

Mahler – Last of the Romantics

by Winthrop Sargeant

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To future historians of music the year 1911 is likely to loom as a very important turning point. To contemporary observers it probably seemed much like any other year. Several great musical figures - among them Richard Strauss and Debussy were enjoying their hey-day. Never before had worldwide intellectual ferment seemed to promise more for the future of art. Never before had there been so many composers, so many skilled executants, such teeming musical audiences. But as we look back at it from the perspective of nearly thirty years, 1911 seems to mark, more definitely than any other date, the end of the great romantic period of music, and the beginning of something else. That year a great drought seemed to dry up the creative source of the romantic movement. People went on composing, but the work of those composers who were big enough to set styles and lead movements, underwent a sudden and strangely unanimous change.

Before 1911 Richard Strauss had turned out one vital composition after another, reaching a peak of creative achievement in *Elektra* (1909). In 1911 he finished *Rosenkavalier*. Since then Strauss has continued to write, but little of what he has written has the sweep, or originality, of his earlier work. It was in 1911 that Sibelius, after three lyric, full-blooded symphonies, produced his bare, enigmatic fourth. The weight and importance of his later work are still to be determined by posterity. By 1911 the best of Debussy's work had already been done. In 1911 Arnold Schoenberg finished the last work of his post-Wagnerian romantic style (*Gurre-Lieder*) and plunged thereafter into the dry, abstract mathematics of atonality. In 1911 Igor Stravinsky dropped the conventions of the great classical-romantic musical language, and wrote his boisterous Russo-Parisian ballet *Petrouchka*. Stravinsky was to become more famous, but whether he was ever to write better music is a question. Today, despite manifestos, credos, theories, and all sorts of aesthetic propaganda, it is becoming more and more doubtful, sad as it is to admit it, whether any music of overwhelming importance has been written since that time.

Just why the particular year 1911 should have rung down the curtain on a whole phase of music, and musical philosophy, is hard to understand. But it is evident, if one considers the changing currents of European thought during the whole period from 1900 on, that music was bound to be deeply affected somewhere along the line, and that the effects were likely to disturb the very core of romantic mysticism which had given nineteenth-century music its enormous vitality. As the heroic conception of life was replaced by the realistic, the metaphysical by the scientific, it is natural that composers should begin to regard their art with changed eyes. When the philosophy of materialism was applied to music, music became purely a matter of substances, combinations, geometric patterns, abstract architecture, aural sensations. And some musicians began seriously to write purely cerebral or purely sensual music, and to explain their own, and other people's music as purely and simply a matter of ingenious combinations of sound. Whether, in accepting this view, they did not throw overboard much that could have given their own work value, is still for future musical audiences to decide. But in applying the materialistic yardstick to the great musical masterpieces of the past they overlooked the very factor that, in the last analysis, made those masterpieces great. True, the abstract architecture of great music makes an impressive study for those interested in technique. But far transcending this in importance is the message that all this architecture was built to convey. For, if we take the word religion in its broadest possible sense, the greatest masterpieces of European music from Bach to Strauss were all essentially religious poems, written in a complex, but widely understood, language of sound.

It was, of course, only a coincidence that Gustav Mahler died precisely in the fateful year 1911. But the coincidence had a certain amount of

poetic justice about it. Mahler was, in a curiously inevitable way, the last of the romantics. Strauss' romanticism was always well mixed with a slightly cynical strain. It was often sexual rather than religious. And it was turned off abruptly in what seemed the prime of his creative life. As a romantic, Schoenberg hardly got a start. Stravinsky was anti-romantic from the first. Sibelius will, I suspect, be placed ultimately as a sort of symphonic landscapist, a somewhat less important figure than present-day Sibelians think him. For Mahler alone, of that generation, it was permitted to reach full stature while the romantic attitude still survived as a potent source of musical inspiration.

Mahler's peculiar position as the last fully-formed link in a dying tradition goes a long way, I think, toward explaining that troubled, poignant, yet grandiose quality which has made him difficult for some music lovers to understand. For his music not only expresses the fervor of romanticism; it is permeated as well by a gloomy premonition of the approaching death of the romantic world-view. Technically Mahler was a symphonist of what the late Paul Bekker has aptly described as the Austrian (as distinct from the German) school. His structural methods were descended from the large, simple, linear, melodic style of Bruckner, a style that was Schubert's before it was Bruckner's, and Haydn's before it was Schubert's. To this extent Mahler was a traditionalist. But here the similarity between Bruckner and Mahler ceases. Bruckner's romanticism was serene and unquestioning, the product of a world that was spiritually at peace. Mahler's is already troubled by a changing conception of life. His methods, his equipment are those of the grand manner. But Mahler himself is an intellectually restless man of the twentieth century. What to the relatively simple Bruckner was a self-evident truth, is to the complex and doubting Mahler, a receding vision, a vision which only a passionate profession of faith will keep alive. Hence, the strenuous "will to believe," the atmosphere of "eternal seeking," the sense of something escaped and forever lost, that permeate so much of his music.

In religion Mahler was an eclectic, instinctively religious as are all real musicians, but too sophisticated and cosmopolitan to accept any religious creed in its primitive form. When asked about his religion he once replied, "I am a musician, that covers everything." His broad, philosophical attitude toward religion made him sympathetic at the same time to the purely doctrinal fervor of Klopstock, the romantic mysticism of Goethe, the negative, and quite un-Christian, poetic passion of Nietzsche, and the pastel-shaded nostalgia of Li Tai-Po. It also gave him his intense respect for the writings of Dostoevsky, a respect that was so great that it led Richard Specht to consider Dostoevsky one of the most important influences in Mahler's intellectual life. Specht, in his biography, quotes an interesting anecdote from Paul Stefan about Mahler and Schonberg sitting one day in a park in Vienna chatting with a group of students. Mahler after holding forth at length about his favorite subject, Dostoevsky, was surprised to learn that none of the younger men had even heard of the great Russian novelist. "But Schonberg," he expostulated, "What's the idea? Let the young people who study with you read Dostoevsky too. That is more important than counterpoint!" The episode, which occurred comparatively late in Mahler's life, shows that he was still as concerned as ever about the novelist who had influenced his earliest symphonies.

The religious, ritualistic subject matter of such works as the *Second* and *Eighth Symphonies* is thus the product of no simple, unquestioning piety, but of a complex, sophisticated twentieth-century mind. Mahler still retained some of the strong sap of the romantic movement. But he was troubled by the illusory quality that romanticism was assuming in the twentieth-century world in which he lived. He himself stated that the only valuable experiences in an artist's life are those that occur before puberty. In Mahler's time the world of magic, of the fairy tale, of the supernatural, of mythical symbols, was already becoming foreign to the adult mind. And that world, upon which nearly every great composer or poet of the past had drawn for his inspiration, remained real, or perceptible, only to the imaginatively unfettered minds of children. The composer, who is the purest and most imaginative kind of poet, was being forced to draw most of the poetic juice of his art from childhood memories. Mahler's preoccupation with children's jingles, folk-like tunes, grotesque military themes, hobgoblin atmospheres, the *Knaben Wunderhorn*, his often deliberately naive religious imagery, were all, I think, symptoms of this struggle to recreate a remembered world far

richer in poetic values than the machine-age adult's humdrum world of reality.

It is also, I think, this feeling of the slipping-away of the romantic view that gives so many of Mahler's works that deeply nostalgic, poignant sense of something forever receding, or lost. I am thinking more particularly of such things as the song *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen*, and *Der Abschied* from *Das Lied von der Erde*. No composer in the whole history of music has expressed, as Mahler has, the loneliness of the individual human soul peering out at eternity.

In the sense that much of his music reflects states of mind and even sometimes describes concrete ideas, Mahler was a "literary" composer. And nothing, it seems to me, is more absurd than the attitude of listeners who approach a Mahler symphony in the abstract without even bothering to find out the ideas and symbols that Mahler himself associated with it. Nor does it seem to me that being a "literary" composer is being a lesser composer. Nearly all the great composers from Berlioz on, and many before him, were "literary" composers. There are those, of course, who prefer to think of the *Ring des Niebelungen* as abstract music, with a troublesome and incomprehensible libretto about vague and unimportant mythological beings. There are those who enjoy Bach's *B Minor Mass* and pretend that its connection with Christian ritual is irrelevant. But such people, I think, are eating the frosting and missing the cake. There is, in reality, very little important music that is purely "absolute."

When audiences understand more about the ideas behind Mahler's symphonies, I think they will find him, not only a great symphonist, but one of the most interesting minds, one of the most imaginative artists, of the early twentieth century. Mahler, in his time, like Mozart in his, used music to express the most poignant poetic experiences of contemporary humanity. If Mahler's poetry is more remote, less fluent, harder to get at, it is at least partly because poets in Mahler's day had to dig deep into the subconscious for their poetry.

Mahler Performance in History

Das Lied von der Erde in Chicago, Stock Conducting

JANUARY 10, 12, and 13, 1939

Those who contend that the mood of a composition is never precisely definable and that one single piece of music (for example) may *equally* represent emotions of solemn joy or pangs of tragic grief should listen to Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* and ask themselves whether four of its six movements could express anything but stark pain. The two delicate landscapes which Mahler offers us in this great symphony might conceivably bear titles other than those they own (though surely an atmosphere of the Orient cannot be ignored as one studies them); but across the other pages of this work, the composer has written with tone, "Suffering" beyond chance of misinterpretation. Here a man who has sounded many black depths of life becomes autobiographical. But in a larger sense he describes the hurt that touches, at some time, all hearts. And it is only in his final acceptance of suffering that he loses contact with many who listen to *Das Lied von der Erde*. For, alas! no animating surge of hope crowns that acquiescence. He but dreams "of the luminous blue of distant space"

The orchestra was at the height of its form last night and Dr. Stock gave a masterly reading of the score. The soloists, Enid Szanthe and Charles Kullmann proved themselves artists sensitive to the Mahler idiom and they as well as Dr. Stock received many salvos of applause from the audience.

by Mary R. Ryan
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The society has just added the following items to our collection. Please contact Teng-Leong Chew if you would like to check out these items.

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Letters to the Editor

♪ I've just listened to the Boulez M8 from 1975. Wow! I'm very happy, if not close to ecstatic. I bought it at the CSO Symphony Store in a remainder bin, having avoided it at full price for fear that he would be "karate-chopping" his way through the Eighth Symphony like he did in a CSO performance of the Seventh Symphony, a performance of which I remain unconvinced.

But the Eighth is different. What a revelation! I thought someone might have committed a fraud and copied a Wyn Morris performance. Such expansiveness! This is a BIG performance conducted to a big space (not listed in the barest-of-bones issue--but Tony Duggan assures me this is the Royal Albert Hall) but with *exquisite detail*. The live performance contains an absolutely brilliant cough obbligato during the introduction to the second part (I almost thought I would hear one of those alternating-tone European ambulances coming to haul this guy away) and a tenor whose artistry far, far exceeded his vocal capacities that day along with some mildly screechy (but certainly peachy) cantatrice--but who cares?

I would say that job one for the Chicago Mahlerites is to get the new President of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra to schedule a performance of the Eighth Symphony by Boulez. We need an "event" in Chicago!

Charles Amenta