

Featured Essay

Mahler's Second Symphony

by Parks Grant

James Huneker once pointed out that the opening of Wagner's *Die Walküre* sounds like that of Schubert's *The Erl-King*. The opening of Mahler's Second or C Minor Symphony is reminiscent of both – though not for long; we quickly become aware that Mahler – not Schubert, Wagner or a second hand version of anybody else – is speaking. The cellos and double basses enter in the second measure with a powerful declamatory theme, which continues for sixteen measures under a constant tremolo G in octaves. During the next fifteen measures the cellos and double basses repeat this declamatory theme (with a slight change near the beginning) while higher instruments, mostly woodwinds, later violins, claim the center of our attention with another important theme. The restless bass figure persists, however, during quite a few measures to come. The rhythms it has already established, and to a lesser degree its melodic characteristics, dominate much of the entire movement.

The second theme or subordinate subject is presented in E major, harmonically a very distant relative of C Minor, key of the first subject. Mahler ever so gently slips from one key to the other. The effect is sheer music – as delightful as it is unconventional, and represents one of the happiest incidents in a symphony that is replete with them. (See example below.)

The image displays a musical score for Mahler's Second Symphony, divided into two main sections: "End of First Theme" and "Beginning of Second Theme".

End of First Theme: This section features a woodwind melody in the upper staves (Woodwinds, Horns and Trumpets) and a rhythmic bass line in the lower staves (Cellos and Double-Basses). The bass line consists of a constant tremolo G in octaves, with triplets of eighth notes.

Beginning of Second Theme: This section shows the transition to E major. The woodwinds and strings play a new melody, while the bass line continues with its rhythmic pattern. The horns sustain a chord. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, rests, and dynamic markings.

Someone has written that the second theme seems to be "suffused with light" as it appears, *pianissimo*, chiefly in strings and horns. The cellos and double basses meanwhile keep muttering away at a melodically compressed fragment of the first theme, with its characteristic triplet rhythm. By causing a particle of the first subject to serve as an accompaniment to the second, Mahler insures a subtle and subconscious connection between them on the listener's part; different as the two are in spirit and tonality, they convincingly belong together.

The comparatively short and peaceful second theme moves toward a climax and cadence in E-flat minor. If we have been lulled away into any daydream, Mahler rudely shatters it with an abrupt loud G-natural, which jars against the just-released G-flat of the E-flat minor triad (E-flat, G-flat, B-flat) on which the theme has just cadenced. The composer's method of bringing us back to the grim business of the first theme (for as will be seen, that is his purpose) is truly a brusque one, but memorable nonetheless.

It must be borne in mind that the typical sonata-allegro movement which forms the first movement of any normal symphony, the section consisting of the two themes (known as the exposition) is almost always enclosed in repeat signs, though actually the practice of repeating the enclosed materials often becomes "a custom more honored in the breach than the observance." Mahler insures the rehearing of his two themes by the simple expedient of writing them out again, though it is no mere literal repetition; on the contrary he varies them tremendously. Undoubtedly their growth during the second presentation is his real aim, not merely their restatement.

The first subject in its new form is at first highly compressed, but then continues with fresh material freely derived from that of the first presentation, so the result turns out to be one of expansion rather than abridgement.

Mahler leads to the second subject by way of a quiet connecting passage in G minor over a steadily-moving bass, during part of which two oboes in unison carry a melody with accompaniment by trumpets – just one of the innumerable unexpected but ingenious orchestration-effects which are scattered through all of the composer's works, reflecting his vast experience as an orchestral conductor.

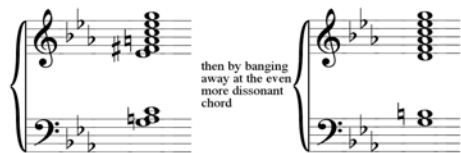
The second presentation of the second theme occurs again in strings and horns, *pianissimo*, but this time more soberly (though not prosaically) in the key of C major, and with no restless bass beneath it. It soon moves however to its former key, E major (the key signature is just one sharp, but the tonality is clearly E major), and there is much admixture of new and freely derived material, including the prominent motive first given out by the English horn.

A short musical notation for the English horn motive, showing a melodic line in E major with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature.

So closely knitted is the structure at this point that it would be well-nigh impossible to lay one's finger on the exact spot where development section begins. The writer's nomination of the third measure after rehearsal figure 9 (see Kalmus Edition miniature score) is only a personal opinion. As the tension gradually mounts, materials derived from the two themes and free extensions of them holds sway in passages of sweeping power. There are a number of memorable moments – one in C-sharp minor featuring wedge-like movement by unison horns and trumpets against two trombones, violas, and cellos; a startling crash from the cymbals unaccompanied, followed by *fortissimo* uproar; a gentle, quiet reference to the second theme, starting in the flute over delightful moving harp figure and continuing in a solo violin; and a brief bit in B major where two trumpets briefly suggest the style of a drinking song.

The energy of the movement seems to disintegrate in a short, tearing passage in E-flat minor. Then hesitatingly, seeming barely able to drag, the music gradually lifts itself out of its exhaustion. Psychologically – and Mahler nearly always utilizes form at least partially for its psychological as well as architectural possibilities – the composer's intention is to lead to a climax of tremendous violence. As

this climax gradually builds there are very brief references to two of the themes, which are later destined to be associated with the idea of “resurrection” which forms the triumphant apex of the last of fifth movement. Naturally, only the person already familiar with the symphony can detect the presence of these all-but-hidden fragments. The violence grows, predominantly in the dark key of E-flat minor, when a sudden downward chromatic scale spills us into C minor. *Fortissimo* brass and timpani hammer out one of the most dissonant passages in Mahler’s writings, by forcefully repeating the dissonant chord.



The tension built up by the latter is almost unbearable, but Mahler quickly resolves it to the tonic chord of C minor (i.e. to C, E-flat, G), and the recapitulation of the two themes is at hand.

Before discussing the recapitulation let us pause to examine the second of these two dissonant chords, which probably stands unique up to the appearance of the modernist movement in music – and very rare even then. It is a complete dominant-thirteenth chord of C minor, built of stacked up thirds complete to the fifteenth or double octave, and contains every note of the C minor scale. (The famous chord in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, which contains every note in the D minor scale, has an effect not nearly so dissonant, due to being widely dispersed, of short duration, and to containing certain tones more weakly scored and hence less prominent than others; that is, Beethoven’s chord is very imperfectly balanced – intentionally so, perhaps – while in Mahler’s the tones are of equal strength, thus accentuating the dissonance.)

The recapitulation of the first subject is highly abbreviated, compared with either of its hearings in the exposition, but contains all the necessary elements that make it a distinctive musical idea. The already-mentioned magical transition passage again leads from C minor to E major to usher in the recapitulation of the second theme, the statement of which is eloquently lyrical.

By the simple expedient of changing a *tremolo* E to E-flat, Mahler returns to the original tonality – C minor – for a long coda. It begins very softly and wearily. Almost inaudible references to earlier motives creep in on the violins (at first marked *ppppp*), until during the course of a *crescendo* and a compensating *diminuendo* of the fabric interweaves many of the already presented motives in brief or perhaps not-so-brief references. For a moment it looks as though the movement will close in C major, but by again changing an E to E-flat, Mahler converts the C major triad (C, E, G) into C minor triad (C, E-flat, G), after which a *fortissimo* downward chromatic scale brings a conclusion – suggesting disillusionment.

At the end of the first movement Mahler write, “Here follows a pause of at least five minutes.”

After a long, tense, stormy opening piece, something unruffled, gently lilting, and reposed is surely in order. The second movement, in A-flat major, 3/8 time, marked *andante moderato*, fulfills these needs. Its style at first reminds one of Schubert, yet those who know Mahler’s works will agree that it is pure Mahler.

The form is roughly ABABA; that is a song-form with repeated trio (middle section); but Mahler’s well-nigh invariable custom of employing varied repetition, and hence allowing for natural organic growth, produces a form-scheme more accurately described as A¹B¹A²B²A³.

After a short hesitating passage, the muted violins make the second statement of the A theme while below them half of the cellos (not using mutes) sound an engaging countermelody, thoroughly Mahlerian.

The second statement of the B theme begins loud, bold, and agitated. It is much longer than the earlier appearance, and this time its climax seems to achieve its destiny; it gets over the hurdle it failed to cross before.

Again, there is hesitation, and the A section is heard for the final time, beginning quietly in *pizzicato* strings. The non-sustained character of this portion makes a delectable contrast with what has preceded and with what is to follow. The movement reaches its height of eloquence in a passage where the principal theme is played by the low woodwinds and low muted strings, while above them the divided first violins have a varied form of the countermelody previously allotted to half of the cellos. Some clashes that occur at certain spots between these two melodies are really fairly harsh, yet they pass quite unnoticed due to the inherently logical movement of both melodies as they pursue their separate ways. (See example below.)



Here surely is the “linear counterpoint” so important in the music of Mahler’s great contemporary Richard Strauss, not to mention later composers.

The conclusion is dainty and winsome, not without just the faintest hint of gentle humor.

Like Schubert before him, Mahler occasionally used materials from one of his songs as the basis for an instrumental work. The third movement of Symphony No. 2 is in large free *Rondo* form and fulfills the function of a *Scherzo*. Much of its material is borrowed from Mahler’s song *Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt* (St. Anthony of Padua Fish Sermon), the text of which was drawn from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Boy’s Magic Horn), a noted anthology of German folk-poems collected by Ludwig Achim von Arnim (1781-1832) and Clemens Maria Brentano (1778-1842). Here deprived of its mocking text, the satire of this third movement was doubtless more apparent to the composer than to anyone else, yet its parodistic spirit is not to be missed.

It opens with some abrupt, short solos on the timpani (incidentally this symphony requires two sets of kettle drums) which might well be derived from the symphony’s opening theme. Running sixteenth-notes in 3/8 time make an early appearance and are encountered in nearly every measure. There are passages which burlesque the style of the *Ländler* (a German country dance), grimacing solos for the E-flat clarinet, scattered notes for the strings to be played *col legno* (with the back of the bow), and occasionally a brief piccolo solo. For contrast there is a more sober though equally homely theme in F major.

After a transitional passage for cellos and double-basses under a long-held flute and piccolo octave C, the horns and trumpets announce a short, bold, fanfare-like theme in D major; the just-mentioned connecting material form a moving bass, and the violins and violas persistently continue with the steady sixteenths. This, like the rest of the middle of the movement, is new material – not taken from the previously mentioned song. Another transition, featuring flute, solo violin, and *pizzicato* cellos, and sounding for all the world like something from Bach’s pen, leads to a second statement of the short fanfare theme, just as bold as before, but this time in E. A delightfully vulgar though lyrical melody, also in E, is sounded by the trumpet, accompanied by three other trumpets, both harps, and strings. Mahler loved to write music which was good-naturedly “corny”, yet whose very bucolicism is distinguished. After another transition the principal idea returns, sardonic as ever.

About two-thirds of the way through the movement the fanfare-theme returns beginning in C, and now in all seriousness appears a striking message (see example below) of great significance, destined to return with such telling effect at the beginning of the last movement and again at its climax.



Things gradually quiet down, and a long transition leads to the final version of the principal theme, the close being practically note-for-note the close of the song on which the movement is based.

The form might be analyzed thus: A¹ B¹ A² W C¹ X C² D Y A³ B² C³ Q Z A⁴. In this scheme, W, X, Y, and Z are transitional passages derived mostly from A, and Q represents the music foreshadowing the fifth movement. The fourth movement follows without pause.

If the third movement is based on a song, the brief fourth part is a song – a deeply moving, placid song in D-flat major for contralto and orchestra. Entitled *Urlicht*, which might be translated “Primordial Light” or “Eternal Light”, its text is drawn from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. It is by far the shortest of the symphony’s five movements. The opening, with its quiet brass instruments, suggests a chorale. With 21 changes of time signatures in the first 35 measures, coupled with a very slow tempo, it seems almost rhythmless; but it is exactly what is needed after the music that has preceded it and in light of that which is to follow.

About two-thirds of the way through there is another of Mahler’s amazing strokes in orchestration. During a passage in A minor a piccolo plays a high, soft countermelody to the singer’s solo, soon joined by a second piccolo a third lower; two solo violins double the two piccolos in the octave below. Only a man who knew the orchestra inside out could have conceived that the ordinarily whistling, shrill piccolo could if necessary sound so delightfully ethereal.

This lovely movement, so charged with mysticism and resignation (as are so many of Mahler’s songs) leads without pause into the finale.

The fifth and final movement – one of the longest in any symphony – was beyond question influenced by the finale of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony and has a general plan in common with it: it opens in pessimism, which increases and then reaches a turning-point; optimism then conquers, steadily gains ground, and finally attains a triumphant conclusion.

Long as this part is, only a person who did not know it would be rash enough to brand it “too long”. The writer’s long-held (though completely unsupported) private opinion is that the finale was originally planned to be even longer – that its form as we know it actually represents a slight condensation.

The uproar of the opening suggests the day of judgment as surely as any music ever can. The quotation already mentioned in conjunction with the third movement (as shown above) is powerfully stated. However there is an immediate quieting down and this motive (see below) associated later with the idea of “resurrection” is heard tentatively. (The casual hint of it in the first movement has already received mention. The other theme that was so briefly foreshadowed appears soon).



In general, it may be said that the first part of the finale consists of a series of comparatively brief and not-so-closely-connected sections, a bit fragmentary in effect. Several spots stand out in the listener’s consciousness, (some of them are not the principal theme, but rather fascinating episodes), namely: (1) A fanfare-like theme for horns, played not in the orchestra but off-stage so that the sound appears to reach us from a great distance – almost like a barely recalled memory, or perhaps suggesting a dimly-perceived glimpse into our future. (2) A chain of trills in parallel triads which is strongly suggestive of the style of the French impressionists. In view of the fact that musical Impressionism was barely becoming established at the time this symphony was written (1894), it seems likely that this resemblance is a thought-provoking coincidence rather than imitation. (3) A short but agitated section suggestive of a desperate pressing to overcome some obstacle, but which quickly collapses. The failure is only temporary, for this theme is destined to turn up twice later, once at the beginning of a passage which does indeed lead across the turning-point of the movement, again as a short contralto solo with a text of reassuring tone. (4) A section based on fanfare-like material accompanied by many trills, slow and majestic, yet brilliant.

The next part of the movement brings the first passage of any sustained length. A terrifying *crescendo* for nothing but percussion instruments – decidedly unusual considering when it was written – suggests the gates of hell opening. The music that follows is a wild march – urgent, desperate, at times hard-bitten, and only occasionally buoyant of confident. Mahler’s favorite rhythmic pattern – eighth-note, sixteenth-rest, sixteenth note – is prominent for the first time in this movement. Sometimes the music suggests an inexorable drive toward an unwelcome fate. The music dissolves in wild collapse; again there is a failure to surmount an obstacle. The above-mentioned agitated theme returns, and this time grows, becomes eager and urgent. It unfolds amid many changes in meter. Meanwhile off-stage there is barely audible fanfare-like material played by two trumpets, triangle, bass drum, and cymbals; it seems to be military music carried to our ears by the wind. The mounting *crescendo* of the rest of the orchestra swallows it up, and soon a bold *fortissimo* sweeps us to the grand climax of the movement, at whose peak Mahler states (in a different key) the chord-progression already heard in the third movement and again at the start of the present movement (see example at left). Here is music that is a climax in every sense – not merely a tremendously loud passage but a genuine turning point as well. A few quiet measures suggestive of dawn lead to perhaps the most remarkable spot in a symphony truly laden with remarkable spots. It is unique; one can search musical literature in vain for anything else even slightly like it. Trumpets and horns, both off-stage, plays fanfares of magical character; in the orchestra there are bird-like twitters from flute and piccolo and underneath occasional rumbles from the bass drum or off-stage timpani. Surely if nature had the gift of composing, the result would sound like this! Mahler has specified that of the four trumpets used, two should be placed to the left, two to the right.

The long-awaited entrance of the chorus follows, in music of solemn, reposed dignity. It will be noticed that both here and twice later, out of the chorus there gradually emerges a solo voice, in this and the following instance the soprano, in a still later passage the contralto. Not unless one consults the score can he say exactly where the soloist is detached from the rest of the chorus. Mahler’s effect is fresh, striking, yet simply achieved. The spirit form now on is by turns solemn, hopeful, restful, reassuring, and wildly triumphant; it has been purged of everything bitter, desperate, and frustrating. The listener is swept into one brilliant cadence after another. Toward the end an organ lends its plangent support to the already powerful chorus and orchestra. The symphony concludes in a blaze of jubilation, the key being E-flat major.

The text employed in the finale is partly by Friedrich Klopstock¹ (1724-1803) (slightly altered by Mahler) and partly by the composer himself. In all fairness it must be said that from a literary standpoint Mahler was no match for Klopstock, one of the great names in German literature,

¹ Mahler used the first two of the five stanzas of “Die Auferstehung” (The Resurrection), one of Klopstock’s *Geistliche Lieder* (Spiritual Songs) – not one of the *Odes* as often stated.

but whose verses extolling the idea of resurrection do not carry as far as Mahler's needs demanded.

It is pertinent to mention that the composer first became interested in this text – indeed first conceived the idea of the symphony itself – when he heard it at the funeral of the great pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow (1830-1894). Thoughts of death were something of an obsession with Mahler (verging on the neurotic at times); hence the thought of another life to come fascinated him as it has many others, for mankind has been intrigued by this idea since the dawn of recorded time.

Some believe the purpose of this symphony is one of “telling a story”, in other words, that it is program music. However the composer has left no official hints other those implied in the texts he has used and the moods he has created. At the time he wrote Symphony No. 2, the symphonic poem was at the height of its popularity, and Mahler was sometimes pressed for explanations of the “meaning” of his work. It is well known that these inquiries annoyed yet somewhat amused him. He even gave out conflicting “stories” on various occasions, there being no better illustration that the first movement of his symphony. On one occasion he described it, rather fittingly, as a “death celebration”, but on another he declared it represented a growing seed trying to push its way up through the soil! To say that he made the latter statement in scorn is probably superfluous.

Donald Ferguson states in his *A History of Musical Thought* that Mahler's Second Symphony is the first instance of a genuine five-movement symphony in the history of music. Dr. Ferguson probably means that earlier works which are nominally cast in five parts (such as Beethoven's Sixth Symphony) could perhaps be reasoned as actually being in four, and that what is nominally one of the movements is in reality just an introduction to one of the others, while with the present work there is no getting around the quintuple division – no explaining it away as a structure which “might” be reasoned otherwise than as marked by the composer.

Symphony No. 2 by Gustav Mahler, known as the “Resurrection” Symphony, calls for one of the most elaborate outlays of musical forces of any work.

The mixed chorus and solo soprano appear in the fifth movement only, the solo contralto in the fourth and fifth. The orchestral forces of course include the usual string section – first and second violins, violas, cellos, and double-basses – plus the following woodwinds, brass, percussion instruments:

- 4 flutes, all alternating with piccolos
- 4 oboes, the third and fourth alternating with English horns
E-flat clarinet
- 4 clarinets, the third alternating with bass clarinet, the fourth with second E-flat clarinet
- 4 bassoons, the third and fourth alternating with contrabassoon
- 10 horns (however Mahler made provision for performance by only 6)
- 10 trumpets (but provision is made for performance by only 8, or even 6)
- 4 trombones
Tuba
Organ
- 2 sets of timpani, plus an additional single drum off stage
- 2 bass drums, one off stage
- 2 pairs of cymbals, one off-stage
- 2 gongs, one (relatively) high pitch, the other low
- 2 triangles, one off stage
- Snare drum (preferably more than one)
- Glockenspiel
- Bells (Mahler requires that they be steel bars of deep, indefinite, but widely-differentiated pitch)
- Ruthe
- 2 harps (with two or more players to each part if possible)

Since it is an unusual instrument, it might be well to speak briefly about the Ruthe (also spelled Rute, literally “rod”). Made of many pieces of rattan, it looks like a large clothes-brush or small broom, and is used to play the bass drum (sometimes on the shell of the instrument). It is used only in the third movement, perhaps because the composer had already employed it in the song from which this was derived. Although Mozart wrote for the Ruthe, comparatively few composers have called for it. Mahler also included it in his Third, Sixth, and Seventh Symphonies. As will be gathered from the foregoing, it is not so much an instrument as a special implement used in playing one of this instruments.

This article was originally published in *Chord and Discord* 2(8): 76-85, 1958. It is reproduced here with the kind permission from Mr. Charles Eble of the American Bruckner Society. The Chicago Mahlerites also thank Mr. Sumio Matsuno for digitizing the musical examples from the original source for reproduction in *Naturlaut*.

New Book Announcement

Gustav Mahler in der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek (Gustav Mahler in the Bavarian State Library)

The Bavarian State Library in Germany today has one of the richest collections of original sources for Mahler's works and personal correspondences. In conjunction with their exhibition “*Gustav Mahler. Letters and music autographs from the Moldenhauer Archives*” from March 21 to May 11, 2003, the Bavarian State Library has published a book that catalogs these archival materials.

The book showcases the collection of twenty-two sketches and drafts to seven symphonies and to four piano and orchestral songs, as well as the approximately four hundred personal letters and documents of Mahler, most of them addressed to Alma Mahler. The very important archive presented in this book (available only in German) thus gives an idea of the life of Gustav Mahler, his musical journeys from the emergence of his composition to his influence over contemporary arts. Steve Coburn will review this book in details in the upcoming issue of *Naturlaut*.

Quotable Quotes...

“Today,” Mahler told me, “I went through the *Scherzo* of my Second Symphony again; I haven't looked at it since I first wrote it, and it absolutely amazed me. It's a remarkable, fearful, great piece! I didn't realize this when I was composing it. Creative activity and the genesis of a work are mystical from start to finish, since one acts unconsciously, as if prompted from outside, and then one can hardly conceive how the result has come into being. In fact I often feel like the blind hen who finds a grain of corn. But, more rarely than with whole movements or works, this instinctive mysterious force appears with individual passages, and then it's the most difficult and the most significant ones. Generally it's those that I don't want to attack directly, those I'd like to dodge around, and which nevertheless hold me fast and finally force their way to the right expression. This is what has just happened to me in the *Scherzo*, with one passage which I had already given up and cut out, but then after all I included it on an inserted sheet. And now I can see that it is the most essential, the most powerful passage of the whole thing...”

- Natalie Bauer-Lechner
From “Mahler: His Life, Work, & World”
Edited by Kurt Blaukopf and Herta Blaukopf