

Featured Article

The Conductor Gustav Mahler: A Psychological Study

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No attempt (as far as I know) has yet been made at a scientific analysis of orchestral conducting in the light of modern psychology. There are, to be sure, textbooks on conducting, but they teach only the technicalities of the profession. There are also histories of conducting, but they are, in the main, mere records of development of those technicalities. As for the numerous biographies of outstanding conductors – these are hardly more than fictional life-stories, records of triumphs and struggles, eulogies or arraignments of the individual art of their subject, achieved by citations from newspaper criticisms, edited and colored by the personal bias of the biographer. In short, there exists no scientifically reliable description of the artistic nature of any conductor's works.

Almost twenty year ago, in the course of a short biography, I tried to trace the development of the personality of a typical operatic conductor. This juvenile attempt, however, stopped at a point where the real task should have begun: the psychological analysis of conducting in general and of Lohse's in particular.

I shall now try to make up for that omission of long ago by analyzing Gustav Mahler's art of conducting.

Some will ask, "Why Gustav Mahler? Why not Toscanini or Stokowski?" Gustav Mahler the conductor is unknown to the present generation, for he left no gramophone records of any of his interpretations, while Toscanini and Stokowski are still here to testify to the relative accuracy of any analysis of their conducting art.

True; yet while Toscanini and Stokowski are with us, Mahler, the conductor, stands aloof in the distance, a safer historical subject, because he is free from the distortions of partisanship still inevitable with the other two. Besides, Mahler's published correspondence is a fund of evidence, a veritable revelation of his approach toward music. His compositions, his method of scoring are incontrovertible facts illuminating his mentality as conductor. Finally, and perhaps most important and intriguing of all, Mahler's career as a conductor reached its peak just when the European mentality was passing through the crises between Victorian bourgeois-individualism and twentieth century mass-mindedness.

Philosophically, Mahler was an idealist in the days when Schiller's individualistic idealism was being supplanted by Hegel's and his school's absolute idealism; that world outlook which later degenerated into a collectivistic dogmatism out of which, in turn, sprang all the pseudo-philosophic "isms". Therefore, Specht's elaboration on the following anecdote is, at best, a sorry joke indeed. At the close of a concert featuring Mahler's Third Symphony, Richard Strauss, who had conducted, said jestingly, "During the first movement I had a vision of interminable battalions of workers marching in the (socialistic) May-Parade at the Prater." Quite obtusely Specht adds, he is sure that Mahler, had he heard this Straussian bon-mot, would have exclaimed:

"That's it! I didn't know it myself until this moment, but that's it!" (Strange! Because the printed score of this first movement bears the programmatic title: "Pan awakens, summer marches in.")

What a hopeless misconception on the part of Specht to imply that Mahler hijacked Marxist music from Kurt Weills and Hanns Eislers before they were born. He has literally made "Capital" of the Absolute. That Mahler the idealist should have portrayed in tone masses of proletarians marching for higher wages and shorter hours is simply unthinkable. Mahler's marches (like Beethoven's) celebrate the progress of no man-made factors. In his music it is only the march itself that marches. To Mahler, whose entire boyhood was spent in the atmosphere of a military barracks, the march pulsation was a general human expression, to use his own favorite term, a "sound of nature" – *Naturlaut*. "It cannot be denied," he wrote, "that our music involves the 'purely human' (all that belongs to it, including 'Thinking') (sic!) ... If we wish to make music, we must not think of painting, poetic imagery, and description. By making music one expresses only the integral (i. e. the feeling, thinking, breathing, suffering) "human being". To him music is beyond all that is matter-of-fact. "The realm of music starts where the dark, shadowy feelings assume full sway, at the threshold of that 'other world', where things are no longer bounded by time and space". So thought the mind that called Schopenhauer's explanation of music (as expressing "the essence of all things") the best definition of music; the mind which contended that the musician lives "inwardly" with little interest for and capacity of understanding the outside world. (Mahler unconsciously proved the truth of this when he traveled through Italy without visiting museums and cathedrals).

A musician standing at the borderline between two civilizations, he is compelled to admit programmatic tendencies in modern music: "There is no modern music since Beethoven which has not an inner program," says he (Letters 296), but proceeds at once to separate himself from the tone-painters and describers. "You are right in saying that my music eventually arrives at a program as the ultimate revelation of a dominating conception, while with Richard Strauss such a program is presented at the outset as a given task to be performed ... In evolving a major musical conception I always come to the point where I have to reach for the 'Word' as the indispensable bearer of my musical ideas".

This is a blank affirmation of Mahler's conception of music both as spiritual and rhetorical. According to him, music does not imitate, it tells; it evokes no reality, but expressing the world beyond our senses, only the idea of reality.

Corroborating my description of Mahler as a mystic¹ the recent Mahler book by Bruno Walter tells us that his favorite readings were Lotze's *Mikrokosmos*, Fechner's *Zend Avesta* and *Nanna, oder das Seelenleben der Pflanzen*, Eduard von Hartmann's *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, and the philosophical poems of the mystic Angelus Silesius: philosophers all, and, if not outspoken mystics, with a decided inclination toward mysticism. Mahler studied these authors to confirm his own painful experiences of the double personality of the limited man and the limitless artist.

It is his rhetorical conception of music which makes him feel so close to Siegfried Lipiner, a Viennese dramatist. Lipiner treated great mythical subjects (Adam Hippolytos) as transcendental philosophies personified. His characters are not life-like individuals. They are impersonal megaphones declaiming high-sounding common places, packing involved ideas into skeleton-formulas, much like Wagner's philosophic libretto-slogans. Lipiner, also a case of borderline-crisis between Victorian Romanticism and modern mass-ideology, anticipated the manner of the collectivistic expressionists, while remaining philosophically the enlightened individualist. His practice, as dramatist, of expanding the individual to a universal symbol, brought him into close kinship with Mahler; his skeleton-language literally crying out for fulfillment through flesh and blood, or through music, was thoroughly Mahlerian. "My dear Siegfried," Mahler wrote to him, "You are really creating music. Nobody will ever understand you better than the musician, and I may add, particularly myself! Sometimes it strikes me as almost absurd how akin my own 'music' is to yours."

¹ *Chord and Discord*, December, 1936

An important admission!

Mahler confesses his rhetorical conception of music as an expression paralleling transcendental poetry achieved by simple, slogan-like formulas. In fact, for his texts Mahler not only used, but himself produced such poetry as evidenced both by his adoption of humble folklore verse from the *Wunderhorn*, and by the creation of such lines as his own (*Vater, sich an die Wunden mein: kein wesen lass verlorren sein*). In the Eighth Symphony his treatment of the mighty medieval hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus* and the transfiguration passage from Faust evidence the workings of this rhetorical conception on an exalted plane.

Mahler's abstract idealism in life and music has been demonstrated.

II

"But Mahler was attacked for his stark realism as conductor and composer," objects my honored opponent.

"The real mystic is the real realist," I answer with the New York lady of a former article of mine². Unfortunately the superficial textbook-and-magazine-philosophers fail to realize that the "idea of reality" includes "reality" as an object to be spiritualized, and this process of spiritualizing is a mental struggle of stirring passion. Mahler's despotism, his sudden angers, his terrible nervousness, his unbearable sarcasm, his fanatical insistence on the accurate execution of all his intentions, his (apparent) absentmindedness, his insatiable greed for correcting and improving, - all these personal features of the musician, which so often contradicted the soft-hearted man, are but symptoms of his enforced struggle to project ephemeral reality into timeless form of the idea. He himself relates the following significant instances:

Taking part in the funeral services for von Bülow, he hears the chorus sing "*Auferstehen, ja Auferstehen*" ("Arise, yea, arise"). These words move him profoundly; he has found the finale which expresses the resurrection of all flesh on Judgment Day. This personal experience at the obsequies of an acquaintance (von Bülow was nothing more to Mahler) combines with his ever-present childhood impressions of marches and military signals, and they become, through his subtle alchemy, abstracted and magnified into "Great Roll-Call" and the tremendous Resurrection chorus of all humanity.

As modern directors of Shakespearean plays, heedless of the clock of time, produce Julius Caesar in modern costumes and uniforms; as Connelly, in "The Green Pasture", merely expressed the Bible in terms and characters of New York's Harlem of today, so Mahler, the first modern artist to conceive humanity as an army marching to its destiny, Resurrection, midst the fanfare of military trumpets, read into Beethoven's Ninth the mass-minded orchestral message of spiritual propaganda for the super-national unification of humanity. Reality and ideology: in every fiber of his being the typical Austrian, he was a traditional individualist, yet he claimed New York, the world-core of modern standardized collectivism as his "spiritual homestead".

Another proof of his spiritual world outlook is the almost complete absence of romance in his life. We know that many conductors virtually live on the sex appeal they exercise on their audience and on the female singers. In Mahler's case we know of but one romance during his entire career as conductor prior to his marriage. That lone love incident occurred in his early twenties and so disrupted his inner life that he fought down and overcame the sensual impulses it evoked as though they had been his worst enemies. He married rather late to remain a one-woman-man to the end of his life. Thus the boy who wanted to become a martyr lived up to his idealism until he died. As was his life so is his music - never sensual, and even so was his conducting.

Beside that of other famous conductors, whose spiritual life oscillates between their scores and friendly bridge, *skat* or *tarock*-tables, Mahler's mental education seems to have excelled by far the usual learning of professional musicians. Nevertheless he reveals himself exclusively the musician to the uttermost boundaries of his rather considerable

learning. His letters show an almost complete absence of humor, much as the letters of Wagner. He expresses his thoughts by means of keen formulas tinged with sentiment and often, with violent sarcasm. Whatever the subject of his commentary, he always returns to the two integral problems of his personality: the double life of the musician and the problem of expressing a given reality by music (*program in absolute music*). Yet he fails consistently to find any solution, or at least, any new or convincing solution.

Furthermore, his life and his letters betray the notoriously poor taste characteristic of musicians in all matters outside of music. He himself admits that the musician has no appreciation of the visible world. Strangely enough even in the world of the audible Mahler is not highly discriminating. It is very significant that he speaks of Halevy's "*La Juive*" as "a wonderful, sublime work; I number it among the loftiest ever created."

III

Although idealism is a permanent feature with Mahler, the expression of this *Weltanschauung* (world outlook) is anything but permanent. Like most idealistic artists he shows no striking, deviating development. *Das klagende Lied* and *Das Lied von der Erde* are, from conception to orchestration, unmistakable expressions of the same mentality through the same style. Mahler's development is one of expansion, of increasing depth, refinement, and differentiation, without any accompanying material change or growth in his artistic personality. Beethoven started in Haydn style, and Wagner in the Meyerbeer manner, but Mahler the composer started as Mahler.

So too was it with Mahler the conductor. His conception of the works he interpreted was the same, from Olmuetz (1882) to New York (1907). It was not the matter, but only the manner of expressing them that changed as he matured.

Mahler connoisseurs will shake their heads and point to Mahler's violent, often grotesque movements of baton, hand, head, feet, body, and eyes during his early years, in contrast to his statuesque, almost affected-looking immobility towards the end of his career. It is true that Mahler (when I, as a little boy, saw him conduct at Vienna) made upon me the weird impression of a frenzied gnome. He frightened and fascinated me at the same time. Yet many years after, when he conducted the premiere of his Sixth Symphony (perhaps the most typically Mahlerian of all his works) his statuesque immobility before the huge orchestra, even when it exploded into an indescribable turmoil of temperament and despair, created just the same uncanny impression, nay, and even more frightening one, because a single impulsive movement of his hand and head would have relieved the almost unbearable tension. That immobility of his was anything but calmness. Frau Mahler relates how at Essen, at the general-rehearsal of the same symphony, Mahler "ran up and down in his dressing room, irrepressible sobs literally bursting from his lip."

That external change (his abandonment of the baton-waving manner) has no counterpart in any inner development. Mahler was at first little understood by the orchestra because he did not "beat" the trodden path of tradition. Any given aggregation of performers, prior to a proper grasp of his style, had to be trained to the intensity of polyphonic thought and expression which was Mahler's orchestral ideal. Mahler too had to find the proper technique for his new polyphonic method of handling the orchestra. Gradually the orchestras grew accustomed to this new style. Eventually he found that he could eliminate most motion as superfluous and concentrate on the subtle *fluidum* which establishes a deeper communion between leader and his men that any amount of waving and signaling.

"But Mahler did change continually!" I hear many object. "Why, he even changed his own works!" Well, let us see what Mahler has to say for himself on that score. He writes to Bruno Walter from New York, 1909: "Just as I want my scores edited anew every fifth year, so I require fresh preparation each time for conducting the scores of other composers. My only solace is that I REALLY NEVER HAD TO ABANDON MY WAY FOR A NEW ONE, BUT WAS ALWAYS IMPULSED TO CONTINUE ON ALONG THE OLD PATH."

2 Ibid.

The “changes” he made never affected the meaning of a work, they served only to intensify, to clarify that meaning for the immediate environment by means of particular group of players on a given occasion and in accordance with that relentlessly evolving spirit of change which we call the “march of time”.

IV

“The essence of every reproduction is exactness,” Mahler used to say in his crisp, slogan-like manner, apparently contradicting another favorite expression of his: “the best music is not written in the notes.” Yet reconciliation between these two apparently clashing ideas is not out of the question. A subtle, invisible band joins them inseparably. That uniting psychological force is the conception of the artwork by its conductor-interpreter.

Since our understanding of the words or works of others depends entirely on the sum of our inborn individuality and our private fund of acquired experience, we cannot grasp their “exact” meaning. We can only understand them as our own mind receives them. This personality-tinged understanding of a thing is, in fact, our “conception” of it. Not only does our personal color qualify the “view-point” with which we regard a work, but so do impulsive changes we unconsciously inflict upon the original by our own individuality.

To the interpreting artist the reproduction of a work is “correct”, if all the written notes and marks of the author are reproduced literally. This process is after all, merely technical; and it can be, is being, and always has been done by every technically reliable artisan, for “He has the part well in hand,“ but “Alas, without the spiritual band.”

This “spiritual band” is the sole key to the inner of the original, that “best music not written in the notes” which even the utmost of sheer technical prowess cannot conjure forth in sound. This imponderable quintessence of artwork achieves revelation through that power of mental assimilation possessed only by one able to switch off his own ego completely in order to merge it with the ego dominating the work itself. Furthermore, an intense power on this part of this new, assimilated self is required for the expression of this quintessence through the actual orchestral reproduction. The Most amazing example of such genius and power in the world today is Arturo Toscanini. Yet Toscanini is a realist by nature, mentality, and education. His intuition functions exactly like that of a great scientist; his power of reproducing an artwork is the very instinctiveness of nature itself. In short, he possesses the supreme faculty of *Einführung*, i.e., of so merging his own ego with the object of his attention that his own life becomes one with the life of that object. However, the madman who identifies himself with Napoleon, and Toscanini, who assimilates his spirit to Verdi’s Requiem so that Verdi’s own spirit seems to interpret his work, are certainly two opposite poles, although they revolve on the same axis.

Though the power of such identification of work and interpreter was not natural to Gustav Mahler, he often came quite close to it. He once wrote to Bruno Walter: “In a word: one who does not have genius, should keep away from the work; but whoever has it needn’t be afraid of anything... Any prattling back and forth about the matter strikes me as if one, who has made a baby, racks his brain afterwards over the question whether it is really the right intentions, etc. The thing is simple. He just loved and – could. Period! And if one doesn’t love and can’t, no baby comes of it. Period again. As one is and can – so the child will be. Once again: Period!”

V

The idealist is, by nature, a split personality. Therefore, that happy fusion of work and interpretation, which is the prerogative of the objective, naïve, realistic artist Toscanini, was denied to Mahler the idealist.³

Mahler himself throws considerable light upon this matter in the following synthesis of cited extracts.

“What is it that thinks within us? And what is it that acts within us?”

³ Notwithstanding the great progress of modern psychology, the best psychological explanation of the difference between the realistic and idealistic artist is still Schiller’s study, “On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry.”

“Why do I believe that I am free while I am imprisoned by the walls of my character as in a cell?”

“I experience strange things with all of my works while conducting them. Wondering curiosity, as poignant as a burning sensation, takes hold of me. What is that world which mirrors such sounds and shapes? BUT ONLY WHEN I AM CONDUCTING! For afterwards, it is all extinguished suddenly; (otherwise, one could hardly resume living). This strange reality of visions, which suddenly melts away like the chimera of a dream, is the deepest cause of the split-life of an artist. Condemned to a twofold existence, woe to him if life and dream become confused. For then he must answer terribly for the laws of the one world in the other.”

This discord between man and artist, this eternal struggle between reality and the idea of reality is the bitter legacy of transgressing idealism.

Here is the key to Mahler’s individual conception of music. Here is his contradictory position between a world that has been and a world to come. Here is the intuition which made his interpretation, even of the old classics, point to the future.

And not a happy future. He foresaw the breakdown of our civilization – through the all-too-comprehensive realization of absolute idealism; hence his fundamental sarcasm, perhaps the most striking feature of the man and the musician. “Why did you live? Why did you suffer? Is all this nothing but a gross, terrible JEST? We must solve these problems in some way, if we are to continue living – even if we shall only continue dying.”

Not only is this outlook on a world, present and future, express itself in his own music, but he also imposed it on whatever music he conducted. Its constant theme was the conflict between two worlds, a tragic struggle, in which triumph meant the attainment of the “other world, where things are no longer bounded by time and space,” in short, the world where *unio mystica* is a fact.

This is the goal toward which all his symphonies strive. No less appropriately, he might also be called the finale-conductor because everything he conducted was subjected to a dominating Finale-concept. Everything else in the world itself was subordinated to that idea. Take his production of Mozart’s *Nozze di Figaro*. Some great French bonmotier said of the play by Beaumarchais: “*Voilà, c’est la révolution qui marche.*” Mahler revealed in Mozart’s opera buffa the bitter social arraignments of Schiller’s *Kabala und Liebe*. From the sarcastic, devilish hurry of the overture he continuously built up to the slow movement of the finale, where pure humanity opened yearning eyes for a moment only to be eclipsed again by the commonplace of the noisy stretta-finale, implying that the old order will go on and on. The central idea of rebellion was ever-present. All the *sforzati*, sudden *ff* and *pp*, all the apparently sweet melodies with their bitter underlying meaning, were aimed at that climax. Specht, describing Mahler’s reading of this work, only mentions how the little wedding-march seemed irritated by “accents of stinging painfulness,” played against the “dark background of a silent crowd of people behind the iron garden-fence, while two big bowls of sinister red fire lit up the wedding-ceremony.” Actually, Mahler even re-interpolated the original trial in court and composed biting secco-recitatives for it, to point out the modern revolutionary trend of Mozart’s work.

To him the *demiourgos* was in everything. Since he was convinced that the central idea created the art-work according to an architectural plan (blueprint), everything had to be subordinated to that idea. To Mahler there could be no independent episodes in an art-work. His was this Fascist ideology half a century before Fascism; everything functions only as a cog in the machine of the art-work’s microcosm.

His absolute unity of idea and execution, his despotic insistence on architectonic structure, his finale-conducting were but the natural consequences of the split personality of the idealist striving and struggling for final amalgamation.

The clash of reality and idea is the very core of dramatics. Mahler the musician dramatized everything he conducted. Yet the factors of his

dramatizations were never personified. He never portrayed the struggle of petty humans, but only of ideas. Impersonal abstracts alone clashed in the world of his creation.

VI

What were the technical means employed by Mahler during a performance to transmit to an orchestra his complicated conception of a musical composition?

Analyzing a conductor's art from a technical viewpoint means testing it for the following: his sense of rhythm, his sense of tempo, his dynamics, his agogics, his reading of harmony and counterpoint, his treatment of orchestration.

Rhythm is music in its most primitive state. When the impish, impious von Bülow, punning on the Bible and Goethe, exclaimed; "In the beginning there was rhythm", he unwittingly uttered a scientific truth, amply corroborated in our own day: viz., that the first musical expression of animal and man is purely rhythmic. The drum is the earliest musical instrument; the dance is the very backbone of music. Rhythm retains its natural, pristine correctness so long as it is the pulse of music performed by a coordinated group of musicians. The moment an appointed leader superimposes his individual rhythmic conception upon the group's collective (almost instinctive) sense of rhythm, there arise discrepancies in the styles of performance. Rhythm now becomes a problem. As early as the Sixteenth Century critics protested against the "arbitrary rhythmical movement" of the conductors. The sense of rhythm is inborn. It may be subtilized, but it cannot be acquired.

Toscanini brought a copy of his recording of Mozart's symphony in D major (K. 385) to Italy and played it for his colleagues. The first movement of the symphony finishes in the middle of the record, leaving no indication as to the exact moment the second section will begin. Involuntarily the Maestro, who had been beating the time during this record, with the close of the first movement, gave the upbeat for the second section on the very dot it actually began. This showed that for Toscanini the pause between the two movements had an exact rhythmical value. At a concert this pause cannot be observed faithfully because of the disturbing conditions in the reactions of the audience. In the enforced calm of the recording laboratory, however, it can be so observed. Originally measured before a living orchestra, this pause was reproduced in exact facsimile by the same conductor, although he now beat the time to a mere mechanical instrument – the gramophone.

Toscanini is of course, an extreme example of rhythmical sensitiveness matched by few human beings. Yet his case shows that there exist natural laws of rhythm, still awaiting adequate scientific clarification, although they function unerringly in the subconscious of exceptional musicians and music-lovers.

I can recall striking instances of Mahler's rhythmical logic.

Pauses emphasized by *Fermata*, technical marks of prolongation, separate the fanfaresque chords which begin the overture to *The Magic Flute*. When Mahler finished the first chord, the ensuing pause was so long that I looked up from my score to find out why the conductor did not continue. Just then he attacked the second chord. Now came a pause that seemed still longer. When the third chord finally sounded the audience had grasped the idea Mahler wished to convey: the solemnity of the "trumpet" call. He was the herald whose pronouncement awaited the reaction of his listeners. "Compose your thoughts for this message!" Thus Mahler established the central-idea of the Realm of Sarastro.

When, after the fugue, the same three chords returned, Mahler made the pauses even longer than before. That was quite logical and natural; for the mind having been swept along with the tide of the *Allegro*, was now in a turmoil and needed still more time to recompose itself. Out of this breathlessness the central-idea must emerge again, more impressive and clear than at first. Its solemnity must be revealed on a still higher level.

A similar rhythmical presentation of an idea by Mahler during his early years (Leipzig) has been transmitted by Max Steinitzer. "It was

something to remember, the way he took the first four measures of the great *Leonore* Overture (no. 3). In the most simple manner each one of the descending octaves became a moment of increasing import for us, until finally the low F-sharp lay revealed in the its majestic, calm immobility."

These few instances (I could have cited many more) suffice to show how Mahler made rhythm a primary spiritual element of his interpretations. Rhythm to him was not the natural pulse-beat of a composition but rather the rhetorical accentuation of the evolving content of the work. His was a logical, perhaps a psychological, but certainly not an instinctive treatment of rhythm. Therefore the rhythmic element was a highly subtle matter for him. It would oscillate between rigid strictness and reckless daring. It was dominated by thematic considerations alone. Even beneath an apparent rigidity there was a world of almost imperceptible degrees of pulsation that was in open disagreement with the normal rhythmic beat of the music, sacrificing that to intensify the music's underlying spiritual content. He treated rhythm in the works of Wagner and Beethoven just as he did in his own symphonies: with freedom and flexibility, introducing startling accents and irregular melodic scansions.

In a word, Mahler's reading of rhythm was primarily rhetorical, not uniformly measured. He unhesitatingly disobeyed the letter of a score in this respect so that he might be more faithful to its spirit.

VII

Tempi! The first disputed and still the most debatable of all the characteristics of conducting. "He takes all the tempi wrong!" is the commonest criticism one conductor whispers to you about another, implying that the so-called *right tempo* is the *sine qua non* of all correct interpretation.

When is the tempo *right*?

The great Monteverdi, in the preface to his eighth book of Madrigals (1683) distinguishes between two different species of tempo; the tempo "*della mano*" (of the hand) and the tempo "*dell' affetto dell' animo*" (affected by the mind). By this Delphic distinction Monteverdi means the tempo beaten by the hand of the conductor as opposed to that produced by the effect of the music upon performers. To him the latter is the only right tempo, for he adds, somewhat maliciously, that it "operates without anyone beating time", meaning that the right tempo does not need a conductor.

Yet there can be no scientifically demonstrated *right tempo* just as there is not set, objectively correct interpretation. There is only a subjectively right tempo, i.e., the tempo which is *right* for one particular conductor.

We have a very precise, scientifically accurate device for fixing the right tempo: Maelzel's metronome. It is over a hundred years old. It stands on every piano; composers have used and still use it freely and frequently to indicate the exact tempo they want. However, musicians and especially conductors don't pay much attention to it. Even those who haven't read Beethoven's letters will cite Beethoven's dictum on the metronome the moment you mention it to them: It (the metronome) is a stupidity; you must FEEL the *tempo!*"

That's just what Monteverdi said in 1638 A.D. – and what Sibelius said (to Rodzinski) in 1937 A.D.

Yet subjective feeling is an unreliable means of achieving correctness of tempo, unless...

The late Max Smith devoted the last years of his life to a study of Toscanini's conducting-art. Smith assisted at all the Maestro's rehearsals and performances and, stopwatch in hand, measured carefully the minutes, seconds, and split seconds Toscanini required for performing certain compositions. He timed at least twenty different performances of the *Eroica* and of Debussy's *La Mer* and found that Toscanini's readings of the same compositions on various occasions never differed in the slightest in this respect.

The late Otto Lohse used to look at his watch before giving he first upbeat and after the last note of an opera act of *Götterdämmerung* and the last act of *Meistersinger*, never varied from more than a few seconds.

Yet the majority of conductors, when sounded upon this very stability of tempo, will scornfully sweep the question aside, insisting that they are not metronomes, but free artists, conducting only according to the dictates of their heart and mood.

Nevertheless it is just stability that sets off the creative artist (even as interpreter) from the arbitrary gipsy. Toscanini illustrated this axiom once and for all when he said, "I can't understand arbitrary changes in anything which is evident. If I study and restudy a work until I have attained a clear vision of it, then that vision becomes final. It cannot be altered thereafter." He meant that that conception could never entertain any essential, organic changes, such as revisions in tempo. What IS the real essence of any artwork? It is its integrity crystallized in the unalterable impression; thus it is; so it must be; it cannot be otherwise. One may not alter the smile of Mona Lisa, nor the inscription on the door to Dante's *Inferno*, nor the prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, nor for that matter, Toscanini's reading of Beethoven *Pastorale*. A work of art (and conducting also has to be such a work) is irrevocably fixed, if it is really a work of art.

Though innumerable books, booklets, and articles have been written on Mahler, there never was, unfortunately, a Max Smith with his stopwatch to report whether Mahler subscribed to that rather amateurish notion of the artist being swept along by his momentary whims, or whether his tempi were as unchanging as his general conception of a composition, for the steady integrity of his tempi is the test of the artistic integrity of a conductor.

We have only a few rather contradictory, documents pertaining to this subject. There is for instance, a mythical letter (unpublished and anonymous⁵) supposedly written by a member of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra after Mahler's first performance of *Lohengrin* at the Vienna *Hofoper*. The writer asserts that he had played *Lohengrin* under Wagner's own direction and claims that, since that time, Mahler's was the first conductor with the *Right tempi*. He stresses especially Mahler's conception of the prelude, which he took just as slowly as Wagner himself, and the prelude to the third act, which he led in genuinely *Furioso* manner. In short, his conducting was Wagnerian, because Mahler "knew how to modify the tempi" to conform to Wagner's intentions.

If that letter is authentic it is a revelation. If it is apocryphal, i.e. trumped up to defend the conductor against the criticisms of the profession, it is still more eloquent, for then it proves that Mahler was inclined to slow up the slow tempi and speed up the swifter ones. A very primitive and crude statement, perhaps, but it hits the nail on the head. It implies that in order to bring out the central ideas as clearly as possible, Mahler accentuated every detail of contrast as sharply as possible, especially contrast of tempo. The Romantic tradition in music was all for the traditional evasion of violence; it doted on so-called medium-tempi and standardized, unobtrusive contrasts. Into that atmosphere of old-time Viennese mellowness Mahler crashed like a bombshell. Even at Hamburg, some years before, when he took over some concerts for von Bülow (who was quite a violent dramatizer himself) the orchestra rebelled against Mahler's tempi just as they rebelled anywhere against his scorn of the classical tradition, against his habit of acceleration.

Furthermore, our letter implies that Mahler used to "modify" the tempo. That again (along with our disclosures concerning Mahler's rhythmic) means that he subordinated the tempo to the central idea of the composition. Thus, according to Steinietzer, he began the *terzetto* of

5 It seems to be the common fate of great revolutionary musicians to find biographers who overflow with praise and orthodox zeal, but who lack reliability, scientific seriousness, and sincerity of research. Neither of Richard Wagner nor of Mahler have we biographical works which can be compared with Wyczewa and Saint Foix on Mozart or with Kurth on Bruckner. The Stefans and Spechts, etc., are fanatical fighters against anybody who dares the slightest criticisms of their idols, but they themselves do nothing of real importance to explain these idols.

the dying Commendatore (in *Don Giovanni*) in a rather fast tempo, but immediately started to slow down very gradually and steadily, until the few bars of the postlude resulted in an "Adagio of the most moving effect." I remember this gradually expiring music well, because it was the first time that an operatic death-scene did not make a ridiculous impression on me, for I really had the feeling of the inexorable (steadily retarding!) approach of Death. Steinietzer does not mention that this effect was achieved in the first place by the reluctantly drumming monotony with which Leporello stammered his fast-beating counter-melody.

We see by this little instance how the general idea, in this case the concept of the dying father, modified the interpretation. Mahler's modifications consist not only in the striking *pp* Steinietzer notes relative to beginning of the *Allegro* of the third *Leonore*, but also in the slow beginning of that movement and its subsequent acceleration. Here we have the *finale-conductor* again, introducing the spiritual significance of architecture into his interpretation.

VIII

His highly individual employment of dynamics was one of the features by which one could single out Mahler's conducting.

An examination of the dynamics in Mahler's orchestral work reveals most interesting data concerning the orchestral language in vogue during the period of transition from Romanticism (Wagner, Strauss) to modern realism and expressionism (Alban Berg, Stravinsky). Such a study, moreover, throws particular light on Mahler's style as a conductor.

Mahler was so sensitive dynamically, that he himself rehearsed *Le Nozze di Figaro* (one of his most carefully prepared standard performances at the Vienna *Hofoper*) with orchestra and complete stage personnel throughout six successive general-rehearsals, when he brought that production to Salzburg. And why? Only because he wished to accommodate the opera perfectly to the acoustics of the Salzburg theater.

The conductor's (Mahler's) treatment of dynamics was also subordinated to the demands of rhetoric.

In Mahler's time the outstanding style of dramatic interpretation on the legitimate stage was that for which Max Reinhardt (inspired by Stanislawski's *Russian Art Theatre*) was held responsible. It consisted in a rather fervid naturalism expressed through exaggerated declamation, exploiting all the possibilities of dynamics, from the hushed whisper to the stentorian shout in opposition to the pleasant transitions favored by tradition. The audience was to be taken by surprise. It was not characters, part of real, unobtrusive Nature, who acted the drama, but mere ideas personified, overstated by actors who were forced to be "symbols". As Mahler puts it "all that is material must be dissolved into form; a higher realm of phenomena where types are individualities."

It is in keeping with such principles that Mahler reproaches the singer cast as Ostrud (*Lohengrin*) for having been too "loud" during her first scene with Elsa. "That was not the right tone for the hypocritical Ortrud with her mysterious behavior, her assumed meekness". It made no difference to Mahler that Elsa would see through Ortrud's too obvious dissimulation. What mattered to him was that Ortrud be established as a regular villainess regardless of logic and psychology. (Logic and psychology were, and still are, despised by the idealists of expressionism.) I remember that scene very well: it was my first *Lohengrin*. In order to stress his idea of an innocent, sweet Elsa as contrasted with a saccharine, yet dangerous Ortrud, Mahler exaggerated all the musical marks Wagner wrote into this scene, the little *crescendo* and *dim.*, the sudden *sfz* and *pp*. Thus he created a magnificent suspense; he led up to the outburst "*Entweihte Götter*" in a way that caused the audience to applaud that invocation if only to relieve its own tension; then he literally drenched the following scene, Ortrud's poisoning of Elsa's confidence, with the colors of a thrilling mystery-play. I could not help the feeling of overemphasis, unnatural declamation, cheap obviousness. *Lohengrin*, which (musically and dramatically) borders perilously on bad taste, attained with Mahler a strange flavor of artistic perfection through ham-acting singers and a

ham-declaring orchestra. He engineered the dreamy prelude, from the *pppp*, (not the original *pp*) up to the *ff* of the brasses in such a way, that these brasses, instead of portraying the climax of an organic growth (usually one of Mahler's strong points), exploded like a sudden onslaught of blunt reality. Speidel, Vienna's most renowned dramatic critic, described this effect as "magical" (*zauberhaft*), while I remember only a harsh awakening from a dream. Yet the Wagnerian idea, the "program", was carried out; the Holy Grail descended to "earth", to be sure, but in this case it reached "earth" with a crash. What was Mahler's reason? At the very end of the opera one knew it. There the *motif* returned again, austere, elevated, *fff* instead of the original *f*. The outburst in the prelude had been but a foreboding of this final touch. The linking central idea stood out above all. The effect was striking, a real delight to every intelligent theatergoer.

However, in the theater and in the concert hall, I don't want to be "intelligent".

Mahler doted on dynamic contrasts. That anecdote concerning the premiere of his First Symphony is significant of Mahler's sudden dynamic assaults.⁶ He loved the "drastic treatment of the orchestra", claiming that Beethoven favored it. When he edited Beethoven's Ninth, he intensified the markings, freely reinforcing or muting sound effects. In fact such was his general practice.

One of his instructions given to the conductor of his Second Symphony, portrays, perhaps better than anything else, the theatrical nature of Mahler's dynamics.

He writes: "The audience is raised to the highest tension by the fanfares of the trumpets; now the mystical sound of the human voices (which may enter *ppp*, as if out of the remote distance) must come as a surprise. I suggest that the chorus (which has been seated until this point) remain seated, and rise only with the E-flat major 'Mit Flügeln, die ich mir errungen.'" I have found this to be an infallibly astounding effect."

IX

By the term *agogics* we mean not only "the process and the result of modifying strict tempo to bring out the full expression of a phrase" (*tempo rubato*). We include within the limits of that term also any details of execution pertaining to the expressiveness of an interpretation.

In this connection the conductor-composer speaks best for himself in a letter full of good advice to a beginner in composition: You are still too intent on "sound and color"! That is a defect of all talented beginners doing creative work today. I know of a similar stage in my own development... mood-music (*Stimmungsmusik*) is a dangerous foundation (*Boden*). Take my advice, for these things are no different than they were. Aim at THEMES clear and plastic, which may be readily recognized in any transformation or development whatever; next, at abundant variety, heightened by the clear contrasting of opposing themes, but above all, rendered interesting by the unfailingly logical development of the *central idea*. With you all this still seems confused. Furthermore, you must get rid of the pianist in you! Yours is not a setting for orchestra, but one conceived for the piano, and then somehow translated into the orchestral language. I too suffered from the same trouble. Today we all originate from the piano, while the old masters came from the violin and from singing."

You see? "Sound and color" are not Mahler's primary concern. He finds the expression of "moods" dangerous. Plasticity (which means distinctness) and the "logical development of the central idea" are his leading principle. Therefore you will find no sweet sentimentality in Mahler's interpretation. The "soulful" *vibrato*, the sensual devices are alien to his ascetic intellectuality. He prefers to oppose phrases of "genuine contrast" against each other. He does not want the orchestral score approached from the pianist's viewpoint, for he regards pianistic phrasing (especially that instrument's wealth of *rubati* and *gruppetti*) as anti-logical, knowing it to spring from the chordal nature of the piano, a basic trait at variance with the melodic, singing quality of the orchestra.

⁶ At the *attacca* introducing the last movement, a dignified lady, shocked by the violence of the "attack", dropped her handbag, spilling its contents on the floor.

Mahler would say to his orchestra: "I breathe every breath with you." In other words he formulated even the small details of agogical expression in the rhetorical way, ever intent on the content of the single phrase, the meaning, to which the sound and color were to be subordinated.

X

He was a "linear musician", one who reads the orchestral score horizontally, perceiving melodies, as opposed to one who reads "vertically", concentrating on the harmonies.

"there is no harmony; there is only counterpoints" is an utterance legend ascribes to him. He proved this principle when he was a youngster, when he arranged Bruckner's Third Symphony for piano for four hands. He followed the orchestral score faithfully, striving "particularly hard to render the single voices in the characteristic range of the instruments, even though such practice sacrificed facile and convenient rendering on the piano."

Mahler experienced music thematically, not harmonically. To him "accompaniment" did not exist. Every part of the orchestra expressed itself independently. It was Mahler who first showed that even second violins of Verdi were not monotonous *fillers-in*, giving them thought, life, and importance of their own. If Mozart is called the savior of the woodwinds (especially of the clarinet), Mahler just may be called the savior of the *middle voices* (The *filling-in part*) of the orchestra. His jest on his own style of composing also applies to his style of conducting when he quotes an imaginary critic and writes: "My musicians play without paying the slightest attention to each other and my chaotic and bestial nature reveals itself in all its vile nakedness".

Listening to Mahler's music today we regard it as comparatively tame and harmonious. Yet in his own interpretation it sounded anything but simple. Similarly he made Beethoven and Wagner anything but the mellow classics they seemed before him. We must remember that Schoenberg and his school were born out of the performances of *Tristan und Isolde* conducted by Mahler, for his *Tristan* often sounded like that modern atonality it actually created. Mahler's daring in leading of discordant parts against each other, regardless of traditional harmonic and esthetic tenets, created the revolution we call "modern music". The central idea, Day vs. Night, manifested itself by clash and discord, even during moments of the most peaceful transfiguration. Only the design counted, never the color. Today Mahler's polyphonic conducting does not appear revolutionary at all since almost every conductor born east of Munich calls himself a "pupil" of Mahler, though he never gave a single lesson in conducting during his entire career. Result: the orchestras execute faithfully the most extravagant stupidities of their conductors.

The Vienna Philharmonic of 1900 was a band calculated to inspire fear in a conductor. "Suppose I did come to Vienna," wrote Mahler, "what tortures would I not have to undergo there with my manner of handling things musical? If I were only to attempt teaching my conception of a Beethoven symphony to the famous Richter-trained *Philharmonicum* I would at once find myself in the midst of the most disgusting squabbles. That was my experience even here (at Hamburg), though, thanks to the support of Brahms and Bülow, I occupy here a position of unquestioned authority."

XI

Mahler was the father of that huge orchestra of our period of mass-minded superlatives that has to be furnished every conductor who has even a modicum of self-esteem. They can't perform with less than the now accepted 20-20-16-10-10 proportion of strings. Mahler transplanted his own magnified orchestral conception to the classics, particularly to Beethoven. He explained his principal notions of orchestral treatment when he justified his retouching of Beethoven's *Ninth*. In an announcement to the public he said:

"The unsatisfactory condition of the brass instruments at that time (Beethoven) rendered impracticable certain sequences of sound necessary to the undisturbed maintenance of the melodic line. It was that defect which gradually brought about the perfection of those instruments. Failure to utilize these improvements in order

to achieve as fine performance of Beethoven's works as possible is a crime."

"The ancient device of multiplying (*Verfielfachung*) the string instruments eventually resulted in a corresponding increase of the wind instruments in order to attain a balancing reinforcement of certain parts without the slightest emendation of the orchestral voices. It can be demonstrated by means of the orchestral score... that the conductor was concerned only with following Beethoven's intentions to the smallest detail. Though he refused to be hampered by "Tradition" in this regard, he wished neither to sacrifice the slightest intention of the master nor to permit such an intention to be lost in an overwhelming concordance of sounds."

By "concordance of sounds" Mahler meant the result of the traditional practice of conducting Beethoven from the melodic-harmonic viewpoint, for he knew Beethoven as one who created not in harmony, but in counterpoint. Therefore (in his edition of Beethoven's *Ninth*) to balance the preponderance of the strings, he doubled the woodwinds, he added a third and fourth pair of French horns, and in the last movement a third and fourth trumpet. In 1900 such an innovation was attacked as a sacrilege; today it is a common practice.

Mahler dethroned the first violins from their ancient absolute sovereignty over the orchestra. The hitherto apathetic state of the second violins and violas was elevated to one of equality with the first violins and cellos respectively. The ascetic Mahler did away with the constant, sweetish *vibratos*, with the sensuality, and pompous glamour of the string section. The Vienna Philharmonic, glorying in the popularity of their emotional soarings, the sensuous, almost gypsy-like sobbing of their strings, resented being banished from the golden Viennese heart to the limbo of the Mahlerian transcendent brain, but the rich *Schmalz* they lost was amply compensated by a proportionate gain in deliberate, impressive delivery. Never before and never since Mahler did they play the prelude to *Lohengrin*, the *Adagio* of Beethoven's *Ninth*, the transfiguration music of Bruckner's *Fifth* with such unearthly, breathtaking spirituality. Mahler wanted singing passages in the strings played with the whole length of the bow, to contrast them with the short figures gasped at the frog or tittered at the point. He reveled in the higher positions of the violin G and D strings without indulging in the sentimentality natural to such fingerings. His *secco* of short, hard chords played by the whole section had the reckless, despotic dryness of a volley of gunfire; his *tremolo* was insidious rather than weird, for it sounded completely dematerialized. In general (if I may be permitted the comparison) Mahler's treatment of the string section had something of the intellectual style, the severe chastity of the Busch-Quartet's playing today; not much sex-appeal, but lots of logic.

It was through Mahler that the woodwind-section attained the importance it enjoys in all good orchestra today. He tempered the different colors of the various instruments to organ-like equality. When (especially in his beloved Beethoven) the different woodwinds alternated *concertante*, you never felt a break in color unless it was intentionally so marked, to achieve contrast. He even trained the single instruments to make imperceptible transitions from one position to the other. On the other hand, he exaggerated the tonal differences between those positions, if the dramatic expression so required. He made the naturally dark low register of the flute or clarinet sound almost black and urged the high register to shrillness. (Note the "vulgar" use of the C and the higher E-flat clarinets in his own symphonies.)

Often in unisons of strings and winds (flutes with violins or cellos and double-basses with bassoons) he forced the weaker winds to dominate the strings, even by doubling the winds, if necessary.

Mahler's pet hobbies in the orchestra, however, were the brass and percussion. (He grew up near the military barracks in Moravia.) The French horns, the group which tradition made transitional from the woodwinds to the brasses, were (strange enough for a basically Romantic musician) the most indifferent group to Mahler. I can't remember any particular feature of his treatment of them.

The trumpets and trombones, especially the trumpets, were his chief concern. These are the instruments most often mentioned in his letters. What he denied to his strings, he gave to his trumpets: sensuality, sweetness, even sexuality. This is one of the ironical "twists" in his musical nature. His exultant, solo-like projection of the climactic trumpet-passage in the second *Finale* of *Aida* still rings in my memory. It yelled like a joyous animal while the violins sounded restrained. The disciple of the wonderful Austrian military bands became a master in blending the brasses. They also were never mere accompaniment, "padding" of the highlights of a composition. Theirs were dramatic functions throughout. Somehow I always had the impression, when Mahler made the brasses enter, that they seemed to have already been playing. Though they were certainly silent until that moment; or with typically Mahlerian contrast, they came in as a sudden surprise. To them too he gave what he denied to the strings; sensuality, even a certain *vibrato* to the trombones and particularly to the Bayreuth Tubas, whenever they sobbed out their theme. Again, for contrast's sake, he had a certain way of getting a *secco* from his trombones that made you shiver: that hard, short *sfz*, almost like barking. He featured short but violent *crescendi* exaggerating them as in rearing *glissandi* (e.g., in the prelude to *The Flying Dutchman*). He blended woodwinds and brasses to a unity of sound never realized before. It is no idle praise of his conducting to assert that even specialists could not differentiate between woodwinds and brasses in the "offstage" passages of the cemetery-scene in *Don Giovanni*.

His percussion-battery shows equally the influence of his military boyhood surroundings. All his symphonies employ a large battery, culminating in the Sixth, where he used an especially constructed gigantic drum (an entire bull-hide stretched over a huge square sounding-board, beaten by a gigantic wooden hammer). This instrument really sounded like "fate pounding at the door", a programmatic nuance which Beethoven had been content to express with a modest kettle drum. Mahler's percussion declaimed heavily. Glitter and despair, roughness and delicacy, literally ran amok in his percussion. He showed marked differences in his handling of timpani and bass drums, *piatti* and *tam-tam*. Their rhythm was always dominating; the entrance of the battery had somewhat the effect of outstanding solo-work.

XI

The conductor Mahler, consistent idealist by temperament and mentality, built up his reproductions (interpretations) on a rhetorical development of the central idea of a work to its final climax and exit (*the finale conductor*). All tectonic features (rhythm, tempo, dynamics, agogics, polyphony, orchestration) were subordinated to the archi-tectonic structure and had no independent significance. Mahler's rhythms were rhetorically accentuated, his tempi dramatically modified, his dynamics and agogics histrionically declaimed, his reading multi-voiced, contrapuntal rather than harmonic, his emphasis one of design rather than color; in short, interpretations which individualized the orchestral parts, making them carriers of integral, yet interdependent ideas.

The net result of such conducting was an unabashed intellectualism⁷ vehemently presented, almost placarded, by clairvoyant brainwaves.

Beethoven's dictum: "Music must beat fire from a man's mind", is often quoted, seldom felt, and rarely grasped in its ultimate meaning. Yet it was fully realized by Mahler the conductor.

With the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, Mahler performed seventy-seven concert works. Twenty-five of them were by Beethoven.

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⁷ In our times of rugged collectivism and instinctivism, the nomenclature "intellectual" is regarded as an insult equaled only by that of "individualist." Therefore, we must bear in mind that in Mahler's time brains and personality were the most honored property of man.