

Mahler and Art

What the Night Tells Me...

by Teng-Leong Chew

After another busy season at the Hamburg Opera House, Mahler returned to his tiny inn at Steinbach am Attersee in the early summer of 1895. He would wake up very early in the morning, and by seven in the morning the composer would have started working diligently in his little studio he had built on the lakeside. It was a perfect setting for Mahler to compose. The flower-strewn meadow that surrounded the composing hut, for example, inspired Mahler to write a minuet, which he later fondly named *Was mir die Blumen auf der Wiese erzählen*. During this time, Mahler conceived an overall plan, undoubtedly the most ambitious ever designed for a symphony, for his new work. The general title was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and it later became *A Midsummer Morning's Dream*, neither of which, Mahler insisted, had anything to do with Shakespeare. The plan for the symphony was grandiose by any standard. From inert matter – rocks and inanimate Nature, Mahler allowed the epic scheme to unfold into flowers, animals, mankind itself and the angels – before it was crowned with universal love, which Mahler considered as the utmost transcendental force.

The opening movement (completed one year later in 1896) was given a rather imaginative name: "Pan's Awakening – Summer Marches In." In addition, the rest of the movements also bore rather programmatic titles:

2. "What the Flowers in the Meadow Tell Me"
3. "What the Animals of the Forest Tell Me"
4. "What Night Tells Me" (later changed to "What Man Tells Me")
5. "What the Morning Bells Tell Me (and later, replaced by "What the Angels Tell Me")
6. "What Love Tells Me"

As an obsessive revisionist, Mahler later forbade these explanatory notes to be used whenever the work was performed, insisting adamantly that this symphony should not be programmatic. Despite the composer's wish, these programmatic titles continue to spark the imagination of the listeners, especially since Mahler's musical pendulum does swing wildly in this symphony. From the march and the child-like play songs, to the angelic bells and the deepest musical contemplation, Mahler has gone to the very heart of existence, and left us awestruck at the world.

Perhaps nothing is more telling of what Mahler had in mind for this symphony than his own letter to the soprano Anna von Mildenburg, in which he confessed, "My symphony will be something the world has never heard before. In it Nature herself acquires a voice and tells secrets so profound that they are perhaps glimpsed only in dreams!" It is therefore not surprising that it should take an artist with an equally vivid imagination to capture this elusive musical imagery on paper.

Few artists could capture the essence of Mahler's programmatic titles for the Third Symphony more aptly than the children books illustrator Maurice Sendak, who became world renowned with the 1963 publication of his book *Where the Wild Things Are*. Sendak was born in 1928 in Brooklyn New York, less than eighteen years after Mahler's death. As one of the most important children's book illustrators of our time, Sendak was awarded the International Hans Christian Andersen Medal in 1970, the closest approximation to a Nobel Prize in the world of children's literature. By the time he worked on the drawing shown below, Sendak's artistry had matured to new heights. Not only are his various animal characters highly individualized, but the background landscape – the foliage and bark of trees, the curious conformation of ferns – is also delineated with masterly ease. Sendak had the precise technical and artistic combination perfect for the job, and it was to RCA Records' credit that they recognized that fact.

Following a triumphant performance of the Third Symphony with James Levine at the Ravinia Festival, the stage was set for the



Chicago Symphony Orchestra to record this work for RCA. In the days of LPs, the physical size of the recording medium meant that the LP cover sleeves themselves were often treated as an artist's canvas, on which beautiful works of art that "represented" the music (most likely in abstract form), or were inspired by it, could be rendered.

The child-like nature of Mahler's Third Symphony, especially the inner movements, which are laden with fantastic images such as angels, night animals, flowers, and cuckoos, set a perfect stage for Sendak.

As an artist, Sendak shares a surprising number of similarities with Mahler. Sendak came face-to-face with the cruelty of death very early in his childhood, losing his friend Pearl Karchawer at the age of thirteen. The two young friends exchanged World's Fair rings in a small hotel in Catkills, where Sendak's parents would take the whole family for summer vacation. Pearl died tragically in surgery less than a year after they first met, and the loss affected Sendak deeply. The artist has never shied away from openly dealing with the feelings of young children about the poignant aspects of life, although it is always done through the innocent perspectives of a child, in many ways not unlike Mahler himself.

Most Mahlerites will undoubtedly find it rather interesting to learn of Sendak's fondness for "angels". A frail boy, Sendak suffered from recurrent childhood illnesses. To ease the child's pain, his father Philip would make up stories, sometimes improvising them to keep the tales going for days. One tale that he remembers vividly was about a child taking a walk with his parents. "Somehow he becomes separated from them, and snow begins to fall. The child shivers in the cold and huddles under the tree, sobbing in terror. Then an enormous, angelic figure hovers over him and says, 'I am Abraham, your father.' His fear gone, the child looks up, and also sees Sarah. When his parents find him, he is dead." Sounds familiarly Mahlerian?



Sendak's preliminary drawing for *Outside Over There*, showing the silhouette of Mozart in a composing hut. (Portion of the sketch)

More importantly, Mahler is one of Sendak's favorite composers, and they both share an admiration for Mozart¹. When he worked on the illustrations of *Outside Over There*², Sendak listened to nothing else but the music of Mozart. He even borrowed certain images from Mozart, especially from *The Magic Flute*. He confesses, "I have done an homage to Mozart as well – at the end of [*Outside Over There*], when the crisis is over and all is reasonably well – only reasonably well – and Ida is going home tired. She wanders through a wood. In the

¹ It was reported that Mahler's last word was "Mozart!"

² *Outside Over There* by Maurice Sendak, Harper and Row, 1981

distance is a little cottage, and a silhouetted figure sits inside, busily writing and composing. It's Mozart working on *The Magic Flute*." As if it is the artist's subtle way of equating the artistry of Mahler and Mozart, Sendak later that year adopted this image for the RCA record cover. Ironically, RCA promptly released the record in 1976, almost five years ahead of the 1981 publication of Sendak's book *Outside Over There*, containing the Mozart drawing.

The commissioned drawing of "What the Night Tells Me" was done with pen-and-ink line and tempera. It measures 14 1/4" X 14 1/4", perfectly the size of the album sleeve. The main focus of the drawing is the angel handing a bouquet of flowers to Mahler. Mahler's silhouette in the composing hut is unmistakable, the sharp facial features, the frail-looking frame of the composer, and the most telling of all, his glasses. The Mahler drawing is indeed significantly more defined than its predecessor of Mozart's image in *Outside Over There*. Unlike the Mozart silhouette which is located on the far left corner of the drawing, Sendak highlights the composer and the composing hut and makes them the main focal point.

The composing hut is a mysterious structure in this drawing. Mahler had three composing huts, all of them built near his summer home in Austrian countryside. The first composing cottage was used in the summer of 1893 to 1896 in Steinbach am Attersee. Here Mahler completed his Second Symphony and his Third Symphony. In 1901, Mahler built a lakeside summer villa by the Wörthersee in the Austrian village of Maiernigg. He composed his Fourth to Eighth Symphonies as well as numerous songs here. Then from 1908 till his death in 1911, Mahler shifted his summer retreat to Toblach, after the heartbreaking death of his daughter Maria. Toblach, a small village at the border of Austria and Italy was where Mahler drastically altered his composing style into the highly personal "Late Period". It is interesting to note that the only composing hut with a wooden exterior, surrounded by such dense foliage and with large windows on all sides, as depicted in Sendak's drawing, is the one in Toblach. Despite its cartoon characteristics, numerous details of the composing hut featured in the drawing match those of the composing hut in Toblach, suggesting that Sendak did not draw the little cottage out of the blue. In addition, attention to detail is one of Sendak's most pronounced signatures; and this is one of Sendak's most detailed works. It is amazing to note the bugle horn played by one of the night creatures on the right side of the drawing, a most easily identifiable instrument used in the third movement of the symphony. Combined with all the other details that represent what Mahler wrote in the original programmatic titles, it is highly indicative that Sendak knew exactly what he was putting into the drawing. So why did Sendak draw the composing hut in Toblach rather than the one in Steinbach am Attersee? Was it because the scenery under the towering Italian Alps provides the artist with a more appropriate material to illustrate his impression of the Third Symphony, or was Sendak trying to convey something? The question remains to be answered, and I shall leave this to the fertile imagination of the readers...

Upcoming Activity

We will hold our usual "Mahlerthon" gathering on December 6, 2003. Leslie Schwartz will host this event, as usual. We will focus on the Fifth Symphony in this gathering.

DVD: Simon Rattle conducting the Berlin Philharmonic
 CD: Rudolf Barshai conducting the Junge Deutsche Philharmonie

We start promptly at 1:30pm. Please arrive 5-10 minutes early. Refreshments will be served.

Please contact Teng-Leong Chew to reserve a seat.