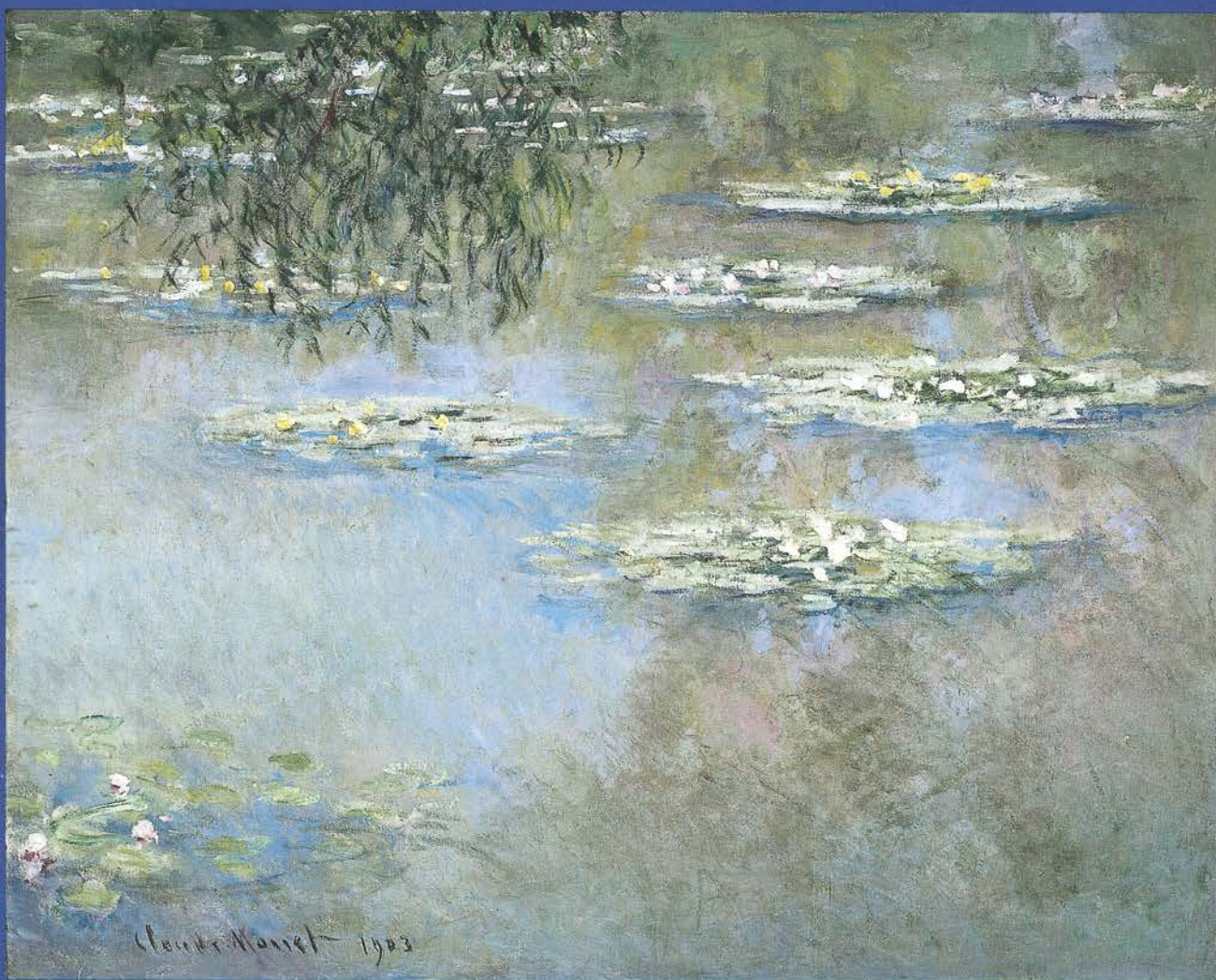


Dayton Daily News
Classical Connections

LISTENER'S GUIDE

by Music Director, Neal Gittleman



IMPRESSIONS IN SOUND
2004-2005 Season



Dayton Daily News Classical Connections No. 4

Gustav Mahler: Symphony No. 6 ("Tragic")

Friday, April 15, 2005



Gustav Mahler: A
Life in Crisis
Stuart Feder
Yale U. Press
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Mahler
Symphony No. 6
San Francisco
Symphony
Michael Tilson
Thomas
Delos SFS 0001



Gustav Mahler

- 1860** July 7, Gustav Mahler is born in Kalischt, Bohemia to Bernhard Mahler, a distiller and tavern owner, and Marie Hermann Mahler. His Bohemian heritage is part of a famous Mahler quote: "I am thrice homeless: as a Bohemian in Austria; as an Austrian in Germany; and as a Jew throughout the world."
- 1866** Begins piano lessons and gives his first public recital.
- 1875** Enters the Vienna Conservatory, studying harmony and composition.
- 1878** Writes his first major work, the cantata *Das Klagende Lied* (*The Mournful Song*).
- 1880** Lands his first conducting post, one of many regional opera house positions that he holds between 1880 and 1897.
- 1884** Composes *Songs of a Wayfarer*, a song-cycle inspired by a failed love affair. Starts Symphony No. 1, which is completed in 1888 and revised four times subsequently.
- 1888** Begins writing songs from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (*The Youth's Magic Horn*), a project on which he works over the next eleven years.
- 1891** Becomes chief conductor of the Hamburg City Theater, his first major opera post in Germany. Mahler works in Hamburg until his appointment to the Vienna Court Opera in 1897.
- 1893** Begins a new work regime that he follows for the rest of his life: Composing during the summertime at a lakeside retreat, conducting during the remainder of the year. Starts work on Symphony No. 2 at the Attersee lakeshore in Austria.
- 1896** Completes the six-movement, hour-and-three-quarters-long *Third Symphony*, the longest yet written.
- 1897** Appointed Artistic Director of the Vienna Court Opera House
- 1900** Builds a villa and "composing hut" on the Wörthersee lakeshore in Maiernigg. It is here that Mahler completes Symphony No. 4 and composes both the fifth and sixth symphonies.
- 1901** Composes the first three movements of Symphony No. 5 plus nine songs. Meets and falls in love with Alma Schindler.
- 1902** Marries Alma. Completes the *Fifth Symphony*.
- 1903** Composes first three movements of Symphony No. 6.
- 1904** Completes *Sixth Symphony*, writes two movements of the *Seventh* and finishes song-cycle *Kindertotenlieder* (*Songs on the Death of Children*).
- 1907** Mahler's four-year-old daughter Maria Anna dies suddenly. Mahler is diagnosed with a potentially fatal heart ailment. Doctors order him to reduce his busy schedule of conducting and composing. He refuses.
- 1909** Moves to New York City to become Music Director of the New York Philharmonic.
- 1911** February 21, conducts the New York Philharmonic for the last time. He leaves the orchestra mid-season, following protracted disputes with musicians, administration and trustees.
- May 18**, Mahler dies in Vienna, near completion of Symphony No. 10.

THE Mahler website:
<http://www.netass.com/~jgrishes/mahler/>



Mahler
Ken Russell, Dir.
Image Entertainment
ASIN 6305131090
(DVD)
ASIN 0780020901
(VHS)
Cool flick, but not
for the faint of heart.

Hammer of Fate

Gustav Mahler said that every symphony should contain a universe. Listeners with short attention spans may assume he meant that Mahler symphonies seem to last an eternity. But what he really meant was that symphonic composers should not limit themselves. A symphony should display every emotion. A symphony should give an audience the sense that an entire lifetime of experience has been compressed into 40 to 90 minutes of music. A symphony should encompass life, death, and beyond. A symphony should take the listener on a journey far beyond day-to-day life. A symphony should give glimpses of the infinite.

No wonder Classical Connections keeps returning to Mahler symphonies!

In February 2001 we explored Symphony No. 1, in a program entitled "Mahler's Song of Nature". We examined how Mahler built this symphony from such disparate elements as folk songs and dances, passages lifted from his *Songs of a Wayfarer* song-cycle, bird calls, fragments of marches and other popular music forms, references to the writings of the author Jean-Paul, and quotes from Beethoven's *Ninth*. In retrospect, I wished I'd called that program "A New Kind of Symphony". That would have been a more accurate title.

A year later, in April 2002, we looked at Mahler's *Fifth*. This time the program was called "A New Kind of Symphony". The title still applied, because Symphony No. 5 marked a significant

change in Mahler's compositional approach. He dropped the idea of building symphonies on pre-existing songs. He jettisoned all the poetic or extra-musical references that had filled the first four symphonies. Symphony No. 5 was pure music, not program music.

The subtitle of Mahler's next symphony — "Tragic" — implies that he might have been returning to the story-telling ways of the old "New Kind of Symphony". But when we examine the *Sixth* in the detail that Classical Connections allows, we'll see that Mahler was actually moving even further away from his old symphonic style. There's still autobiography. There's still song-like writing. There is still an entire universe. But this symphony is even more traditional in structure. Even as his musical language takes him further from the classical tradition, Mahler's approach returns to the more abstract music-making of Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, and pre-*Ninth* Beethoven. As he probes deeper into the symphonic past, the results push him further into the symphonic future. Each of Mahler's prior symphonies had been called "modern" (either in praise or scorn) by his contemporaries. But the *Sixth* was the first truly modern symphony. For the symphony, the 20th century began in 1904 with Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 6.

Sounds like we've picked the right piece to close our 2004-2005 *Dayton Daily News* Classical Connections season!

From Ecstasy to Agony

Mahler completed his *Fifth Symphony* on August 23, 1902. It ends in a glorious shout of joy. He finished Symphony No. 6 on or about August 18, 1904. It ends in a bleak shudder of despair.

What happened in those two years?

The ecstasy of the *Fifth* was motivated by the happiness of Mahler's private life. He had met, wooed, and married the woman of his dreams, Alma Schindler. She was pregnant with their first child. Despite the usual problems and intrigues at the Vienna State Opera, for Mahler, 1902 was as good as it gets.

So we'd expect that the dark conclusion of the *Sixth* must flow from trouble in the Mahler household. Yet Alma Mahler's

1904 diary entries reveal a summer full of peace and happiness. When not busy composing, Mahler devoted himself to playing with his two-year-old daughter Maria and her newborn sister Anna. On one of their last days in the country before returning



Gustav and Alma

to Vienna for the start of the 1904 opera season, Gustav and Alma went for a walk along the shores of Wörthersee Lake, the site of their summer home. Her diary recounts this exchange:

Alma: What I love in a man is his achievement, and the greater his achievement, the more I must love him.

Gustav: That really poses a danger for me. What if someone else came along who is better than I?

Alma: Then I would have to love him.

Gustav: I'm not worried for now. I don't know anyone who is better than I!

That hardly sounds like a composer who had just completed his darkest symphony yet.

So what happened between August 1902 and August 1904? There's no simple answer.

Though we know it as "The Tragic Symphony" (a name that Mahler used, but then retracted), the *Sixth* is not exactly the downer you might expect.

First Movement: A march, this is one of the most powerful movements in all of Mahler, with a heavy, unrelenting pulse. It has none of the whimsy of the "*Frère Jacques*" funeral march of the *First Symphony*, none of the majesty of the funeral march that opens the *Second*, none of the exuberance of the 35-minute "Mother of all Marches" that starts the *Third*, and, ironically, none of the tragic solemnity of the first-movement funeral march of the *Fifth*. This march is impetuous and driven in a way that



no other Mahler march is:



The march pulse also generates the first of two cyclic motives — motives which recur throughout the symphony:



Pounded out in unison by two timpanists, this insistent rhythm symbolizes Fate. It is followed by (and later, is superimposed on) the second cyclic motive, which is also a Fate symbol:



This motive is based on the simple change from major ("happy") to minor ("sad"). On the surface, it's almost banally simple. Yet by virtue of repetition, Mahler imbues this motive with a weight and power that belies its simplicity. This warning is stark: "Your happiness can change to sadness. Just like that."

The most memorable musical figure in the first movement is the flowing second theme, marked *Schwungvoll* (full of verve):



Right after composing this music Mahler went up to the main house from his "composing hut" by the lake shore and told Alma, "I have tried to personify you in a theme. I don't know if I've succeeded, but you'll have to be content with it." (She was.)

The first movement is based on the innate tension between the pounding intensity of the march music and the unabashed passion of the "Alma Music" and closes with a triumphant statement of the Alma Theme. So where's the tragedy?

Patience! Any student of ancient Greek literature knows that for a tragedy to work, the audience must vicariously experience a hero's fall. To create a truly cathartic experience from the audience's feelings of pity for the hero and fear of tragedy befalling them, the author must establish the height from which the hero will fall. The first movement of *Mahler Sixth* is the set-up. The actual fall comes later — in the symphony's closing pages.

Scherzo: This is the first movement of the *Sixth* that Mahler composed in the summer of 1903. It begins with the same pounding notes as the first movement, confused by clashing accents between the timpani and low strings plus a triple- rather than duple-meter:



This is a standard-issue Mahler-style demonic scherzo, full of characteristic grotesque touches: shrill upper-register woodwinds, exaggerated nuances, harsh accents, nasty trills. What makes this scherzo stand out from Mahler's others is the vehemence of the gestures and the underlying sense of violence. That all vanishes, however, in the tender trio, marked *Altwäterlich* (old-fashioned), which Alma said was inspired by daughter Maria at play with her summer-house playmates:



This movement's dramatic flow depends on the alternation between the driven scherzo and the gentle trio. Though this is similar to the scheme of the first movement, there is no ecstatic finish. The movement slows down and dies away in one of Mahler's spookiest endings.



Mahler's composing hut on the Wörthersee in Maiernigg

Slow Movement: One of Mahler's most endearing pieces, it is full of simple, naive sentimentality — precisely the kind of emotion that would be dangerous in any other composer's hands. With Mahler, however, the music is so sincere that we forgive him its schmaltziness:



The indication beneath the melodic line says it all: “tender but expressive”. There’s also a striking detail in the melody. When the tune changes from G-flat to G-natural in the fourth measure, the harmony changes from minor to major, reversing the major-to-minor Fate Motive that dominates the rest of the symphony. This highlights the slow movement’s unique role in the *Sixth*. It’s the one movement where Mahler allows the tension to relax.

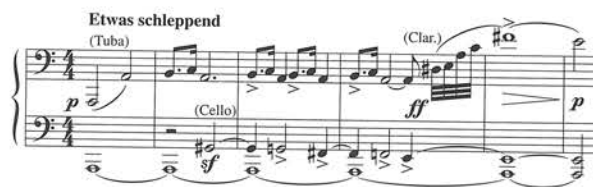
Mahler wisely refrains from presenting any contrasting material in the slow movement. No dark or menacing music breaks the spell cast by the opening phrase. Such a lack of contrast would normally be a weakness. But there is so much anxiety in the other movements that the listener welcomes this 15-minute respite — and worries what disasters await in the finale.

Fourth Movement: When Mahler left Vienna for his country home in the summer of 1904, his first task was to compose the finale of the *Sixth Symphony*. But he found himself stuck in the most serious composer’s block of his career. Unable to make progress on the finale, he wrote to Alma asking her to bring the manuscripts of the other movements when she came from the city. Referring to the first three movements failed to break the block, and it was only after a trip to the Dolomites that Mahler was able to start productive work on the last movement.

There was good reason for the writer’s block. The finale of the *Sixth* is one of the most complex symphonic movements of all time. The complexities are both technical and psychological, and I believe the root cause of Mahler’s inability to begin work was that he had not yet figured out how to end the symphony.

The standard dramatic shape of the romantic symphony of Mahler’s time dated back to Beethoven’s *Fifth*: a journey from darkness and struggle into light and triumph. In the first three movements of Symphony No. 6, Mahler had set himself up to follow that model. To do so, Mahler would need to write a last movement that would have even more stress and tension than its predecessors yet would still ultimately resolve in a jubilant, resplendent conclusion.

Mahler begins his finale appropriately, with a sharp accent, a dissonant chord, and a soaring melody. The dual Fate Motives from the first movement appear, then we plunge into a solemn dirge from the tuba, accompanied by timpani and cellos, and followed by a wailing cry in the clarinets:



The half-hour finale comprises three long dramatic sweeps. Each begins with great passion and vehemence, dominated by march-like rhythms and repeated statements of the Fate Motive. Each builds to a climax where we expect Mahler to usher in the anticipated triumphal music. Each time, however, this expectation is dashed by the most striking feature of the finale: a hammer-blow from the percussion section, which plunges the music from the verge of exaltation back to the depths of despair. (See “Special Effects”, on page 40.) The final hammer-blow follows the most hopeful climax of all, and at this cataclysmic moment the symphony’s struggle turns to a sudden and tragic end. The Fate Motive pounds out in the timpani one last time, and the symphony fades into silence.

Mahler said that the *Sixth* is the story of a hero who suffers three blows of fate, the last of which kills him. So the hammer-blows in the orchestra are both literal and symbolic. The finale’s emotional power comes from Mahler’s skillful manipulation of the audience’s expectations and desires. We expect a happy ending because all of the *Sixth*’s predecessors (all the way back to Beethoven’s *Fifth*) have happy endings. We want a happy ending because we’re human and we hope for the best. What makes this symphony truly modern is Mahler’s realization that the happy ending is not guaranteed. At the very last minute, almost without warning and for no apparent reason, the symphony ends in death and despair.

Why? There’s no easy biographical answer. Mahler’s professional career as a conductor was full of stress and intrigue, so he had ample experience on which to model the high-energy struggle portrayed in this symphony. But Mahler was thriving at the Vienna Court Opera and seemed to revel in the daily challenges of his work.

Despite Alma’s reports that the summer of 1904 was totally happy, cracks were beginning to show in the Mahlers’ idyllic home life. When Alma Schindler met Mahler she was a talented, promising composer who had been studying with Alexander Zemlinsky. When they married, Gustav insisted that Alma give up composing. She agreed with great reluctance and deeply resented setting



Vienna Court Opera House

aside her dreams. Alma, almost 20 years younger than her husband, felt stifled and complained in her diary of being “constantly pregnant”. Mahler eventually became painfully aware of Alma’s discontent — in 1910, when he learned of her affair with the architect Walter Gropius — but as he wrote the *Sixth*, he still thought everything was perfect.



Walter Gropius

Maybe it was precisely Mahler’s happiness that led him to end Symphony No. 6 as he did. Perhaps happiness frightened him. Mahler was a superstitious worrier. But I suspect that the tragic turn of the finale is connected to the *zeitgeist* of the new century.

Even by 1904 it was clear that the simple, old ways of the 19th century were over. The Boer War and Russo-Japanese War gave every indication that the 20th century would

be a century full of horrors and death. Mahler sensed that, and it drove him to break the symphonic mold. The old Beethovenian model of struggle-to-triumph was outdated. The 20th century symphony would end in death, despair, nothingness. Heroes of the ancient Greek tragedies fell because of inherent character flaws. Heroes of 20th century tragedies would fall because of the times in which they lived. In the modern era tragedy strikes for no reason. It strikes simply because it does.

While the *Sixth Symphony* did not mirror the facts of Mahler’s life at the time, it foretold coming disasters. Mahler, indeed, received hammer-blows in 1907: Maria, his youngest daughter, died from scarlet fever and diphtheria and he was diagnosed with serious heart disease. Mahler composed his bleakest symphony at a pinnacle of personal happiness, but just as the elation at the end of the first movement leads, inevitably, to the despair of the symphony’s closing bars, so Mahler’s joys of 1904 led to intense suffering in 1907 and beyond.

Special Effects

The tradition of adding special effects to Romantic Era symphonies began — of course — with Beethoven. Beethoven added extra instruments — piccolo, contrabassoon, and three trombones — to beef up the sonority of the last movement of his *Fifth Symphony*. He portrayed a thunderstorm — complete with thunder-rolling timpani — in the *Sixth*. And don’t forget the soloists, chorus, and percussion band in the “Ode to Joy”.

Berlioz built on Beethoven, adding church bells, off-stage oboe, and other extra instruments to the orchestra for his 1830 *Symphonie fantastique*. But it was with the symphonies of Mahler — the *Sixth*, in particular — that the use of symphonic special effects really took off.

Mahler’s Symphony No. 1 featured off-stage brass and the famous muted solo double-bass for “*Frère Jacques*”. An off-stage ensemble of horns sounds the Last Trumpet in the finale of his *Second*. The mournful sound of an off-stage trumpet creates a magical mood in the third movement of Symphony No. 3. The *Fourth Symphony* features a solo violin tuned a step too high in order to create the nasty, pinched sound of a devilish fiddler. After an effects-less *Fifth*, Mahler was back at it in Symphony No. 6 with a menu of symphonic oddities: cowbells, church bells, and hammer-blows.

Who Let the Cows Out?

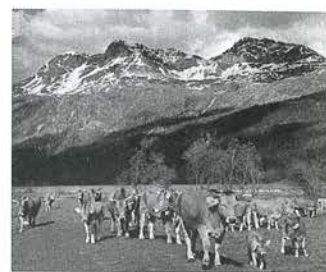
About ten minutes into the first movement of Mahler’s *Sixth*, the tumult of the development section fades and an otherworldly sound drifts over the orchestra: the soft, ethereal tintinnabulation of distant cowbells. If rendered correctly by the off-stage percussionist, it sounds as if the doors of the concert hall have been opened to reveal a Tyrolean landscape with gentle bossies grazing in mountainside pastures. (If

rendered badly, it sounds as if junk peddlers were selling their wares in the lobby!)

The sound of European-style cowbells is unfamiliar to United States audiences. Most of us know cowbells as noisy things in swing, rock, and salsa drum sets; as crowd-rousers at sporting events; or as a clanging aural alert to watch where you’re walking on dairy farms. In fact, I never understood Mahler’s use of cowbells in the *Sixth* until I spent a summer in Switzerland in 1984. On an excursion from Geneva to the Jungfrau, I heard the real thing. And I got it. From a distance, cowbells in the field have a gentle, sweet sound that causes an instant relax reflex in the listener. This is what Mahler aims for.

Mahler understood that this magical effect would be hard to achieve. When the cowbells enter in the first movement, Mahler writes this detailed note in the conductor’s score: “The cowbells must be handled very discretely, in a realistic imitation of a

herd grazing in the distance — sometimes together, sometimes sporadic, some higher-pitched, others lower-pitched. Yet it should be clearly stated that this technical note to the conductor does not connote any programmatic meaning.” Mahler wanted the emotional effect that the authentic sound of cowbells creates without us thinking that the cows themselves were part of a symphonic back-story. (The symphony’s “hero” is not a dairy farmer!) In fact, though Mahler wants the sound to be authentic, it is clearly not real. The cowbells begin softly in the



Four-Legged Cowbell-ists

distance. After two bars, Mahler indicates “coming nearer” for four measures. Then three measures of silence. Then three measures of bells. Three more measures of silence. And three more measures of bells, now “getting further away”. That’s not how real cows behave.

Because stagehands frown on bringing herds of cattle backstage, orchestral percussionists have to show their imagination and ingenuity in order to successfully create the magical sound that Mahler wants. The best way I know of is to string a large number of cowbells of varying sizes on a rack. The percussionist then activates the bells by gently touching the strings and tapping the bells by hand. It seems a silly thing on which to waste valuable time when rehearsing a long and difficult symphony like the *Sixth*, but getting exactly the right sound from the cowbells is critically important.

As beautiful as the cowbell effect is, there’s an ironic twist to the story. The sound from the cowbells of the herds that grazed near Mahler’s composing hut in Maernigg disturbed the composer’s work. So Mahler convinced the farmers in the neighborhood to remove the cowbells so he could work without noise pollution from the Bovine Philharmonic!

The Belfry

Mahler reprises the cowbell effect midway through the finale, just after the first of the movement’s three emotional collapses. Then a new off-stage effect appears: the distant tolling of soft, deep bells, like the carillon from a far-off church steeple. Again, Mahler has specific instructions for the sound he wants and how to get it: “Two or more very deep bells of differing and indeterminate pitch, positioned in the distance, played gently and irregularly.” This is, in effect, a man-made sound to echo the sound-from-nature of the cowbells. The difference comes from the weight of the church-bell sound versus the lighter effect of the cowbells.

Examples from five different symphonies prove that Mahler was particularly fond of off-in-the-distance effects. This is a reflection of the importance of psychology in Mahler’s writing. Mahler was a conductor as well as a composer, hence the specificity of his writing, his detailed “Notes for the Conductor”, and his sensitivity to music’s emotional effect on the audience. Mahler understood that distant off-stage instruments cause a palpable response in an audience accustomed to the intense presence of the orchestra’s sound in the concert hall. The power of the off-stage sound is not just in its contrast and its beauty but also in the sense that it brings the audience in contact with an otherworldly, ineffable, mysterious presence. The special sound of off-stage instruments transports the audience from the reality of the concert hall to a different emotional state.

What will we use for these deep off-stage bells? Dayton composer and sculptor Michael Bashaw assures me that he’s got lots of low, indeterminate-pitch bell-like things in his studio and promises to fix us up with whatever we need.

If I Had a Hammer

The hammer-blows of the finale are the *Sixth Symphony*’s most striking — and most problematic — special effect. Though they were a central part of Mahler’s compositional strategy for the piece, they posed great difficulties. Mahler couldn’t decide how many hammer-blows to use. The manuscript has five: one in the ninth bar, two in the lengthy development section, one in the recapitulation, and a final stroke in the coda. Mahler deleted the first and fourth blows during rehearsals for the premiere. The first came too early in the movement, without sufficient music to prepare the hammer’s emotional impact. Having deleted the first one, removing the fourth — which fell at an analogous place — was automatic. By the first performance, Mahler had settled on the “three blows of Fate”.

In 1907, after his world had begun to collapse, Mahler deleted the final hammer-blow from the finale. Mahler was a deeply superstitious man, as evidenced by his later attempt to dodge the “Ninth Symphony Jinx” by titling the symphony he wrote just after Symphony No. 8 *The Song of the Earth*. (It seemed to work, but once Mahler had finished the piece he actually called “Symphony No. 9”, Death got him midway through the *Tenth*!) The most crushing blow for Mahler was the death of his daughter Maria.

The loss was worsened by the fact that in 1904 Mahler had completed a song-cycle called *Songs on the Death of Children*. Convinced that he had caused the bad karma that led to Maria’s death, Mahler must have felt that actually portraying the “third hammer-blow that kills the hero” was too dangerous. Nevertheless, in the DPO’s performances of the *Sixth* symphony, we will restore the third-and-final hammer-blow. Mahler’s anxieties aside, I find it crucial to the dramatic and musical structure of the piece.



Gustav with Maria, two years before her death

The hammer-blows also pose practical difficulties. Mahler was precise in describing the sound he wanted: “A short, powerful, but dull-resounding blow of a non-metallic character (like an ax-blow).” Unfortunately, Mahler had no suggestions regarding how to get that sound. There wasn’t — and still isn’t — a hammer in the orchestral percussion arsenal. Moreover a hammer makes no sound by itself, and Mahler gives no hint what the hammer should hit.

The problem is exacerbated by the competition the hammer-blow-ist faces. The first blow comes on top of a triple-*forte* chord in the orchestra which includes simultaneous attacks in

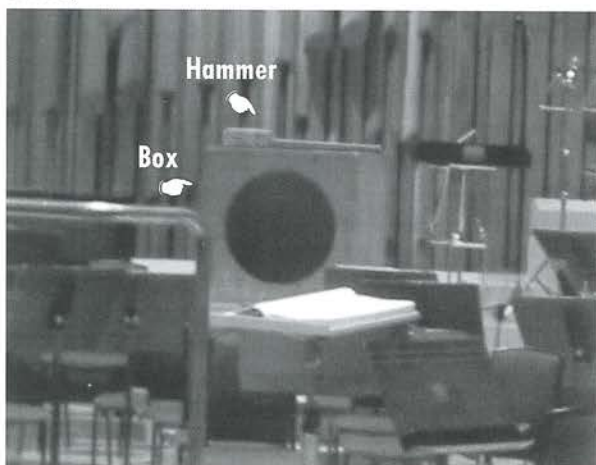


the timpani and bass drum. The second is the same *plus* gong and cymbals. (Mahler indicates that the gong and cymbals are to be used only if the hammer doesn't generate enough sound to penetrate through everything else, but if the hammer isn't heard, then adding the gong and cymbals will only obscure it more.) Ironically, the last hammer blow, the one Mahler ultimately removed, has the least competition and is the one most likely to be clearly audible.

Unless the right combination of hammer and striking surface is found, the hammer-blows end up as a purely visual effect. That's not so bad, because the sight of a percussionist wielding a mighty maul and hammering away is (forgive me) striking. But if the symphony is to have its full impact, the hammer-blows must be heard.

The most important thing is what the hammer hits. Mahler's instructions that the sound should resemble an ax striking a tree imply that a heavy, solid surface is needed — something akin to a large stump used for splitting firewood. But striking a solid surface doesn't produce a sound that can compete with the rest of the orchestra. For the sound to project into the hall, the striking surface must resonate, which means striking a hollow object such as a box.

What sort of a box will we use? As I write the *Listener's Guide*, the jury is still out. During the summer, DPO Assistant Conductor Patrick Reynolds attended a performance by the London Symphony. He immediately e-mailed me his report: "The LSO used what looked like a standard home clothes dryer, front-loading, with door removed (made of wood, of course). It's about that size, with a large round 'port' in front. It was very loud, medium-dark." Principal Percussionist Michael LaMattina has been researching and thinks the Cleveland Orchestra might be willing to lend us their "*Mahler Six* Box" (smaller than a front-loading dryer), which may do the trick. Between September and April we'll test several different possible box configurations and use the best one. (Who knows? Maybe we'll let you in the Classical Connections audience hear the box auditions and decide for yourselves. We've done stuff like that before!)



Hammer and box, London-style

Then there's the question of the hammer itself. Some orchestras use an actual sledge hammer or post maul, which can generate a big, powerful effect. But a sledge hammer's metal head gives the metallic sound that Mahler specifically ruled out. Our solution was inspired by the beautiful hand-made laminated wood hammer that the Minnesota Orchestra hangs on the wall backstage in their concert hall. I asked Burt Saidel's "God Squad", master woodworkers to Dayton's arts organizations and houses of worship, to build us our own *Mahler Six* Hammer, which will make its debut in April 2005. It's quite a hammer. Heavy enough that Mike LaMattina better eat his Wheaties. It's beautiful, too. So beautiful that it seems a shame to use it for its intended, violent purpose. But that won't stop us!



Harold Prigozen, Michael LaMattina, Burt Saidel, and "The Dayton Hammer"



Hammer Test Number One

Whatever happens in our performances, I can guarantee you it won't be what I witnessed back in 1983 when, in my second month on the job as Assistant Conductor of the Oregon Symphony, James DePreist led the OSO in performances of the *Sixth*. They used a standard-issue sledge hammer striking a large wooden crate. On the first hammer-blow of the second performance, the hammer went through the top of the crate. Not only was the crunching, cracking sound completely wrong, but the percussionists had to rotate the unwieldy crate mid-performance in order to get an unbroken surface ready for blow number two. It was a memorable effect, but without the affect that Mahler had in mind!

What's on Second?

(With Apologies to Abbott & Costello)

Careful readers may have noticed that in discussing the movements of Mahler's *Sixth* (see "From Ecstasy to Agony", page 37), I called them "First Movement", "Scherzo", "Slow Movement", and "Fourth Movement". That was not a careless inconsistency. I couldn't call the middle movements "Second" and "Third" because no one's 100% sure which is which. Indeed, in recent years, this has become a burning controversy in Mahler scholarship.

Mahler's manuscript has the scherzo second and the slow movement third. But during the rehearsals for the 1906 premiere he changed the order, and the first published score reflected the change. It's easy to see why Mahler made the switch. The scherzo begins with the same pounding repeated-note figure as the first movement. Not only are the notes and attacks the same, but the tempo is almost identical. Having ended the first movement with an exhilarating statement of the Alma Theme, Mahler probably felt that it was too soon to return to the insistent march-like tread. Following the high-energy first movement with the *Andante moderato* feels right and also forms a direct link with the vivacious "Alma Music" of the first movement's coda. When the pounding scherzo follows the slow movement, it starts the build-up of momentum that leads to the high anxiety of the finale.

When the International Gustav Mahler Society published the new Critical Edition of the *Sixth* in 1962, however, the scherzo was back in second position. Erwin Ratz, the renowned Mahler scholar who edited the score, asserted in the Forward that after the premiere Mahler decided to go back to the original manuscript's order and only a publisher's mistake had caused the score to be printed with the *Andante moderato* following the first movement.

Ratz offered no evidence to support his claim, but musicologists did discover a 1919 telegram from Alma Mahler to Amsterdam Concertgebouw conductor Willem Mengelberg reading, "First Scherzo, then *Andante*." Alma was a notoriously

unreliable and self-contradictory authority on the musical details of her husband's works, so even with the telegram, the order of movements remained a matter of dispute.

On December 14, 2003, an article by devoted Mahlerite Gilbert Kaplan in the Sunday New York *Times* revealed new evidence proving that Ratz had made the move-the-Scherzo-back decision entirely on his own. Ratz had asked Alma Mahler to intervene with the publishers on his behalf, had engaged in a cover-up, and deliberately suppressed compelling evidence that Mahler intended the 1906 decision to put the *Andante* second to be permanent.

Subsequent printings of the Critical Edition will place the slow movement second and, in the meantime, the publishers have inserted an addendum into all current inventory indicating that *Andante*-then-Scherzo is "in accordance with the will of the composer".

Will new evidence surface between now and April 2005 that will cause me to change my mind and put the Scherzo ahead of the slow movement? I don't know.

THIRD BASE!



Bud Abbott and Lou Costello perform "Who's on First?"
(Who's on the right? No, that's Lou!)

Bud and Lou do "Who's on First?" on the web:
<http://www.abbottandcostello.net/clips/who1st.wmv>

