

Gustav Mahler

Symphony No. 6

GUSTAV MAHLER was born in Kalischt (Kaliste) near the Moravian border of Bohemia on July 7, 1860, and died in Vienna on May 18, 1911. He composed the Sixth Symphony during the summers of 1903 and 1904, completing the orchestration on May 1, 1905. He led a reading rehearsal with the Vienna Philharmonic in March 1906 and conducted the first public performance on May 27, 1906, in Essen (he later went on to revise the work in various ways).

MAHLER'S SYMPHONY NO. 6 IS SCORED for four flutes and piccolo (third and fourth flutes also doubling piccolo), four oboes (third and fourth doubling English horn), three clarinets with high clarinet (D and E-flat) and bass clarinet, four bassoons and contrabassoon, eight horns, six trumpets, three tenor trombones and bass trombone, tuba, timpani, bass drum, snare drum (doubled), cymbals, triangle, rattle, tam-tam, glockenspiel, cowbells, low-pitched bells, birch brush, hammer, xylophone, two harps, celesta (doubled if possible), and strings.

In 1921, Paul Bekker, in the earliest really substantial study of Mahler's work, *Gustav Mahlers Sinfonien*, began the chapter on the Sixth Symphony by noting that at that time the trilogy of purely instrumental symphonies, Nos. 5, 6, and 7, were the works least frequently performed, and that, of these, the Sixth was the rarest of all. For many years the Sixth was the only Mahler symphony never to have been given in America. (Serge Koussevitzky intended to remedy that defect in 1933 but apparently was unable to make arrangements with the Leipzig publisher for the parts. It remained for Dimitri Mitropoulos to introduce the symphony to America in 1947, and by then the problems were different: the publisher's original parts had been destroyed in wartime bombings, so new parts had to be copied from the score.) Until the 1960s, when, true to the composer's own prediction, his time finally came, these "middle" symphonies were still rarely heard. The ice was broken mostly by the Adagietto movement of the Fifth Symphony, which almost attained a life of its own, but gradually all of them entered the repertory of the major orchestras and they have now been recorded many times over. In recent decades, the Sixth and Seventh symphonies (the Seventh for a long while being regarded as the most problematic stepchild of Mahler's newfound popularity) have come to be as firmly established as the Fifth.

Possibly part of the reason for the neglect of the middle symphonies was that audiences found it easier to follow Mahler's highly original approach to symphonic writing when provided with an explicit program (such as those he produced for the First and Third symphonies, though he later suppressed them) or with a text (as in the Second, Third, Fourth, and Eighth). His dazzlingly complex and ingenious instrumental symphonies simply overwhelmed the senses, especially before the development of the long-playing record, when one had to catch them at infrequent performances. No composer has benefited so much from the development of the recording as Mahler, simply because listeners were then able to live with his demanding works until their secrets could be revealed. We might have expected that the Sixth would be easier to comprehend than the others, if only because it is one of Mahler's rare productions to follow the traditional four-movement symphonic form, but the somber emotional quality of the score seems to have acted against it. Although Mahler avoided revealing any kind of program for the three symphonies, he did allow the Sixth to be performed with the epithet *Tragic*; but later he removed even that much of a hint. The mood is, in any event, self-evident, since it is the only Mahler symphony to end unrelievedly in the minor. All the others, even when they start in the minor, proceed to blazing triumph or, at least, to gentle, poignant resignation, in the major mode. But though the fatalism of the ending—for Mahler was indeed a fatalist—may depress listeners who look instead for transfiguration, writers on Mahler increasingly rank the Sixth, taken as a whole, as his greatest symphonic achievement. The composer himself found the work almost too moving to bear and predicted—correctly, as it turned out—that the Sixth would languish in obscurity until the world knew his first five symphonies.

We might very well wonder why Mahler wrote a “tragic” symphony in 1903 and 1904. As is usually the case with such queries, the answer is by no means simple; indeed, perhaps no explanation is possible. On the face of it, tragedy should have been the thing farthest from Mahler’s mind. He had married Alma Schindler, around whom his life henceforth revolved, on March 9, 1902, and their first daughter, Maria, was born in November. The year was one of increasing professional acclaim for Mahler the composer, with the enormously successful premiere of the Third Symphony in Krefeld in May. As a conductor he had already reached a pinnacle, having served as music director of the Vienna Opera since 1897. And he had begun composing with renewed vigor after his wedding, spending his summer vacations from the opera house engaged in feverish creative activity.\* The Fifth Symphony, composed during the first summer after his wedding, is aptly characterized by Michael Kennedy as Mahler’s *Eroica*, a symphonic conquest. But the Sixth, composition of which occupied the next two summers, is quite a different matter. The symphony is filled with the heavy tread of marching, with dotted rhythms, and, above all, with a motto idea that consists simply of an A major triad that suddenly turns to minor. This major-to-minor motto functions on the smallest scale as a metaphor for the mood of the entire work, which several times in the last movement seems about to culminate in the major mode but finally shrinks from so positive a conclusion and ends tragically—but with defiance—in A minor.

We have a tendency, *ex post facto*, to think of Mahler as a death-obsessed neurotic, virtually incapable of living in the real world but rather pouring out his anguish, longing, and intimations of mortality in his work. To a considerable extent these views derive from Alma’s memoirs, which are an indispensable source but must be used with extreme caution, since she had every reason to build up her own role in “sustaining” the composer through his tribulations. (A great deal of the Mahler legend and of our understanding of his music ultimately goes back to otherwise unsupported statements in Alma’s memoirs.) Until his heart lesion was discovered in 1907 Mahler maintained a vigorous summer regimen of swimming, hiking, and mountain climbing, activities put in the service of generating and working out his musical ideas. Even Alma recalls that the two summers during which he composed the Sixth were emotionally untroubled. Of 1903, she said:

Summer had come, and with it we resumed our life at Maiernigg and its unvarying and peaceful routine. Mahler soon began working. This time it was the first sketches for the Sixth Symphony. He played a lot with our child, carrying her about and holding her up to dance and sing. So young and unencumbered he was in those days.\*\*

Of 1904, the summer in which Mahler finished the symphony, Alma noted only that it was “beautiful, serene, and happy.” (Their second daughter had been born that June.) Only one thing upset her—or so she remembered years later: in both summers Mahler set to music some poems by Friedrich Rückert dealing with the death of children.

I found this incomprehensible. I can understand setting such frightful words to music if one had no children, or had lost those one had. Moreover, Friedrich Rückert did not write these harrowing elegies solely out of his imagination: they were dictated by the cruellest loss of his whole life. What I cannot understand is bewailing the deaths of children, who were in the best of health and spirits, hardly an hour after having kissed and fondled them. I exclaimed at the time: “For heaven’s sake, don’t tempt Providence!”†

The result, of course, was Mahler’s great song cycle *Kindertotenlieder* (“Songs on the Death of Children”), which was thus being conceived and composed at the same time as the Sixth Symphony.

Alma claimed similar foreboding upon hearing the completed symphony. (Despite the lengthy gestation period, encompassing two summers, she did not hear the work in progress; Mahler composed in a distant, private little hut in the wood and refused to play his music to anyone before it was finished: “An artist could no more show unfinished work than a mother her child in the womb.”) On the day that Mahler finally announced the work to be finished, Alma rushed to get everything done in the house, then walked with him arm in arm to the little hut, where he played it through for her.

Not one of his works came so directly from his inmost heart as this. We both wept that day. The music and what it foretold touched us so deeply. The Sixth is the most completely personal of his works, and a prophetic one also. In

the *Kindertotenlieder*, as also in the Sixth, he anticipated his own life in music. On him too fell three blows of fate, and the last felled him. But at the time he was serene; he was conscious of the greatness of his work. He was a tree in full leaf and flower.

We may well believe that the two were overcome by the deep personal expressiveness of this music, but the reference to “what it foretold” is surely wisdom after the fact. The last movement contained, at three decisive points, a single powerful stroke with a hammer, the instrument being introduced into the score of the symphony solely for these three strokes. According to Alma, the composer described the movement, with its hammer strokes, as “the hero, on whom fall three blows of fate, the last of which fells him as a tree is felled.” With the hindsight of one writing her memoirs, Alma saw three “hammer strokes” that struck Mahler himself in the year 1907 (though her description of the events, which has been followed by most writers, telescopes the time span and gives the impression that the blows came directly one after the other): his resignation from the Vienna Opera in the face of mounting opposition to his reforms (and the strong thread of anti-Semitism in the city’s cultural life), the sudden and devastating death of his elder daughter Maria, at age four-and-a-half, from scarlet fever and diphtheria, and the discovery of his own serious heart condition—the blow that “felled him.” Still, though Alma and Mahler may not have reacted with foreboding when she first heard the music, the composer after 1907 came to be superstitiously afraid of the three hammer strokes and eventually removed the last, “mortal” blow. As the score is printed in the critical edition of Mahler’s works, there are only two such strokes, though some conductors choose to reinstate the missing one. (James Levine does not.)

The hammer blows presented a problem at the first performance. During the rehearsals it was discovered that they could not be heard to proper effect, and the performers tried striking the hammer against various objects (including a specially constructed drum of Mahler’s own invention) to improve audibility, but none of them seems to have been entirely satisfactory. The Dutch conductor Willem Mengelberg wrote to the composer with a suggested solution, for which Mahler thanked him in a letter promising to try it when he conducted the symphony in Amsterdam and planning perhaps to add a note to the score by way of explanation. Unfortunately Mahler never did conduct the Sixth in Amsterdam, Mengelberg’s letter to him is lost (so we do not know what the suggestion was), and the composer never changed the explanation in the score, which states simply that the hammer blow should be a “short, strong, but dully reverberating stroke of a non-metallic character (like an axe-stroke).” Thus the problem of creating the appropriate sound is left, in each case, to the performers.

Alma’s memoirs recall the emotions aroused in the composer as he prepared the orchestra for the first public performance of the Sixth, to be held at a festival of the United German Music Society in Essen. She also recalled the utter insensitivity of the other important composer there, Richard Strauss:

We came to the last rehearsals, to the dress rehearsal—to the last movement with its three great blows of fate. When it was over, Mahler walked up and down in the artists’ room, sobbing, wringing his hands, unable to control himself. Fried, Gabilovitch, Butts, and I stood transfixed, not daring to look at one another. Suddenly Strauss came noisily in, noticing nothing. “Mahler, I say, you’ve got to conduct some funeral overture or other tomorrow before the Sixth—their mayor has died on them. So vulgar, that sort of thing—But what’s the matter? What’s up with you? But—” and out he went as noisily as he had come in, quite unmoved, leaving us petrified.^

Apparently one result of Mahler’s highly wrought-up reaction to the dress rehearsal was that he did not conduct the premiere himself well, fearing to underline the significance of the last movement. The response of the critics was not especially favorable, with complaints in general that Mahler’s undeniable brilliance of orchestral technique had outstripped the content of his work. But two young men with highly educated musical ears were entranced and excited, and they remained devotees of Mahler’s music. Their names were Anton Webern and Alban Berg.

One reason for their enthusiasm is that here Mahler achieves his most successful balance between the claims of dramatic self-expression, which is always at the core of his music, and architectural formality. It is, in fact, one of the most striking things about the Sixth that it is at once deeply personal and classically formal. Three of the four

movements are in the tonic key of A minor, the only exception being the slow movement (a symphonic tradition going all the way back to Haydn, though rarely maintained at the end of the nineteenth century). The sinister opening bars introduce the constantly recurring motives of the steady tramping in the bass and a dotted rhythm. The formal exposition (which is repeated, as in earlier classical symphonies) adds to these motives a melody opening with a downward octave leap and more marching, leading to the first explicit statement of the “motto” mentioned earlier.

Orchestral timbre plays as important a part as the change from major to minor in coloring this idea: three trumpets attack the A major chord *fortissimo* but die away to *pianissimo* as it turns to A minor; three oboes, entering on the same chord, grow from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*, so that the heroic brassy sound of the major chord gradually shifts to the expressive nasality of the double reed. A chorale-like theme in the woodwinds, punctuated by light pizzicato strings, leads to F major and the passionate second theme (which, again according to Alma, was the composer’s attempt to depict her), soaring in the violins and upper woodwinds.

After a full repeat of the exposition, the development gets underway with rich contrapuntal interchanges between the various thematic ideas. Among the most poetic passages is the surprising appearance of cowbells playing against soft chords in the celesta and high, triple-*piano* tremolo chords in the violins. Mahler, the ardent alpinist, had no doubt heard the sound of cowbells many times echoing up to him through the clear mountain air; he considered them “the last earthly sounds heard from the valley far below by the departing spirit on the mountain top.” But in the score he adds a careful footnote that “the cowbells must be handled very discreetly—in realistic imitation of a grazing herd, high and low-pitched bells resounding from the distance, now all together, now individually. It is, however, expressly noted, that this technical remark is not intended to provide a programmatic explanation.” The first movement ends with the “Alma” theme in a temporarily consoling A major.

The middle two movements raise a special question. Mahler originally placed them in the order Scherzo-Andante, which is the order found in the manuscript and used in the first published score. But then, perhaps because he was persuaded that the thematic material of the scherzo was too similar to that of the first movement, he reversed the order of the two movements to Andante-Scherzo, the sequence used for all of the performances Mahler himself conducted and for subsequent printings of the score during his lifetime. But he was not permanently convinced, changing his mind on this point, even during rehearsals. Though the editor of the 1963 critical edition of Mahler’s Sixth Symphony, as well as the editors of the 1998 reprint, opted for Mahler’s original conception of Scherzo-Andante, the most recent editor reversed the decision in 2003, saying (on an insert to the score) that the order should be Andante-Scherzo. Since arguments can be made for either sequence (Scherzo-Andante or Andante-Scherzo), the controversy has become more heated in recent years, and it remains for conductors to choose between the two. In this series of concerts, James Levine will conduct the symphony both ways.

The Andante, in E-flat major, provides the one real passage of consolation in the symphony (significantly, this occurs in the key that is farthest away from A minor), though the melodic material is akin to that of one of the *Kindertotenlieder*. Whether this lyrical movement is placed second or third, Mahler here provides wonderful contrast to what precedes and follows it.

The scherzo opens with an explicit reminiscence of the tramping bass of the opening movement, and follows it with recollections of other material, now occasionally in a slightly parodistic mode (especially the sarcastic trills of the woodwinds). The Trio, marked “*Altväterisch*” (“in an old-fashioned style”), features the oboe in a charming passage written in irregular rhythms. According to Alma’s memoirs, this section “represented the arhythmic games of the two little children, tottering in zigzags over the sand.” Here again she found the ending to be ominous and foreboding, dying away enigmatically, as it does, into A minor and silence.

The finale begins in C minor, the relative minor of the Andante’s E-flat major—one of Mahler’s favorite expressive tonal relationships. A soaring violin theme, beginning with a rising octave, mirrors the falling octave of the first-

movement theme. In this finale, Mahler establishes, on an imposing scale, a contrapuntal texture bringing together elements from throughout the symphony, especially the first movement. A development section builds toward a massive climax in D major, but just at the point of arrival the first hammer blow breaks off the cadence and the major mode shifts suddenly to minor for a new and still more urgent development. Building to a passage of pure, almost Palestrinian counterpoint in A, the climactic cadence to D is once again interrupted by a hammer stroke and a deceptive cadence onto B-flat. Another return to the introduction builds a climax in A major, which bids fair to hold to the triumphant conclusion of the symphony; this is the point where the third and final hammer stroke is called for. Even if it is omitted from a performance, as it is from the critical edition (which James Levine follows in this regard), the point is marked by the thunderous return of the marching timpani figure from the opening movement, following which the only response is a complete collapse, as the brass and woodwinds sound once more the A minor triad—the conclusion of the motto figure—while the heavy timpani march dies away in sullen silence to a soft pizzicato A in the strings.

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