

## Perspectives

# The Religious Impulse in Schumann's and Mahler's Settings of Goethe's *Faust*

by Eftychia Papanikolaou

Eftychia Papanikolaou is assistant professor of Music History at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. She holds a B.A. in English philology and literature from the University of Athens, Greece, music theory degrees from the National Conservatory of Athens, and both master's and Ph.D. degrees in musicology from Boston University. She served as visiting assistant professor at Wellesley College, teaching fellow at Harvard University, and has also taught music history courses at Boston University, Tufts University, Brandeis University, and the Longy School of Music.

Her principal research focuses on music of the long nineteenth century and, in particular, the aesthetics and social history of music. She has published on topics as diverse as the music of ancient Greece, opera, Mahler and fin-de-siècle Vienna, and music and film. She is currently writing a monograph on the genre of the romantic symphonic Mass.

Among nineteenth-century composers, Schubert, Berlioz, Liszt, and Wagner are only a few of those who were inspired by Goethe's *Faust* to create works in such diverse musical genres as the lied, opera, and symphony. Naturally, most composers chose to focus on Part I of *Faust*, since Part II was often deemed to be unusually challenging for musical presentation, largely due to its philosophically oriented dramaturgy and aesthetic nuances. In an unconventional turn, it was precisely the end of *Faust II* that Robert Schumann chose to set to music first. Later he incorporated that setting into his *Scenen aus Goethes Faust* ("Scenes from Goethe's *Faust*"), a dramatic composition on which he worked intermittently for almost a decade, between 1844 and 1853.

Gustav Mahler set the *Schlusszene* of *Faust II* in an equally exalted setting that encompasses the entire Second Part of the Eighth Symphony (1906), thus serving as the culmination of the first part's setting of the Latin Pentecost hymn *Veni creator spiritus*. The work as a whole has been interpreted as a religious statement, while the Second Part has been described as a cantata, an oratorio-like movement, or even a religious drama in the tradition of *Parsifal*.

A close look at the two settings reveals that both composers responded to Goethe's poetry in an astonishingly similar manner, especially in the way the music parallels and reflects the poem's religious overtones. For reasons of brevity, this essay will offer a broad comparison between the two *Faust* settings, with emphasis on the composers' inspiration, musico-dramatic choices, and the compositions' implications for sacred musical aesthetics during the so-called long nineteenth century.

-----

Schumann's original inspiration to set the *Schlusszene* of *Faust II* to music came in 1844. In February of that year, during the Russian tour that he and Clara undertook, Schumann read parts of *Faust*, and even "considered treating *Wilhelm Meister* as an operatic subject."<sup>75</sup> Within a month, and in spite of his depressed psychological state, he finished the sketches of the entire final scene of *Faust II*, the part he called "Faust's *Verklärung*," and which would later form Part III of his composition (see Figure 1). Among nervous attacks and "with effort" on his part, as he noted in his *Haushaltbücher*, Schumann finished the complete draft of the final scene in December 1844 (although he kept revising the work well into 1848).<sup>76</sup> As far as we know, he had completed the part that had inspired him the most and at the same

<sup>75</sup> John Daverio, *Robert Schumann: Herald of a "New Poetic Age"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 292.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

time he had "abandoned his earlier plans for a *Faust* opera,"<sup>77</sup> in favor of an oratorio-style treatment of the work. During those physically and mentally demanding years in Schumann's life, any expansion of *Faust* into a larger work might have seemed daunting and premature.

**Figure 1**  
Robert Schumann (1810-1856)  
*Scenen aus Goethe's Faust, WoO 3 (1844-53)*

### Overtüre

### Erste Abteilung

- 1 – Szene im Garten (Gretchen and Faust)
- 2 – Gretchen vor dem Bild der Mater Dolorosa (Ramparts scene)
- 3 – Szene im Dom (Mass, Organ, and Singing)

### Zweite Abteilung

- 4 – Ariel. Sonnenaufgang (Ariel, Faust, Spirits)
- 5 – Mitternacht (Faust and Four gray women: Want, Guilt, Worry, Distress)
- 6 – Faust's Tod (Mephistopheles, Lemurs, Faust)

### Dritte Abteilung

- 7 – Faust's Verklärung

- I. "Waldung, sie schwankt heran" (Chorus)
- II. "Ewiger Wonnebrand" (Pater Ecstaticus, T solo)
- III. "Wie Felsenabgrund mir zu Füßen" (Pater Profundus, B solo)  
"Welch ein Morgenwölkchen schwebet" (Pater Seraphicus, Bar solo)  
Chorus of Blessed Boys
- IV. "Gerettet ist das edle Glied" (Angels, chorus)  
"Jene Rosen" (Younger Angels, S solo and chorus)  
"Uns bleibt ein Erdenrest" (More Perfected Angels, T & B soli, chorus)
- V. "Hier ist die Aussicht frei" (Doctor Marianus, B solo)
- VI. "Dir, der Unberührbaren" (Doctor Marianus, B solo)  
"Du schwebst zu Höhen" (Penitent Women, 2S, Mezzo, A soli)  
"Neige, neige" (Penitent Woman/Gretchen, S solo; Chorus)  
"Komm, hebe dich" (Mater Gloriosa, Mezzo solo)  
"Blicket auf" (Doctor Marianus, B solo)
- VII. Chorus mysticus. "Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis" (Soloists & Chorus)  
[2 versions of the *Schlusschor*, "Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan"]

Almost a year later, in September 1845, he admitted in a letter to Felix Mendelssohn: "The scene from *Faust* rests on my desk. I'm downright afraid to look at it again. Only because the sublime poetry of precisely this closing scene grips me so would I venture [to resume] work; I don't know whether I'll ever publish it."<sup>78</sup> We see a renewed interest in *Faust* in 1849, right before the first public performance of the *Schlusszene* in Dresden, for the festivities surrounding the 100th anniversary of Goethe's birth on 29 August 1849. Amidst revolutionary activities that forced the entire family to flee Dresden, relocate temporarily in Bad Kreischa, and live in exile for a couple of months, Schumann kept composing shorter pieces for voices and eventually decided to expand the work by adding two more parts. Between 13 and 24 July 1849, he drafted and scored what became Part I of *Faust* (written in 3-1-2 order) and, without interruption, he finished the entire Part II in the Spring of 1850. On 10 May 1850 he could finally write in the *Haushaltbücher*: "Completed *Faust*, with joy."<sup>79</sup> Three years later he added the overture; and on 17 August 1853, almost ten years after its inception, the work was finally complete.

-----

The story surrounding the genesis of Mahler's Eighth Symphony is rather more familiar. Having left behind an extremely successful

<sup>77</sup> John Daverio, "Schumann, Robert," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., ed. by Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, Vol. 22 (London: Macmillan, 2001), p. 778.

<sup>78</sup> Daverio, *Robert Schumann: Herald of a "New Poetic Age"*, p. 366.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 367.

season at the Vienna Opera, in May 1906 Mahler traveled to his summer house in Maiernigg, determined to dedicate the first part of the summer to revising the Seventh Symphony. His plans changed immediately, however. This is how he described that experience in a letter he wrote to Alma several years later:

On the first morning of vacation I went up to my Häuschen in Maiernigg firmly resolved to be really lazy (I needed it so badly) and gather my strength. As soon as I entered my old, familiar workroom, the Spiritus creator took hold of me, shaking me and scourging me for eight weeks, until the main part was finished.<sup>80</sup>

The outcome was one of the most idiosyncratic works not only in Mahler's output but also in the earlier part of the twentieth century. According to several accounts, that summer he finished the gigantic Eighth Symphony in a little more than two months. Mahler had used the human voice in three of his previous symphonies—the Second, Third and Fourth—but this time he decided to compose an entirely choral Symphony in two parts: he set the First Part to *Veni creator spiritus* ("Come Holy Ghost, Creator"), a ninth-century Latin Pentecost hymn attributed to Hrabanus Maurus (776-856), while the Second Part comprises his melopoiesis of the final scene of Part II of *Faust* (see Figure 2).<sup>81</sup>

**Figure 2**  
**Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)**  
**Symphony no. 8 (1906)**

**Outline of Part II**

**Faust Part II, Act V**

Introduction (mm. 1-166)  
Instrumental "Overture"

Exposition (mm. 167-579)  
"Waldung, sie schwankt heran" (Chorus & Echo)  
"Ewiger Wonnebrand" (Pater Ecstaticus, Bar solo)  
"Wie Felsenabgrund mir zu Füßen" (Pater Profundus, B solo)  
"Gerettet ist das edle Glied" (Angels & Chorus of Blessed Boys)  
"Jene Rosen" (The Younger Angels)  
"Uns bleibt ein Erdenrest" (More Perfected Angels, Chorus & A solo)

Development (mm. 580-1420)  
"Ich spür' soeben" (The Younger Angels)  
"Hier ist die Aussicht frei" (Doctor Marianus, T solo; The Blessed Boys)  
"Dir, der Unberühbaren" (Chorus)  
"Du schwebst zu Höhen" (Penitent Woman, S solo & Chorus of Penitent Women)  
"Bei der Liebe" (Magna Peccatrix, S solo)  
"Bei dem Bronn" (Mulier Samaritana, A solo)  
"Bei dem hochgeweihten Orte" (Maria Aegyptiaca, A solo)  
"Die du großen Sünderinnen" (Magna Peccatrix, Mulier Samaritana, & Maria Aegyptiaca. S, A, A soli)  
"Neige, neige" (Una Poenitentium/Gretchen, S solo; Blessed Boys)  
"Komm, hebe dich" (Mater Gloriosa, S solo)  
"Blicket auf" (Doctor Marianus, T solo and choruses)

Epilogue (mm. 1421-1572)  
Chorus mysticus (Soloists & Choruses)

It would be pure conjecture to assume that Mahler had Goethe's *Faust* in mind from the start. There is no doubt, however, that the composer knew *Faust* well, and that he had expressed his wish to set the text to music before. La Grange argues that the choice of the *Faust* text must

have come easily to him, since Goethe "had always been one of his literary gods."<sup>82</sup> Mahler owned a complete edition of Goethe's works, and is known to have memorized several passages. Goethe had also made a translation of the *Veni creator* hymn (in Weimar, dated 10 April 1820), and several authors have conjectured that Mahler had read Goethe's translation before, so that the connection between the hymn and the author of *Faust* was an immediate one.

Mahler's immense satisfaction with what he called "the greatest thing I have done so far" has been aptly documented.<sup>83</sup> The dithyrambic tone of his description of the Eighth only parallels the triumphant premiere of the work four years later, on 12 September 1910 in Munich, under the composer's direction.

----

As to their settings of *Faust*, both Schumann and Mahler followed Goethe's text quite faithfully: with the exception of occasional repetitions and/or omissions, the poetry serves as a libretto—an approach usually found in later operatic works such as Strauss's *Salome* and Berg's *Wozzeck*. Most insightfully, John Daverio has viewed *Faust* as part of a triptych of "literary operas," alongside *Genoveva* and *Manfred*.<sup>84</sup> Although "opera" may be an inaccurate genre designation for Schumann's *Faust*, this approach, whereby the text is taken and used verbatim from a preexisting source, was rather radical for Schumann's time. Even more uncompromisingly, Schumann's *Faust* in its completed form defies traditional genre categorization. After abandoning his plan for a *Faust* opera, Schumann chose to treat "the entire material as an oratorio"<sup>85</sup> (albeit of a hybrid form), that encompasses a mixture of genres and styles, including those associated with sacred music. Comparable sacred overtones characterize Mahler's musical setting, and the work as a whole has been viewed with similar skepticism as to its generic classification.<sup>86</sup>

In many ways, Schumann and Mahler's musical settings constitute only a reflection of the uncompromising qualities inherent in Goethe's drama itself. *Faust* has been open to various interpretations, some of which stem from Goethe's own laconic and even contradictory, at times, statements about the work. Most notably, Goethe offered his own explanation for the hero's final salvation, at the scene commentators have often observed as espousing a theology of Catholic inspiration. When the Angels appear "floating through the higher atmosphere, carrying Faust's immortal part," they proclaim two of the most famous lines in the entire poem: "Who ever strives with all his power, we are allowed to save" ("Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, / den können wir erlösen," ll. 11936-37).<sup>87</sup> Goethe himself considered these lines to be the essence of *Faust* (also written in quotation marks in Goethe's manuscript). In one of the conversations that Eckermann relates from 6 June 1831, Goethe quoted this passage and noted:

In these lines ... is contained the key to Faust's salvation. In Faust himself there is an activity that becomes constantly higher

<sup>82</sup> Eveline Nikkels and Robert Becqué, eds., *A "Mass" for the Masses: Proceedings of the Mahler VIII Symposium, Amsterdam 1988* (Rijswijk, The Netherlands: Nijgh & Van Ditmar, 1992), p. 134.

<sup>83</sup> In a letter to Dutch conductor Willem Mengelberg, which arrived in Amsterdam on 18 August 1906. See original in Gustav Mahler, *Briefe 1879-1911*, ed. Herta Blaukopf (Zsolnay, 1982), p. 360; translation in Kurt and Herta Blaukopf, eds., *Mahler: His Life, Work and World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), p. 194.

<sup>84</sup> Daverio asserts that for Schumann, "cobbling together a libretto out of an undisputed masterwork of world literature such as Goethe's *Faust* would have been tantamount to blasphemy." See Daverio, *Robert Schumann: Herald of a "New Poetic Age,"* p. 303.

<sup>85</sup> In a letter of December 1844 to Krüger: "I'm still much occupied with Faust. What would you think about treating the entire material as an oratorio? Isn't this a clever and beautiful idea?" *Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>86</sup> Daverio views it as an "encyclopedic array of genres: church music, oratorio, horror opera, grand opera, lied, symphony." *Ibid.*, pp. 385-87.

<sup>87</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Faust* (New York: Doubleday, 1961). The pictorial sources for the setting of the final scene have been well documented, most recently by Salvatore Calomino, "Depiction of the Anchorites in Mahler's Eighth Symphony," *Naturlaut* 3:4 (2004): 2-6.

<sup>80</sup> Letter of 8 June 1910, quoted in Henry-Louis de La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*, vol. 3: *Vienna, Triumph and Disillusion, 1904-1907* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 426-27.

<sup>81</sup> Part Two of the Eighth Symphony is the longest single movement Mahler ever wrote, and it may also be viewed as a truncated sonata form (in terms of use of its thematic material), although these divisions serve only as convenient points of articulation rather than clear-cut formal sections.

and purer to the end, and from above there is eternal love coming to his aid. This harmonizes perfectly with our religious views, according to which we can obtain heavenly bliss, not through our own strength alone, but with the assistance of divine grace.<sup>88</sup>

Numerous explanations have been proposed on the reasons for Faust's redemption, and Goethe's explanation often seems to be quite inadequate. For some, Faust does not seem to strive for salvation; it is rather offered to him through the mediation of Gretchen, who exemplifies Goethe's notion of "divine grace." This concept, that striving will not bring salvation without divine intercession, is a quintessentially Catholic belief, and Goethe seems to be espousing at this point one of the basic tenets of Catholic theology.

In the same conversation with Eckermann, Goethe admitted that it would have been very difficult for him to describe the conclusion, "where the redeemed soul is carried up," since we do not have any "intimation" of "supersensual matters." For that reason, he chose figures and images from the Christian Church, which gave his "poetical design a desirable form and substance."<sup>89</sup> Thus, formal considerations rather than a strictly Christian outlook lie behind the *Schlusszene*. As Charles Rosen reminds us, in relation to romantic poetry, the Romantics' need to use "a theological vocabulary was independent of their religious creed or lack of one, but the meaning of that vocabulary cannot be understood except through its relation to organized religion and society."<sup>90</sup> Under this light, and given the broader religious overtones of the work, the final eight lines of *Faust II* constitute some of the most often-discussed and perplexing passages in world literature. These transcendental lines, bearing the title *Chorus mysticus*, describe fulfillment, arrival, and accomplishment. "Das Unbeschreibliche" is a place of ecstasy, a luminous topos of completion and realization:

*Alles Vergängliche  
ist nur ein Gleichnis;  
das Unzulängliche,  
hier wird's Ereignis;  
das Unbeschreibliche,  
hier ist es getan;  
das Ewig-Weibliche  
zieht uns hinan.*

All that is transitory  
is but a parable;  
The unattainable  
is here attained;  
The indescribable,  
here is accomplished;  
The Eternal-Feminine  
draws us on high.<sup>91</sup>

Accordingly, both Schumann's and Mahler's settings of the *Chorus mysticus* are replete with religious echoes, irrespective of any particular theological tropes. Contemporary thinkers were also attuned to those implications: Schumann's music for the final scene betrays an unmistakably romantic character, and thus adds to the text's transcendental imagery. On the occasion of the premiere of "Faust's *Verklärung*" in 1849 (the part that would later constitute Part III of the *Scenen*), the critic who had succeeded Schumann as editor of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in 1845, Franz Brendel, published a review in that journal. Brendel realized the sacred implications of such a vivid representation of Goethe's quasi-religious text, especially in the concluding scene, which in his review he identified as the "church music of the future" ("Kirchenmusik der Zukunft").<sup>92</sup>

<sup>88</sup> 6 June 1831, in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann*, trans. John Oxenford (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), pp. 413-14.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 414.

<sup>90</sup> Charles Rosen, *Romantic Poets, Critics, and Other Madmen* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 37.

<sup>91</sup> Adapted from Walter Arndt's translation of *Faust*, ed. Cyrus Hamlin (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1976), p. 308.

<sup>92</sup> "Ich bin der Meinung, daß wir hier Elemente der Kirchenmusik der Zukunft vor uns haben." Alfred Brendel, "R. Schumann's Musik zu der Schlussszene des Göthe'schen Faust," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 31 (1849): 115. Brendel concludes his article by stating that "With the disappearance of faith in the traditional ecclesiastical sense due to the expected course of world-history, art must also relinquish its former ways and derive new inspiration from the new direction of the spirits [of the time]." ("Mit dem Welt geschichtlich berechtigten Verschwinden des Glaubens im alt-kirchlichen Sinne muß auch die Kunst diesen Boden verlassen, und aus der neuen Richtung der Geister neue Begeisterung schöpfen.")

The issue of the ideal "church music of the future" entered romantic musical aesthetics early on. After E.T.A. Hoffmann's condemnation of contemporary church music in the early part of the nineteenth century,<sup>93</sup> music criticism seemed to struggle to define the content of genres that betrayed a cross-fertilization between the sacred and the secular. The Bible offered possibilities for limitless interpretations through each artist's subjective vision, and its text had been "canonized" through thousands of musical settings for liturgical purposes. At the same time, works of secular literature were also "canonized" through musical treatment that was primarily reserved for sacred compositions. Under this practice, works such as Schumann's *Faust* and *Requiem für Mignon*, Op. 98b (inspired by a secular text, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*) were clothed in music of explicit sacred overtones, while at the same time, a work such as Johannes Brahms's *Deutsches Requiem*, with its inclusion of passages chosen from Luther's translation of the Bible, would lose its liturgical garb and find a place in the concert hall. In fact, that Schumann had decided at that stage of his life and career to complete an oratorical work of such unprecedented proportions as *Faust*, based not on the Bible but on the "secular Bible of the Germans," as Heine had insightfully called Goethe's drama,<sup>94</sup> may also speak of his own renewed interest in writing music for large choral-orchestral forces and the elevated status of these works in his output and critical writings. In his famous laudatory article of 1853 titled "Neue Bahnen" (New Paths), Schumann urged the twenty-year-old Brahms to compose for "massed forces, in the chorus and orchestra," since "there lie before us still more wondrous glimpses into the secrets of the spirit world."<sup>95</sup> Daniel Beller-McKenna sees in Brahms's *Deutsches Requiem* the fulfillment of that prophecy, since in that work he simultaneously "engage[d] the German cultural tradition" and embarked "on the specifically German path as Schumann bade him."<sup>96</sup> Schumann's own homage to the "German cultural tradition" may be seen in his own grand compositions for chorus and orchestra, and the particular associations to the precarious political atmosphere around the time of the composition of those works.<sup>97</sup>

Not surprisingly, Schumann's radical—for the time—treatment of *Faust* in an oratorio-like setting, resonated with Franz Liszt, another fervent advocate of the fusion of music and literature. In his writings, Liszt praised Schumann for having been the first composer "to compose complete parts of a tragedy, of the most monumental work of our time, *Faust*, without modifying or arranging the text in any way."<sup>98</sup> Liszt

<sup>93</sup> E. T. A. Hoffmann, "Old and New Church Music," in *E. T. A. Hoffmann's Musical Writings: Kreisleriana, The Poet and the Composer, Music Criticism*, trans. Martyn Clarke, edited by David Charlton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 351-76.

<sup>94</sup> Heinrich Heine, "The Romantic School," in *The Romantic School and Other Essays*, trans. Helen Mustard & ed. Jost Hermand and Robert C. Holub (New York: Continuum, 1985), p. 40.

<sup>95</sup> As cited and translated in Oliver Strunk, ed., *Source Readings in Music History*, revised by Leo Treitler (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), p. 1158.

<sup>96</sup> Daniel Beller-McKenna, "Brahms, the Bible, and Robert Schumann," *American Brahms Society Newsletter* 13/2 (1995): 3. See also his *Brahms and the German Spirit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 37ff.

<sup>97</sup> Within the time that separates the composition of Part III from Parts I and II of *Faust*, Schumann wrote *Genoveva*, Op. 81 (his only completed opera), *Manfred*, Op. 115 (based on Byron), and the *Requiem für Mignon*, Op. 98b, among other shorter compositions for voices and orchestra, all during a period of great "political excitement" over the outbreak of revolution in Paris, Milan, and Vienna," as he noted early in 1848 (Daverio, in *The New Grove*, Vol. 22, p. 781). It may not be a coincidence that three months later he decided to add a "rousing" choral conclusion to the "Gerettet ist das edle Glied" section, possibly in reaction to the revolutionary climate of the time. As he noted in a letter to Brendel of the following year, it had fallen to him "to tell, in music, of the motivating sorrows and joys of the times" (17 June 1849; *Ibid.*, 783). Through this nationalistic "wink," in true Handelian musical fashion, Schumann celebrated with massive choral-orchestral forces the unification of the "German cultural tradition" with the spiritual world that he later bade Brahms follow.

<sup>98</sup> Originally in Liszt's *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4 (Leipzig Breitkopf und Härtel, 1882). Translated as "Robert Schumann (1855)," in *Schumann and His*

would have had in mind his own rendition of the *Faust* story, since it was during the same time that he was working on his *Eine Faust-Symphonie* (1854-57), an idiosyncratic symphonic work that also concludes with the *Chorus mysticus* from Goethe's drama

In 1834, Liszt had disclosed his thoughts on church music in a long article published in French, the last part of which is now better known as "Über die zukünftige Kirchenmusik" ("On the Church Music of the Future").<sup>99</sup> In the article he lamented the decline of religion and sought to establish the criteria for the ideal church music of his day. Influenced by Saint-Simonian socialist philosophy<sup>100</sup> and the religious ideas of the unorthodox reformer Hughes Félicité Robert de Lamennais, Liszt advocated for a type of music that would emulate older venerable musical styles, while at the same time he presented himself as a fervent proponent of a new kind of church music which would embrace the most progressive elements of contemporary music, especially its tendency toward expansiveness and theatricality: "[Music] must be humanitarian, ... strong, and effective, uniting, in colossal proportions, theatre and church; at the same time dramatic and holy, splendid and simple, solemn and serious, fiery and unbridled, stormy and calm, clear and fervid."<sup>101</sup> Underneath Liszt's elaborate prose lies a manifesto for a type of church music that comes close in character to the most expansive secular works written in the early part of the nineteenth century. What Liszt proposed came very close to a fusion of sacred "ideas" and secular "styles," to paraphrase a well-known phrase; or, the "church music of the future" would ideally be represented by works that united sacred content and secular forms.

Thus, by implication, the ideal church music of the future would fuse musical genres and artistic styles, transcend the boundaries of liturgical performance, defy adherence to predetermined dogmatic texts, and borrow from the world of opera characteristics associated with dramatic presentation—in other words, the "church music of the future" that Brendel alluded to in 1849 is not that remote from the musico-dramatic world of Schumann's and Mahler's settings of *Faust*. What is additionally impressive in both cases is the fact that, alongside the composers' espousal of the most progressive tendencies of the period, especially in their expansiveness and theatricality, they continued to look at the past as a source for inspiration and even validation—much along the same lines that Liszt described. Schumann's *Chorus mysticus* begins with a fugal chorus of surprisingly parochial austerity, and proceeds with a double four-part chorus in an elaborately woven contrapuntal web. Interestingly, the falling interlocking fifths that form the fugue subject appear also before at the Cathedral scene of Part I, and at the "hear our imploring" line of the Penitent women in Part III. The motive seems to be almost an emblem of religious interconnections throughout the work. That the ending of the work harkens back to older styles of church music, in a *stile antico* fashion, is even more overtly manifest in the "Ala breve" notation of the movement—a sure indication that the future is secure only when grounded in the past, a notion that Schumann had invariably articulated before.

-----

That Mahler considered the religious implications of the text when he composed the second part of the Eighth is not only manifest in the exalted musical setting but also in a number of his writings. Two letters

---

*World*, ed. by R. Larry Todd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 350. Regarding the first musical setting of *Faust* by Anton Heinrich Radziwill, see Richard Green, "Music in Goethe's *Faust*: Its First Dramatic Setting," in *Our Faust? Roots and Ramifications of a Modern German Myth*, ed. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), pp. 47-64.

<sup>99</sup> Franz Liszt, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6 vols., ed. Lina Ramann (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1880-83), vol. 2, pp. 55-57. An English translation of the entire article may be found in Franz Liszt, *An Artist's Journey: Lettres d'un bachelier ès musique, 1835-1841*, trans. Charles Suttoni (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 236-37.

<sup>100</sup> When in Paris, Liszt became acquainted with the teachings of Claude Henri, Comte de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), the influential French socialist philosopher and social reformer. See especially Ralph P. Locke, *Music, Musicians, and the Saint-Simonians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

<sup>101</sup> Paul Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 19-20. Original emphasis.

that Mahler wrote to Alma in the summer of 1909 reveal important information about his own interpretation of *Faust*. In June of 1909 he received a letter from Alma in which she had quoted the last four lines of the *Chorus mysticus*. Mahler wrote back offering his interpretation of the passage. This letter, which reads like a set of "program notes" to the second part of the Eighth, is worth quoting at length:

I take those four lines, then, in the closest connection with the preceding ones—as a direct continuation, in one sense, of the lines they follow, and in another sense, as the peak of the whole tremendous pyramid, a world presented and fashioned step by step, in one situation and development after another. [...] It is all an allegory to convey something which, whatever form it is given, can never be adequately expressed. Only the transitory lends itself to description; but what we feel, surmise but will never reach (or know here as an actual happening), the intransitory behind all appearance, is indescribable. That which draws us by its mystic force, what every created thing, perhaps even the very stones, feels with absolute certainty as the centre of its being, what Goethe here—again employing an image—calls the eternal feminine—that is to say, the resting-place, the goal, in opposition to the striving and struggling towards the goal (the eternal masculine)—you are quite right in calling the force of love. [...] [Goethe] presents and expresses it with a growing clearness and certainty right on to the *mater gloriosa*—the personification of the eternal feminine! ... The eternal feminine has drawn us on—we have arrived—we are at rest—we possess what on earth we could only strive and struggle for. Christians call this 'eternal blessedness,' and I cannot do better than employ this beautiful and sufficient mythology—the most complete conception to which at this epoch of humanity it is possible to attain.<sup>102</sup>

In Mahler's mind *Faust* and Christian imagery were interconnected. Religious mysticism resounds splendidly in Mahler's setting of this text, replete with sacred overtones. The setting of the *Chorus mysticus* as a chorale, another venerable sacred genre, ideally intensifies the religious imagery of the scene that preceded it. It reflects the sense of arrival, and serves as the most fitting peroration of a metaphysical quest where, as La Grange has eloquently put it, Mahler links "Christian and Faustian Utopias."<sup>103</sup>

The musical fusion of profane and sacred elements in the Eighth, where the sacred text of Part I is "profaned" by secular music, while the secular text of a humanist artist becomes sanctified, is also emblematic of Mahler's view of Viennese culture. Audiences in Vienna approached the arts with incredible, almost religious, devotion. Since art became religion, the chorus does not sing only in praise of God, but of art itself. Religion and art appear under one and the same guise.

Perhaps in 1906 Mahler did not set out to write a secular work, a Symphony, whose spirit would resemble that of a sacred composition. By 1910, however, he certainly saw in this work his final personal, artistic, and spiritual testament. As Alfred Roller reported, "after a rehearsal of the Eighth in Munich, [Mahler] called out cheerfully: 'Look, this is my Mass.'<sup>104</sup> Mahler must have regarded the composition of a Mass to the Christian Latin text extremely limiting, especially since his intellectual horizons had spread far beyond the confines of doctrinal religion. His religious and creative quest had been shaped by artistic giants who transcended dogmas. Thus in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, where art had been elevated to the status of a new religion, the century-old idea of *Kunstreligion* had found its ideal representation. Mahler was

---

<sup>102</sup> Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*, ed. Donald Mitchell and trans. Basil Creighton (New York: Viking Press, 1969), 320-321. This passage was written three years after the completion of the Eighth, possibly because the intervening traumatic events in Mahler's life (between 1906 and 1910, the year of the premiere of the Eighth) triggered a reexamination of the Symphony's spiritual message. They should in no way, however, serve as documentation of the original inspiration behind the work. They constitute events *ex post facto*, and should be viewed as such.

<sup>103</sup> La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*, vol. 3, p. 907.

<sup>104</sup> "Aber nach einer Probe der 'Achten' in München rief er mir in Erinnerung an dieses Gespräch fröhlich zu: 'Sehen Sie, das ist meine Messe.'" Alfred Roller, *Die Bildnisse von Gustav Mahler* (Leipzig: E. P. Tal & Co., 1922), p. 26.

able to express through his music the changing aesthetic trends of society; art had established itself as a powerful spiritual force—a kind of “surrogate religion,” to use Schorske’s expression.<sup>105</sup> Mahler’s initial invocation is not only to the “Holy Spirit” as an abstract notion of God, but also to God the Creator who endows the artist with inspiration and creativity—and the product of such divine inspiration is represented in *Faust*, the chief monument of German literature.<sup>106</sup>

----

There is every indication that Mahler knew Schumann’s setting. Alma praised Schumann’s *Faust* several times in her diaries, and Mahler always spoke enthusiastically of the lyrical content in Schumann’s compositions. But Mahler preferred to conduct his own re-touched scores of Schumann’s First and Fourth Symphonies, and his remarks indicate that the subtlety of the symphonic language of Schumann’s early romanticism must have not resonated with his own expansive outlook. In one specific instance, Mahler seems to have made an indirect reference to Schumann’s *Faust*. That was in August 1906, right after the completion of the Eighth, and Richard Specht reports Mahler’s enthusiastic description:

Just think: within the last three weeks I have completed the sketch of a completely new symphony, something that makes all my other works seem like preliminary stages. I have never composed anything like this. In content and style it is altogether different from all my other works, and it is surely the greatest thing I have ever composed. I have probably never worked under such compulsion; it was a vision that struck me like lightning—the whole immediately stood before my eyes; I had only to write it down, as if it had been dictated to me. [*als ob es ihm diktiert worden wäre*]. . . This Eighth Symphony is already remarkable in that it brings together two works of poetry in different languages. The first part is a Latin hymn and the second nothing less than the final scene of Part II of *Faust*. Are you not amazed? I had longed to set to music the hermit scene and the Finale with the Mater gloriosa in a manner that would be different from all the sugary [*süsslich*], weak ways it has so far been done, but then thought no more about it.<sup>107</sup>

Quite possibly, it is Schumann’s *süsslich* setting that Mahler implies here—a characterization that, surprisingly, Alma had used several years before to describe what Schumann’s *Faust* setting was not!<sup>108</sup> Both composers evoke the past by using a musical language that alludes to former sacred genres. In the *Chorus mysticus*, in particular, they both seem to be preoccupied with the move heavenward: Schumann drives the point home in a brilliantly Handelian fashion, while Mahler seems to be striving toward a transcendent musically sphere, with the soprano soloists competing to ascend ever “hinan.” Mahler’s setting of the *Chorus mysticus* as a chorale, first as a hushed prayer and later in a massively exultant, communal assertion, ideally reflects the sense of arrival, and captures the spirit of mysticism and religious imagery that this humanist text alludes to. Schumann and

<sup>105</sup> Carl Schorske, *Thinking with History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 185. Indicative of Mahler’s philosophical quest is Bruno Walter’s description that after 1904 Mahler “began to seek God in books. He had lost Him in the world, which seemed to him ever more dark and mysterious. Where was God, whose gaze had erstwhile, at least occasionally, met his own, and once even gloriously. He sought him in Spinoza, Plotinus, and other philosophers and mystics.” Bruno Walter, “Mahlers Weg, ein Erinnerungsblatt,” *Der Merker* 3/5 (1911): 166-71; translation in La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*, vol. 3, p. 461.

<sup>106</sup> For a longer treatment of the confluence of the sacred and the secular in the Eighth, see my forthcoming article “*Kirchenmusik der Zukunft?* The Case of Mahler’s Eighth Symphony”.

<sup>107</sup> Richard Specht, “Zu Mahlers Achte Symphonie,” *Tagepost*, Graz; no. 150, 14 June 1914. Translation in La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*, vol. 3, pp. 429-30.

<sup>108</sup> In a diary entry of 17 March 1898, Alma writes: “This evening I played the most beautiful passages from [Schumann’s] ‘Faust.’ The music is unbelievably sweet (not sugary) and charming.” See Alma Mahler-Werfel, *Diaries 1898-1902*, trans. Antony Beaumont (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 13. Interestingly enough, the same word had been used condescendingly to describe the Adagietto of Mahler’s Fifth Symphony; see Constantin Floros, *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies*, trans. Vernon Wicker (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1993), p. 331, n. 34.

Mahler go beyond Goethe’s implied narrative and the requirement for diegetic music at this part of the drama: the concluding portion of the *Chorus mysticus* is also an emblem of universality, much in the tradition of Beethoven’s Ninth.

The Eighth Symphony thus emerges as a colossal hymn to creativity, art, and redemption through love. After all, Mahler dedicated the work to his wife Alma with some of his most heartfelt words of affection, exactly at a time when he knew he was losing her. To the fifty-year-old composer, the ideas of creativity and Eros (especially as encapsulated in the Eighth), God as the creator and Mahler himself as an artist-creator, and Alma as the ultimate creator (both spiritual, as the object of his Eros, and material, as the “eternal feminine”), were intermingled in his mind. The Symphony concludes with the off-stage brass intoning the musical motto that alludes to the *Veni creator* motive of the Symphony’s opening measures. Not surprisingly, Mahler’s exploration into the divine, art, and creativity converge at the end of the Eighth into one: the feminine principle, whose ability to create connects it to everything else in the work.

John Daverio saw in Schumann’s *Faust* the composer’s intention to “redeem” the “secular musical genres, the symphonic-instrumental and the lyric vocal, on a quasi-religious plane.”<sup>109</sup> The Eighth may be viewed as Mahler’s response to exactly the same imperative. His nine completed symphonies and the unfinished Tenth do not merely constitute a single numerical succession. By using the symphony, a quintessentially secular genre, Mahler engaged in a metaphysical pursuit that involved nature and metaphysics, the mundane and the divine, the human and the transcendental.

The two composers’ musico-dramatic choices reveal affinities that demand more than simply the cursory look this preliminary report offers here. Although more than half a century separates the two works, and—technically—neither of the two genres pertains of the sacred-music tradition, this repertory needs to be rehabilitated and viewed as a response to the pervading ideology surrounding sacred musical aesthetics in the long nineteenth century.

## Quotable Quotes

Comments on Mahler’s music capture a variety of opinions. To put the present understanding of his works in perspective, it’s useful to consider some opinions from previous generations of listeners. The Eighth Symphony has elicited a number of responses, which capture a range perspectives about it. Two comments are particularly notable for their strong reactions to the work:

- If you are perverse enough to endure over an hour of masochistic aural flagellation, here’s your chance! This grandiose Mahler “Symphony of a Thousand”, with all its elephantine forces, fatuous mysticism and screaming hysteria, adds up to a sublimely ridiculous minus-zero. – R. D. Darrell, *Downbeat* (1952)
- At the end of the first part of Mahler’s Eighth Symphony, the *Veni Creator Spiritus*, I strolled about the lobby, absolutely disheartened and disillusioned. That these lovely old Latin iambics, filled the breath of the Holy Spirit should be wrenched into rhythms, square and round, and yelled and shouted by hundreds of vociferous ladies and gentlemen, ponderously piled in superiorcumbent tiers, with a howling orchestra with additional instruments galore – seemed gross and irreverent. Dry Teutonic intricacies of melody and harmony seemed to instill a furor, with the accent on the *roar*. – Charles Peabody, *Daily Advertiser* (Boston), 12 April 1918

<sup>109</sup> Daverio, *Robert Schumann: Herald of a “New Poetic Age”*, p. 321.