

## **Symphony No. 5 in C-sharp minor**

**Gustav Mahler**

**Born in Kalischt (Kaliště), Bohemia, July 7, 1860**

**Died in Vienna, May 18, 1911**

Except for purely technical analyses of musical works, discussions of Romantic compositions typically make connections between a composer's life and music. Beethoven, as always, is the favored and favorite model. His personal circumstances and professional career further exemplify a common biographical strategy: the division of a lifetime's music into three periods. Thus we often try to find out what went on in a composer's life at the time he wrote a particular work. It is hard to escape these familiar and satisfying ways of situating pieces of music even if we acknowledge that the relationships between an artist's daily existence and work are not always self-evident or meaningful.

**"An Entirely New Style"** Mahler's Fifth Symphony is a pivotal work both with respect to the composer's life and creative legacy. As with Beethoven's path-breaking "Eroica" Symphony, this piece seems to strike out in new directions and initiates a "middle" period and musical style. And as with Beethoven's personal crisis around 1802, when he first began to come to terms with his hearing loss, Mahler, too, experienced both trauma and a new state of personal affairs around the time he wrote the Fifth Symphony. The previous four had either been based partly on his own earlier songs or actually incorporated songs and choruses within them. Mahler now produced a trilogy of purely instrumental symphonies (1901-05). He started work on the Fifth during the summer of 1901, after a year marked by a near-death experience in February (internal hemorrhaging) and by his resignation as principal conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic soon thereafter. (He remained as director of the Court Opera, arguably the most powerful musical position in all Europe.)

Administrative and performance duties forced Mahler to do most of his composing during the summer months and in 1901 he had a lovely, newly finished house in Maiernigg on the Wörthersee—the posh, idyllic resort in the Carinthian Mountains where Brahms and others vacationed. This extraordinarily brilliant and productive summer elicited the following comment from Mahler: "My creative work is that of an adult, a man of ripe experience. Although I no longer attain my former heights of enthusiasm, I now feel I am in full possession of my powers and technique, that I am master of my means of expression, and capable of carrying out anything I put my hand to."

Nearly 10 years later, in one of his last letters, written just three months before his death at age 50, Mahler expressed a very different view of his earlier "powers" and "mastery," even as he continued to acknowledge that the Fifth Symphony had initiated a new stage in his symphonic career: "I have finished my Fifth—it had to be almost completely reorchestrated. I simply cannot understand why I still had to make such mistakes, like the merest beginner. (It is clear that all the experience I had gained in writing the first four symphonies completely let me down in this one—for an entirely new style demanded a new technique.)" It may seem

curious for Mahler to say he had just completed a symphony premiered seven years earlier, but then he continuously revised his compositions, and none more so than the Fifth.

**Life Changes** Mahler apparently wrote more than half of the Fifth Symphony, as well as some of his greatest songs, during these restorative months in Maiernigg. Upon his return to Vienna for the new season, he soon met, and a few months later married, the beautiful Alma Schindler, who was nearly half his age. By the time he could return to complete work on the Fifth the following summer, they were expecting their first child.

The challenges to Mahler's health and professional standing early in 1901 may indeed relate to the manifest changes in some of his basic musical concerns that found such penetrating expression during the summer. Yet the situation is more complex. For one thing, the Fourth Symphony had already been something of a departure from his previous three much longer, louder, and more Romantic symphonies. In the Fourth, Mahler turned to more Classical forms and strategies, and although he included one last vocal movement, using a song concerning a child's view of heaven drawn from the folk collection *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Youth's Magic Horn), he now sought to distance himself from programs and extra-musical "crutches." The Fifth Symphony would take this to its logical next step: no stories, no overt song.

No overt song—which is not to say that Mahler turned his back entirely on *Lieder* as the basis for symphonies. For one thing, the summer of 1901 was also a turning point in Mahler's development as a *Lied* composer. After more than a dozen years of setting almost nothing but *Wunderhorn* poems (he used a Nietzsche text in the Third Symphony), Mahler now found inspiration in the writings of the early-19th-century German Friedrich Rückert. His move from folk poetry to high art poetry was crucial, but did not come before Mahler wrote two final *Wunderhorn* songs: "Revelge" (Reveille) and "Der Tamboursg'sell" (The Drummer Boy). The latter is intimately related to the opening movement of the Fifth Symphony, just as the Rückert song "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen" (I Am Lost to the World) breathes the same air as the famous Adagietto movement for strings and harp later in the Symphony. Both of these cases are instructive: Mahler now made his songs go "underground," as Mahler scholar Donald Mitchell puts it. No longer boldly sung or plainly quoted as in the earlier symphonies, his new songs nevertheless helped to generate the mood and spirit of his later symphonies and even occasionally make brief and subtle literal appearances.

**A Closer Look I: From Death to Triumph** Mahler cast his Fifth Symphony as a large three-part structure in five movements. As with that most famous of Fifths—Beethoven's—the large-scale trajectory of the work is from darkness, even death in Mahler's case, to triumphant affirmation. One way this is represented musically is in the progression from minor to major keys (C minor/major in Beethoven, C-sharp minor/D major in Mahler). The opening two movements form the first segment, the Scherzo the second, and the Adagietto and Finale the third.

The opening (**Trauermarsch: In gemessenem Schritt. Streng. Wie ein Kondukt**) is perhaps the best known of Mahler's death marches, at least one of which occurs in most of

his symphonies and even in some of his songs. A piercing trumpet call (using a variant of the famous Beethoven Fifth rhythm) introduces the movement and returns three times at important moments, each one, as musicologist Constantin Floros has noted, in a somewhat different form. (Mahler had already strategically placed the same Beethovenian trumpet fanfare in the Fourth Symphony.) A middle section (Suddenly more quickly—Passionately wild) provides some contrast before a final part that sounds strangely like a development section. The second movement (**Stürmisch bewegt. Mit grösster Vehemenz**) follows directly from the previous one and includes a number of interruptions with music from the Funeral March. An imposing chorale melody in D major prefigures events to follow later in the Symphony, but is cut off.

The central **Scherzo** movement (**Kräftig, nicht zu schnell**) changes mood to one of resounding affirmation in D major. Mahler repeatedly remarked on the unusual nature of this movement and how it would no doubt be misunderstood: “The Scherzo is an accursed movement! It will have a long history of suffering! For 50 years conductors will take it too fast and make nonsense of it. The public—oh heavens—how should it react to this chaos that is eternally giving birth to a world that then perishes in the next movement, to these primordial sounds, to this blustering, bellowing, roaring ocean, to these dancing stars, to these shimmering, flashing, breathing waves.”

**A Closer Look II: Mahler's Love/Death** The third main section returns to a pair of movements, but whereas the second movement had seemed to be an outgrowth of the first, the fourth serves as introduction, actually linked at the end, to the finale. The haunting **Adagietto** is today the most famous music Mahler ever wrote, in large part because of its evocative use in various ballets and films, most notoriously Luchino Visconti's adaptation of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. This well-known movie cloaks the music in death, a mood abetted by the slow tempo in which the movement has typically come to be performed in recent decades, much slower than Mahler apparently himself performed it (about eight minutes, roughly the same timing as his protégés Willem Mengelberg and Bruno Walter). Yet reliable reports from Mengelberg indicate that Mahler wrote the *Adagietto* not as a deathly lament but rather as an amorous offering to Alma. The noted conductor wrote in his score: “This *Adagietto* was Gustav Mahler's declaration of love for Alma! Instead of a letter, he sent her this in manuscript form; no other words accompanied it. She understood and wrote to him: He should come!!! (both of them told me this!).”

The movement can seem like a love song without words, and yet Visconti's association with death resonates as well, suggesting that the two forces are intrinsically linked. Freud, with whom Mahler would later have an infamous meeting in 1910 concerning his marital problems with Alma, explored the fundamental drives of love and death (Eros and Thanatos), which find such remarkable expression in this movement. In addition to the debt to his own *Rückert-Lieder*, Mahler seemingly alludes to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, that most sensual of operas which so effectively merges the two drives in the so-called *Liebestod* (Love Death).

The **Rondo-Finale (Allegro giocoso. Frisch)** brings the Symphony to a triumphant conclusion. Some have criticized the movement as falsely affirmative. (The philosopher T.W. Adorno remarked, "Mahler was a bad yes-man.") The boisterous D-major conclusion is indeed a stark contrast to the funereal first movement, as also was Mahler's grim situation in 1901, the summer after a season of trials, in utter contrast to the following one when the newly-wed composer and his pregnant bride enjoyed Maiernigg together. If this seems once again to support connections between life and work (sad summer, sad music; happy summer, happy music), we might ponder that the next year, in 1903, when Mahler was at the height of his professional fame and reveling in the joys of his growing family, he began work on the Sixth Symphony, the "Tragic."

Mahler conducted the first performance of the Fifth in Cologne on October 18, 1904. His friend and rival Richard Strauss wrote to him: "Your Fifth Symphony again gave me great pleasure in the full rehearsal, a pleasure only slightly dimmed by the little Adagietto. But as this is what pleased the audience the most, you are getting what you deserve." Mahler's most beloved movement has pleased audiences from the start, even if it did not so engage Strauss and has arguably come disproportionately to represent Mahler as a sentimental composer of deathly longing.

—Christopher H. Gibbs

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