

GUSTAV MAHLER

IT was at the end of a pre-war summer holiday in and around Munich—on September 12th, 1910, to be precise—after the Oberammergau Passion Play and the customary feast of Beethoven, Mozart and Wagner, that I first heard a symphony by Gustav Mahler. The concert had not been included in our pre-arranged programme, for, although my companion had heard Mahler conduct *Tristan* in London many years before, his own music was quite unknown to us, and we did not realise how important an event in the musical life of Europe was the first performance, conducted by himself, of his Eighth Symphony. We were persuaded by a Bavarian acquaintance to prolong our stay for a few days in order to be present at what we were assured would be a memorable occasion, and we were rewarded by hearing a work and a performance (or rather two performances, for the Symphony was played on two successive evenings, and we seized the opportunity of hearing it a second time) which made an unforgettable impression. Performances such as those two were destined never to be heard again, for Mahler died a few months later, and no other conductor's interpretation could quite equal his own, but the work remains, and has aroused enthusiasm in many countries. Now at last it is finding its way to England, and is to be performed at the Queen's Hall, London, on April 12th next. Mahler's work has been so much neglected in this country¹ that

¹ To the best of my knowledge only three of his symphonies have been given in London; the First and Fourth, at Queen's Hall Promenade Concerts in 1903 and 1905 respectively, and the Seventh at a Queen's Hall Symphony Concert in January, 1913. His great posthumous song-cycle, 'Das Lied von der Erde,' was given at Queen's Hall in January, 1914. Some of his songs are occasionally heard at concerts. Of performances in the provinces I cannot speak, but I believe the First Symphony was given in Manchester in 1911.

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the occasion seems fitting for a slight account of his life and work, more especially as the Eighth Symphony gives final and triumphant expression to ideas that are gradually taking form and developing through his earlier works.

He was born of Jewish parents at Kalischt in the German-speaking part of Bohemia on July 7th, 1860. It is related of him that as a small child he loved to listen to the folk-songs and marching-songs sung by the soldiers in the neighbouring barracks, and that when only four years old he could sing no fewer than two hundred of these songs. His early love of march rhythms and simple folk melodies never left him, and is often echoed in his songs and in his symphonies. At the age of fifteen, his musical gifts being recognised, he was sent to study music at the Vienna Conservatoire, later he spent two years at the University there, but in 1880 he started on his professional career as a conductor. For the following eight years he held positions at various theatres in Germany and Austria. He had already started composing before he left Vienna, the choral work, 'Das Klagende Lied,' being written in 1880, but his first composition of real importance, the orchestral song-cycle 'Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen,' was not finished till 1884.²

Mahler's symphonies fall into certain well-defined groups, and the composition of each group was preceded by that of a set of songs, the words and music of which give a clue to the general ideas and motives of the following symphonies. Thus the cycle just mentioned, telling the story of a boy's disappointed love, finds its symphonic counterpart in his First Symphony, finished in 1888, and described as 'a tragedy

² Performed with orchestral accompaniment at Queen's Hall in November, 1927. It has also been sung several times in London with piano accompaniment.

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of youth broken in life.'³ The principal themes of the first and third movements are taken from the songs of the cycle. This symphony is classified either as the prelude to the first group, or as the first number of it.

In 1888, Mahler was appointed director of the Court Opera in Budapest, a post he held for over two years. Among his successes there was a production of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* which won enthusiastic praise from Brahms—his genius as a conductor was by this time fully recognised. In the same year he seems first to have become acquainted with Arnim's and Brentano's collection of German folk-songs, 'Des Knaben Wunderhorn.' These poems proved a fruitful source of inspiration, and during the next few years he set a number of them for solo voice and orchestral accompaniment. They were followed by the Second, Third and Fourth Symphonies, usually known as the Wunderhorn-Symphonies, in all of which the folk-song element is prominent. They are further remarkable for the introduction of the human voice in one or more of the movements of each.

The Second Symphony is generally considered the finest of all Mahler's earlier works. It depicts a soul's pilgrimage from doubt and pessimism to faith. The first three movements are purely orchestral, and portray the soul's Prometheus-like struggles against the higher powers and its vain search for happiness in nature and among men. Then follows a short and very beautiful song for alto voice, 'Urlicht,' from 'Des Knaben Wunderhorn,' expressing faith and hope in God, and the last movement, after a final outburst of despair gradually giving way to hope, ends triumphantly with a choral setting of Klopstock's 'Resurrection' Ode. This symphony, partly writ-

³ Richard Specht, *Gustav Mahler*, p. 162.

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ten in 1890, was finished in 1894, when Mahler was not yet a Christian. It is difficult to believe that he was not, at all events, very near to finding the true faith, but his biographers are agreed that at the time his idea of resurrection was the purely naturalistic one of re-incarnation, and his faith was only in the omnipotence of a love whose real significance he did not yet understand. His religious ideas at the time were pantheistic, and his friend Specht⁴ records a conversation in which Mahler declared his belief that 'we shall all return.'

He seems always to have had a mystical consciousness of the immanence of God in nature. We find this consciousness expressed in his Third Symphony, the only one for which he wrote a definite 'programme.' The underlying idea of the work is, in his own words, that 'It begins with inanimate Nature and rises up to the Love of God.' After an introductory movement, headed 'Pan erwacht,' there follow five short movements, describing in turn the message⁵ of the flowers, the animals, mankind (alternatively night), the angels (alternatively the morning-bells) and finally love. The earlier movements are orchestral; the song of mankind is an alto solo, a setting of Nietzsche's 'Brummglocke'; the song of the angels, a little gem from 'Des Knaben Wunderhorn' describing the joy of the angels at the repentance and forgiveness of Peter, is set for boys' chorus, women's chorus and alto solo; the final movement again is purely orchestral, but bears the motto from 'Des Knaben Wunderhorn':

'Vater, sieh an die Wunden mein!
Kein Wesen lass verloren sein.'⁶

⁴ Specht, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

⁵ 'Was mir die Blumen erzählen,' etc.

⁶ 'Father, look on my wounds, let no man be lost.'

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Writing to Frau von Mildenburg in August, 1896, Mahler says of this last movement that it might almost as well be called 'Was mir Gott erzählt.' There can be no doubt that by this time he had learnt the real meaning of Divine Love, for he became a Catholic in 1895, while actually engaged on this symphony.

I have dwelt at length on these two works, because of their importance in the development of Mahler's religious ideas. The last symphony of the 'Wunderhorn' group forms an epilogue and carries on the idea expressed in the finale of its predecessor—the individual soul in harmony with the Divine. It is a comparatively short and altogether light-hearted work, slighter in texture than the others. The third movement (adagio) has a tranquil beauty that made a deep impression on me when I heard the work.⁷ 'Des Knaben Wunderhorn' is again drawn upon for the finale, a delightful Bavarian folk-song for soprano solo.

Mahler's Second and Third Symphonies were finished during the period (1891—1897) that he was conductor at the Municipal Theatre in Hamburg. Before the Fourth was completed he had started his ten years' work as conductor and 'artistic director' at the Vienna Opera. His activities in this post are summarised as follows by a writer in Grove's Dictionary of Music, Third Edition: 'During the ten years that he spent in this post he got through a mass of production of opera, wiped out the debt that had been crippling the Hof Oper, and gathered about him not only a cultured and enthusiastic audience but a strong artistic following. There was nothing that he did not look into. Every detail of production as well

⁷ At the Mahler Memorial Festival at Mannheim, May 10th and 11th, 1912. It was there, too, that I heard the Eighth Symphony for the third, and 'Das Lied von der Erde' for the first, time.

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as of stage deportment and musical phrasing he considered within his province and worthy of his close attention. And all this immense zeal was expended for the sake of the work. For himself he cared nothing, except in so far as he was the chosen instrument for the doctrines of faultless opera production.'

Yet, in addition to all this work, he still found time for composition. To this period belongs the second group of symphonies; these too heralded by a group of songs. Some poems of Friedrich Rückert—whose work has been drawn upon by so many song-writers—furnish the material for this group. In addition to various single songs, Mahler composed, during the period 1900-1902, the beautiful cycle of five 'Kinder-totenlieder,' which are perhaps the finest of all his songs.⁸ A certain pathetic interest attaches to these, for some five years after they were written he lost his own elder and much beloved child.

The three symphonies of the second group, in contrast to their predecessors, leave aside all transcendental problems and deal only with those of the personal and inner life. They differ, further, from the Second, Third and Fourth Symphonies in being purely instrumental. The Fifth Symphony depicts joy in the active life. Beginning on a tragic note with a funeral march its mood changes to one of happiness and exultation. The Sixth, generally known as the 'Tragic,' is its antithesis, and ends in tragedy. The Seventh Symphony is romantic in character. After a long and somewhat complicated first movement there follow three short movements, a Nocturne (*Nachtmusik*), a Scherzo of wildly fantastic character, and a second Nocturne, which have been described by one of Mahler's most discerning critics⁹ as 'pure mas-

⁸ These have occasionally been sung in London.

⁹ H. Leichtentritt.

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terpieces.' The final movement (Rondo Finale) has a triumphant swing about it that somehow recalls the Finale of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. It has been said to show the individual in harmony with the world, as the Finale of the Third Symphony shows him in harmony with the Divine.

The Seventh Symphony was finished in 1905. In the following year Mahler had completed the Eighth, a work which forms a 'group' in itself and in which a return is made to the transcendental ideas of the earlier symphonies. Writing to W. Mengelberg in August, 1906, Mahler says: 'It is the greatest work I have yet composed, and so unique in contents and form that it is quite impossible to write about. Imagine the whole Universe bursting into sound. It is no longer human voices that sing, but the circling planets and suns.'

The symphony is the apotheosis of the Love that, as Dante saw, 'moves the sun and the other stars.' To carry out his stupendous idea, Mahler, as in the Wunderhorn Symphonies, had recourse to the human voice, but this symphony alone is vocal throughout. It has two parts, the first being a setting of *Veni Creator*, the soul's cry to the Holy Spirit, the creative spirit of Love, and the second having as its text the final scene of Goethe's *Faust*, Part II, where the soul of Faust, snatched from the devils by the angels who have been sent by Our Lady to rescue him, is borne upwards, through the regions where the anchorites dwell in holy contemplation, by the prayers of 'Una Poenitentium, sonst Gretchen genannt,' and her three great fellow-penitents, Mary Magdalene, the Samaritan woman, and Mary of Egypt, to the feet of Mater Gloriosa herself, who here herself symbolises the creative spirit of Love, uniting 'amor' and 'caritas' in her own person.

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Mahler uses Goethe's text as showing the redeeming power of the love called upon so fervently in the hymn. The connection between the two parts is made still clearer by the music, themes of the first part being repeated in the second. For instance, the song of Pater Profundus, at the words 'So ist es die allmächtige Liebe, Die alles bildet, alles hegt,'¹⁰ echoes part of the 'Gloria' motive at the end of Part I.

At first sight, the name 'Symphony' may seem unsuitable to this great choral work, but its formal construction is in fact symphonic, the First Part being in regular 'first movement' form, and the Second containing Adagio (prelude, chorus of Anchorites, and songs of the Pater Ecstaticus and Pater Profundus), Scherzo (song of the angels) and Finale. The work is written for an unusually large orchestra, for seven solo voices (two sopranos, two altos, tenor, baritone and bass), two mixed choirs and boys' choir. It would be futile to attempt to give any detailed description of it, and moreover unnecessary, since it is soon to be performed and broadcast in this country.

It was the last of Mahler's works that he heard himself. Soon after the two performances in Munich in 1910, he went to America (for the third time) to conduct a series of concerts, returned broken in health, and died in Vienna on May the 18th, 1911. R.I.P.

He left behind him two works which are considered by many critics to be of even greater musical beauty than the Eighth Symphony. One of these, 'Das Lied von der Erde,' is a cycle of six orchestral songs, three for alto and three for tenor voice, the words from 'Die chinesische Flöte' by Hans Bethge, a series of translations from old Chinese lyrics. As this work

¹⁰ 'So is it almighty love, that forms all and protects all.'

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was heard in London at a Queen's Hall symphony concert in January 1914, it is probably familiar to many musical readers of BLACKFRIARS. It seems likely that this song-cycle would have been the prelude to yet another group of symphonies, but only one of these was completed, though a tenth was in contemplation. In this Ninth Symphony, Mahler again returned to purely instrumental means of expression, and to the classical four movement form—with the difference that the first and last movements are slow, framing two quick movements. This symphony, like most of the master's works, still awaits a hearing in England. It is to be hoped that the coming production of the Eighth Symphony will awaken so much interest that we may soon be given the opportunity of hearing many more of Mahler's masterpieces.

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