The Opening of the Mahler Ninth Symphony and the Bernstein "Heart-Beat" Hypothesis.

by Charles Amenta

Leonard Bernstein stated in both his Norton Lectures of 1973 at Harvard University as well as in a video devoted to the Mahler Ninth Symphony; "Four Ways to Say Farewell," his opinion that: "the opening bars of [Mahler's Ninth Symphony] are an imitation of the arrhythmia of his failing heartbeat."[1] Over the years, though, few have accepted Bernstein's observation. In this essay, I argue that Bernstein was essentially right, although he didn't offer enough accurate details to convince many people. I also plead that Mahler's evocation of a heartbeat in no way violates the sacred abstract nature of musical art.

As is well known, Mahler was diagnosed as having a serious heart condition as a result of a physician's home visit to comfort and treat Alma Mahler in her grief and prostration over the death in 1907of her and Gustav Mahler's oldest daughter, Maria ("Putzi"). Mahler casually offered to be examined also at that time, and was immediately discovered to have a heart condition on a simple auscultation (stethoscope examination) of his heart.[2] A second opinion in Vienna confirmed the diagnosis of post-rheumatic heart disease. Stephen Hefling recently noted[3] that the practice of that day was to restrict vigorous activity not only to prevent strain on the defective heart valve (or valves), but, more relevantly, to hold off the increased threat of fatal infection that such valvular heart disease risked. That latter complication was, indeed, the illness to which Mahler succumbed in 1911. It should noted that Bernstein was incorrect in that Mahler's heart was not "failing" at the time of the composition of the Ninth Symphony – a diagnosis implying that Mahler's heart contractions were not sufficient to adequately circulate his blood[4].

Bernstein stated that Mahler had an "arrhythmia" which is another unfortunate misuse of specific medical terminology. There is no reason to believe that Mahler had an irregular heart beat or "arrhythmia," a term which implies that either the beats of the heart come at irregularly spaced intervals (i.e., erratic) or that the heart was dangerously beating too quickly or too slowly. Thus, Bernstein's contention might have been dismissed out of hand by music-loving physicians because the opening of the Ninth Symphony has none of the features of an irregular heart beat.

What Mahler certainly had was a heart murmur as a result of his rheumatic heart disease, a complication of his repeated bouts of strep throat. Acutely in the initial phase of this complication, the mitral valve becomes inflamed causing a swelling and back leakage ("regurgitation" or "insufficiency" in medical terms). Afterward in chronic cases, the valve reacts to the inflammation by scarring, causing a narrowing of the passage through the valve or mitral "stenosis." This was almost certainly Mahler's condition at the time of his diagnosis in 1907[5]. A loud or "high grade" murmur would be noted by any competent physician on a quick listening (auscultation). Indeed, a strong enough murmur can be felt by merely placing the hand upon the chest. Alma Mahler is quoted, "For years I had been frightened by the whistling sound that could be heard very loudly on the second beat…"[6]

What would a mitral stenosis murmur sound like? Exactly as Alma Mahler stated, in addition to the two normal main sounds the heart makes, the well-known "lubb-dupp" or S1 and S2 sounds, there would be a "blowing" sound in the much longer time interval following the S2 sound before the S1 returns to repeat the rhythm. This is exactly what Mahler writes in the opening measures of the Ninth Symphony. The S1 and S2 are in the cellos and the longer blowing sound in the fourth horn. If one considers each entrance of the cellos a single heart beat or pulse, this would be an extremely slow heart rate. Yet, such a rate, though perhaps not as extreme, would be fully consistent with Mahler's participation in vigorous physical activities such as swimming, mountain climbing, and bicycling. The more conditioned the athlete, the slower the heart rate.

While Bernstein's insight might be mystically attributed to some privileged psychic communion with Mahler, more basic musical empathy would appear to be sufficient. The first basic element of the heartbeat motive is its lack of melodic movement. It stays on A, and thus is a projection of pure rhythm which is unique in opening a Mahler symphony, and perhaps, for any important Mahler theme or motive. The trumpet opening of Mahler's Fifth Symphony initially stays on one note but that solo goes on to encompass a large melodic terrain. The monotone heartbeat motive is separate from the harp motto, the horn call, and the viola tremolo which comprise the opening material of Mahler's Ninth Symphony. As Bernstein noted, the heartbeat motive only later occurs at the most ominous passages in the first movement – at the start of the development[7] and toward the end of this section. This latter instance, in the tuba and trombones at maximum force[8], is perhaps the most dramatic and disruptive moment in the movement leading directly into a funeral cortege passage.

Moreover, Mahler never separates these three notes – the "murmur" always follows the heartbeat – though in the climactic final recurrence there is an extension of the murmur sound as though to emphasize the truly menacing element in the heart sound. Compare this to the last two notes of the harp motto which are immediately augmented by an interpolated note at its second presentation. Also the last two notes of the harp motto, comprising a descending whole step, anticipate the "*Lebewohl*" refrain of the first melody. I would argue also that the melodic contour of the harp motto somewhat anticipates the melodic

[1] Leonard Bernstein, *The Unanswered Question: Six Talks at Harvard* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 317.

[2] Henry-Louis de La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*, 4 vols., 3:*Vienna: Triumph and Disillusion (1904-1907)* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 692.

[3] Stephen E. Hefling, "An Analytical View of the Ninth Symphony," (conference paper) MahlerFest XVIII (Boulder, Colorado) 15 January 2005.

[4] La Grange, p. 694.

[5] La Grange, p. 693.

[6] La Grange, pp. 694-95.

[7] At the double bars, two measures before Tempo I. subito (aber nicht schleppend). 12 measures after rehearsal number 6 in the Dover edition.

[8] Two measures before rehearsal 15 in the Dover edition with the indication to the trombones *Schlltr. Auf.* [bells up] and *fff* (mit hőchster Gewalt)" [with utmost force]

turn of the last movement. Still, the heart-beat motive is stark, undeveloped, and implacable.

Nevertheless, I imagine that this idea of an imitated heart sound being interpolated into a symphony might be rejected because it would seem to violate a sense of the wonderful, abstract nature of music--that music is powerful not because it attempts reproductions of everyday sounds, but because of some quasi-magical or spiritual psychic resonance. I would argue that the heartbeat hypothesis should not be rejected for three reasons. First, the heartbeat holds a privileged position regarding music. Just think of the common terms in both music and the medicine of the heart: rhythm, beat, pulse. Indeed, it might well be that our universal attraction to musical rhythm is an epiphenomenon of our sense of our own heartbeat.

Second, there is a strong tradition of heartbeat sounds in music. Another example occurs in the heart-beat timpani notes in Florestan's second-act aria in *Fidelio*. Perhaps even more apropos would be the expiring hero's heartbeat in Strauss's *Tod und Verklärung* which is another work that Mahler, the conductor, would have known intimately. An additional example in the concert repertoire is Ravel's *La Valse* which opens with the depiction of an excited heartbeat.

Finally, with Mahler, the heartbeat elements are so subsumed into the art of motivic construction and symphonic architecture—compare this to Strauss's more programmatic treatment in *Tod*-- that there can be absolutely no doubt as to the aesthetic transformation. Mahler did not "document" his heartbeat anymore than he documented a cuckoo song in his First Symphony. (Indeed, Mahler's cuckoos uniquely sing in perfect fourths which is a stylized, rather than mimetic, rendering of their natural song—compare this to the cuckoos in the "Pastoral" Symphony of Beethoven.) This is also the argument against those who would say that Mahler wasn't highly "accurate" in his representation of a heartbeat with a diastolic murmur. Well, of course not!

That Mahler opened his symphonic message of farewell with the representation of his soon-to-be-fatal heart condition should only add an element of poignancy rather than seem an intrusion of stark reality into the aesthetic world of music, especially in a work like the Ninth Symphony. In the essentials, Bernstein was correct.

In the next issue…

FEATURED ESSAY

The Religious Impulse in Schumann's and Mahler's Settings of Goethe's *Faust* by Eftychia Papanikolaou

Goethe's *Faust* served as the inspiration for numerous nineteenth-century musical compositions, ranging from Lieder by Schubert to large-scale works such as Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* and Liszt's *Faust-Symphonie*. Most composers were inspired by Part I of *Faust*, whereas Part II was deemed unusually challenging for musical presentation, largely due to its dramatic effects and philosophical content. It was precisely the ending of *Faust II* that inspired Robert Schumann to compose music for that scene, which he later incorporated into his dramatic composition *Szenen aus Goethes Faust* ("Scenes from Goethe's *Faust*," 1844-53). Gustav Mahler also used the *Schlußszene* in an equally exalted setting that encompasses the entire Second Part of the Eighth Symphony (1906), thus serving as the culmination of the First Part's sacred Latin Pentecost hymn *Veni creator spiritus*. This essay will offer a broad comparison between the two *Faust* settings, and consider both the composers' musico-dramatic choices, and their implications for sacred musical aesthetics.

How Mahler Brought Bach to America by Mary Wagner

This article will present Mahler's roles in the first tours of the New York Philharmonic to more than a dozen cities outside of New York City. In many of these concerts Mahler programmed his arrangement of the Bach Suites on a modified harpsichord. Critics offered a variety of opinions regarding the performances. Moreover, these performances marked the first time audiences experienced Mahler as a composer, conductor, and performer. Throughout these tours Mahler performed the work and conducted the orchestra from the modified keyboard.

In Memory: Gary Bertini (1927-2005)

Gary Bertini, one of the most respected conductors of Mahler's music, died on 17 March 2005. He was born on 1 May 1927 in Brichevo, Bessarabia (currently the Republic of Moldavia) and eventually moved to Israel. He studied music in Milan and also Paris, where he became acquainted with such renowned musicians as Arthur Honegger and Olivier Messiaen. Bertini founded the Israeli Chamber Orchestra in 1965, and later become chief conductor of the Jerusalem Symphony. Other posts in his career included music advisor for the Detroit Symphonyy, general music director of the Frankfurt Opera and principal conductor of the Cologne Radio Symphony. In fact, Bertini's work with Mahler is best known for his cycle of symphonies with the later ensemble, which predates the recordings of Mahler's works that he undertook later in his career with the Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony.

Bertini's recordings of Mahler's symphonies with the Cologne Radio Symphony were released on EMI, and they involved such fine musicians as Florence Quivar, Lucia Popp, Jessye Norman, Marjana Lipovsek, Ben Heppner and others. His recent work with the Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra includes further recordings of several of Mahler's symphonies.

Bertini received numerous awards for his contributions to music, including the prestigious National Prize of Israel; the Abbiati Prize from Italian music critics (in 1995 as "Best Conductor" and in 1998 as "Best Conductor of Opera"); the Grand Prix from music critics in France for his recordings of Benjamin Britten´s opera *Billy Budd* and Sergei Prokofiev´s *War and Peace*; and in November 2003 the French music critics singled out his DVD of *War and Peace* among that year's releases in that medium.

When it comes to complete cycles of Mahler's symphonies, Bertini's recordings are regarded highly by audiences around the world. His interpretations are solidly based, with a faithfulness to the scores that is sometimes lacking with other conductors. Without attempting to review his entire oeuvre on CD, those who want to know more about his style or become reacquainted with it might listen to his EMI recording of *Das Lied von der Erde* with Lipovsek and Heppner. The music remains as eloquent testimony to Bertini's impressive career and fine music-making.

James L. Zychowicz

Editorial Board

Editor-in-Chief: James L. Zychowicz

Associate Editors: Salvatore Calomino, Teng-Leong Chew, David Ellis, Jan Hoeper

Please send letters and any essay submissions to

Teng-Leong Chew t-chew@northwestern.edu
James L. Zychowicz JZychowicz@aol.com

Advisory Board

Frans Bouwman
Henry-Louis de La Grange
Joel Lazar
Xiujun Li
Zoltan Roman
Stan Ruttenberg
Benjamin Zander
James L. Zychowicz

Official Website
http://www.chicago-mahlerites.org

Mahler Archives Online
http://www.mahlerarchives.net

© 2005 The Chicago Mahlerites