
Reading

From the words of composer-conductor Leonard Bernstein’s book,
The Infinite Variety of Music.

So here we are in our sharp, clear, efficient, hygienic Century, longing for the old one in our secret hearts. Why do we yearn so for Schubert and Schumann and Wagner? Why do we run to the concert hall at the mention of Brahms’ name? Why is Tchaikovsky our favorite composer?

Well, because he and his Romantic hierarchy give us what we yearn for secretly, what our bright todays and tomorrows lack. The Romantics give us back our Moon, for instance, which science has taken away from us and made into just another airport. Secretly we all want the Moon to be what it was before: a mysterious, hypnotic light in the sky.

We want love to be mysterious too, as it used to be, and not a set of psychotherapeutic rules for interpersonal relationships. We crave mystery even while we forge ahead toward the solution of one cosmic riddle after the other.

We are all still Romantics at heart, and the world, once bitten by that bug, will never quite be free of its resultant fever, the Freedom Fever, by which we are still so hotly driven. But the way we live is no longer Romantic; and so, when we are most sorely pressed, we look backward, and know for what music to listen

Sermon

Good Morning.

Last year, I was honored to accept the Worship Committee’s invitation to commemorate the bicentennial birthday of composer Felix Mendelssohn. Well, this concert season, audiences all over the world are being treated to a veritable bouquet of music centennials and bicentennials: That pair of great first generation Romantic composers, the German Robert Schumann and the Pole Frederic Chopin, were both born in 1810; closer to home and to our time, Pulitzer Prize winning American composers William Schuman and Samuel Barber were 1910 birthday boys.

But there’s another important artist whose birth and death dates dominate this year’s musical observations by having been born in July 1860 and dying in May 1911, so that both his birth sesquicentennial and death centennial occur this concert season.

One of the joys of teaching is never knowing what’s going to happen when you ask a question. Many years ago, I asked a class, “What important figure in 20th Century cultural history said, ‘Meine Zeit wird noch kommen’ (‘My time will yet come’)? And a young woman frantically waving her hand, shouted, ‘I know! I know! My father curses him every night watching the evening news, saying he’s ruined the country. It’s Richard Nixon!’”

Well, no. It's not Richard Nixon, but composer and conductor Gustav Mahler, and "My time will yet come" is one of the most intriguing pieces of self prophecy in 20th Century art, a statement Mahler often used in response to hostile evaluations of his music and of him. In this sesquicentennial concert year of his birth and the centennial of his death, it's worth asking why Mahler was so remarkably right in his prediction.

To frame my try at an answer this morning, I'm going to play excerpts from two very personal works by Mahler, the first from 1901-02, the fourth movement of his Fifth Symphony, the "Adagietto" or "little Adagio," beautifully played a moment ago by our pianist, Todd Painter, and termed by the Dutch conductor and Mahler's friend, Willem Mengelberg as a love letter, a declaration of love from Gustav to the young woman who would become his wife, Alma Schindler: brilliant, multitalented, ambitious, vain, hard, grasping, barracuda vicious, an artist's daughter termed "the most beautiful girl in Vienna" and not shy about reminding people of it. Gustav was 41; Alma was 22. To say the least, this relationship and their marriage would prove stormy and destined for a very rough ride.

The last music I'll play will be the final music Mahler lived to write, this time dedicated and addressed to Alma in the score, the concluding measures of the unfinished Tenth Symphony, from the summer of 1910.

Here's the haunting start of the 1901 "Adagietto," which I've faded into a passage some moments later leading to a really gorgeous harmony and resolution we sense is coming. We're ready for it, we feel we deserve it, and Mahler does not disappoint us.

<<MUSIC>>

So what's the problem? What's not to like about that?

The circumstances of Mahler's slowly won popular and critical acclaim make for one of the most interesting stories in modern cultural history. Mahler was an admired and coveted opera and orchestral conductor who after ten years' service, resigned the General Music Director position of the Vienna State Opera in 1907 (arguably then Europe's most prestigious musical appointment) to become a guest conductor at New York's Metropolitan Opera early in 1908.

After predictably feuding with the management over its artistic decisions, Mahler resigned to accept the offer of Music Director of the New York Philharmonic – a post held fifty years later by Leonard Bernstein and which Mahler occupied from the fall of 1909 to February 1911. Mahler was half way through his second season with the Orchestra when a streptococcus infection and bacterial endocarditis, an infection of his already abnormal heart valve, led some weeks later to a decision to return home to Vienna to die, lacking the penicillin which would have saved him but not be discovered until 1928.

As recently as at the 1960 centennial of his birth, Mahler was regularly regarded as a curio and cult figure, a composer of parochial interests, who to his detractors seemed only capable of the erratic expression of his *creative* gifts, as opposed to general admiration of his *recreative* skills as a conductor and administrator.

Today, to say that situation has changed is like calling Niagara a waterfall. Mahler's symphonies and song cycles are now part of the basic repertoire. There's an interesting analogy here to the rediscovery in our time of another 19th Century cultural figure misperceived and dismissed during his lifetime as a popular if poorly educated ex-sailor and writer of South Seas

romances, but so revered now as one of our greatest artists that the American critic Harry Levin has suggested the scholarly study of Herman Melville has replaced whaling as New England's leading industry.

Until 1967, there were no recorded versions by the same conductor of all eleven Mahler symphonies (the ten numbered ones and the late symphonic song cycle *Das Lied von der Erde* (*The Song of the Earth*)). A trip to the Internet now shows well over a thousand recordings of Mahler's music, including completed symphonic cycles by some two dozen conductors and more still in progress, some of them for the second times.

The point is that Mahler's professional life represents what critic Irving Kolodin terms "a paradox without precedent among great composers," an artist of two identities, in both of which he achieved international fame, but the paradox is that he had one pre-eminent identity during his life, quite another after his death.

How did this happen? Mahler was right, if half century early in the prediction of his acceptance, and for a complex array of reasons worth our attention.

To begin with, the philosophical questions which so troubled him were those about the purposes of human existence, the jagged nature of The Human Condition, what he learned from reading Goethe, Schopenhauer, Kant, Nietzsche, as Mahler was among the most well read of composers. These kinds of questions are all too familiar to us and our anxious age, familiar in a way so as not to threaten us – post Hiroshima, post-Auschwitz, post-Watergate, post-September 11 – as they did his contemporaries.

Mahler's life and art are a rich mixture of characteristics, what the British poet and engraver William Blake termed "the contraries," what modern criticism identifies as "dualism": opposing or at least complementary impulses or qualities, which instead of being smoothed away or obscured in his art, form the very weave of its fabric.

What puzzled Mahler's contemporary audiences about his music? Well, first, they heard exaggeration, extravagant length, volume, and noise. They heard moments like this, the raucous close of the thirty-five minute first movement of his 90-100 minute Third Symphony; now think about this: a first movement longer than the entire four movements of a Haydn or Mozart symphony, and termed by no less an authority than the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the longest symphony in the standard orchestral repertoire. Let's fasten our seat belts

<<MUSIC>>

Tracing influences on his life and work, it's not hard to understand additional reasons why audiences were baffled. Consider some of the personal issues:

Born a Jew into a non-observant family, he was baptized and became a Roman Catholic convert in 1897. Mahler arrived in Vienna during a time of undisguised Anti-Semitism, finding himself and his young assistant, Bruno Walter (Schlesinger) regularly attacked with ethnic slurs in the daily press and referred to as "our Jew conductors."

Even before these incidents, Mahler had been told that an important Music Directorship offer was being withheld because its Board of Trustees objected to, quote, "the shape of his nose," unquote. Stung by the story, when the offer was eventually made he wired the reply, "Sorry, cannot accept. Nose still same shape."

(That such attitudes are more than ancient history in Austria have been illustrated by incidents related by contemporary conductors like Leonard Bernstein, who reported overhearing members of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra at one of their 1970s rehearsals refer to Mahler as the composer of “scheissmusik” or music made of excrement.

Sir Georg Solti, recent Music Director of the Chicago Symphony, was asked by a member of the Vienna Philharmonic after they’d performed a 1960s Mahler concert why he insisted on programming this “cheap Jewish café music.” Famed conductor Arturo Toscanini, once asked why he didn’t perform any of Mahler’s works, replied that in his considered opinion, Mahler’s scores were fit to be used only for toilet paper.)

People hostile to Mahler said his 1897 Catholic conversion was done only to permit his candidacy for the Vienna State Opera General Music Director job, for which Catholic baptism was an Austrian state prerequisite. Mahler’s friends, on the other hand, said he had long before developed a genuine admiration for and study of Catholic ritual.

To return to additional personal, sometimes contradictory issues:

Mahler made a living nine months of the year as a conductor, as a *re-creative* performer of other men’s music. Each summer and during holidays, he was exclusively a composer, focused wholly on his own creative work.

He was an exceptionally well read, articulate, sophisticated adult, who through his music often expressed a powerful yearning for childhood innocence.

We know from his letters and accounts of friends and colleagues he was a deeply spiritual person, hungry for religious faith and certainty, but accompanied all his life by equally deep rooted attractions to skepticism and to doubt.

Then consider the artistic ambivalences of his work:

- The shifting moods of his music, its volatility and unpredictability
- A recurrent sense of disillusionment, even disgust, juxtaposed with longings for religious trust and spiritual answers
- An admiration of childlike wonder and innocence, yet with regular reliance on complex uses of irony not at all adolescent, much less innocent
- Recurrent humor, coexisting with recurrent preoccupations with death
- Conventional 19th Century musical forms and harmonic language and an extremely close marriage of music and texts, regularly utilized to convey very 20th Century feelings of lost certainties, of corrosive cynicism, and *angst*

In few aspects of his life could Mahler find the ideal setting in which to compose or conduct, the perfect balance, the harmonious reality always tantalizingly close yet still out of reach. Things regularly malfunctioned, Murphy’s Law (“If anything can go wrong it will, and at the worst

possible time”) continued to triumph – just as in Mahler’s music, the most luminous expressions of joy or affirmation rarely climax, but regularly fade into yearning, sudden sarcasm, or violence.

There is an interesting side story related to this characteristic, on which psychologically oriented listeners and critics have focused. In the last summer of his life, in 1910, writing the Tenth Symphony he would not live to complete, Mahler was trying to come to terms with a marital crisis sufficiently severe to warrant his making an appointment with no less than Sigmund Freud, then on his summer vacation in Leyden, Holland.

For four hours, the two men strolled through the city streets while Freud urged Mahler to free associate, especially about his family and childhood. Mahler told him of a childhood incident of having witnessed his alcoholic father berating, then beating, his frail mother. Terrified, he ran from the house, straight into an organ grinder parked at the front curb, cranking out “Ach, du lieber Augustin.”

[I would sing more, but OSHA guidelines guard against the mass rush for the exits which would result]

But keep that story in mind and consider this illustration, also from the first movement of the Third Symphony. It begins with the sweetest expression of a simple theme, but at each successive repetition, it’s punctuated with ever more bitter – even savage – orchestral comments, twisted and distorted, complete with snidely derisive high woodwind laughter and unmistakably mocking brass donkey brays.

<<MUSIC>>

Mahler’s style and work, in the words of Russian musicologist Ivan Sollertinsky, are like “Dostoevsky retold by Charlie Chaplin.” Audiences and critics want handles, labels, categories with which to experience and discuss artists. Mahler rarely cooperated, as he grew to be a figure of glaring contradictions bent on frustrating our wishes for easy classification. Like Beethoven, like Goethe, like Melville, Mahler is a cultural bridge figure, with a foot in one Century, a second in another, whose art and work are a span over which audiences may cross.

Mahler’s audiences, suggests commentator Samuel Chakwin, didn’t hear what we hear in his music. Mahler simply shook his head and said his time would come.

“Now we hear his music differently. We know why it wasn’t appreciated when he wrote it: it truly wasn’t music of (or at least for) its time. Europe then was elitist, prosperous, and headed toward death as surely as the *Titanic* toward its iceberg. Mahler was a kind of miner’s canary, more sensitive to what was ahead than his contemporaries. Their music was Richard Strauss, who was writing pieces as huge, magnificent, and brainless as the dinosaurs and just as sure of ultimate extinction. By comparison, Mahler’s music was unsettling and vaguely subversive. It was full of irony and loss as he saw old certainties turning hollow around him. Yet he ultimately chose hope over despair and learned, as Viktor Frankl was later to discover in the death camps, that Love [is] more powerful than Death.” (Chakwin)

So we know what puzzled contemporary audiences about Mahler’s music. In addition to exaggeration, volume, and noise they heard moments of seeming mockery like this one, the Funeral March from his First Symphony, based on a nursery song we all learned, and they asked, “What is

this man doing to the form hallowed by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms?” A funeral march for solo double bass fashioned from a nursery song? Yes, indeed. See if you recognize it.

<<MUSIC>>

“Bruder Martin,” “Brother Martin” or “Brother John” in the original German; also familiar to us, of course, as “Frere Jacques” in French.

Today’s audiences accept – as Mahler did – the polarities of joy and pain, logic and absurdity, faith and doubt, love and death, acting and enduring, not as impenetrable mysteries, but simply as coexistent facts of being human. What seemed hopelessly contradictory for Mahler’s time seems remarkably in keeping with ours. As editor Donald Vroon writes, Mahler

“ . . . stands at the end of an era, as the culmination of the great classical-romantic tradition. He stretches the symphonic form to its very limits. His subject matter is the ultimate questions: God, nature, life, death, and life after death; faith, hope, doubt, and love. He reaches deep inside us; he forces us to face our nightmares and our fears. [Few] other composer[s] ha[ve] confronted us so bluntly, so consistently, on such a profound level. In this sense, Mahler is [one of] our greatest [artists].”

The enduring and summary fascination of Mahler’s music may be that it defies characterization by single qualities like “despairing” or “joyous.” More often, especially with his middle period and late works, Mahler writes music that contains its own opposites, or as British critic and musicologist Deryck Cooke puts it, Mahler expresses contrary feelings simultaneously. Cooke quotes the 20th Century Czech poet Rainer Rilke, using as a motto, “dennoch preisen”; or “praising life in spite of everything.”

Nowhere is this effect more plain than in Mahler’s last great symphonic trilogy from 1908-11, *Das Lied von der Erde*, the Ninth and Tenth Symphonies, in which we may hear how amid the recognition of approaching the end of one’s life, the memories of its loves, accomplishments, and triumphs grow all the sweeter.

Caught in the disintegration of certainties, the erosions of conventional faith which streak so many of our lives, each of us may be assured of at least one fact: that we will die. With that realization, however, we may submit or feel crushed, or choose to use death’s experience as a measure of how well we’ve lived. To Mahler in the last years of his life, aware of a serious heart condition and of his crumbling marriage, one clearly did not surrender by moving into a truce.

Let me close, as promised, with excerpts from the last music Mahler would live to write, the unfinished Tenth Symphony, in part a musical love letter (perhaps at Freud’s urging?) purposely addressed to Alma in the score. It followed discovery by Mahler of her affair with the brilliant young architect Walter Gropius, later to found the famed Bauhaus School, and whom she would eventually marry four years after Mahler’s death – though to be sure, not before experiencing a volcanically passionate affair with the young Expressionist painter, Oskar Kokoschka.

The Symphony’s last movement contains two of the most bittersweet, memorable melodies Mahler ever wrote, starting with this one, one of the great orchestral display pieces for solo flute.

<<MUSIC>>

But Mahler even outdoes himself with what follows, a companion theme of surpassing tenderness, affection, grace, and beauty, descending then soaring to new expressive heights.

<<MUSIC>>

The final measures are dying away, when suddenly there is a great orchestral rushing sigh and final cadence, as if to suggest having found a long sought sense of peace at last. Commentator Michael Steinberg terms it

“a great song of life and love – the most fervently intense ending to any Mahler symphony and a triumphant vindication of his spiritual courage.”

In the manuscript at this point, Mahler writes, “Für dich Leben! Für dich Sterben” (“To live for you! To die for you” “Almschi!” [his pet name for Alma]

<<MUSIC>>

The last word goes to Deryck Cooke.

. . . we find ourselves then in many ways the uneasy heirs of the first Romantics, still committed to their ideal of refashioning the world, though more soberly in view of bitter experience. Their central problem – the discrepancy between human aspiration and human weakness – is still ours

Of all the late Romantics, Mahler speaks most closely to our age. An heir of Beethoven and Richard Wagner, he was intensely preoccupied with this discrepancy between aspiration and weakness. His persistent theme is “The spirit is willing, but” – no, not “the flesh is weak”; rather, the spirit is willing but is undermined by its own fatal weakness – faced by life’s frustrations, it is a prey to discouragement, bitterness, emptiness, despair [In Gustav Mahler], this general human dilemma was acute.

“Meine Zeit wird noch kommen.” Mahler also would tell people, “I am three times homeless: as a native of Bohemia in Austria, as an Austrian among Germans, and as a Jew throughout the world. Always an intruder, never welcomed.”

Today, for countless audiences, Mahler’s home – and time – have turned out to be our own.

Amen.