

Envy and Misinterpretation: Richard Strauss and Mahler's Resistance to the Descriptive Program

by Joseph E. Jones

The sometimes-amiable, sometimes-adverse friendship between Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss lasted from 1887 until Mahler's death in 1911.¹ By the late 1880s, Mahler had achieved greater prestige than Strauss had as a conductor, yet Strauss's early success as a composer, most notably in the genre of the tone poem, earned the Bavarian wider fame. Around the time of Strauss's triumphant premieres of *Don Juan* and *Tod und Verklärung* in 1889, Mahler was securing the first performances of his "Symphonisches Gedicht in zwei Teilen" and *Todtenfeier*. After disappointing premieres, he revised the two works and recast them as symphonies that included movement titles and descriptive programs. Further unsuccessful performances followed, and Mahler grew increasingly wary of sharing the programs of his works.² The so-called "Münchener Erklärung" (Munich Declaration) of 1900 – perhaps his most-cited assault on the usefulness of these descriptions – seemed to react to the negative reception of the symphonies, which stood out in relief when compared to the success of Strauss's tone poems.

Was Mahler's rejection of the program, at least in part, a response to Strauss's compositional authority, and if so, to what degree did Mahler feel the need to differentiate himself from Strauss's musical aesthetic? Commentators have long reflected on Mahler's changing attitude toward his programs, but as Stephen Hefling points out, "It remains uncertain to what extent Mahler's adoption of a program may have been influenced by the success of Strauss's early tone poems."³ Hefling's statement encourages us to reevaluate the influence Strauss's achievements in the genre may have exerted over Mahler's own music, perhaps elevating Strauss's role to level greater than has been acknowledged.

Some insights may be gained from an overview of Mahler's early years, from 1880, when he secured his first conducting appointment, to 1886, when he began intensive work on what would become his First Symphony. While I shall emphasize Mahler's attitude toward his descriptive programs, it is important to consider Strauss's parallel activities in this arena. The following discussion reviews their careers from 1887 to 1900, the period when Mahler worked on his first three symphonies and Strauss completed his eight tone poems.⁴ This sets

¹ Their friendship is documented in nearly one hundred letters first published in *Gustav Mahler, Richard Strauss: Briefwechsel 1888-1911*, ed. Herta Blaukopf (Munich: R Piper, 1980). An English translation by Edmund Jephcott appeared in 1984 published by Faber and Faber, Chicago. Hereafter, I refer exclusively to the English language version.

² Not all the performances were complete failures, and some critics found promising movements. The finale of the First Symphony received the greatest criticism. Recalling the 1891 premiere in Budapest, Friedrich Löhr wrote, "The *attacca* leading into the last movement so alarmed an elegant lady sitting next to me that she dropped everything she was holding onto the floor." Kórnél Ábrányi defended the earlier portions of the symphony as such: "Were the composer to write a fitting finale to the first three movements of his work—his gift for this was proven particularly by the beautiful thematic composition and brilliant instrumentation – then he could produce a symphony which would tower far above the everyday mass-produced pieces." See *Mahler: A Documentary Study*, ed. Kurt Blaukopf (London: Thames & Hudson, 1976), pp. 185-86.

³ Stephen E. Hefling, "Mahler's 'Todtenfeier' and the Problem of Program Music," *19th Century Music* 63/1 (Summer 1988): 45.

⁴ Constantin Floros cites Mahler's own division of his works into three periods, with the first "mature" compositions beginning in 1887; see his

the stage for a reevaluation of Mahler's famous renunciation of programmatic titles in 1900, followed by a comparative look at the "Mitternachtsgedicht" from the Third Symphony and Strauss's tone poem *Also sprach Zarathustra* – works composed concurrently and which both make use of the famous text by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Reexamination of the period up to 1900 indicates that Mahler's reaction against the descriptive program is linked to his rivalry with Strauss, whereas his post-1900 statements suggest greater concern with the comprehension of his narratives by critics and audiences.

Years of Development: 1880 to 1886

Four years his senior, Mahler established his own conducting career somewhat earlier than Strauss. Mahler's first position came at the age of twenty in Bad Hall, a small spa town in Oberösterreich. For the summer season of 1880, he conducted operettas in a small, barn-like structure for audiences of vacationers who visited the area to enjoy the therapeutic waters.⁵ During this time, he completed an early version of *Das klagende Lied*, a work he revised periodically over the next two decades and finally published in 1902. His short engagement in Bad Hall was followed by a directorship at the provincial theater of Laibach (Ljubljana), where he worked from 1881 to 1883. Biographers often note that Mahler began an intense study of the central operatic repertoire during the Laibach years, which later helped him to gain positions of greater prestige. In May 1883, Mahler accepted an important contract as music director at the Royal and Imperial Theater in the central German city of Kassel. He soon became infatuated with a young coloratura named Johanna Richter; their affair inspired the texts for Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (composed from 1883 to 1885), themes from which were later incorporated into the First Symphony.⁶

Mahler soon grew tired of the relentless programming of light opera and frequent conflicts with his superiors. The end of his relationship with Richter compounded these professional tensions, and in early 1884, Mahler contacted a number of opera houses as he sought opportunities to move away. He received an affirmative response from the Neues Stadttheater in Leipzig and was engaged as head conductor on a six-year contract. However, the position was not scheduled to begin until the summer of 1886. Overwhelmingly discontent in Kassel, Mahler contacted Hans von Bülow about the possibility of working with him in Meiningen during the interim. Bülow had no openings, so Mahler was forced to endure a second difficult season in Kassel. In a stroke of remarkable timing, Mahler also landed a lucrative position at the Neues Deutsches Theater in Prague, where he could only conduct from August 1885 to July 1886 due to his prior commitment to Leipzig. While his period in Prague was brief, Mahler enjoyed great successes with Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the first two operas of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, and Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*.⁷ His early compositions from this period were mainly Lieder, most of which did not receive more than a couple of performances.

Despite the frequent career moves and his relatively young age, Mahler quickly established himself as an exciting, knowledgeable conductor. Richard Strauss, on the other hand, enjoyed a number of

Gustav Mahler: Die Symphonien (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1977), pp. 13-14, or the English translation *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies*, trans. Reinhard G. Pauly (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1993), pp. 17-18. In his early study of the symphonies, Paul Bekker also links the beginning of Mahler's first true period to the completion of the First Symphony. See in this regard Paul Bekker, *Gustav Mahlers Sinfonien* (Berlin: Schuster & Loeffler, 1921), p. 23. Thus, this paper considers the period from 1880 to 1886 as Mahler's (and Strauss's) years of development.

⁵ Henry-Louis de La Grange, *Gustav Mahler. Vol. 1* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1973), p. 75.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁷ Peter Franklin, "Gustav Mahler," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edition, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, Vol. 15 (London: Macmillan, 2001): 605.

successful compositional premieres before making his mark as a conductor. Strauss's first musical influence was his father Franz, a celebrated horn player, whose preference for the music of Robert Schumann, Felix Mendelssohn, and Johannes Brahms is felt in the young composer's early works. Before developing an interest in opera, Strauss devoted his compositional energies to Lieder and as with Mahler, he returned over the course of his entire career to this genre. Strauss also wrote important instrumental compositions at this time such as the Serenade for Winds and the Violin Concerto, which premiered at Berlin in 1882. While in Berlin for these performances, Strauss came under the spell of Bülow who premiered his Serenade with the Meiningen orchestra. Impressed by Strauss's potential, Bülow commissioned the Suite in B-flat for Winds, with which Strauss made his conducting debut in Munich in November 1884.⁸ The following year, Strauss's Symphony in F received performances in Europe and America, and Bülow conducted the first Horn Concerto in Meiningen.⁹ Strauss later referred to this period as his "Brahmsschwärmerei" (Brahms enthusiasm) – an apt description of his style of this period.

In October 1885, Bülow suddenly left his position at Meiningen to go to Hamburg and appointed Strauss as his successor; the competition to replace him had included Mahler (who coveted the opportunity to work with Bülow), Felix Weingartner, and Jean Louis Nicodé. After Bülow's departure, Strauss grew increasingly attracted to Liszt's symphonic poems and Wagner's operas (forbidden fruit under his father's supervision); this took place largely through the influence of his friend Alexander Ritter. Work on the *Burleske* for piano and orchestra spanned Strauss's Meiningen period and reflected the influence of both Brahms and Wagner, albeit in a parodistic manner. Strauss stayed in Meiningen for just six months before accepting the position of third conductor at the Munich Hofoper – a move that allowed him to return to his family and childhood friends. Strauss had thus gained enviable experience with Bülow in Meiningen, but Mahler's experience from his more independent positions earned him wider recognition as a conductor. By August 1885, both men began new positions that would further their fame as conductors and inspire their first successful compositions.

The First Three Symphonies: August 1886 to 1900

At the very time Mahler was establishing himself as a conductor, Strauss wrote a series of works that made him one of the foremost composers of the day. Before starting in Munich, Strauss traveled to Italy and was inspired to compose the multi-movement "symphonic fantasy" *Aus Italien*.¹⁰ This effort was the first of many tone poems he would compose in the following decade. Although he worked at one of the most important opera houses in Germany, Strauss's subordinate position as third conductor allowed him more time than ever to compose. He finished three more tone poems while in Munich: *Macbeth* (1886, revised in 1900), *Don Juan* (1888), and *Tod und Verklärung* (1888-89), none of which premiered during the first Munich period. Strauss also composed a number of Lieder on texts by Adolf Friedrich von Schack and in 1887 began the long process of composing his first opera *Guntram*, which was inspired by his friendship with Ritter and the growing interest in Wagner and Liszt.¹¹

Mahler began his new position in Leipzig during the summer of 1886. The recently rebuilt Stadttheater featured the famous Gewandhaus Orchestra and world-class singers.¹² His reputation as a Wagner interpreter spread through his successful performances of the *Ring* cycle, which he shared with the lead conductor Arthur Nikisch.¹³ In the

fall of 1887, Mahler tackled what became his first compositional success – the completion of Carl Maria von Weber's unfinished opera *Die Drei Pintos*.¹⁴ Although the popularity of the opera dwindled following its premiere, performances across Europe won Mahler both name recognition and a financial windfall. With the completion of *Die Drei Pintos*, Mahler began three ultimately more important projects: songs from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, his yet-unnamed "Symphonisches Gedicht," and a funeral march entitled *Todtenfeier*.¹⁵ As with the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, a romantic affair inspired the latter two works. Ironically, Mahler had become involved with the wife of Carl Maria von Weber's grandson, who had given Mahler the sketches of *Die Drei Pintos*. Mahler completed the "Symphonisches Gedicht" in April 1888, but it proved to be just the first of several versions. A chronology of the genesis of the first four symphonies is provided in the following table.

Chronology of Mahler's first four symphonies

1884	Begins "Symphonisches Gedicht in Zwei Teilen," becomes the First Symphony
1885	Continues work on "Symphonisches Gedicht"
1886	Continues work on "Symphonisches Gedicht"
1887	Continues work on "Symphonisches Gedicht"
1888	Completes "Symphonisches Gedicht" Begins work on the <i>Todtenfeier</i>
1889	"Symphonisches Gedicht" premieres in Budapest Work on parts of the Second Symphony
1890	Work on parts of the Second Symphony
1891	Asks Schott Verlag to publish <i>Todtenfeier</i> as a symphonic poem Work on parts of the Second Symphony
1892	Work on parts of the Second Symphony
1893	Revises "Titan" ("Symphonisches Gedicht"); performance in Hamburg Works on the Andante and Scherzo of the Second Symphony Minor work on what would become the Third Symphony
1894	Continues revising "Titan"; performance in Weimar <i>Todtenfeier</i> becomes first movement of the re-orchestrated Second Symphony Begins composing last five movements of the Third Symphony
1895	Continues revising "Titan" Continues last five movements of the Third Symphony
1896	Drops the title "Titan"; First Symphony performed in Berlin Composes first movement and completes the Third Symphony
1899	Begins the first two movements of the Fourth Symphony
1900	Re-orchestrates and completes the Fourth Symphony
1901	Revises the Fourth Symphony Begins the first three movements of the Fifth Symphony

In October 1887, Mahler (age twenty-seven) met Strauss (age twenty-three) who was in Leipzig to conduct a performance of his Symphony in F minor with the Gewandhaus orchestra.¹⁶ Recalling their first meeting to Bülow, Strauss wrote, "I made a new, very delightful

⁸ Bryan Gilliam, *The Life of Richard Strauss* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 24.

⁹ Bryan Gilliam, "Richard Strauss," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edition, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, Vol. 24 (London: Macmillan, 2001): 498.

¹⁰ Gilliam, *The Life of Richard Strauss*, pp. 39-40.

¹¹ Gilliam, "Richard Strauss," p. 499.

¹² Franklin, p. 605.

¹³ La Grange, *Gustav Mahler. Vol. 1*, p. 149.

¹⁴ In the introduction to the critical edition, James L. Zychowicz offers a detailed history of the opera's genesis, spanning from Weber's initial sketches in 1820 through Mahler's reconstruction in the late 1880s. See his *Die drei Pintos: Based on Sketches and Original Music of Carl Maria von Weber*, Part 1 (Madison: A-R Editions, 2000), pp. ix-xx.

¹⁵ In *Gustav Mahler. Vol. 1*, p. 868, La Grange points out that Mahler himself sometimes referred to the work as a symphony and other times as a symphonic poem.

¹⁶ Herta Blaukopf, p. 107.

acquaintance in Herr Mahler, who seemed to me a highly intellectual musician and conductor; one of the few modern conductors who knows about tempo modification, and who in general had excellent views, particularly on Wagner's tempi. Mahler's arrangement of Weber's *Die Drei Pintos* seems to me a masterpiece.¹⁷ However, Bülow's evaluation of the new opera was quite the opposite and Strauss somewhat embarrassingly retracted his glowing endorsement.

Arguments with the management at the Stadttheater led to Mahler's dismissal from Leipzig in 1888. He was soon appointed director of the Royal Hungarian Opera in Budapest, which was one of the most important theaters in the Empire and Mahler's most important position to date. He was scheduled to begin in October and spent the foregoing summer unsuccessfully trying to schedule the premiere of his symphony. In his first extant letter to Strauss, Mahler inquired about a possible performance in Munich, but the premiere was not to take place until November 1891 in Budapest.¹⁸ The work was presented under the title "Symphonisches Gedicht in zwei Teilen," with each movement labeled only with its tempo marking rather than a descriptive title that would convey an explicit program. Although Mahler shared his programmatic narrative with a local newspaper in advance, he refrained from including any such description in the concert program. Critical reception of the work was largely unforbearing, and at least one newspaper blasted Mahler specifically for not providing his audience with the necessary commentary to help them understand it.¹⁹ According to Natalie Bauer-Lechner, Mahler said after the premiere, "My friends avoided me afterwards; no one dared to mention the performance or the work to me, and I went about like a leper or an outlaw."²⁰ Bitterly disappointed, he spent the subsequent months buried in the *Wunderhorn Lieder*, a preoccupation that resulted in various pieces including the song "Es sungen drei Engel," which Mahler planned to use in his Third Symphony.²¹

During this same period, Strauss accepted the post of Kapellmeister in Weimar in 1889, which he held until 1894. Although he did not compose any new tone poems during these years, it was during this period that the premieres of *Macbeth*, *Don Juan*, and *Tod und Verklärung* took place; the latter two works in particular brought Strauss widespread fame and earned him a reputation as Germany's leading modernist. Weimar offered Strauss his first opportunities to conduct many important operas in the repertoire including Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, which he performed uncritically in 1892.²² Strauss also built a relationship with Cosima Wagner and Bayreuth through recurring conducting engagements at the summer festivals. Instead of tone poems, Strauss spent much of his compositional energy on his first opera, *Guntram*, which he completed in 1893. After a six-year period of gestation, the work premiered in Weimar to rather disastrous results.

Meanwhile, mounting political tensions in Hungary led Mahler to seek a new post in Hamburg, where he became Kapellmeister in March 1891. Building on his experience in Leipzig and Budapest, Mahler became increasingly famous for his fine interpretations of Mozart and Wagner, and conducted his first *Tristan und Isolde* shortly after arriving in Hamburg. In his first year, he composed large portions of the

¹⁷ Hans von Bülow – Richard Strauss: *Briefwechsel*, ed. Willi Schuh and Franz Trenner, trans. A. Gishford (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1955), p. 54.

¹⁸ Mahler wrote this letter in August 1888. See Herta Blaukopf, p. 19.

¹⁹ La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*. Vol. 1, p. 206.

²⁰ Natalie Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, trans. Dika Newlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 161. For the most recent German-language edition, see *Gustav Mahler in den Erinnerungen von Natalie Bauer-Lechner* (Hamburg: K. D. Wagner, 1984); subsequent references are made to the English edition.

²¹ La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*. Vol. 1, p. 250.

²² Gilliam, *The Life of Richard Strauss*, p. 56.

Wunderhorn Lieder and completed the *Todtenfeier*, which he intended to publish as a symphonic poem. An often-cited meeting with Bülow took place in September when Mahler shared his new programmatic work. Mahler recounted the event in a letter to Fritz Löhr: "When I played my 'Todtenfeier' to him, he became quite hysterical with horror, declaring that compared with my piece *Tristan* was a Haydn symphony, and went on like a madman."²³ Mahler also shared his disappointment with Strauss: "As for my scores, dear friend, I am on the point of locking them away forever. You cannot imagine the constant rejections that I experience!"²⁴

Mahler spent 1893 orchestrating the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* and recasting his "Symphonisches Gedicht in Zwei Teilen" as a symphony entitled "Titan." In October, the work received its second performance in Hamburg with the full title "Titan: eine Tondichtung in Symphonieform," complete with descriptive movement titles and a program.²⁵ Strauss helped arrange a third performance in Weimar for the Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein festival in May 1894.²⁶ Unlike at the Hamburg performance just seven months earlier, Mahler refused to supply the Weimar audience with the programmatic details of his symphony, writing, "Such technical remarks bewilder the public, which tends to read rather than listen."²⁷ While the performance received "rather weak applause and much booing," Mahler still considered it a partial success.²⁸

Also in the summer of 1894, Mahler revisited the *Todtenfeier*, which had still not been performed. Abandoning the idea of the work as a tone poem, he envisioned the funeral march as the opening of what would become his massive Second Symphony. Mahler composed the second and third movements in the summer, and by the end of the year, incorporated the *Wunderhorn* song "Urlicht" for alto voice as the fourth movement.²⁹ He added a fifth movement that featured Klopstock's poem *Aufersteh'n* ("Resurrection"), which he had heard sung at Bülow's funeral in March,³⁰ and finished orchestrating the fourth and fifth movements in the fall.³¹ With the organizational aid of

²³ Gustav Mahler, *Briefe: 1879-1911*, ed. Herta Blaukopf (Wien: P. Zsolnay, 1996), No. 107. The English translation appears in Gustav Mahler, *Selected Letters of Gustav Mahler*, ed. Knud Martner, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 139.

²⁴ La Grange cites Mahler's comment to Strauss from an uncatalogued letter dated October 1891. See *Gustav Mahler*. Vol. 1, p. 244.

²⁵ The complete program appears in Hermann Danuser, *Gustav Mahler und seine Zeit* (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1991), pp. 135-36.

²⁶ The *Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein* was established in 1861 to encourage performances of new music—at first primarily the works of Liszt—although they did not restrict themselves to German composers. Strauss became president in 1901 and helped champion performances of a number of Mahler's works. See James Deaville, "Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edition, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, Vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 2001): 403-04.

²⁷ Gustav Mahler, *Briefe: 1879-1911*, No. 134. The English translation appears in La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*. Vol. 1, pp. 298-299.

²⁸ La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*. Vol. 1, p. 300.

²⁹ The third movement incorporates melodic material from another *Wunderhorn* song, "Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt."

³⁰ La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*. Vol. 1, p. 294.

³¹ Due to its relationship with Klopstock's text and the descriptions Mahler shared with others, the symphony became known as "the Resurrection." A truncated version of the program he revealed to Bauer-Lechner follows: "The first movement depicts the titanic struggles of a mighty being still caught in the toils of this world; grappling with life and the fate to which he must succumb—his death. The second and third movements, Andante and Scherzo, are episodes

Strauss, Mahler conducted the first three movements of the Second Symphony in Berlin in March 1895 to mixed reviews, and the first full performance followed in December. The premiere was Mahler's first great success, although perhaps due to the symphony's length, many subsequent performances featured just the first or the first three movements.

While Mahler toiled on his symphony in the fall of 1894, Strauss married Pauline de Ahna and shortly after returned to Munich to assume the position of Kapellmeister. He remained there for four seasons, and as with his first period in Munich, he composed primarily tone poems and Lieder. The failure of *Guntram* discouraged him from composing another opera until 1900 when he completed *Feuersnot*. Instead, Strauss followed up the success of *Don Juan* and *Tod und Verklärung*, with *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche* (a subject he considered setting as an opera but completed as a tone poem in 1895), *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1895-96), *Don Quixote* (1896-97), and *Ein Heldenleben* (1897-98). Strauss also expanded his conducting engagements across Europe, including a season with the Berlin Philharmonia Orchestra that laid the groundwork for his twenty-year tenure at the Hofoper beginning in 1898.

Mahler also spent time in the German capital during this period. In spring of 1895, an important performance of his First Symphony took place in Berlin, with the "Titan" title and the movement descriptions suppressed. The performance was unsuccessful, and Mahler spent the summer composing what would become his longest work – the six-movement Third Symphony. As was the case with his first two symphonies, Mahler envisioned a specific programmatic framework during the genesis of the Third. The third and fifth movements incorporated the *Wunderhorn Lieder* "Ablösung im Sommer" and "Es sungen drei Engel," and the fourth movement drew on Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, as will be discussed below. In a period of great compositional productivity, Mahler also finished the sixth movement "Was mir die Liebe erzählt" by the end of the summer. He considered using his setting of "Das himmlische Leben" as a seventh movement ("Was mir das Kind erzählt"), which eventually served as the Finale of the Fourth Symphony.³² He orchestrated the latter five movements in June 1896, and by the end of that summer, he tackled the first movement. In addition to the movement titles listed here, Mahler wrote detailed descriptions of their programmatic content in his letters, which he also shared with newspapers and prospective concert venues. A number of concerts in 1896 and 1897 featured extracted movements, but the first complete performance of the symphony waited until the Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein festival in 1902 at Krefeld arranged by Strauss. In a letter to Alma, Mahler emphasized Strauss's active role in ensuring the concert's success: "[He] walked right up to the stage and applauded ostentatiously, thus instantly sealing the movement's success. As further movements followed, the audience seemed even more deeply moved. Strauss took a progressively passive part in the proceedings and by the close he was nowhere to be seen."³³ Indeed, the concert was received with enthusiasm and Mahler's refusal to circulate his descriptive program appeared to pay off.

Mahler's path to the Vienna Hofoper is complex and extends well beyond the scope of this paper. He officially converted to Catholicism

from the life of the fallen hero. The 'Urlicht' represents the soul's striving and questioning attitude towards God and its own immortality. While the first three movements are narrative in character, in the last movement everything is inward experience. It begins with the death-shriek of the Scherzo. And now the resolution of the terrible problem of life—redemption." See Bauer-Lechner, pp. 43-44.

³² La Grange offers a table detailing two distinct programmatic schemes Mahler considered for the Third Symphony; see his *Gustav Mahler. Vol. 1*, p. 328.

³³ Gustav Mahler, *Letters to His Wife*, ed. Henry-Louis de La Grange and Günter Weiss (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 105. The original German-language edition appeared under the title *Ein Glück ohne Ruh'. Die Briefe Gustav Mahlers an Alma. Erste Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin: Siedler, 1995).

in February 1897 as a necessary prerequisite and officially began his duties as director in September. At the outset, his authority with the music of Mozart and Wagner immediately earned favor with his audiences and critics. By the end of the decade, his own first three symphonies as well as the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* had been published, and he then directed his compositional energies toward the Fourth (1900) and Fifth Symphonies (1901-02). Prior to his arrival, Vienna's longstanding reputation as a European center for opera had been in jeopardy, but Mahler's revitalization of the standard repertoire raised the Hofoper to new levels. Meanwhile, Strauss's comparable position in Berlin began in the summer of 1898. After achieving widespread success with his tone poems, Strauss returned to opera with *Feuersnot* (1900-01) as well as the non-explicitly programmatic orchestral work *Symphonia domestica* (1902).

Die Münchener Erklärung

After more than a decade of questioning the value of the descriptive programs for his symphonic works, Mahler appeared to reach a crossroads in the year 1900. His outspoken reaction to explicitly programmatic music has long interested observers, due in no small part to the "Münchener Erklärung" in October 1900. For the first fully successful performance of the Second Symphony, Mahler disallowed the well-known programmatic descriptions from the concert, which took place at the Münchner Gesellschaft für moderne Tonkunst. La Grange writes that Mahler was disgusted when he discovered an old program still in circulation, because he wanted to distance himself from the "enthusiasts" of descriptive music, who in Mahler's view "commit one of the biggest musical and artistic errors."³⁴ Meeting with a group of supportive friends after the concert, Ludwig Schiedermair recalled Mahler's now-famous words: "Away with programmes that arouse false notions. Leave the audience to its own thoughts on the work being performed; do not force it to read while the music is being played; do not teach it to be prejudiced! If a composer has imparted to his listeners the feelings that flowed through him, his goal is attained. The language of sound has come close to words, but has revealed infinitely more than they can express."³⁵

Commentators regularly fail to take stock that this "quote" is only Schiedermair's memory of what Mahler said, and not necessarily his exact words. Even from those who acknowledge this situation, there has been surprisingly little skepticism. Too often, writers have used the statement to make facile generalizations about Mahler's attitude toward his programmatic descriptions. For instance, Herta Blaukopf neatly packages four crucial years of Mahler's development on this issue with the casual observation, "He started in 1896 with the suppression of the title 'Titan' and all the subtitles of the First Symphony, and ended in 1900 with a radical renunciation of programmes and all literary auxiliaries."³⁶ For Floros and others, the label "Münchener Erklärung" essentially serves as a catchphrase that falsely implies to the reader an event of unequalled consequence. Actually, Mahler made similar comments years before and after October 1900.

While he often shared his programs in an effort to explain his works to critics or to help make their performance more likely, Mahler always objected to them as definitive explanations of his music. Reflecting this attitude, which developed in the mid-1890s, Mahler writes in a letter to Otto Lessmann, "Acquaintance with and understanding of a musical work must be acquired through detailed study, and the more profound the work, the longer and more difficult the process."³⁷ After his supposed renunciation of programs in 1900, Mahler still allowed them to circulate (or was powerless to prevent it), and even offered on occasion to provide additional commentary to concert organizers. La

³⁴ La Grange, *Gustav Mahler. Vol. 2. Vienna: the Years of Challenge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 596.

³⁵ Ludwig Schiedermair, *Gustav Mahler* (Leipzig: H. Seemann, 1900), p. 13f. The English translation appears in Herta Blaukopf, p. 127.

³⁶ Herta Blaukopf, p. 122.

³⁷ Mahler, *Briefe: 1879-1911*, No. 127.

Grange documents an instance in December 1901 where Mahler “carefully devised a new, detailed programme” for audiences of the Second Symphony in Dresden.³⁸ While Mahler refrained from publishing a program for the Fourth Symphony, James Zychowicz points out that the composer revealed descriptive elements of the work to Bauer-Lechner and Bruno Walter.³⁹ Not until the premiere of the Fifth Symphony in 1904 – four years after his “radical renunciation” of programs – did Mahler altogether stop sharing his programmatic descriptions.

Floros provides an overview of Mahler’s commentary on the program by quoting a number of Mahler’s letters from 1893 to 1906. While he does turn a critical eye toward Schiedermaier’s remembrance, Floros supports the notion that 1900 was Mahler’s “Wendepunkt” (turning point) with regard to narrative programs.⁴⁰ He also engages with Mahler’s motives for distancing himself from programmatic music at that time. According to Floros, one reason, which Mahler stated numerous times in his letters, was the fear that his audiences would misinterpret them.⁴¹ In a letter to Bauer-Lechner, Mahler emphatically refuses to circulate his program for the Fourth Symphony, because the critics “are already so corrupted by program music that they are no longer capable of understanding a work simply as a piece of music!”⁴² Floros also refers to pressure by conservative critics like Eduard Hanslick who favored the absolute music of Brahms and opposed the growing Wagner Society in Vienna of which Mahler was a member.⁴³ Perhaps Mahler, who was still fairly new at the Hofoper, considered de-emphasizing the explicit descriptions of his early symphonies in order to gain favor with the critical press.

The final reason Floros cites, which deserves greater attention, was Mahler’s desire to distance himself artistically from Strauss. As we have seen, Mahler faced disappointing performances of his early works for over a decade. After youthful experimentation composing Lieder, Mahler devised his first large-scale orchestral works as tone poems, all the while fully aware of Strauss’s achievements in the genre. The two exchanged scores on a number of occasions, and as Blaukopf argues, Mahler studied Strauss’s manuscripts “not only to learn from them, but also, no doubt, to mark himself off from them, [and] to preserve his own sound.”⁴⁴ Despite their friendship, they competed both for conducting positions and for compositional fame.

It is entirely plausible that Mahler felt envious of Strauss’s nearly immediate success with his tone poems and of his position with Bülow in Meiningen. In a letter to Max Marschalk from 1896, Mahler writes, “Take the Strauss case! They [the critics] now proclaim with mighty complacency that the days of unrecognized genius are over. For behold: hardly has he appeared than we trumpet his praises! Hurrah: from now on geniuses will be paid forthwith in cash!”⁴⁵ It is even possible that he was motivated to recast the two symphonic poems as

symphonies in order to strike out on a new path. However, they fared no better at first; more likely, Mahler’s reworking of their musical content – not his decision to strip their programmatic description – ultimately led to the symphonies’ success. With regard to the programs of the first three symphonies, La Grange argues that “gradually the music of Strauss, and of all the *neudeutsch* school for that matter, turned him against all attempts at [writing] descriptive music.”⁴⁶ Thus, Mahler broke away from Strauss both in genre and in his approach to conveying the meaning of his music to the audience. However, by the time Mahler firmly retracted his programs, which as we have seen was a number of years after his “Münchener Erklärung,” Strauss had already ceased composing tone poems and had returned to the genre of opera. As a result, Mahler’s “nach-Erklärung” stance on the descriptive program was surely less about his possible envy of Strauss than his fear that others would misunderstand the meaning of his music. A comparison of Mahler’s Third Symphony with Strauss’s *Also sprach Zarathustra* anticipates this change in Mahler’s position and highlights their different approaches to programmatic music.

Responses to Nietzsche:

Mahler’s Third Symphony and Strauss’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra*

In August 1896, Mahler and Strauss each completed a composition that responded to Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1885). Strauss decided to base his tone poem freely on the book (“frei nach Friedr. Nietzsche”), dividing it into nine sections with titles drawn from Nietzsche’s chapter titles.⁴⁷ In the program notes for the tone poem’s November 1896 premiere, Strauss writes:

I did not intend to write philosophical music or to portray in music Nietzsche’s great work. I wished to convey by means of music an idea of the development of the human race from its origin, through the various phases of its development, religious and scientific, up to Nietzsche’s idea of the superman. The whole symphonic poem is intended as an homage to Nietzsche’s genius, which found its greatest expression in his book *Also sprach Zarathustra*.⁴⁸

Strauss’s printed score even included the opening lines of Nietzsche’s book. Central to Strauss’s conceptualization of the work on the largest level is the tensional, vain struggle of “humanity,” reflected by the tonal center B, to reach “nature” or “the universe,” as represented by the tonal center C. From the immediate portrayal of the sunrise, Strauss proceeds to depict the events of Zarathustra’s journey through musical metaphor. For instance, he conveys the religiosity of the masses in “Von der Hinterweltlern” through the evocation of the Latin *Credo*, complete with somber orchestration that features an organ. In “Von der Wissenschaft,” Strauss embodies “science” with a fugue that blends the tonalities of B and C, implying that the path from humanity to the beyond is through science (and implicitly, not through conventional religion). Nietzsche’s “Tanzlied” for human revelry is incarnated as a Viennese waltz, and in the final section, the “Nachtwandlerlied,” Strauss signifies the night watchman’s warning at midnight with the striking of bells.

Contemporaneous with Strauss’s project, Mahler began work on the fourth movement of his Third Symphony, setting the text of Zarathustra’s famous “Mitternachtsgedicht” (Midnight Song) for alto soloist with the apt title “Was mir die Nacht erzählt” (What the night tells me). This is the climax of Nietzsche’s book, where Zarathustra reflects on his interactions with a humanity that is deep in woe (“Tief ist ihr Weh”), and yet still longs for the joys of eternity (“Doch all’ Lust will Ewigkeit”). According to Bauer-Lechner, Mahler absorbed Nietzsche’s writings in 1895 and even toyed with naming his Third Symphony “The Gay Science” or “My Gay Science,” which would have quoted the title

³⁸ La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*. Vol. 2, p. 523.

³⁹ Zychowicz identifies strong programmatic and thematic relationships with the first three symphonies and reminds us that Mahler viewed the first four as “eine durchaus in sich geschlossene Tetralogie” (a perfectly self-contained tetralogy). See James L. Zychowicz, *Mahler’s Fourth Symphony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 24-25 and 31-34. Mahler’s own comments on this relationship appear in Bauer-Lechner, p. 154.

⁴⁰ Constantin Floros, *Gustav Mahler I* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1977), p. 22.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴² Bauer-Lechner, p. 184.

⁴³ Floros, *Gustav Mahler I*, pp. 32-33.

⁴⁴ Herta Blaukopf, p. 122.

⁴⁵ Mahler, *Briefe: 1879-1911*, No. 200. The English translation appears in Herta Blaukopf, p. 127.

⁴⁶ La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*. Vol. 2, p. 521.

⁴⁷ Richard Strauss, *Richard Strauss Edition: Tondichtungen II* (Frankfurt: C. F. Peters, 1999), Band XIX.

⁴⁸ Denis Wilde, *The Development of Melody in the Tone Poems of Richard Strauss* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 1990), pp. 153-54.

of Nietzsche's preceding book.⁴⁹ The citation is unique for Mahler, as the other texts from his early symphonies are taken from the *Wunderhorn* poems, including two other movements of the Third.⁵⁰ Floros points out that Mahler was already at odds with Nietzsche's ideals by 1901, but there is no evidence of what he thought of Nietzsche at the time of symphony's composition. Despite the lack of written evidence from Mahler, Floros convincingly argues that the meaning of the Third is diametrically opposed to *Also Sprach Zarathustra* with its pronouncement that "God is dead," because Mahler "believed strongly in metaphysics, the transcendental, and in the existence of God."⁵¹

While there is a substantial commentary on Strauss's and Mahler's use of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* and the extent that they incorporate his philosophy, much is based on hermeneutic analysis.⁵² In short, the main difference between their respective settings is that Mahler utilizes Zarathustra's text as one element of his symphony's program, while Strauss uses the whole of Nietzsche's book as the narrative framework for his tone poem, thus paying homage to a philosophy he finds interesting by "translating Nietzsche's thoughts and feelings into music."⁵³ Nietzsche remains relatively unchanged in Strauss's setting, while Mahler's descriptive program (which he later suppresses) incorporates the "Mitternachtsgedicht" into a broader narrative. Disinterested in Nietzsche's idea of "eternal recurrence,"⁵⁴ Mahler appropriates the notions of joy superseding pain, and "tiefe Ewigkeit" (deep eternity), while his affirmative fifth movement "What the Angels Tell Me" endorses a conventional narrative of Christian resurrection that Nietzsche never would have endorsed. Mahler's nuanced, yet independent appropriation of Nietzsche posed a significant challenge to his critics and audiences, so much so that by the premiere in 1902, he refused to circulate it. However, when Mahler conceived on the work in the mid-1890s, the program was both useful as a creative framework and in vogue with Strauss's tone poems.

Envy, Then Misinterpretation

In many instances where Mahler questioned the value of sharing his descriptive programs, he focused on Strauss as a counter-example. In a letter to Bruno Walter in 1897, he writes, "You have very aptly characterized my goals in contrast to those of Strauss. You are right that my music attains to a programme as its final intellectual elucidation, whereas in Strauss the programme is given from the outset as a task to be performed."⁵⁵ Four years later, he writes to Alma, "I had a very earnest talk with Strauss, in which I tried to show him the cul-de-sac he is in. Unfortunately he didn't really understand me. He's such a dear fellow, and he takes a really touching attitude

towards me. But where I have a clear view of him, all he can see of me is the pedestal on which I stand—hence he can make nothing of me."⁵⁶ While commentators such as Floros and La Grange cite these letters in their assessment of Strauss's influence, they understate the increasingly condescending manner with which Mahler addressed his friend and rival. In their own time and still today, Mahler is characterized as philosophical, intellectual, and troubled, while Strauss is often described as pragmatic, goal-oriented, and grounded. Peter Franklin contends that Mahler "tended to play the idealist to Strauss's worldly materialist, in their own understanding if not also in that of the wider public."⁵⁷ Blaukopf suggests that Mahler may have even felt "morally superior" in his disregard of practical concerns such as moneymaking and the aesthetic tastes of his audience.⁵⁸ Strauss's advocates perpetuate these characterizations; Matthew Boyden writes, "Strauss was too much the bourgeois and too concerned with the success and prosperity of his music to move very far from the interests and appetites of his ticket-buying public. Strauss cared nothing for aesthetic movements or ideologies."⁵⁹ Mahler and Strauss both respected and sometimes condemned one another on professional and on personal levels, but Mahler more strongly criticized Strauss's apparent "misdirection" as a composer of explicitly programmatic works.

As Mahler's disdain for Strauss grew more apparent in his letters, he became increasingly opposed to sharing his descriptive programs. This culminated in the first few years of the 1900s, after which Mahler focused intensely on the probability that audiences and critics would misunderstand his narratives, and therefore, his music. In 1900, he wrote to Schiedermaier, "What I yearn for, to be understood, has rarely been my lot. Least of all by people who have had no close connection with me and who have had to derive all their knowledge of me from those hieroglyphs called scores I have provided them with."⁶⁰ Regardless of Mahler's decision to withhold the programs of his early symphonies, they continued to disseminate during his lifetime. Since the programs formed an important aspect of Mahler's creative process by providing him with a narrative and ideological framework, they offer valuable perspective on these rich, vastly extended compositions. Thus, as La Grange argues, even though Mahler would have preferred otherwise, "they should be known and quoted today for what they are, regardless of whether or not they are indispensable to a full understanding of the works."⁶¹

Strauss's Enduring Reputation

Beyond the self-deprecating comment that Richard Strauss made about himself – "I may not be a first-rate composer, but I *am* a first-class second-rate composer," other composers felt otherwise. For Percy Grainger, Strauss was "a human being of the great order." Debussy once stated "I can assure you that there is sunshine in the music of Strauss. . . it is not possible to withstand his irresistible domination." One anecdote has the elderly Strauss confronting American soldiers in 1945 on the grounds of his home in Garmisch. When he said he was the composer of *Der Rosenkavalier*, the men left his home undisturbed.

⁴⁹ Bauer-Lechner, p. 35.

⁵⁰ For this reason, Mahler's first four symphonic compositions are often referred to as "The Wunderhorn Symphonies."

⁵¹ Floros, *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies*, p. 91.

⁵² See in this regard John Daverio, *Nineteenth-Century Music and the German Romantic Ideology* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993) and Zoltan Roman, "Nietzsche 'via' Mahler, Delius and Strauss: A new look at some fin-de-siècle 'philosophical music'," *Nietzsche-Studien*, 19/29 (1990): 292-311.

⁵³ Herta Blaukopf, p. 120.

⁵⁴ "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!" Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 341.

⁵⁵ Mahler, *Briefe: 1879-1911*, No. 206. The English translation appears in Blaukopf, pp. 122-23.

⁵⁶ *Gustav Mahler: Letters to His Wife*, p. 76.

⁵⁷ Peter Franklin, "Strauss and His Contemporaries: Critical Perspectives," in *The Richard Strauss Companion*, ed. Mark-Daniel Schmid (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), p. 37.

⁵⁸ Herta Blaukopf, p. 131.

⁵⁹ Matthew Boyden, *Richard Strauss* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999), pp. 125 and 209.

⁶⁰ Ludwig Schiedermaier, *Musikalische Begegnungen* (Cologne: Staufien, 1948), p. 46. The English translation appears in La Grange, *Gustav Mahler. Vol. 2*, p. 523.

⁶¹ La Grange, *Gustav Mahler. Vol. 2*, p. 526.