

Featured Essay

Mahler, Mourning and Consolation

by Stuart Feder

At the beginning of 1909, time was Gustav Mahler's most precious possession.

He would become forty-nine years old in the summer of that year, the same summer when he composed the *Ninth Symphony*. The number "nine" had a magical quality for the superstitious Mahler and the story of his avoidance of designating a Ninth Symphony is well known—the ominous number after which Beethoven and Bruckner composed no more symphonies. Perhaps, Mahler reasoned—however irrationally—he was out of the woods since *Das Lied von der Erde*, which had had composed the previous year, would really have been his *Ninth*. Later in summer 1909, he would complete the finishing touches on *Das Lied*.)

Early that year Mahler wrote to Bruno Walter, "I am more avid for life than ever, and find 'the habit of being alive' sweeter than ever. The days of my life are like the Sibylline books."¹ Again, the number nine lurks as Mahler demonstrated his classical gymnasium education in citing from the Roman historian, Livy the story of nine oracular books that were offered by a prophetess for a sum initially rejected. Only after she had burned three and then three again, each time offering those remaining at the identical initial price, was her offer accepted; thus the increased value of what remained.² And for Mahler, it was time that was his most precious possession.

Nevertheless there remained a vulnerability to superstition. Before the return to Toblach for the summer's work Mahler had been conducting in New York; his second season there. A growing social life had taken Gustav and Alma to the home of the millionaire, Otto Kahn, where the entertainment was a séance by the then-famous medium Eusapia Palladino. While all held hands in a circle, and as her trance approached its climax, the participants felt they were being touched by some force. According to Alma, "Palladino commanded Mahler to look into the alcove behind her and murmured that he was in danger. She summoned him almost compassionately to sit beside her ... We went away in silence, pondering deeply." For some days Mahler was preoccupied with the experience recalling numerous details, but eventually said, "Perhaps there wasn't any truth in it and we only dreamed it."³

What lurked perennially was death and its accoutrements—the trappings, associations and implications of death. This was the unsettling "force" that had touched Mahler at the séance; but he was no stranger to it. Indeed, it might be said that Mahler had a romance with death, which is represented richly in his music from his earliest works. *The Songs of a Wayfarer*, for example (with the text by Mahler) ends in death, a suicide at that. The funeral marches of the *First* and the *Fifth Symphonies* are well-known among many examples of dirges. And Death itself is defeated in the *Finale* of the *Second* (again to words of Mahler): "All conquering death, now thou art conquered." Manically he adds, "On wings that I have won I shall rise up again. I die to live again." This is whistling in the dark on a grandiose scale! Nor does fear alone account for these representations; there is also the wish! Dying in order to live again reduces death to a temporary and transitional state; a stroke of mastery if a dirty trick on rational life. And half-dozen years later after the forty-one-year-old Mahler's actual scrape with death from a hemorrhage he wrote: "While I was hovering on the border between life and death, I wondered whether it would not be better to have done with it at once, since everyone must come to

that in the end."⁴ The brilliant musical solution of *Um Mitternacht*, written the following summer, lies in one of Mahler's several representations of afterlife. Here, amidst previously tacit brass and harp, the singer/persona yields to the power of God ("At midnight, I gave my power into Your hands ..."); a musical analogue to the famous Rodin sculpture. As for the preciousness of time that would haunt Mahler the actual "Mitternacht" motto is like the ticking of a clock slowed down to surrealist proportions. We will return to the crisis of 1901 presently, as it ushered in the trend to another aspect of death that would occupy Mahler for the rest of his life, and which would richly inform the creation of the *Ninth Symphony*. That is the theme of mourning.

Perhaps the most poignant musical representation of the longing for death may be found in another of the Ruckert songs, *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen*. It is easy to get seduced by the metaphorical implications of the song—psychological withdrawal, meditation, oriental and western philosophy etc.—hence avoid the actuality, here the beautiful actuality—of death itself. It is perhaps the closest example in music of Freud's death instinct; the gradual cessation of organic life and the reassertion of entropy. The final phrase of the song is among Mahler's longest, comparable perhaps to the ending of *Das Lied von der Erde*—where, incidentally, the terminal "ewig" is repeated nine times.

What is remarkable about the early critical response to the *Ninth Symphony* is the near-universal agreement among observers that (1) the *Ninth* grew directly from the world of *Das Lied von der Erde*. Bruno Walter wrote: "The title of the last song 'Der Abschied' could stand at the head of the *Ninth*"; and (2) as Alban Berg put it: "The entire [first] movement is based upon a presentiment of death." Stephen Hefling in his definitive article on the *Ninth Symphony* in the *Mahler Companion* asserts that although such readings have "recently been challenged, much evidence stands in support of them."⁵ Adorno later weighed in with the observation that "the movement ... involves itself with time, it becomes entangled in immediacy, in a second life blooming as if it were the first."⁶ And Berg, again, elaborates on "the premonition of death ... that registers itself again and again." In the *Ninth*, Berg concludes, "death announces his arrival."⁷

This interpretive thread has been experienced by responsive listeners for now close to a century! This says something about Mahler and something about the listener. First to the latter; then something of the life behind Mahler's music, and the trend of mourning from that characterized his work from the time of the *Fifth Symphony* to the *Ninth*.

In Mahler's generation not only was music advancing in the modernist atmosphere, but the auditor—the listener or consumer, if you will—as well. Changing was the ideal listener of the nineteenth century, once described by Arnold Schoenberg as someone who "when he heard a composition for the first time observed its construction, was able to follow the elaboration and derivation of its themes and modulations ... who after one hearing could take a melody home in their memory."⁸ What had supervened, yet not replaced traditional notions of form, could be observed in the *Zeitgeist* that enveloped not only music but literature and science as well. The influence of William James's "stream of consciousness" and Sigmund Freud's "free association" could be perhaps best observed in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. There, the author creates a semblance or *simulacrum* of mental life. Mahler's music, par excellence, with what Adorno calls its "breakthroughs"; its intrusion and reconstruction of memory; and affects that resonate in the listener's experience; recreates a semblance of mental life in

⁴ *The Mahler Companion*, p. 350

⁵ *The Mahler Companion*, pp. 467-68

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *Idem*

⁸ Arnold Schoenberg, "New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea," in *Style and Idea—Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein (New York: St. Martins Press, 1975), pp.120-21

¹ Quoted by Stephen E. Hefling, "The Ninth Symphony," pp. 467-90 in *The Mahler Companion*, edited by Donald Mitchell & Andrew Nicholson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p.468 [hereafter *The Mahler Companion*]

² William Rose Benét, *The Reader's Encyclopedia* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1948), p.1028

³ Alma Mahler, *Memories and Letters*, edited by Donald Mitchell and translated by Basil Creighton, 3rd ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), p. 159.

music. This may not only be recognized by the listener, but invite a kind of entrainment: that is, the resonant eliciting of the listener's own emotional life. I believe this phenomenon may do more than account for the communality of agreement regarding the *Ninth Symphony*. It may also explain the enthusiastic and tenacious devotion of many to the music of Mahler.

Now to the life (and the death) behind the *Ninth*. It was the crisis of 1901 when the composer believed he faced death that the theme of mourning made its most prominent appearance in his music. It was the very next summer that the composer began his *Kindertotenlieder*. It was characterized by well-known stylistic changes as seen in the *Fifth Symphony* of the time. Clearly the *Wunderhorn* years were over as Mahler wrote the last of the *Wunderhorn* songs and turned to Rückert texts. In *Kindertotenlieder*, only a shadow behind the deaths of children one finds the theme of the bereavement and mourning of the parents. Biographically, Mahler has revived his identification with his own parents and the multiple deaths of his siblings. This artistic and personal trend was accompanied by an astonishing change in Mahler's actual life. Suddenly, the confirmed bachelor was ready for marriage and soon after he met Alma Schindler in the fall, marriage rapidly became a foregone conclusion. I believe the forty-one-year-old bachelor, frightened by the passage of time and his own mortality, sought the common immortality of man: the wish to have a family of his own. Thus the importance to him of marriage and the anticipated birth of his first child. Hence, all the more intense the loss that that destiny had in store.

If it is true that the *Ninth* is in some sense a continuation of *Das Lied von der Erde*, we must look to the circumstances that inspired *Das Lied*. I have asserted that *Das Lied* is an artifact of mourning and melancholia. The life circumstances that led to its composition relate to the Mahlers' bereavement in 1907 when Gustav's favorite daughter, called Putzi, died of diphtheria. Gustav and Alma mourned in different ways, and characteristically, the form Mahler's mourning took was its mastery through music. His mourning was transformed into high musical art, its medium the text of *Die chinesische Flöte*. There, a virtual palette of subtle shadings of melancholy (or depression) pervades both text and its realization in music. Most important in this regard is the final movement, *Der Abschied*, where one finds the culmination and terminus of all of Mahler's previous eschatologies. The ultimate "place" was one never before articulated in music. Boundaries dissolve between the living and the dead; the human and non-human; the organic and inorganic—inspired by the philosophy of Gustav Fechner.⁹ In this final movement, Mahler creates a sense of detachment from persons that characterizes mourning. He finds a point of resolution and comfort beyond mere resignation in a degree of consolation, a resting point in the process of mourning, although not a final one.

For mourning, an ongoing task and process, is only fitfully and incompletely accomplished and consolation must be sought repeatedly with fading intensity as time goes on. This is what is revisited in the *Ninth Symphony*. Most of the commentary of death, noted earlier relates to the first movement, the *Andante comodo*. On the manuscript pages Mahler had inscribed, "Oh days of youth! Vanished! Oh love! Scattered!"¹⁰ The key is loss; on 2 September, 1909 when the composer completed the *Ninth* he had passed his forty-ninth birthday only two months before. Ever aware of the passage of time, he was cognizant that his mother, to whom he had been close, died at age fifty-two. (Mahler himself would die before he reached that birthday.) Yet the well-known and often cited musical quotation of Johann Strauss, *Freut euch des Lebens* (Enjoy Life) is hardly one of grief or despair. Mahler, a master of encoding affect in music, casts it as gentle nostalgia. If the "days of youth" have vanished and "love ... scattered", the painful sting has been effaced. The work of mourning has progressed and in its place one finds a degree of soothing; of consolation.

⁹ Stuart Feder, *Gustav Mahler—A Life in Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 150.

¹⁰ *The Mahler Companion*, p. 477

It is in the fourth movement, the *Adagio*, that consolation receives its most poignant and detailed representation in all of Mahler; perhaps in all of musical art. In a recent article "Music Mourning and Consolation", Alexander Stein writes,

"Our relationship with music fosters a restructuring of emotional experience, especially during periods in which trauma and sorrow have created a world experienced as fragmented, disorganized, isolating, distemperate, or monochromatic. Mourning music, from this perspective, can be understood to temporarily recuperate or re-stabilize certain ego functions, which further speaks to its special ability to provide succor." [p. 807] He remarks further "One way then in which music consoles . . . is in temporarily relieving or diminishing feelings of pain by providing an illusory response ensconced in rhythm and sound to the dominant wish of the bereaved – reunion with the lost object."¹¹

What then are some of the musical features of the *Adagio* that speak of consolation. The opening (two measures) introductory gesture connects the lonely, anguished world of mourning to the glowing consoling string choir. What has been fragmented achieves firm organization. A sense of calm dignity, even religiosity, prevails as a long lyric line is prolonged the more with the device of the melodic "turn." Far from being mentally pulled apart with oft-times dissonant polyphony (as in other sections of the *Ninth*) the listener is in a sense *held*. We have entered the realm of a proverbial holding environment. There, loss and longing does not imply aloneness. We are, as it were "in good hands."¹²

The ending of the *Ninth* incorporates a remarkable act of consolation. A quietness prevails – as if the polar opposite of the lament—an ineffable peace, almost beyond understanding. Once again (as in *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen*) there is a gradual, resigned cessation of life's force, as in the entropy of Freud's death instinct. But it is marked here by consolation, not despair. James L. Zychowicz, who has commented upon the "personal annotations in the *Adagio*" notes Mahler's self-quotation in the final section (*Langsam und ppp bis zum Schluss*), from the fourth song of the *Kindertotenlieder* cycle, *Off denk' ich*. Wordless here, the music evokes the original phrase "Der Tag ist Schön auf jenen Höh'n,"—"The day is beautiful from those heights."¹³ Here again is a revisiting and furthering of the consolation sought in the ending of *Das Lied von der Erde*, that ultimate and ideal "place" free of loss and mourning, representing in music "the dominant wish of the bereaved:¹⁴ – reunion with the lost object.

Upcoming Trip

The Chicago Mahlerites will be organizing a trip to St. Louis for the 5 November 2005 (Saturday) performance of *Das Lied von der Erde* by the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra under the direction of their new conductor, David Robertson. For details of the concert, please refer to p. 12 of this issue. Please mark your calendar in advance. Detailed plan of the event will be posted on our internet discussion forum.

The Chicago Mahlerites welcome the following new members:

Richard L. Harsch from Chicago, Illinois
John Ahouse from Long Beach, California
David Umlauf, Barrington, Illinois

¹¹ Alexander Stein, "Music, Mourning and Consolation," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 52:3 (2004): 807

¹² Gilbert Rose, personal communication, 2002

¹³ James L. Zychowicz, The "Adagio of Mahler's Ninth Symphony: A Preliminary Report on the *Partiturentwurf*," *Revue Mahler Review* 1(1987): 90

¹⁴ Schoenberg, "New Music, Outmoded Music, Style and Idea," p. 807