

## Symphony No. 5 in C-sharp Minor

Gustav Mahler

Born in Kalischt, Bohemia, July 7, 1860; died in Vienna, May 18, 1911

On February 24, 1901, Gustav Mahler had his first close brush with death. It had been a typically frenetic day: he had conducted the Vienna Philharmonic in the afternoon, then moved on to the opera house in the evening to lead a production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. Later that night, he suffered a violent hemorrhage, and his sister Justine found him lying in a pool of blood. He recalled: "While I was hovering on the border between life and death, I wondered whether it would not be better to have done with it at once, since everyone must come to that in the end." But Mahler's constitution was still robust and, after surgery, he recovered rapidly. His body had chosen life over death, and in the following summer his creative spirit made the same choice for his Fifth Symphony.

After this crisis, the summer of 1901 turned out to be the most productive and serene of Mahler's career. Because of his nonstop conducting career from September through May, only the summer months were available to him for composing. In 1901, a new summer home awaited him: a splendid villa he had had built in the village of Maiernigg on the shores of the peaceful Wörthersee in southern Austria. The composer was delighted with this retreat: "It's too beautiful, one shouldn't allow oneself such a thing," his puritan conscience complained. Up a steep path in the woods was his little composing cottage or *Häuschen*, meagerly furnished with a piano, a worktable, and a chair or two. Here that summer he created the central Scherzo and the first two movements of his new symphony, as well as eight orchestral songs, including three of his great *Kindertotenlieder* ("Songs of the Death of Children") and three other songs to poems by Friedrich Rückert. Not surprisingly, the songs fertilized the symphony, and some of their themes and moods infiltrated its movements.

Before he was able to return the next summer to complete his Fifth Symphony, another major event occurred. That winter, he met and married the alluring Alma Schindler, 19 years his junior. As he returned to Maiernigg in June 1902, he brought his new bride, already expecting their first child. Yet, as Alma Mahler ruefully recalled, the routine at the Mahler Villa changed hardly at all to accommodate their new status: everything still revolved around providing Mahler with peace and solitude for his composing. Nevertheless, new feelings of joy surely influenced the symphony's conclusion as he created the gorgeous string-and-harp *Adagietto* (which his friend the

Dutch conductor Willem Mengelberg believed was a love song to Alma) and the exuberant Rondo-Finale.

With the Fifth Mahler realized he had created something "completely unlike anything I have written before." In the broadest terms, it marked a break from the three preceding symphonies, which incorporated sung texts into the symphonic fabric. Though they still contain melodic quotes from his songs, Mahler's three middle symphonies, the Fifth through Seventh, are wordless, exclusively instrumental compositions. The composer's development and transformation of themes become more imaginative, his contrapuntal interweaving of lines more complex, his harmonies more daring, and his orchestration leaner and often harsher.

Yet, although the Fifth Symphony contains no external program, it still intimately reflects the patterns of its creator's inner and outer life. Only the mercurial Mahler could juxtapose such wildly conflicting moods as this work contains. In the words of Deryck Cooke, "The symphony might almost be described as schizophrenic, in that the most tragic and the most joyful worlds of feeling are separated off from one another, and only bound together by Mahler's unmistakable command of large-scale symphonic construction and unification."

The symphony's five movements are grouped into a larger structure of three sections. The death-obsessed movements one and two, which share much of the same thematic material, form Part I. Part II is the Scherzo, the work's longest movement. Part III comprises the *Adagietto* as a slow introduction and the Rondo-Finale.

**Movement one** is a funeral march — a favorite Mahlerian trope — in the dark key of C-sharp minor; its various sections are linked by the searing solo-trumpet fanfare that opens it. After the fanfare, the strings in low register introduce the principal theme, a dry-eyed lament over the muffled tread of the cortege. When the fanfare returns the third time, it is immediately engulfed by a wild outburst of grief from the violins in the first Trio section. Later a second Trio takes a different emotional approach with consoling, very Viennese music in the strings. But this too builds to a climax of pain Mahler labels "Klagend" ("Lamenting"). The music sinks downward in exhaustion while a frail flute whispers the fanfare.

Marked "Stürmisch bewegt" — "with stormy motion" — **movement two** is the angry working out of the themes and the emotions largely kept under control in the march. The strings open with a wild paroxysm of grief, burdened by harmonic and rhythmic struggle, that seems an intensification of the march's first Trio music. Then cellos introduce a contrasting mood, a marvelous long-spun theme that expands the consoling music of the march's second Trio. Above them, high woodwinds tremble and

cry out an important motive: a wailing melodic leap of a ninth falling back to the octave. These themes and moods battle for control until an exalted brass chorale in the brilliant key of D major seems to proclaim triumph. But it is too soon, and the music soon flickers out in woodwind cries.

The symphony now undergoes a schizophrenic mood swing from tragedy to comedy. This buoyant dancing **Scherzo** in D major — the symphony's harmonic goal — was the first music Mahler created for the work, and it portrays the untroubled pastoral pleasures of his retreat at Maiernigg. The scherzo music itself is in the style of the Austrian country dance known as the *Ländler*, but its naiveté is contradicted by the composer's sophisticated rhythmic cross-play. It is succeeded by a first Trio, a lilting Viennese waltz for the strings, and a second Trio, in which the principal horn — which has an important solo role throughout this movement — creates gentle, dreamlike music with strings and woodwinds. Listen for a haunting passage of horn calls and distant answers as if from across a mountain valley. Cooke calls this Scherzo "a dance of life, evoking all the bustle of a vital existence as opposed to the concentration on the inevitability of death in the funeral marches." For the rest of the symphony, Mahler chooses life over death.

In Part III, the beautiful *Adagietto* for strings and harp serves as slow introduction to the Finale. Often excerpted, its sensuous beauty speaks for itself. Written in the first summer of his marriage, it is, if not a love song to Alma, surely an expression of the peace of his composing retreat. Its music recalls his contemporaneous Rückert song, "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen" ("I am lost to the world"), which ends with the words: "I live alone in my own heaven, in my love, in my song."

The ebullient **Rondo-Finale** in the new home key of D major follows immediately. Solo woodwinds introduce a collection of folksong-like themes that will propel the movement, then the French horns spin out the mellow rondo refrain. At this time, Mahler was entranced with J. S. Bach's contrapuntal wizardry, and this finale overflows with exuberant fugato passages. When the horns and low-register violins introduce the subject of the second fugato section, we may not immediately recognize the tune, but the strings soon confirm it as the *Adagietto*'s yearning theme, now sped up and dancing with all the rest. Themes are combined in contrapuntal merriment until the brass grandly proclaims a chorale similar to the premature one in movement two. Now the time is right to celebrate the triumph of life over death, as the music romps to a joyous conclusion.

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