminates in an extraordinary, twenty-seven-minute hymn to divine love.
  - C. In a letter dated August 29, 1895, Mahler laid out the plan of the symphony to his friend Fritz Lohr: "...The movements are meant to express the arrangement of all creation, as follows:
    - I. The creation of life out of lifeless matter/What the Mountains Tell Me
    - II. What the Flowers Tell Me
    - III. What the Animals Tell Me
    - IV. What Mankind Tells Me
    - V. What the Angels Tell Me
    - VI. What Love Tells Me" (Floros, 88)
  - D. Let us sample the first movement, which Mahler referred to variously as "the awakening of Pan," "the creation of life out of lifeless matter," "summer marches in," and "what the mountains tell me."
    1. Note as you listen that from the "void" comes jagged, primeval, craggy vertical power; uneroded as yet by the forces of nature; undecorated by the niceties of human civilization (melodic embellishment). (Musical selection: Symphony No. 3, movement 1 opening [1896].)

2. Of this opening music, Mahler said, "It is hardly music...just the voice of nature: one shudders at this motionless, soulless material, from which, little by little, life frees itself and finally conquers, developing and differentiating step-by-step: flowers, animals, men, right up to the kingdom of the spirit and that of the angels" (de La Grange, 365).
  3. According to Natalie Bauer-Lechner, while writing this piece, Mahler "was struck with the most uncanny sense of awe," yet he still believed himself a martyr who would not be understood in his lifetime.
- V. We conclude this lecture with a quick reference to Mahler's Symphony No. 4 (1900).
- A. It is the third and last of the *Wunderhorn* symphonies, so called because of the inclusion, as its fourth movement, of a song from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*.
  - B. The Fourth is entry-level Mahler, the most gracious and unselfconscious of his symphonies, almost completely devoid of the weighty, ironic, and dark philosophical and expressive elements of his other work.
  - C. Like Beethoven's Symphony No. 8, Mozart's *Jupiter* Symphony (No. 41), and Brahms's Symphony No. 4, Mahler's Fourth is his "classical" symphony—the shortest, most structurally clear, and most thematically lyric of all his work. It is "about" a child's (Mahler's) innocent view of life and heaven without the typically intervening step of death.