

A Literary Link between Mahler's Early Poetry and Symphony No. 2

by Jan Hoepfer

"Is a musician conceivable who is no poet? Is a poet conceivable who is no musician?"

~ Clemens Brentano, compiler of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*

As some of our members may recall, a couple of years ago I attempted a project of making verse translations of a number of Mahler's early poems (particularly those of 1880 and 1884). Ever since, I have intended to write an overview of those poems, analyzing from a literary perspective their stylistic and formal characteristics and speculating on poetic influences. That should have been this article. But in researching the authors that Henry-Louis de La Grange cites as early influences on Mahler (such as Hölderlin, Schiller, Lessing, Grillparzer, Goethe, Hoffmann, Angelus Silesius, and of course Jean Paul), I came across a striking passage from Jean Paul's 1796 novel *Siebenkäs* (full title: *Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Arrangements, or Married Life, Death, and Wedding of the Public Defender F. St. Siebenkäs*). The passage stuck out for its similarities to not only the most unusual poem in the 1884 series, No. 5, but also to the 1900 program of Mahler's Second Symphony (begun in 1888). I therefore propose that this passage may serve as a critical source for the genesis (or at least Mahler's explication) of the Second, as well as an interesting link between Mahler's early poetry and his later musical output—a link that I hope will be explored in further detail in the future.

In 1884, when Poem No. 5 was written, Mahler was grudgingly serving as music director (second *kapellmeister*) in Kassel, and the immediate source of his 1884 poetic outburst seems to have been a rocky love affair with a young soprano, Johanna Richter. Thus, many of the poems from this period deal with the subjects of love and rejection. The poems, which seem to remain something of an embarrassment to some Mahlerians, are not, in my opinion, quite as bad as they are advertised to be. Granted, they are not wildly original, but they are exuberant, and they reflect the twenty-four-year-old poet's interests and influences.

Several of the poems, especially Nos. 6 and 7 as Henry-Louis de La Grange suggests, were probably intended as lieder, and would be more palatable in that form. The poems often utilize the (by now, and probably by Mahler's time, rather hackneyed) imagery of Romanticism: the stars, the knight, the wanderer, blossoms in the breeze, etc. Unlike many German Romantic poets, however, Mahler never references Greek mythology (he rarely even uses proper nouns), creating instead a timeless realm more suited to the lied. Also unlike other German poets he read, such as Goethe, Schiller, and Hölderlin, Mahler rarely tackles lofty questions in these early poems. One exception, however, is poem No. 5, exceptional for its philosophical breadth, its passionate outbursts, and its length.

Of all the early literary influences on the young Mahler, none was more powerful than Jean Paul (Johann Paul Friedrich Richter, coincidentally the same surname as Johanna Richter, which means "judge" in German). Jean Paul's florid prose, dense imagery, emotive outbursts, and emphasis on metaphor pervade Mahler's effusive letters from the early 1880s. The influence of Jean Paul is, of course, often mentioned with respect to the First Symphony, early versions of which were subtitled "Titan," after Jean Paul's magnum opus. The subsequently deleted second movement, "Blumine," took its name from Jean Paul's *Herbst-Blumine*. Jean Paul's 1796 novel *Siebenkäs*, which Mahler believed to be the "most perfect" of Jean's Paul's works, is referenced in an 1893 program for the First Symphony in which the first part of the symphony is subtitled "From the days of youth: flower, fruit, and thorn pieces."

An even earlier reference to *Siebenkäs* appears in Mahler's Poem No. 5—and reappears, I would like to suggest, in the finale of the Second Symphony, which was written in 1894. The influence of Jean Paul in these two early symphonies is therefore so strong that the pair might even be called the "Jean Paul" symphonies. To my knowledge, no one

has suggested this connection between *Siebenkäs* and the Second Symphony; Constantin Floros's book *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies*, for example, cites only biblical passages and a Wunderhorn poem as possible inspirations for the program's eschatological narrative. The program, which was written for performances of the symphony in 1900 and 1901, has been viewed by some as a mere retrospective invention that should yield little insight about the genesis of the symphony. Since Mahler ultimately did affix the program, however, the program is valuable for telling us about the composer's preoccupations, if not at the time of writing (1894), at least in 1900. I think it entirely possible, however, that Mahler had at least a general version of this narrative (possibly even just a memory of *Siebenkäs*) in mind while composing, since we know from Poem No. 5 that he had an interest in doomsday material.

The *Siebenkäs* passage I will examine, titled "First Flower Piece: Dead Christ's Speech from the Heights of the Universe That There Is No God," begins with this intriguing little footnote, a message that might have attracted the inquisitive young Mahler to this chapter in the first place:

If sometime my heart were to become so unfortunate and hardened that all my feelings that attest to the existence of God were destroyed, then I would shock myself with this chapter, and it would save me and give me back my feelings (trans. Hoepfer).

Mahler consistently employs this effect of the "terrifying shock" throughout his compositions, from the last movement of his First Symphony to the first movement of his last (Tenth) symphony.

To expedite discussion, I've included Mahler's poem below (left column), excerpts from Jean Paul's chapter (middle column), and excerpts from the program of the Second Symphony (right column). To illustrate the similarities between the three, words used in Poem No. 5 are in italics in the other columns, and words used in the Second Symphony's program are set in bold in the other columns. Of course, the excerpts are all in English translation, so the chart does not indicate when the exact same German word was used in the texts—it merely shows that the same idea was transferred.

The narrative sequence in Mahler's Poem No. 5 is stunningly similar to that of the *Siebenkäs* passage: not only does Mahler preserve the "it was all a dream" device, he even borrows details of Jean Paul's apocalyptic imagery. The "sparks in the void" metaphor is especially telltale as borrowed material. Significantly, in Mahler's poetic recasting of Jean Paul's narrative, he removes the overt religious references, instead using obliquely nondenominational spiritual ideas. Jean Paul's Christ, for instance, becomes "the friend of those who yearn and pine." In the program to the Second Symphony, Mahler also retains this nonspecific reference to a "Caller" and an "Eternal Judge."

The poem takes an interesting turn in stanza 6, when Mahler begins referring to "Du," the German informal "you." Frankly, I'm not sure what to make of this. Mahler first seems to refer to a kind of spiritual "savior"; however, in the next stanza, the tone becomes more conversational, and it seems the "Du" refers to a person, probably a woman. This poetic turn perhaps displays Mahler's tendency to unite the spiritual/philosophical with the worldly/personal. The dream sequence itself, which sandwiches metaphysical speculation between episodes in the earthly realm, seems to reflect Mahler's interest in uniting the temporal and eternal. This interest is displayed in his music all the way through *Das Lied*: the physicality of *Der Trunkene im Frühling* immediately precedes the profound meditations on eternity in *Der Abschied*.

In addition to the physical/spiritual duality, Mahler also sets up, at the end of the poem, a duality (often evident in his music) between laughter and tears. Here I think of musical comparisons to the funeral march of the First Symphony or the braying horns in the Scherzo of the Sixth Symphony, which sound like laughter lapsing into weeping.

For me, perhaps the most interesting comparison between these three apocalyptic visions is in their endings. In Mahler's 1884 poem, he departs from Jean Paul's joyous return to faith, concluding the poem with anxiety and mixed emotions—the freedom of the human soul/will (saucy spark) nevertheless quenched by eternity, a sort of *felix culpa* wherein knowledge has been gained, but innocence lost. The program

to the Second Symphony, however, ends with a redemption and resurrection, much more in line with the tone of spiritual affirmation and bliss at the end of Jean Paul's "Flower Piece." However, even the ambiguous Poem No. 5 has excerpts that suggest the Second Symphony: "Yes! By God!—To live!—To live! . . . Have faith, sweet life, believe!" (Cf. Second Symphony, "O believe, my heart . . . Prepare to live!").

Remarkably, as these brief remarks have sketched out, the subject material of Mahler's early poetry is amplified, not refuted, in his later works. The most significant illustration of a continuing influence is, of course, that Mahler even took two lines from Poem No. 7 ("*Der Nacht blickt mild . . .*") and modified them for use in *Das Lied von der Erde: Alle Sehnsucht will nun träumen, / die müden Menschen gehn heimwärts, / um im Schlaf vergeßnes Glück und Jugend neu zu lernen!*" Much speculation could be made about the changes the older Mahler made to his Poem No. 7, but the fact that he references it directly—after a span of more than twenty years—makes it all the more believable that when writing the finale to the Second Symphony in 1894 (or when

writing the program to the symphony in 1900) Mahler may have looked back to his 1884 poems and, in turn, to the sources that inspired them.

In closing, the study of these poems from 1884 can provide us with insights into the genesis and development of ideas that Mahler would later explore in his music. Mahler's early poems therefore should not be shrugged off as the fling of a flighty young genius, but should be studied for the wealth of information they can offer about how the young Mahler saw the world and ideas around him, as well as how he saw himself—"A saucy spark that broke free from the forge, / Which must (I saw) flicker out, into eternity." The spiritual questions that Mahler was drawn to in the writings of Jean Paul and that he tackled in this early Poem No. 5 would continue to absorb him throughout his life—certainly through to *Das Lied's* last, dying "Ewig" ("Forever") or the final, fading measures of the Ninth, which themselves flicker out, unresolved, into silence.

To view the entire text of the Jean Paul chapter (in English), visit <http://www.geocities.com/jhoeper/preface.html>

Mahler's Poem No. 5 [Kassel, October 1884]	Jean Paul's Siebenkäs (trans. Sharon Jackiw)	Symphony No. 2 Mahler's 1900 program
<p>1) At the <i>close of day</i>, I sat, aloof, forlorn, Thinking of the noon of my life's sun, In bliss unbroken, calmest contemplation, Oh—wildest wishes, to daylight yet unborn.</p> <p>2) Through space as infinite as desert sand There came the friend of those who yearn and pine And <i>freed me from the magic bond of time</i>, I followed him into a dreamy land.</p> <p>3) I saw the world, stripped of all its lies, —Monstrous flames here danced upon the shore And through the dark abyss I spied a door —Eternal life was right before my eyes.</p> <p>4) The <i>sea</i> on which the hellish flames were buoyed, My helpless gaze did founder in and sink, Countless <i>sparks</i> there broke forth from the brink, Rising up and up to vanish in the void.</p> <p>5) Rising, disappearing, no end and no beginning. —I heard a mournful <i>knell</i> of lamentation Such pain—the hidden horror of creation. As though aching to proclaim life's meaning.</p> <p>6) Then, seized with fear, I trembled like a leaf In boundless grief, I wished that I would die. —Oh no!—"Not to perish! Not to die!" Cease to be? Yes! By God!—To live!—To live! . . .</p> <p>I saw it clearly—thou—"rich in mercy!" Thou spoke to me—thy words still ring— In pure compassion, knelt thou by my side! Above I spied a snow-white, feathered wing And saw an angel who down to me didst dive. I knew him well—Have faith, sweet life, believe! Bending down, sweet words of comfort he did bring.</p> <p>Again I sit (and rack my brains) To think up something nice for thee. Look here, you fool! It's a serious thing, human life. In a dream I saw my poor, mute life —A saucy spark that broke free from the forge, Which must (I saw) flicker out, into eternity.</p> <p>(Then I awoke, both laughing and mourning, And was gripped with a terrible yearning.)</p>	<p>"Once on a summer <i>evening</i> I lay on a hillside in the sun and slept. And I dreamed that I awoke in the churchyard... I searched the night sky for the sun... All the graves were open...below me the first tremor of a vast earthquake..."</p> <p>"High up in the vault of the church hung the clock face of <i>Eternity</i>, on which there were no numbers...And now a tall and noble figure descended from the heights to the altar with incomparable pain, and all the dead shouted, 'Christ Jesus! Is there no God?' The figure, 'There is none!...'Howl on discords, shatter the shadows with your shrieks, for He is not."</p> <p>"And when Christ saw the thronging press of the worlds..., how one celestial orb after another poured out its gleaming souls into the sea of the dead, as a firework scatters swimming <i>sparks</i> upon the waves, then he....</p> <p>"[Christ] cried out, 'Stark, silent Void! Cold, eternal Necessity! Mad Chance! Are you known to yourselves?...How alone is everyone in the wide grave of the universe! I have no one beside me but myself—O Father!'"</p> <p>"[Christ] 'You unfortunates, you are not healed after death...no morning comes and no healing touch and no eternal Father! --Mortal beside me, if you still live, worship Him now, or you will have lost Him forever.'...an immeasurably prolonged pealing of <i>bells</i> began to sound the final hour of time . . . when I awoke.</p> <p>"My soul wept with joy that it could worship God again...and between heaven and earth a glad and transitory world stretched its short wings and lived, as I did, in the eyes of our eternal Father; and from all of nature around me streamed tranquil music, like distant evening bells."</p>	<p>"...[I]n this solemn and deeply stirring moment...a voice...chills our heart...a voice...we usually ignore: 'What next? What is life and what is death? Will we live on eternally? Is it all an empty dream or do our life and death have <i>meaning?</i>'"</p> <p>"Once more we must confront terrifying questions.... The voice of the Caller is heard. The end of every living thing has come, the last judgment has come.... The earth trembles, the graves burst open, the dead arise and march forth in endless procession.... The cry for mercy and forgiveness sounds fearful in our ears. The wailing becomes gradually more terrible. . . all consciousness dies as the Eternal Judge approaches. . . . Then God in all His glory comes into sight. A wondrous light strikes us to the heart. All is quiet and blissful."</p>