

Season Finale: Resurrection

An American Composer's Perspective on Mahler

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Maestro Guzman is devoting tonight's Plano Symphony 40th season finale to one work: Mahler's monumental Symphony No. 2 ("Resurrection"). Austrian composer Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) was one of the greatest composers of his day. During his lifetime, he was much better known as a conductor than as a composer, and he was the only musician ever to be awarded the prestigious directorships of both the New York Philharmonic and the Vienna Opera. Mahler's mighty symphonies were, like Beethoven's, received with puzzlement at first, but now, they are central to the orchestral repertoire. The composer presciently said, "My time will come," and, indeed, it has.

Composers between Beethoven (1770-1827) and Mahler had divided themselves into two camps, each claiming to be the true bearers of Beethoven's mantle. "Classical Romantics" such as Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms followed the symphonic Beethoven, using traditional forms such as sonata, rondo and variations. "Romantic Romantics," on the other hand, such as Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner, emulated the revolutionary Beethoven, who broke formal barriers and explored the idea of "program music" that told a story beyond the patterns of the notes themselves. Born while both Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) and Richard Wagner (1813-1883) were still composing, Mahler had the musical stature both to continue Beethoven's traditional symphonic tradition *and* to break new stylistic ground, thus finally bringing the two camps together.

In veneration of Beethoven, Mahler wrote nine symphonies and was superstitious about writing a tenth for fear that -- like Beethoven -- he would not live to finish it. As it turned out, Mahler did try for a Tenth Symphony and, sadly, did not live to see its completion. With today's medical techniques, his heart condition could have been cured in a week. Mahler did not compose chamber music, nor did he follow Wagner's lead in writing operas, but, along with his contemporary Richard Strauss (1864-1949), who wrote both symphonies and operas, Mahler continued Wagner's signature achievements of stretching the limits of tonality and of developing extended musical forms and massive orchestral resources. Like Wagner and Strauss, Mahler also made the setting of text a prominent feature of his work.

Mahler's effect on succeeding generations has been enormous. The great Viennese modernists Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg and Anton Webern as well as composers today acknowledge their debt to Mahler as one who brought the treasures of the past into the present to create the music of the future. A particularly moving example is Mahler's unfinished Tenth Symphony, written on his deathbed, in which the composer looked clearly into the future and created breathtaking, atonal sounds that reached far

beyond the musical world he was about to leave. As Mahler wisely put it, "Tradition is the conservation of the fire, not the adoration of the ashes."

Even though the texts clearly deal with the themes of death and the afterlife, Mahler did not call his 1895 Symphony No. 2 in C Minor the "Resurrection Symphony." The score calls for an enormous orchestra, with multiple winds and percussion, organ, two harps and the echoes of antiphonal offstage bands plus soprano and alto soloists and mixed chorus. There are five movements, with the first and last serving as the largest "bookends" to contain the massive content. Performances generally take 90 minutes.

The first movement, "*Todtenfeier*" (Funeral Rites) began its life in 1888 as a separate "symphonic poem" in the same grand manner as the "Funeral March" from Beethoven's Symphony No. 3 known as the "Eroica." It begins in the characteristic duple march meter, like the Eroica, in the key of C minor. There is a rapturous second theme which sweetly ascends the E Major scale in tribute to the second theme of the first movement of Beethoven's Violin Concerto. Throughout the movement, there are contrasting episodes marked by sudden changes of tempo. Some passages are mournful, some are full of violence, and one triumphant trumpet theme recurs in the finale of the symphony. Because of the length of the movement, Mahler suggested in the score that a pause be observed after the music to give the audience time to digest the power and solemnity.

The second movement is a gentle, nostalgic *Ländler*, a dance in triple meter which combines the courtly grace of a minuet with the folksy sway of the waltz. There are two contrasting sections which take a more philosophical turn: sometimes playful, sometimes stern, but always with a fond nod to Beethoven. Like the first movement, it has been performed as a separate piece, and it is companion piece to similar short, sweet movements in other Mahler symphonies which the composer called "the raisins in my cakes."

The third movement is a scherzo in quick triple meter with a hypnotically sinuous effect. There is a Jewish folk flavor with high klezmer clarinets. With his typical love of juxtaposing opposites, Mahler also employs a song melody from his earlier *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Boy's Magic Horn). The text is from a German folk song about St. Antony of Padua preaching to the fishes, hence the title, *Fischpredigt* (Sermon for the Fishes). There is a contrasting middle section with rumbling, whistling and prominent trumpets that build to a climactic "Cry of Despair," after which St. Antony continues his sermon. Before the end, there is a quiet quotation from Schumann's song cycle *Dichterliebe* (A Poet's Love). In his 1968 *Sinfonia* for voices and orchestra, Italian composer Luciano Berio used Mahler's scherzo to create a collage, over which he floated a host of well-known classical themes along with a witty patter which includes solfège syllables.

In the short fourth movement, *Urlicht* (Primordial Light), the composer follows Beethoven's model in his Ninth Symphony by introducing the human voice at the end.

Unlike Beethoven, however, Mahler makes his vocal entrance magically quiet, as the alto soloist intones another poem from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. The text moves from the beauty of a red rose to humanity's longing to be united with God. The music subtly moves from one meter to another, and a brass choir creates a halo to set the heavenly scene.

The fifth movement continues without a pause, as a dark, brass reminder of the "Cry of Despair" melts into a melodic depiction of "Resurrection" with a new theme that quietly begins to ascend the C Major scale. The moment has its counterpart in the finale of Beethoven's Ninth, where, early in the movement, there is a quiet orchestral hint of the closing chorale melody. Soon, there is a fearsome statement of the "Dies Irae" (Day of Judgement) from the Catholic Mass for the Dead. As in the Beethoven, there is a massive sonata-allegro structure with an orchestral exposition, a rich, unpredictable and episodic development and an extended choral recapitulation.

At the end of the development, the music falls to a whisper with only the flutes playing with quiet offstage brass to set up a "something-big-is-about-to-happen" mood for the final fifteen minutes with the chorus. They enter quietly and mysteriously, in the distant key of G-flat major. From this point, the rhythmic motion stops moving forward, and the rest of the symphony coasts slowly to the end. The effect is like the moment when an airplane has finished its takeoff and the roar of the motor stops; the wheels fold in, and it seems as if we are floating in the air to our destination. Throughout this section, the soloists and chorus intertwine, with each plateau reaching higher than the last, often with ravishingly beautiful entrances for the two soloists.

For his text, Mahler chose an 18th-century "Resurrection Hymn" by Friedrich Klopstock, to which the composer added verses of his own. At this point in his life, Mahler had not yet converted from Judaism to the Catholic faith, and the turbulent rises and falls in the music have been interpreted as a representation of his personal spiritual struggle. The vocal settings of the words "*Mit Flügeln, die ich mir errungen*" ("With wings I won for myself") and "*Sterben werd' ich, um zu leben!*" ("I shall die so as to live!") have extra musical emphasis. At the end, there is a surge of rhythmic energy, and the symphony ends in a transcendent blaze of glory with brass fanfares and the triumphant pealing of multiple bells.

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