

Notes on the Program
By Aaron Grad

Symphony No. 9 [1909-10]

GUSTAV MAHLER

Born July 7, 1860 in Kalischt, Bohemia

Died May 18, 1911 in Vienna, Austria

Gustav Mahler was born into a German-speaking, upwardly mobile Jewish family in what is now the Czech Republic. He studied piano and composition at the Vienna Conservatory, where he experimented with writing chamber music modeled after Brahms, but it was his stunning talent as a conductor that came to shape the course of his career.

Rising rapidly through conducting jobs in smaller cities, Mahler was only 28 when he began directing the Royal Hungarian Opera in Budapest. From 1897 to 1907 he occupied one of the most influential podiums in Europe, leading the Vienna Court Opera, and in his last years he made his mark in the New World, conducting the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic. He always kept up his composing on the side, sticking exclusively to songs and symphonies, and by the time of his death at age 50 he had completed nine enormous and incomparable symphonies.

Mahler did most of his composing during summer vacations in the Austrian Alps. Returning from his first Metropolitan Opera season in 1908, he drafted *The Song of the Earth*, an orchestral song-cycle that was his Ninth Symphony in all but name. Ever prone to obsessing about his own mortality—especially after being diagnosed with the heart condition that would ultimately cut his life short—Mahler couldn't escape the fact that his two symphonic heroes, Beethoven and Bruckner, each died with nine finished symphonies.

The next summer, when he was back in Austria after another New York season, Mahler concentrated on sketching a true Symphony No. 9, and he completed the orchestration in April of 1910, during a successful first season as Music Director of the New York Philharmonic. Upon returning to Europe that summer, Mahler conducted the premiere of his Eighth Symphony—the last of his own works he would hear—and he sketched movements for a Tenth Symphony. He also learned that his wife, Alma, was having an affair with the young architect Walter Gropius, a heartbreak that sent Mahler to consult with the psychotherapist Sigmund Freud.

Mahler returned to New York for the 1910-11 orchestral season, but his work on the podium was cut short by what appeared to be fatigue-induced illness in February. It turned out to be an infection stemming from his heart defect, and he died in Vienna three months later. The next year, it fell to his protégé Bruno Walter to lead the Vienna Philharmonic through the first performance of Mahler's swan song.

The Ninth Symphony is awash with suggestions of death, but it is hardly alone in that regard among Mahler's works. The Second Symphony took its nickname from an earlier song Mahler adapted for the last movement, *Resurrection*, and the three hammer strikes of the "Tragic" Sixth Symphony represented a premonition, according to Alma Mahler, of the three tragedies of 1907, including their daughter's death. Mahler's thoughts of mortality in the Ninth Symphony come through most overtly in the form of a quotation. In several places, most prominently in the heart-wrenching tune of the *Adagio* finale, he incorporated the gesture of three notes descending stepwise. This motive matches the opening melody of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 26, "Les Adieux" ("The Farewell"), composed in honor of an absent patron. In the score, Beethoven wrote the German word for farewell, *Lebewohl*, over those three notes; in Mahler's symphony, each recurrence of the motive seems to recall that wistful word.

The Ninth Symphony begins and ends, atypically, with slow movements. The *Andante comodo* first movement introduces a broad D-major melody that rocks between two notes—avoiding, for the time being, the final step down that would complete the "farewell" gesture. Variants of the same theme veer into the minor key, setting up a recurring conflict in this monumental first movement.

The more buoyant second movement takes the shape of a *Ländler*, a rustic country dance from Austria. Once again, the initial melody references the three notes that spell "Lebewohl," this time bouncing on the second note before stepping down again. These same ideas return later in more unstable forms, with the keys changing capriciously while themes stack up in disjointed layers.

The third movement is labeled *Rondo-Burleske*; the "Rondo" refers to a particular structure oriented around a recurring theme, while the "Burleske" suggests music of an exaggerated, over-the-top quality. The mood shifts are extreme, flashing instantly from the heft of a Bach-like fugue one moment to a giddy trifle of a dance the next. Coming out of a slower passage that contains traces of the "Farewell" pattern, the re-entry to original tempo passes through a surreal series of fragments that seize upon and reinterpret familiar motives.

The drama of the Ninth Symphony comes to a head in the final *Adagio* movement—music that the legendary Mahler interpreter Leonard Bernstein described as "a super-prayer for the restoration of life, of tonality, of faith." Here the "farewell" gesture blooms into a full-throated melody delivered by an impassioned string ensemble. The way the first note is repeated and drawn out gives the theme a marked similarity to the "Eventide" hymn tune, familiar as the melody of *Abide with Me*.

In Beethoven's sonata, the third note of the "Lebewohl" motive is accompanied by an unexpected minor chord instead of the stable tonic chord; in Mahler's treatment, the gesture likewise defies tonal expectations by modulating to new keys. The harmonic ground shifts constantly under the "farewell" figure, as if refusing to accept any resting point as a finality.

As the symphony reaches its reluctant conclusion, time seems to slow down, and the textures strip down to unadorned lines. From this precipice, a new theme enters, a self-quotation from Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* (*Songs on the Death of Children*). The violins intone the closing phrases of the cycle's fourth song, which ruminates on the fantasy that the children are not dead, but only out for a long walk. The text that corresponds to the violin melody reads, "We'll catch up to them on those hills. / In the sunshine the day is fair." The movement ends by settling gently on D-flat major, a half-step lower than where the symphony began, and unmistakably closer to death.

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