

GUSTAV MAHLER

Symphony No. 2 in C minor, "Resurrection"

Born: Kalište, Bohemia, July 7, 1860

Died: Vienna, May 18, 1911

Work composed: 1888–94

World premiere: December 13, 1895, in Berlin. Mahler, a renowned conductor, directed.

The first movement pits a spine-chilling first subject against a second theme rising comfortingly in the strings. Mahler's development of these contrasting materials is such that the outcome of their apparent struggle is uncertain until the final moments. As the symphony's initial chapter closes, death seems triumphant.

The final movement's scene of universal resurrection centers on a long and truly fantastic orchestral march that suggests all of humanity since the beginning of time proceeding toward rebirth. It is an awe-inspiring, and at times terrifying, parade. Finally, we hear a comforting motif, symbolic of resurrection, rising sweetly in the strings and preparing the symphony's concluding hymn to resurrection.

During the first years of the 19th century, Ludwig van Beethoven single-handedly transformed the symphony, expanding its scale and range of expression, making it a vehicle for high musical drama, and imprinting it with his personality to an extent no composer had ever done. At the end of the same century, Gustav Mahler achieved a comparably original rethinking of symphonic music. Mahler's symphonies again broadened the genre's dimensions and imparted to it a still more personal character, one that made its implicit drama both idiosyncratic and, paradoxically, universal.

But for all that he advanced symphonic composition into new realms of form and expression, Mahler retained some of Beethoven's concerns. Most importantly he, like his great predecessor, conceived several of his symphonies as enactments of his own spiritual struggles. Chief among these was, for Mahler, the issue of mortality, and death and its conquest became the programmatic theme of his Second Symphony. Work on this huge composition began in 1888, but six years later its author still had not finalized his conception of the piece. This came only after Mahler happened upon "The Resurrection," an ode by the poet Friedrich Klopstock, which suggested to him a vision of divine compassion and eternal life. Klopstock's verses became the text for the symphony's finale and provided a dramatic focus for the entire composition.

Mahler also tapped another source of inspiration when composing the symphony. This was *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* ("The Youth's Magic Horn"), an anthology of German folk poetry, which he had discovered in 1886. Almost immediately, he began to compose songs to poems from the collection, and he continued to do so intermittently for the next decade and a half. The *Wunderhorn* songs form the creative core of Mahler's early maturity. In striving to capture the particular qualities of the verses — their alternately earthy and delicate tone, their intimations of magic, eroticism, and death, their wise innocence — the composer found his own musical voice. It was a voice of nostalgic longing and macabre humor, of shimmering textures and shrill outcries; it spoke the most refined musical language as well as the vernacular dialects of marches and dance tunes. Far from remaining confined to his songs, those style traits found their way into Mahler's orchestral works. The same qualities that sound so clearly throughout the composer's songs of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* are heard in the Second, Third and Fourth symphonies also. Moreover, both the third and fourth movements of the "Resurrection" Symphony are substantially drawn from *Wunderhorn* songs.

The arc of the composition takes us through death to rebirth. Its opening movement is, by Mahler's own account, a "*Todtenfeier*," a funeral rite. This characterization, however, hardly conveys the tremendous drama of the music, which suggests in imaginative terms a desperate struggle between mortality and the will to live.

The next two movements present what we might think of as flashbacks to the recently ended life. First comes an *Andante* conjuring, Mahler declared, memories of happiness and innocence from the life of the recently deceased. The composer evokes this state in music reminiscent of the 18th century.

The scherzo-like third movement regards life with a cynical eye for its pleasures. Its flowing melodies have undeniable charm, like the glittering things of this world, but at the same time convey a hint of decadence and the grotesque. The suggestion of a more noble kind of existence, embodied in the stirring fanfare that appears suddenly midway through the movement, fails to alter the course of events. At last there is a great cry of protest. The composer adapted the music for this movement from his *Wunderhorn* song recounting Saint Anthony's futile sermon to the fish, who, like the pleasure-seekers of Mahler's world, hear but do not heed the call to virtue.

The final parts of the symphony offer contrasting visions of resurrection. The fourth movement is a transcription of another of Mahler's *Wunderhorn* songs. Sung by an alto soloist, "*Urlicht*" expresses the faith of a child, simple and serene. This is a far cry from the apocalyptic vision of the finale, which opens with a tumultuous outburst followed by recollections of earlier movements (a procedure derived from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony). In broadly arching fanfares and a sounding of the centuries-old melody of *Dies irae*, the chant for the dead, all those who have perished are called to life again. They stream forth, as Mahler described, "in endless procession. The great and the small, kings and beggars, righteous and godless."

But there is no Biblical judgment. As the chorus enters with the assuring verses of Klopstock's hymn, we understand that forgiveness, love and eternal life are to be mankind's final reward. A "resurrection" theme swells in the orchestra, leading to another vocal episode in which the alto and soprano soloists are featured. Slowly the hymn grows in power until it reaches its climactic affirmation: "Rise again, my heart. / What you have conquered will bear you to God."

Scored for soprano and mezzo-soprano soloists, and mixed chorus; 4 flutes, all doubling piccolo; 4 oboes (the 3rd and 4th doubling English horn); 2 clarinets in E-flat, 3 clarinets in B-flat (the 3rd doubling bass clarinet); 4 bassoons (the 3rd and 4th doubling contrabassoon); 7 horns; 6 trumpets; 4 trombones; tuba; timpani and percussion; 2 harps; organ; strings.

© 2017 Paul Schiavo