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Symphony No. 7 in E minor

GUSTAV MAHLER

Born July 7, 1860, Kalischt, Bohemia
Died May 18, 1911, Vienna

While it is true that in his own time Mahler was enormously respected as a conductor but not taken very seriously as a composer, he did have some very devoted admirers among major musical figures. One of those, who was just beginning to enjoy some recognition for his own works, was the young Arnold Schoenberg, who had not yet developed his theory of atonalism as he approached age 30, in 1904, but had firmly established himself as a force to be reckoned with when he wrote to Mahler after hearing his Third Symphony in that year:

> I think I have experienced your symphony. I felt the struggle for illusions; I felt the pain of one disillusioned; I saw the forces of evil and good contending; I saw a man in a torment of emotion exerting himself to gain inner harmony. I sensed a human being, a drama, truth, the most ruthless truth!

While Schoenberg's interpretation of the "program" of the Third Symphony differed radically from the one Mahler himself made known in some detail, its emphasis on urgency and emotion was, as Deryck Cooke observed some fifty years ago, "fundamental to Mahler's whole symphonic output—except the Seventh; and Schoenberg promptly saw the difference." Five years after expressing himself on the Third, Schoenberg wrote to Mahler about the Seventh:

> I had less than before the feeling of that sensational intensity which excites and lashes one on, which in a word moves the listener in such a way as to make him lose his balance without giving him anything in its place. On the contrary, I had the impression of perfect repose based on perfect harmony. . . . I have put you with the classical composers—but as one who to me is still a pioneer. I mean, there is surely a difference in being spared all extraneous excitement, in being at rest and in tranquility, in the state in which beauty is enjoyed.

Mahler made the first sketches for his Seventh Symphony in the summer of 1904, about the time Schoenberg heard and responded to the Third; he completed the score the following year and conducted the premiere in Prague on September 19, 1908. Many in the audience found the work outrageous, and even those sympathetic to Mahler as a composer were baffled by it. More than a hundred years later, the Seventh remains perhaps the least understood of Mahler's symphonies, and also the least frequently performed. At a time when all the others have taken their places in the repertory (even those that require costly supplementary vocal and instrumental forces) and when we have amassed several "performing versions" of the Tenth, which Mahler did not live to complete, the Seventh remains something of a curiosity—"undoubtedly the Cinderella among Mahler's symphonies," in the words of the aforementioned Cooke (who gave us two of those performing versions of the Tenth). In several respects, though, both musically and "autobiographically," the Seventh is no mere curiosity, but the most remarkable of the lot.

It happens to be the concluding segment in the trilogy of purely instrumental symphonies which Mahler completed in the three years following his marriage to Alma Schindler. In a sense it represents a resolution of the tensions and contrasts embodied in the two preceding segments—the *particular* tensions and contrast, one must emphasize, for these two factors are omnipresent and essential ingredients of Mahler's style in all his works.

Outwardly, the three symphonies which preceded this trilogy would appear to be more adventurous, for Nos. 2, 3 and 4 all include movements with voices and their respective layouts vary from four to six movements, but Nos. 5, 6 and 7 represent a far greater refinement and deepening of Mahler's personal language. No. 5, in five movements, begins with a funeral march and continues with a sustained outburst of clearly tragic import, but after Part I (comprising the first two movements, the equivalent of a symphonic allegro with an unusually extended introduction) it becomes an affirmative and even exuberant work. No. 6, in four movements, evolves into the most piercingly tragic of all Mahler's symphonies; indeed, at one time he affixed the title "Tragic" to that score, in which he predicted, as it were, the "three flows of Fate" that were to befall him. Those blows had not fallen by the time the Sixth was completed, though, and, having immersed himself so completely in the consuming tragedy of that work, Mahler was then ready to cleanse himself of the despairing mood by writing a different sort of symphony, recalling the old Greek practice of following an exalted tragedy with a comedy or satyr-play.

It was in this frame of mind, apparently, that Mahler made his first sketches for the Seventh in the summer of 1904, almost as soon as he had completed the Sixth. He knew by then that the new symphony would be laid out more or less symmetrically in five movements, but he was uncertain about just what turn the respective movements would take. The two he composed that summer were the second and fourth, each of which he labeled *Nachtmusik*. This term may be translated literally, "Night Music," or in its widely used musical sense as "Serenade." Both meanings apply here, for while both of these movements have elements of the serenade in them they are also filled with darker nocturnal impressions as peculiar to Mahler as those in the "night music" the young Béla Bartók began writing at about the same time were to be for the Hungarian composer throughout *his* creative life.

A full year passed before Mahler got round to the rest of his Seventh Symphony. The inspiration for the remaining movements came to him with such suddenness and force that he was able to compose all three of them within four weeks at the end of the summer of 1905. He then described the work as the happiest music he had ever written. It is also, as Cooke pointed out, "Mahler's most extraordinary example of fantastic, grotesque and outré orchestration for its own sake."

While there are no true parallels between any two of Mahler's symphonies, the Seventh does have several points of similarity with the Fifth. In the five-movement scheme of No. 5, a great scherzo stands at the center and serves as a sort of emotional pivot, an transitional point from gloom to images of serenity and humor. At the center of the more symmetrically organized Seventh is a briefer but even more extraordinarily original scherzo, which in this case is not itself the core of the work, but rather a grand intermezzo between the two *Nachtmusiken* that do constitute the core. This scherzo, which Mahler headed *Schattenhaft* ("In the shadows"), is also pivotal in a sense, though, as it may be considered a further specimen of "night music." (The general character of these three movements together earned the Seventh Symphony the informal title—not bestowed by Mahler himself—"Song of the Night.")

The two outer movements, apparently unconnected to this nocturnal mood but quite related to each other, provide the sharpest contrast to the three inner ones—so sharp, indeed, that some commentors have described the Seventh as *two* symphonies, the one wrapped about the other. Today's

listeners, more familiar with Mahler's ways, are less likely to miss the Mahlerian point that the symmetry of this work's structure is decreed by its content: it spans like a great arch, with all the continuity implied in such an image.

As originally published, the Seventh Symphony was the most error-ridden of all Mahler's scores. When the centenary of the composer's birth was approaching, in the late 1950s, the International Gustav Mahler Society gave first priority among its projects to a new critical edition of this work. The large orchestra specified in the score includes cowbells, a tam-tam, a glockenspiel, a guitar, a mandolin, and still more instruments from outside the normal orchestral complement. A "tenor horn" in B-flat (the instrument known as the baritone horn in our brass bands) is specified for the slow introduction to the opening movement, in which it is directed to play "with big tone" in presenting the theme which Mahler described as "the roar of Nature." The "roar" is awesome for its solemnity rather than its ferocity. The introduction, in B minor, pursues a funereal tread, but the texture brightens as the music works its way into E minor and momentum builds to the point at which the *Allegro* begins.

The principal theme is a march, with echoes of Mahler's song settings of texts from the collection of folk poetry known as *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* ("The Boy's Magic Horn") and the extension of his *Wunderhorn* style in his Symphonies Nos. 2-5, and at the same time reminiscent of Bruckner in its particular contours. It is in fact to be treated, later in the symphony, in the somewhat Brucknerian manner in which the finale of Mahler's Fifth Symphony recalls a brass chorale introduced in the opening movement. This music is nonetheless perhaps more quintessentially Mahlerian than any other single movement Mahler composed. It might be said to represent him at a crossroad, reminiscing on his earlier achievements (though hardly in the obvious manner of his friend Strauss in *A Hero's Life*), distilling what is most valuable from them and proclaiming his future course.

In the luminous second theme, in C major, the listener may notice a resemblance to the spirit, if not the actual notes, of the consolatory music in Mahler's Second Symphony (*Resurrection*). Passages for the horns may recall the parodistic chorales in the scherzo of the Sixth; others, when the marchlike material has attained its full momentum, evoke similar episodes in the first movement of the Third (suggested also by the tenor horn solo in the introduction) and the finale of the Sixth. "Woodland" images from various earlier works flash by between episodes. But in his new harmonic adventurousness—in the glorious dissonances and piercing isolated notes from unexpected sources—Mahler looks forward surely and directly to his Ninth Symphony. This very dramatic and intricately woven movement, actually in conventional sonata form, ends in E major on a note of assertive cheerfulness, with "military" elements to the fore.

A less jubilant sort of military atmosphere makes itself felt in the first *Nachtmusik* (in C minor); it is in the vein of Mahler's *Wunderhorn* songs—the last two in particular: Revelge ("Reveille," composed in 1899) and *Der Tambourg'sell* ("The Drummer Boy," 1901). There is no outright, conspicuous quotation of these or any other songs in this symphony, as there is in the *Wunderhorn* symphonies, but a rhythmic figure used in *Revelge* is used in this movement, and there are echoes from some of the earlier symphonies as well. Along the way there are two trios, which in this case might be called intermezzos: the first (in A-flat) begins with a Schumannesque melody for the cello which turns into a march motif from the Third Symphony, here gaily embellished with glockenspiel and triangle. The opening material then regroups itself in a more ethereal frame, with cowbells emphasizing the other-worldly effect (as they did in the Sixth Symphony). The second intermezzo (in F minor), at once more dreamy and alive with spectral night-figures, intervenes briefly; the opening material then returns again and continues unhurriedly to the end of the movement.

The scherzo (in D minor) is the most bizarre segment of the work: grotesque, arch, sinister, downright menacing—and yet not without almost lovable and even humorous moments. The sputterings of the tuba, the measured drumbeats, isolated notes from the double bass, and other less conspicuous touches add up to an effect that seems more burlesque than menace. Suddenly, out of this emerges a ludicrously emphatic waltz, and by way of a trio there is a folkish passage in Mahler's most beguiling childlike manner (D major), oboes carrying the melody until it is broken off by the solo violin in a quasi-echo of the episode in the scherzo of the Fourth Symphony in which "Death plays the fiddle." The waltz and the opening material then continue to alternate; the sinister elements are brought to a head in this fantastic movement, and therein dispelled for the remainder of the symphony.

The second *Nachtmusik* (in F major, the same key as the famous (and still widely misunderstood) *Adagietto* which stands in the same position between scherzo and finale in the Fifth Symphony, brings the first unstrained relaxation in the work. Shorter, sweeter and altogether more intimate than the earlier *Nachtmusik*, it is marked *Andante amoroso* and is scored for a reduced orchestra, with harp, mandolin and guitar certifying its "serenade" nature. Here the term *Nachtmusik* as it had been used by Mozart and others in preceding centuries is thoroughly apt: a nocturne, a serenade—including, in this instance, a humorous passage in which the serenaders have to tune their instruments.

Far from being a "Song of the Night," the finale, in C major, is an exultant sunrise, more exuberant as well as more extended than the one introducing Strauss's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Even more than the opening movement, this is a classical gesture on Mahler's part, and yet it was this movement that particularly outraged some of his contemporaries. Some of them charged him with simply having copied Wagner's *Meistersinger* Overture—but at the premiere in Prague Mahler himself very pointedly followed the performance of this immense symphony with that familiar piece so that the wholly intended allusion would not be missed. Like the corresponding movement of the Fifth, this finale is in part satirical, but here the element of satire is quite overwhelmed by the impression of breathless, intoxicating festivity and exultancy, from the moment the music bursts forth all ablaze with a fanfare actually played on the timpani (con bravura) before it is taken up by the brass. (Sibelius, it may be noted, had done something of this sort a few years earlier in the scherzo of his First Symphony, in which the timpani introduce the theme while the strings provide percussive accompaniment.)

With this music the various moods of night are past and the scene is flooded with brightest sunlight, illuminating something like a carnival in which dancing bears and daintily pirouetting ballerinas alternate and occasionally collide with one another. (Stravinsky's *Petrushka* would have its premiere only three years after this work.) There are eight colorful episodes in this Rondo-Finale, each heralded by the opening material. In one we hear a pre-echo of Lehár's operetta *The Merry Widow* (first produced in 1905, but at the end of that year, months after Mahler had completed the Seventh Symphony); another more clearly foreshadows the fourth of the six songs ("Von der Schönheit") in Mahler's own *Lied von der Erde*. Cymbals clash, bells and chimes are sounded. In the super-exultant coda the march theme from the first movement is brought back à la Bruckner and mingled with the ritornello theme of the rondo itself. (Mahler not only used this Brucknerian device at the end of his Fifth Symphony, but would do so again in his Eighth.) It is the earlier theme that prevails at the end, amid a jubilation of bells, chimes, brasses and drums.

In November 1907, by which time Mahler had completed his Eighth Symphony (the "Symphony of a Thousand") but neither it nor the Seventh had yet been performed, he met Sibelius in Helsinki, and the two exchanged thoughts on what a symphony ought to be. For Sibelius, who composed a good deal of descriptive music in other forms, a symphony was *not* to be "programmatic," but had to exhibit "the severity of style and the profound logic that created an inner connection among all of the motifs." Mahler, however, countered that "the symphony must be like the world; it must embrace *everything*." And for him, to be sure, it did, and perhaps never more inclusively than in his Seventh.▪