

## Mahler and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra: A Century in Performance

- by Jan Hoeper and Teng-Leong Chew

During a recent excursion to the Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony, the society obtained the full records of all Mahler performances given by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra thus far. As we sat down and analyzed the number, 111 years after the orchestra's inaugural concert in 1891 under maestro Theodore Thomas, we spotted some rather fascinating facts, and thought members of The Chicago Mahlerites would find them interesting.

The Chicago premiere of a Mahler symphony took place on March 22, 1907, under the direction of Frederick Stock. Interestingly, Chicagoans' relationship with Mahler started out not with the First, but the tumultuously charged Fifth Symphony. The foreign and unforgiving symphonic style sent shock waves across the local music scene, rattling the audience and music critics alike. The resulting reaction, as expected, matched the Mahlerian musical assault in its intensity. The local critics smeared the symphony in almost every newspaper the next day. One example is published in this issue of *Naturlaut* (page 3).

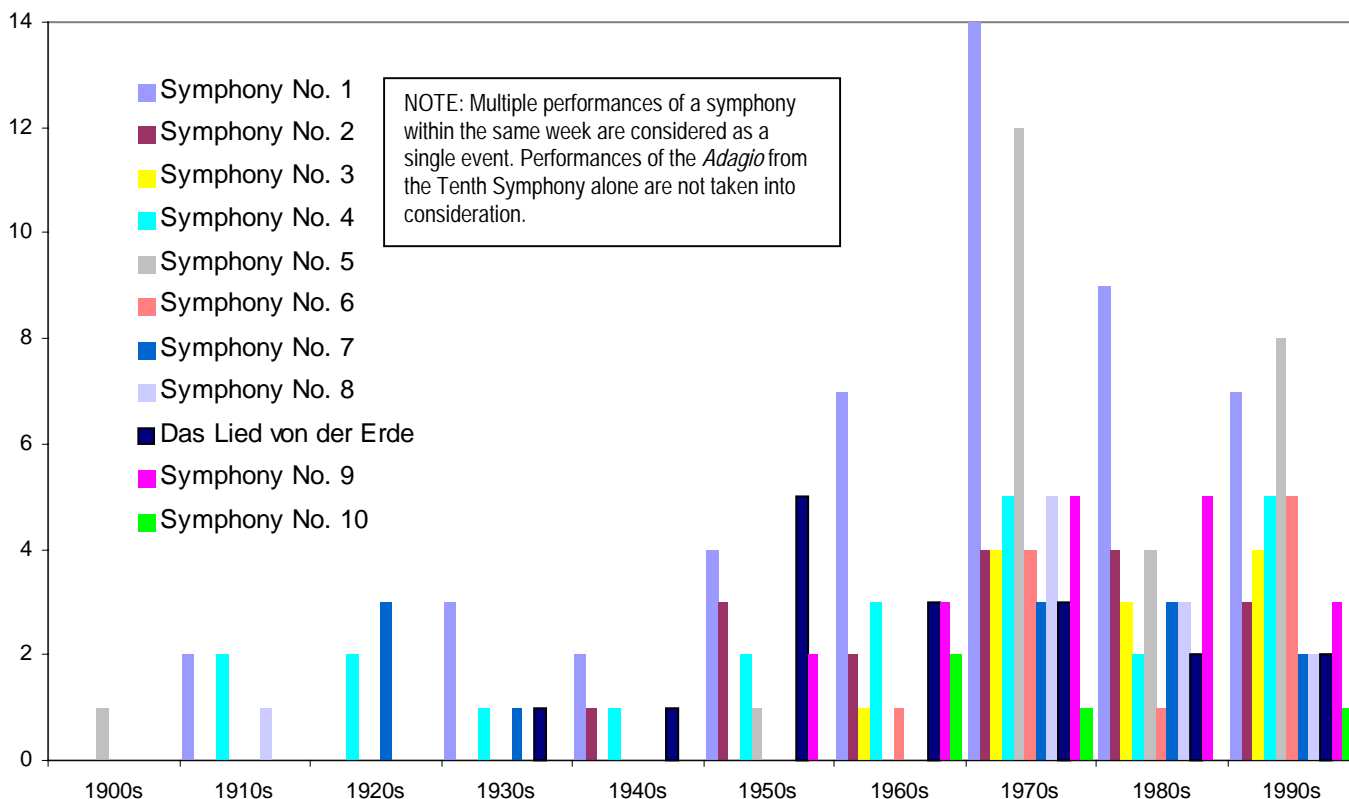
As expected, the First and the Fourth Symphonies are the two most performed at all times. While the two "lighter" symphonies (First and Fourth) dominated the list in the early days, it is mind-boggling to note that a symphony as forward-looking and boldly experimental as the Seventh has been performed three times in the 1920s. Frederick Stock once again braved the potential criticism and gave the American premiere of this symphony on April 15, 1921. By March 1933, he had in fact performed this work on four separate occasions.

The other two *Wunderhorn* symphonies, on the other hand, were late-

comers. This is not at all surprising as the cost of putting together a performance of that magnitude would have been extremely prohibitive in the early days. With an audience considerably less sophisticated than those in the 1970s and later, it would be an unfathomable administrative gamble to invest so much into these colossal Mahlerian symphonies. The great German conductor Fritz Busch conducted the first Chicago performance of the Second Symphony on February 17, 1949, with Ellen Faulk and Karin Branzell as soloists. The chorus of the Chicago Musical College under the direction of James Baar collaborated with the Chicago Symphony in this performance. The event must have been so successful that William Steinberg performed it again at Ravinia on July 25 1950, this time with the Northwestern University Chorus. And in exactly six months (to the date), Leonard Bernstein conducted it again at the Symphony Center. For the musicologists at-heart or in profession, Pierre Boulez also conducted the original first movement of the Second Symphony, *Totenfeier*, in December 1996.

Jean Martinon directed the Chicago premiere of the Third Symphony as late as March 1967. This performance has been immortalized on record and is packaged into the Chicago Symphony Historical Recordings box set. The gigantic Third did not receive the same popularity as the Second. It was not performed again until Claudio Abbado broke the spell in 1971. James Levine then conducted it three more times in very memorable performances within the same decade at Ravinia. The Levine's performance is also available on record.

After the 1907 curse of "Ugly Symphony Is Well Played" (refer to p. 3), the Chicago Symphony appeared to be reluctant to test the water again with the Fifth Symphony, creating the longest gap in performance in all of the Mahlerian symphonies. Rafael Kubelik performed it in 1950. And it was not touched again until the 1970s when suddenly it was performed a record of twelve times, almost all of it during the ambitious and highly successful Chicago Symphony tours of the US, Europe and the Far East (1970-1977). Who, you ask, had the guts to pull off such a feat? Well, take a guess. Like Bill Drewett says, the winner gets a lawn seat at the Grant Park Music Festival, sponsored by The Chicago Mahlerites!



The Sixth Symphony, nicknamed "Tragic" by some, ends tragically as the least performed of all "completed" symphonies (The Tenth, of course, can never be fairly taken into this account). Antal Dorati conducted the first performance, and Christoph Eschenbach conducted it last in 1998. This wonderful performance was reviewed by a couple of members and can be found on the society website.

The Seventh received its well-regarded interpretations under Levine's and Abbado's batons in 1980-1985. Abbado's authoritative recording has been dear to the heart of many until it was recently replaced by the even finer rendition with the maestro conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra.

"The Symphony of A Thousand" was first performed on April 24, 1917 at the Auditorium Theater under Frederick Stock. It involved, including Stock himself, nine conductors to put the performance together. Choruses from around the area taking part in this historical event included the Apollo Music Club, the Chicago Mendelssohn Club, the Philharmonic Society, Swedish Choral Club, American Choral Society, Bell Telephone Male Chorus (did they have female chorus?), Chicago Singverein, and last but not least, 200 boys from the Oak Park and River Forest grade and high schools. One can only imagine how awestruck the Chicagoans must have been by the magnificent view of nearly one thousand musicians and singers before them. This feat of near-miracle was not repeated again until 1971, when Solti (of course), performed it at the Civic Opera House and then recorded it in the magnificent Sofiensaal, Vienna (recording session only). Between Solti and Levine, they have performed this symphony nine times. Eschenbach conducted the symphony in the most recent performance in 1996, at the Medinah Temple, a magnificent venue which (at the time of this publication) is being converted, sadly, into a mall.

*Das Lied von der Erde* was the first Late Period triptych performed in the Windy City. Frederick Stock was, once again, the first conductor to bring it here during the tumultuous year of 1939. This zen-like symphonic song cycle is also the only major work of Mahler ever performed by the revered Fritz Reiner, who began his tenure with the Chicago Symphony in 1953. Eschenbach conducted the most recent performance at Ravinia on July 1, 1994.

The heart-wrenching Ninth has very rapidly become one of the top Mahlerian repertoires since its Chicago premiere on April 6, 1950 by George Szell. Rafael Kubelik performed it two years later in 1952, and again in 1969. Solti conducted it, amazingly, in 21 concerts in the 1980s, even showcasing the orchestra with this symphony on their first tour to Australia (1988). The most recent performances of the Ninth were given by Pierre Boulez in a series of four concerts in 1995.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra has performed only two out of the numerous performing versions of the Tenth Symphony. Although Clinton Carpenter, one of the two Americans who completed a performing version for the symphony, is a local musicologist, his version has never been performed in public by the Chicago Symphony. Jean Martinon conducted the first performance of the Tenth in 1966, using the Cooke version (He used Cooke's first version at the time). James Levine gave the Ravinia premiere in 1979 (also using the Cooke version, probably the second). Leonard Slatkin, after giving the world premiere of Remo Mazzetti's first version in St. Louis with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra on March 10, 1995, came almost immediately to Chicago and performed the same version with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra on April 13-15.

Overall, no other director conducted more Mahler than Sir Georg Solti. Frederick Stock, Claudio Abbado, James Levine and Christoph Eschenbach follow closely. Levine and Eschenbach have conducted Mahler's symphonies mainly at Ravinia. Daniel Barenboim, the current fearless leader of the Chicago Symphony has conducted four Mahlerian symphonies, the First, the Fifth, the Seventh and *Das Lied von der Erde*. Barenboim has also performed some of Mahler's lieder, which are not included in this survey. Amid the shocking absence of any Mahlerian symphony programmed in the 2002-3 season, we reflect back, with fond memory, to Stock's incredible foresight and tenacity to bring the many Mahlerian symphonies to the Windy City, and Solti's stamina to champion Mahler's work during his tenure.

## **Lob des Hohen Verstands (In Praise of High Intellect)**

**by Jan Hoepfer**

Ah, the critics. You can't live with 'em, and you can't live without 'em. Well, maybe you could live without some of them. And given the benefit of hindsight, there's nothing more fun than having a good chuckle at the expense of the fourth estate.

Here in Chicago, Mahler's music did not have a very auspicious beginning. At the start of the twentieth century, the city boasted a thriving press of over half a dozen daily newspapers, most of them with music critics. Thus, numerous published reactions document the first performance of a Mahler symphony in Chicago—Symphony No. 5, performed on March 22, 1907, by the Theodore Thomas Orchestra, conducted by Frederick Stock. For the most part (there are notable exceptions), these various papers sport the standard reaction to new music, even today: technically impressive, but far from enjoyable.

The article below wins my prize for least classy headline. The violent protest engendered by this performance of Mahler's Fifth (both the silent protest of a moiety of the audience, and the subsequent braying of critics like Mr. Ular) perhaps helps explain why, as you'll see in the graph on the opposite page, this work was not performed again in Chicago for years after the fateful premiere. What is most interesting about this article is not the tizzy that the writer works himself into, although this is hilarious to today's reader. Instead, the interesting thing to me is the quote by Frederick Stock, who was by most accounts an advocate of new music and admirer of Mahler, and who later gave performances of many of Mahler's works. Perhaps this rather negative quote was taken out of context, or perhaps Stock later reexamined his opinions of Mahler. At any rate, the critic seems to take the cues (and many of the words) for his own conclusions directly from Stock's comment.

Also curious is Stock's Strauss quote, a remark (though quoted second-hand) that Strauss had echoed at other times ("Look, he's certainly not a great composer. He's just a very great conductor. . . ." Strauss to Fritz Busch, quoted in Henry-Louis de La Grange, Vol. 3, p. 557). Could the comparison of Mahler to Meyerbeer (dubiously quoted though it may be) be a hint of anti-Semitism, perhaps stemming from Wagner's derision of Meyerbeer in his infamous essay "Judaism in Music"?

At any rate, Strauss, Stock, and Ular would all be stunned to know that, nearly a century after this disparaged Chicago performance, Mahler's symphonies would frequently rival Beethoven's in number of performances per season. They would be speechless upon hearing that there is a group in Chicago dedicated to listening to, discussing, and researching Mahler and his music. Read this article, and get a good laugh out of it. When you're finished laughing, though, think about the questions raised above, and feel free to write us with your remarks and opinions.

**Examiner, March 23, 1907**

**Ugly Symphony Is Well Played**

**Thomas Orchestra Shows Director Mahler of Vienna Writes Bad Music - by Miller Ular**

Gustav Mahler is director of the Vienna opera. He is unequaled as an opera director, and almost unsurpassed as an orchestra conductor. He is a man of remarkable personality and of profound musical learning. So it is but natural that he should compose. His principal compositions are symphonies—six of them. The fifth, known as "The Giant Symphony," was performed yesterday by the Theodore Thomas orchestra under the baton of Frederick Stock.

It is a work an hour and fifteen minutes in length,<sup>1</sup> and before it was done, fully half the audience had fled. And with good reason. For Mr.

<sup>1</sup> If Ular were indeed precise about this duration, Stock's overall timing rivals that of Bernstein/Wiener Philharmoniker (75:46).