

Understanding Music

Seventh Edition

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*un po' per celia,
e un po' per non...*

a bit to tease him,
and a bit so as not to...

A section [return to original melody; voice tripled then doubled in orchestra]

2:52	<i>morire al primo incontro, ed egli alquanto in pena, chiamerà, chiamerà, "Piccina mogliettina, olezzo di verbena!", i nomi che mi dava al suo venire.</i> [crescendo]	die at our first meeting, and then, a little troubled, he will call, he will call, "Dearest, little wife of mine, dear little orange blossom!" the names he used to call me when he first came here.
3:28	<i>Tutto questo avverrà, te lo prometto.</i> [climax]	This will come to pass, I promise you.
3:34	<i>Tienti la tua paura, io con sicura fede l'aspetto.</i>	Banish your idle fears, I know for certain he will come.
3:48	[lush orchestral postlude]	
4:19	[final chords]	

Gustav Mahler (1860–1911)

Gustav Mahler was the last great Romantic composer. In his work, Romantic song and the Romantic symphony come together in a final (somewhat nostalgic) triumph of late Romanticism. Mahler was born in Bohemia of Jewish parents and made his career in Germany and Austria. His musical talent was evident at an early age, and he gave his first public piano recital at the age of 10. Mahler lived near a military base, and when he was small, he loved to listen to the marching bands. Band music and marches of all kinds show up constantly in Mahler's music. He also was attracted to folk poetry and songs.

As a student in Vienna, Mahler took many classes in history and philosophy as well as in composition. For the next 20 years, he made his living as a conductor. He had a large number of appointments in towns across Europe, most of them lasting for only a year or two. Mahler had tremendously high standards; he was autocratic and demanding of his musicians and uncompromising in his approach to the music. This did not endear him to administrators or to his players, but he gradually made a name for himself as a brilliant conductor, specializing in the works of Mozart, Beethoven, and Wagner. Mahler worked so hard that he had little time for composition, but gradually he developed a habit of composing during the summers, when

the concert season was over. In this way, he managed to complete his first three symphonies, but people found them hard to understand.

The most important conducting position in Austria at that time was as music director of the Vienna Opera House. Mahler was by now the obvious choice for the job, but the fact that he was Jewish presented a formidable barrier in a city notorious for its anti-Semitism. He therefore had himself baptized as a Catholic and was appointed to the position in 1897. Mahler's tenure there had its problems: he was unpopular with the players because he was so strict; and there was considerable resentment over his appointment, despite his religious conversion. Mahler continued composing, and he completed several large-scale compositions during this time.

In 1902, when he was in his 40s, Mahler fell in love with Alma Schindler, a talented young woman of 23. Mahler was as autocratic in his marriage as he was in his work, and the couple had difficulties, but the depth of their relationship was never in doubt. Alma Mahler later published books of memoirs about her life with Mahler and with her two later husbands, one a famous architect and the other a novelist.

In 1907, Mahler suffered three profound setbacks. The campaign against him in Vienna finally led to his resignation from his job, his five-year-old daughter died of scarlet fever, and it was discovered that Mahler himself had a

heart condition. In 1908, in an attempt to change entirely the circumstances of his life, Mahler accepted two positions in New York. He was appointed music director of the Metropolitan Opera and conductor of the New York Philharmonic. Mahler was superstitious and afraid to finish his Ninth Symphony, remembering that both Beethoven and Schubert had died after completing nine symphonies. Nonetheless, his Ninth was finished, and Mahler began working on his Tenth. But his worries turned out to be well founded. In 1911 he fell seriously ill. Mahler decided to return to Vienna, where he died at the age of 50, leaving the Tenth Symphony incomplete.

Mahler's Music

Mahler's music represents the last great achievement of the Romantic ideal. In it, he tried to capture "the whole world": nature, God, love and death, exaltation and despair. To do this, Mahler had to invent new musical genres and forms. Most of his work is closely connected to song. Four of his symphonies use voices as well as instruments, and song melodies find their way into many of his instrumental works. Mahler wrote some important **orchestral song cycles**, in which the typical Romantic song takes on a completely new guise: in place of piano accompaniment, Mahler uses the orchestra, hugely expanding the range of expressive possibilities.

Mahler was a radical innovator in many other ways. He had the most precise idea of

what he wanted to express—and no fear of disregarding tradition to achieve this. "Tradition is a mess," he once said. His harmony is quite unorthodox, and he often ends a work in a key different from the one in which it began. We have seen that Beethoven was able to begin a symphony in a minor key and end it in the major, but actually changing the tonal center of a work was quite new. Some of Mahler's symphonies are longer than any that had come before, lasting 90 minutes or more.

Mahler was a brilliant and very subtle orchestrator. He had an exact idea of the sound he wanted to produce. He used enormous orchestras, and sometimes the effect is shattering; but the main reason he needed so many instruments was to achieve the widest possible range of tone colors. In the Third Symphony, he wrote a solo for a very rare instrument: the post horn, a small horn generally used on mail coaches. In the Second Symphony, he combined an English horn with a bass clarinet—an amazing and evocative sound. On the other hand, his Third Symphony begins with the awe-inspiring sound of *eight* horns blasting out a stirring fanfare *fortissimo*. He was extremely meticulous about how he wanted his works to be played. Because he was a professional conductor himself, his scores are covered with exact instructions for almost every phrase of the music.

Most of Mahler's music is programmatic in some way. The slow movement of the Fifth Symphony is a testament of love for his wife, Alma. And the scherzo of the same symphony is a portrait of his children playing. Some of

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"Mahler Third Symphony"

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ALMA MAHLER

Gustav Mahler first met Alma Schindler at a dinner party in Vienna on November 7, 1901. Three weeks later he proposed to her, and on March 9, 1902, they were married in Vienna's Karlskirche. At Mahler's request and in spite of her considerable talent, Alma gave up composition after their marriage. She devoted herself entirely to her husband. Mahler's enormous productivity after their marriage can be attributed in no small measure to Alma's constant encouragement, but her diaries reveal that she resented the suppression of her own artistic abilities. Later, with Mahler's encouragement, she published five songs under her own name.

Alma's *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters* paints an interesting picture of her husband. He is portrayed as egocentric and incapable of profound love for anyone but himself. However, Mahler's letters to Alma and his adoration of his daughter Maria show us a different picture of his character. Although Alma knew Gustav better than anyone else did, scholars believe that much of her testimony is unreliable.

Before meeting Mahler, Alma had been in love with the artist Gustav Klimt and the composer Alexander Zemlinsky. After Mahler's death, she married the architect Walter Gropius in 1915 and the writer Franz Werfel in 1929. She was also the mistress of the painter Oskar Kokoschka. Alma outlived Gustav Mahler by 53 years and died in the United States in 1964, at the age of 85.

his programs are ambitious in the extreme, including representations of the creation of the world (Symphony No. 3) and the journey from life to death to resurrection (Symphony No. 2).

Throughout his music, there is a tinge of regret, of irony, even of deliberate distortion. A sense of yearning fills the pages of his work: a feeling of the impossible aims, the losses, the tragic undercurrent of human existence. If Mahler's musical impulse could be summed up in one musical phrase, it would look like this:



Try playing or singing these four notes. Notice how the phrase reaches up—only to fall back a little. Notice how the sense of striving overcomes the feeling of resolution. And notice (if you play the notes together as a chord) the slight dissonance, which sounds bittersweet and thoughtful. This is the essence of Mahler's music.

Mahler's music is full of quotations from Wagner, Brahms, Mendelssohn, and especially Beethoven. It is as though he were looking backward at the entire history of Romantic music. And this is appropriate, for he was its last and one of its greatest manifestations.

LISTENING GUIDE

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GUSTAV MAHLER (1860–1911)

*Fourth Movement, "Urlicht" ("Primeval Light")
from Symphony No. 2 in C Minor (Resurrection)*

Date of composition: 1888–94

Orchestration: alto voice; two piccolos, three flutes, two oboes,

English horn, three clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon,

four horns, three trumpets, glockenspiel, two harps, and strings

Tempo: *Sehr feierlich, aber schlicht* ("Very ceremonial, but straightforward")

Meter: $\frac{4}{4}$

Key of movement: D \flat major

Duration: 5:15



CD III, 2

The *Resurrection* Symphony is an enormous work, lasting nearly 90 minutes. It is in five movements, and it traces a spiritual journey from death to resurrection. In its sense of subjectivity and spiritual progression, it is reminiscent of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. This parallel is made the more obvious by Mahler's choice of the same key, C minor, and by the move in the last movement to C major and triumph.

The fourth movement marks the beginning of Mahler's lifelong preoccupation with the blending of symphony and song. The movement is actually the setting of a song text, sung by a solo alto voice with the orchestra. It is entitled "Urlicht" ("Primeval Light"). The text's central message is contained in its eighth line: "*Ich bin von Gott und will wieder zu Gott*" ("I am made by God and will return to God"). Mahler said of this movement, "The stirring voice of simple faith sounds in our ears."

The melodic shape of the vocal line often follows the phrase shown above—an upward curve followed by a slight fall. In addition, Mahler has composed the most remarkable instrumental music for this movement: quiet, stately, and richly orchestrated, with striking changes of key. The music does far more than accompany the words: it gives them new and profound meaning beyond their own power of expression.

Song Text

O Röschen rot!

Der Mensch liegt in grösster Not!

Der Mensch liegt in grösster Pein!

Je lieber möchte ich im Himmel sein!

Da kam ich auf einen breiten Weg;

Da kam ein Engelein und wollt mich abweisen.

Ach nein! Ich liess mich nicht abweisen!

Ich bin von Gott und will wieder zu Gott!

Der liebe Gott wird mir ein Lichten geben,

Wird leuchten mir bis in das ewig, selig Leben!

O red rose!

Humanity lies in deepest need!

Humanity lies in greatest pain!

I would rather be in Heaven!

Then I came upon a broad path;

Then came an angel that tried to turn me away.

But no! I will not be turned away!

I am made by God and will return to God!

Dear God will give me a light,

Will light my way to eternal, blessed life!