

Mahler's Songs

Funny how things work out. Last season's Classical Connections Series began with programs on Tchaikovsky and Mahler. Same thing this year. Last year, Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto and Mahler's Fourth Symphony. This year, Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony and Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* (*The Song of the Earth*).

Pure accident.

But a happy accident! These are some of the most beautiful, most thrilling works in the repertoire by two of the most fascinating composers of all time.

The choice of the two Mahler works is serendipitous. One's a symphony built around a song. The other's a symphony made up entirely of songs.

There's a great line of art songs (called *Lieder* in German) that runs from Beethoven to Schubert to Schumann to Brahms to Mahler. *Das Lied von der Erde* is the culmination of that line. That's why we'll begin the concert with a primer on *Lieder*, the amazing amalgam of naive folk song and high-falutin' composition that's at the heart of the romantic movement in 19th-century German music.

Great songs call for great singers, and we've got two of 'em! Mezzo-soprano Susan Platts is one of the best Mahler singers of our time. I still get chills thinking about her rendition

of the fourth movement of Mahler's Resurrection Symphony with the DPO in 2012. Tenor John Pickle is a thrilling singer and a thoughtful musician. He made a memorable Dayton Opera debut in 2014 as Radames in Verdi's *Aida*, and now he returns to Dayton to tackle one of the biggest challenges in tenors' concert repertoire.

Mahler's songs are his most intimate works. Mahler's symphonies are his most grandiose. In *Das Lied von der Erde*, these two seemingly disparate worlds combine.

The result is magic.



PROGRAM

Sunday, January 10, 2016, 3 pm

GUSTAV MAHLER (1860–1911)
from Rückert Songs: *Liebst du um Schönheit*
If You Love Beauty
Susan Platts, mezzo-soprano

from *The Youth's Magic Horn: Revelge*
Reveille
John Pickle, tenor

Das Lied von der Erde
The Song of the Earth
Symphony for Tenor, Alto, and Orchestra
after Hans Bethge's *The Chinese Flute*

- I. *Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde*
Drinking Song of the Earth's Sorrow
- II. *Der Einsame in Herbst*
The Lonely One in Autumn
- III. *Von der Jugend* On Youth
- IV. *Von der Schönheit* On Beauty
- V. *Der Trunkene im Frühling*
The Drunkard in Spring
- VI. *Der Abschied* The Farewell

Susan Platts, mezzo-soprano
John Pickle, tenor

Sing Me a Song, Play Me a Symphony

by Neal Gittleman

In 1907 Gustav Mahler suffered three traumas that seemed to mirror the three massive hammer-blows he had composed into the finale of the Sixth Symphony. His five-year-old daughter Maria died of scarlet fever and diphtheria. His wife began an affair with the architect Walter Gropius. He was diagnosed with a potentially fatal heart condition. Mahler's response was the crowning achievement of his career: *Das Lied von der Erde* (*The Song of the Earth*), a symphony comprising six songs based on ancient Chinese poems on life, death, love, and nature.



MAHLER & MARIA

With the exception of an incomplete piano quartet, an abandoned opera, and a cantata—all early works—every piece of music Mahler wrote was either a symphony or a song. *Das Lied von der Erde*, one of his last compositions, was both.

Songs

All of Mahler's songs—like most German art songs of the 19th century—were composed for voice and piano. Beginning with the song-cycle *Songs of a Wayfarer* (1883–1885), Mahler also arranged his songs for voice and orchestra. The texts of the *Wayfarer*

songs came from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (*The Youth's Magic Horn*), a compendium of folk poems published in the early 1800s. Mahler chose four *Wunderhorn* poems to tell a loosely constructed story of a man wandering through the countryside, trying to get over a failed love affair.

Between 1892 and 1901 Mahler wrote 16 more songs based on *Wunderhorn* poems. Many, like *Das irdische Leben* (*The Earthly Life*) and *Revelge* (*Reveille*), are full of dark, tragic irony. Some, like *Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt* (*St. Anthony of Padua's Sermon to the Fishes*) are gently humorous. Others, like *Lob des Hohen Verstandes* (*In Praise of Lofty Intellect*), are snarky satires. The music of the *Wunderhorn* songs is full of the harmonic twists and turns of Mahler's intricate symphonic style. But the melodies are simple, catchy tunes that resemble folk songs.

In the summer of 1901, Mahler wrote four songs to poems by Friedrich Rückert: the incomparably beautiful *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* (*I Have Become Lost to the World*) and the mysterious *Um Mitternacht* (*At Midnight*), plus two songs taken from Rückert's heartbreaking volume *Kindertotenlieder* (*Songs on the Death of Children*). Another Rückert song from 1902, the beautiful *Liebst du um Schönheit* (*If You Love Beauty*) was a love-gift from Mahler to his new bride,



ALMA

Alma. Two more *Kinder-totenlieder* followed in 1904, shortly after the birth of the Mahlers' second daughter. The timing and the subject matter led

to great how-could-you-write-something-like-that tension between Alma and Gustav, and the death of their first daughter in 1907 made the *Kinder-totenlieder* seem eerily and tragically prophetic.

Symphonies

Most Mahler songs are intimate miniatures lasting five minutes or less. His symphonies, by contrast, are panoramic works lasting an hour or more. But Mahler loved to blur the line between song and symphony.

His first four symphonies are often called the “Wunderhorn” Symphonies because of their close connections to songs from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. Symphony No. 1 (1888) is a kaleidoscope of references to Beethoven's Ninth, Jean Paul's novel *Titan*, “Frère Jacques”, and an etching by Morris von Schwind. He also uses musical themes from two of the *Wayfarer* songs.



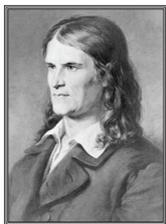
Symphony No. 2 (1894) is the first of five Mahler symphonies to include

singing. It begins with a massive funeral march and concludes with a monumental choral setting of Friedrich Klopstock's ode “Resurrection”, immediately preceded by the *Wunderhorn* song *Urlicht* (*Primal Light*).

Poetic images abound in the titles of the six movements of Symphony No. 3 (1896): “Pan Awakes—Summer Marches In”, “What the Flowers in the Meadow Tell Me”, “What the Animals of the Forest Tell Me”, “What Man Tells Me”, “What the Angels Tell Me”, and “What Love Tells Me”. There are songs, too. The third movement is an instrumental reworking of *St. Anthony of Padua's Sermon to the Fishes*, and the fifth is another *Wunderhorn* song, *Es sungen drei Engel* (*Three Angels Were Singing*). In between is a song for alto set to words taken from Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

Mahler initially wanted his Third Symphony to have a seventh movement, the *Wunderhorn* song *Das himmlische Leben* (*The Heavenly Life*). But he changed his mind and saved the song to use as the finale of Symphony No. 4 (1900).

After the four *Wunderhorn* symphonies, Mahler switched to a new, all-instrumental mode in Symphony No. 5 (1902), Symphony No. 6 (1904), and Symphony No. 7 (1905). But even without singing, echoes of the songs remain. The famous *Adagietto* movement



RÜCKERT

of the Fifth Symphony is patterned on one of the 1901 Rückert songs. The Sixth's "Alma Theme" has a songlike quality. The fourth movement of Symphony No. 7 is like a wordless serenade, complete with guitar and mandolin accompaniment.

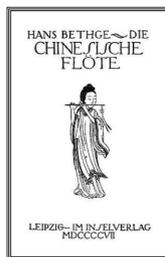
Voices then return—with a vengeance—in Symphony No. 8 (1907). The Eighth has two movements. The first is a magnificent chorus on the hymn *Veni, Creator Spiritus* ("Come, Creator Spirit"). The second employs eight singers, massive choir, and orchestra in a concert setting of the final scene from Goethe's *Faust*.

With eight symphonies completed, Mahler got nervous. Schubert, Beethoven, and Bruckner had all died after writing their ninth symphonies. Superstition (combined with worries over his heart condition) inspired Mahler to try to beat the ninth-symphony jinx by writing a ninth symphony that wasn't called "Symphony No. 9": the 1909 song-cycle/symphony *Das Lied von der Erde*.

If Mahler was trying to trick fate, he failed. Symphony No. 9 was finished in 1909 and Mahler died in 1911, having not quite completed his Symphony No. 10.

Lost (and Found) in Translation

Das Lied von der Erde and the Ninth Symphony are Gustav Mahler's wistful, beautiful farewell to life. The six songs of *Das Lied...* come from *The Chinese Flute*, Hans Bethge's book of German poems in German adapted from ancient Chinese originals. The texts underwent multiple translations and transformations. Here's an example of what happened to just one line of one poem.



The fifth movement of *Das Lied von der Erde*, "The Drunkard in Springtime", is a vigorous song for tenor in which a drunken man revels in his favorite things: nature and liquor. The original poem, "Feelings on Awakening from Drunkenness on a Spring Day", by the 8th-century Chinese poet Li-Bai, begins:

Earthly life resembles a big dream.
Toil is pointless.

In 1862, poet Hervey de Saint-Denys made a French translation of Li Bai, titled "A Spring Day: The Poet Expresses His Feelings Emerging from Drunkenness". It starts:

If life is like a big dream, what
good is it to torment your existence?

That version was then translated into German in 1905 by Hans Heilmann, titled "A Spring Day", beginning:

If life is a dream, why trouble and torment yourself?

Two years later, Bethge created his own version of Heilmann's poem, called "The Drinker in Spring", which opens:

If existence is only a dream, why then care and torment?

Mahler, who rarely set poetry without making his own adaptations, changed Bethge's line to:

If life is no more to me than a dream, then why toil, why bother?

Each translation moves further from the original but brings the line closer to Mahler's getting-ready-to-let-go-of-life message.

The changes in that line are subtle. But in the finale of *Das Lied von der Erde*, "The Farewell", Mahler went much further. He created a climactic half-hour symphonic movement by combining two poems by two different Chinese poets and completely changing the ending. Bethge's final lines translate as:

I shall never again ramble.

My feet are tired and my soul is tired.

The earth is the same everywhere.

And eternal, eternal are the white clouds.

Mahler rewrote Bethge's ending for a deeper, more personal message of farewell to the beautiful earth he loved so dearly:

I shall travel to my native land, my home!

I shall never ramble far away.

My heart is calm and awaits its hour.

In spring the dear earth blooms everywhere and grows green again!

Everywhere and forever the distant horizons shine blue!

Forever... Forever...

Forever... Forever...

Forever...

Forever...

Forever...

And with each "Forever..." the singer seems to move into the distance, disappearing into the musical landscape, as if gently passing from life into death.



THE SINGER'S FINAL "FOREVER..." IN MAHLER'S PIANO DRAFT

TIMELINE ~ Gustav Mahler

1860

July 7, born in Kalischt, Bohemia to distiller/
tavern owner Bernhard Mahler and Marie
Hermann Mahler.

1866

Begins piano lessons. Gives first public recital.

1875

Enters Vienna Conservatory, studying
harmony and composition.

1878

First major work, the cantata *Das Klagende
Lied (The Mournful Song)*.

1880

Named opera conductor in the spa town of
Bad Hall, the first of many conducting posts.

1884

Writes *Songs of a Wayfarer*.

Starts First Symphony.

1897

Converts from Judaism to Christianity in
order to qualify to direct the Vienna State
Opera. (He gets the gig!)

1901

Composes four songs to poems by Rückert.

1902

Marries Alma Schindler. Writes Rückert song
Liebst du um Schönheit as a love token for Alma.

1907

A bad year. Four-year-old daughter dies.
Wife has an affair. Heart disease diagnosis.

1908

Composes *Das Lied von der Erde*.

1909

Moves from Vienna to New York to lead the
New York Philharmonic.

1911

May 18, dies in Vienna of endocarditis.
November 11, *Das Lied von der Erde*
premieres.

1860

Lincoln elected 16th U.S. President.
South Carolina secedes. First British Open
golf tournament.

1866

Alfred Nobel invents dynamite.

1875

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. First
successful swim of the English Channel.

1878

H.M.S. Pinafore. David Hughes invents the
microphone. Hardy's *The Return of the Native*.

1880

Ben-Hur. Edison invents the light bulb. First
bingo game. Rodin sculpts *The Thinker*.

1884

Huckleberry Finn.

Seurat's *Bathing at Asnières*.

1897

First college basketball game (Yale beats
Penn, 30-10). *New York Sun*: "Yes, Virginia,
there is a Santa Claus"

1901

William McKinley assassinated. TR takes over.

1902

Chekov's *The Three Sisters*. Aswan Dam
opens. Monet paints *Waterloo Bridge*.

1907

Oklahoma becomes 46th state. Picasso's
Demiselles d'Avignon. Cubs win the World Series.

1908

William Howard Taft elected U.S. president.

1909

Peary reaches the North Pole.
Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* play Paris.

1911

Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*.
Charles Kettering invents the
electric starter.