

A Member Remembers...

Mahler Through the Wrong End of the Telescope

by John David Lamb

I suspect that most people come to love Mahler through a direct, emotional experience with the music, and only later some go on to study scores and analyze the structure as a way of deepening their understanding. Quite by chance, I came to Mahler's music from the opposite direction. In the summer of 1949 I was invited to attend theory classes at the University of Washington. That was a time when I was beginning to think seriously about composing, and Stravinsky was my household god. One of the professors, hoping to distract me from *Petrouchka*, lent me a score of Mahler's Fourth, challenging me to analyze it and get back to him. At age fourteen I had no tools with which to analyze anything like a Mahler symphony, but I looked at the score and was immediately intrigued. What kind of composer would start a major work with sleigh bells and then end it with a simple children's song? And didn't he know that a symphony that starts in G major is not supposed to end in E? For the next few weeks I spent many hours in a practice room painfully hacking my way through the score at the piano.

All kinds of unusual things popped out as I made my slow progress through those pages. The first odd thing that caught my eye occurred as early as bar 9 where the violas have a little sixteenth note figure that looks as though it is going somewhere, but it is cut off without resolution, and the line is taken up by the horn. This happens three more times on that same page, and I came to discover that this is one of Mahler's favorite tricks. The other trick that often goes along with it is the way in which melodic lines are doubled. Another example from page two (measure 13) is where the oboe doubles that sixteenth-note figure in the violins, and then when the violins cut out, the line is continued with oboe and clarinet (measure 14). The striking feature of these passages is that Mahler seldom allows an overlap when passing the line from one instrument to another. Sitting there at the piano, I could scarcely imagine how that would sound with the orchestra

The next remarkable feature I noticed was the striking use of the horns. My orchestration textbook favored using the horns as a kind of glue to hold the inner voices together, and to serve the same function as the sustaining pedal on the piano. Mahler does not do this at all. He elevates the horn section to a value nearly equal to the strings, and the principal horn is given virtuoso lines seldom seen outside of concertos. A third characteristic that struck me was Mahler's habit of cutting off a whole section abruptly and starting something completely different. Rehearsal number 4 in the first movement of the Fourth Symphony is a good example of this. Then there are the sudden outbursts that seem to come out of nowhere, such as the wild "*Etwas eilend*" passage in the same movement, right before rehearsal number 5.

So I continued to slog my way through the Fourth Symphony, marveling more and more at each new find. Unfortunately, I ultimately was left with merely a collection of oddities since I had no sense of the whole. I did make a wonderful discovery toward the end of the third movement. After that breathtaking up-sweep and the sudden burst into E major, there are what must surely be the two most beautiful pages in all of printed music. (If you have the old study score, check pages 144-145, rehearsal number 12—the passage just before the opening of the fourth movement.) I promised myself then and there that someday I would write something that at least *looked* as pretty. When the term ended, I returned the score and had to admit that I didn't understand it at all. Nevertheless, I had been bitten.

Nearly two years passed before I heard a recording of Mahler's Fourth Symphony, and suddenly I remembered many of the strange things I had seen in the score. The sound was much different from what I expected; what had looked like abruptness came out sounding perfectly smooth and coherent. Naturally I had to buy my own score and start all over again. That winter I remember taking the recording to

my piano teacher's house on a number of evenings and sitting on a couch together with a girl, who was also a piano student, and listening to the symphony over and over. Our teacher brought us hot chocolate from time to time to keep up our strength. There was snow outside and the sleigh bells seemed just right. It was all very romantic, and for the first time I began to sense something of the emotional side of the work. In any case it was a bonding experience for my friend and me, and we came to think of it as our own music. We were married a few years later at about the time Horenstein's recording of Mahler's Ninth Symphony was first released, and we shared that one too.

The Ninth made a huge impression on me, and I was especially fascinated by the intricacies of the first movement. By this time I had enough theory under my belt to enable me to understand the harmonic properties of the movement, but the thing that interested me most was the way Mahler built up his material out of little fragments that could be arranged in various ways to provide seemingly endless versions of the themes. All the techniques I had noticed in the Fourth were carried to greater lengths in the Ninth, and of course I spent many hours with the score.

By the mid-1950s, the recording industry was beginning to discover Mahler, and as good recordings became available, I was able to hear and study all of Mahler's major works. It was a heady period. Like many composers, I tended to look at new music first with an eye to learning new tricks that I might be able to exploit in my own music. This inevitably led to some unfortunate experiments, which it is best not even to discuss.

In the fall of 1956, well before the Mahler Renaissance, I started graduate school at the University of Washington, and I brought with me a violin concerto, which I had just finished. Hoping to make a good impression on the Dean, I took him my score and asked for his comments. When I went back to see him a week later, he stood up back of his desk and essentially hissed: "Take back your score, MISTER MAHLER!" And with that, he tossed it across the room at me. His evaluation may have been accurate, but I was utterly crushed, and I soon learned to keep my head down in that Mahler-hostile environment. But that was then, and times have since changed.

My first live Mahler performance was, I think, in 1958: Mahler's Fifth Symphony with the Seattle Symphony conducted by Milton Katims. I attended all the rehearsals with score in hand. To my horror, I discovered that Katims had methodically gone through the score and "fixed" all those Mahlerish places where lines are passed from one instrument to another without overlaps. He wrote in overlapping notes and thus ruined the effect. What a shock! The performance was disgraceful, but I did get an insight I had missed before — the spatial aspect of the orchestration. In passing the lines from instrument to instrument, Mahler obviously gave thought to where the sound was coming from, and this constant shifting of center contributed to the feeling of transparency and lightness in his music.

And so it was that for the first ten or more years of my acquaintance with Mahler, I concentrated on technical things and gave very little thought to what the music might mean. But eventually, when I began to get some years on my shoulders and after suffering some losses of my own, the music itself gradually swam into view. It was as though I had spent a long time with my nose close to the canvas studying the brushwork and tiny details, and then when I finally stepped back, found myself staring wide-eyed at a full-size Constable. At last I could understand the emotional impact that Mahler's music has on people. Although I am still skeptical of claims as to the "true meaning" of the music, I can accept that there may be many true meanings depending on what we bring to it and what our needs are. I remain in awe of Mahler's surpassing technical achievement, yet at the same time I know that the music has enriched my life at the innermost level, because of its deep emotional content and honest intellectual commitment. I have no regrets about the years of technical study, and maybe they prepared me for more far-reaching experiences later. In fact, the performance of the Ninth in January 2005 at MahlerFest was the most intense musical experience I have ever felt in a concert hall, and it came upon me suddenly without warning. Such things do not happen by accident, and I am grateful that I was ready when the time came.