

When *Das Lied von der Erde* is not good enough...

by Teng-Leong Chew

On 19 and 20 February 2005, The Oregon Mozart Players premiered Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* with a new chamber orchestra version arranged by the composer-conductor Glen Cortese. A chamber orchestra version of *Das Lied von der Erde* is not a new concept. At the turn of the century when recording technology was not as sophisticated, composers who wanted to study the works of their peers often made musical reductions of orchestral works in order to study the work in earnest. Mahler's symphonies were published in four-hand and also two-hand piano versions. Reduced orchestrations were available for several works, such as the arrangement Schoenberg made for *Das Lied von der Erde*. Yet Cortese's version stands apart from those other arrangements because it is sung in Chinese, rather than with the German text Mahler adapted for the work.

At about the same time, the China Philharmonic gave the U.S. premiere of Ye Xiaogang's *Das Lied auf der Erde* in San Francisco. Unlike its Oregon counterpart, this was a new composition set to the original Chinese poems Mahler used for *Das Lied von der Erde*. While the music was different, the poems chosen were Chinese-language versions of the same selection that Mahler had used for his own work.

It is unclear what has triggered the sudden interest in the returning of *Das Lied von der Erde* to the Chinese settings. The new works can be seen as either (1) a musical response to Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, or (2) an attempt to attract Chinese speakers, who otherwise may not have ventured to listen to any Mahler's work. Mr. Cortese's version is derived from Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, with new and reduced orchestration. Again, the text is predominantly sung in Chinese, except a few lines. The music, in essence, is the same as that of Mahler, and thus cannot be classified as an artistic response.

Ye Xiaogang's *Das Lied auf der Erde*, on the other hand, could be perceived as an artistic response. It is indeed an entirely new musical composition. The fact that the composer based the music on precisely the same poems raised a few possibilities: (1) that he did not think Mahler's music reflected the essence of the original poems; (2) that Mahler's compositional skills did not accomplish what Mahler himself wanted to convey; and/or (3) that Ye wanted to explore what *Das Lied von der Erde* would have sounded like had Mahler been knowledgeable about the Oriental music. Regardless of the situation, these two works could potentially do some serious disservice to Mahler's music for the following reasons.

First, *Das Lied von der Erde* remains one of the most profound and important breakthroughs in the development of Western music. Mahler set an unprecedented musical scope for this gigantic song-symphony. Using the passing of the seasons, the various emotional stages in life, and invoking incredible compositional skills, he posed a challenging metaphysical question in the first movement, and set out to address it through the following movements, which culminate in the philosophical resolution of the question in "Der Abschied". One critical aspect of this work is that the poems could have been derived from any language. Mahler had neither read nor understood the original poems in Chinese, and his only source was Hans Bethge's *Die chinesische Flöte*. Therein lies the misconception, that *Das Lied von der Erde* is about the Chinese poems. It is critically important to stress the following points: (1) The translated poems that Mahler set for *Das Lied von der Erde* captured the core of his musical thoughts; (2) Mahler never tried to capture the spirit of the Chinese poems. Precisely because of this misconception, Chinese listeners often complain that *Das Lied von der Erde* poorly reflects the simplicity of the Chinese language or that the work fails to represent the essence of the poems. Any attempt to show how Mahler would have composed *Das Lied von der Erde*, had he known Chinese music, only compounds this misconception.

Unlike the Indo-European languages, the extremely free syntax of the Chinese language means that the same poem may invoke such different images that not only it may be perceived distinctly by different readers, but that it may in fact stir differing emotions in the same reader, if the same poem is revisited later in time. Precisely because of this unique property of the Chinese language, it is untenable to expect that

Das Lied von der Erde or any musical work to ever successfully and accurately reflect such illusive and ever-changing images.

By the same token, to change the German text to Chinese introduces more textual discrepancies into the already tortuous path undergone by the original poems, and further widens the linguistic perception gap for Chinese listeners, presumably the target audience of this endeavor. The problem with this effort carries, unfortunately, even more profound repercussions. Mahler remains one of the most important German *Lied* composers of all time. His setting of the text is skillfully crafted to perfectly match his music – this great care in music-text relationship is particularly evident in his late works such as the *Rückert Lieder* and *Das Lied von der Erde*. That was precisely why Mahler himself made extensive alterations to Bethge's translation in the process of adapting the poems to the music, further supporting the notion that the composer placed more emphasis on the music than on the text, such that the poems were merely means to convey his musical thought. Thus, to perform the work in Chinese raises several key issues: (1) Will the Chinese text serve the music effectively? (2) How does one reconcile the quantitative difference between the polysyllabic German language and the monosyllabic Chinese languages? and (3) Which Chinese dialect should one use?

Mr. Daniel Ng who oversaw the translation project in the Cortese version attempted to reconcile the vast quantitative differences in the number of syllables (for example, the difference between 380 syllables in German and 80 in Chinese in "Der Abschied" alone) by occasionally introducing additional poems never selected by Mahler into "Der Abschied". Furthermore, when Mahler's extensive alteration precludes the possibility of finding a match in the Chinese poem, such as in the last four lines of "Der Abschied": "*Die liebe Erde... ewig, ewig, ewig...*" the text in the Cortese/Ng version switches from Chinese to German. It is unimaginable how Mahler's music can be well-served when the audience is distracted not only by two interspersed languages, but also the inclusion of additional poems that the composer himself had not chosen for this work. This musical caricature has rendered the rest of the questions raised above pointless. Mr. Ng's textual alteration is not only disrespectful to one of the most important and visionary works in Western music, but also an insult to the Chinese literature.

On the other hand, if the original poems merely serve as a vehicle for Mahler to create his song-symphony, then Ye Xiaogang's *Das Lied auf der Erde* stands at the exact opposite pole. To write a piece of work based on a set of poems chosen by another composer is putting the text above the music. *Das Lied auf der Erde* is therefore a musical work constrained by text. Whether or not it is a successful work is beyond the speculation of this essay and is best left to the judgment of the audience.

As a devoted champion of Mahler's music, Mr. Cortese contributed many powerful renditions of Mahler symphonies greatly treasured by many of us. It is unfortunate that, while perhaps well-intentioned, his recent endeavor has missed the mark. In light of these two responses to *Das Lied von der Erde*, I would cite an alternative in which a similar situation has been handled with invaluable artistic and educational value, and utmost respect for both the original Eastern source and the Western music that adapted the Oriental influence. On 4 March, 2005, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra performed under the direction of David Robertson a series of works by Boulez (*Rituels* and Piano Sonata no. 1), Stravinsky (Piano Concerto), and Messiaen (*Sept haïkai*), all of which had been influenced by the distinct color, the unique micro-intervals and the meter-less music of the Japanese high court tradition of *gagaku*. Instead of rewriting Boulez's *Rituels*, for example, into a Japanese style composition, the orchestra performed the works through the first part of the concert, and invited the Reigakusha gagaku ensemble from Japan to perform their traditional works in the second half. One was immediately aware of how Boulez and Messiaen derived the fascinating soundscape of their music. It was a true musical illumination all around, without any original work being transformed, and certainly without the distraction of superfluous issues. I hope those deeply devoted to *Das Lied von der Erde* will seriously consider the concerns addressed here, and if necessary, explore better options in integrating the poems into their concert program.

* Daniel Ng, Oregon Mozart Players 2004-5 season program note. At press time, the program note can be accessed via: <http://www.oregonmozartplayers.org/season/programnotes3+4.asp#concert4>