*Featured Article*

## With Hammer and Cowbells – Mahler's Sixth Comes to America

**by Gabriel Engel**

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The prolonged, spontaneous ovation accorded the belated American premiere of Mahler's *Sixth* at each of its three performances (Dec. 11-13, 1947) by the N. Y. Philharmonic under Mitropoulos' brilliant direction, should go a long way toward proving that this sadly neglected work is in reality one of the most vital and appealing of all Mahler's symphonies. Given perhaps less than a dozen times during the two score years of its existence, mostly during Mahler's lifetime (i.e., before 1911), it is not likely that any living American reviewer had ever heard it before. Of course, the premiere at Essen, as well as the performances that followed, had elicited the usual raucous chorus of critical abuse heaped upon any Mahler achievement by a world in which petty jealousies were busy every moment producing fresh axes to grind. Yet even had it been a new work by Beethoven or Brahms it could scarcely have better survived the heavy cross of rejection laid upon it by apologetic extenuations on the part of confessed Mahler devotees. "My time will yet come", Mahler used to say, commenting upon the failure of his contemporaries to understand his works. He meant hostile critics and musicians, no doubt, but so far as the *Sixth* was concerned, he might as well have included most of his friends. Significant in this connection are some words Arnold Schoenberg spoke about Mahler's art:

> "In place of many words, it would perhaps be best for me to say, 'I believe firmly and unshakably that Gustav Mahler was one of the greatest of men and artists'. For there are only two possible ways to convince anyone of an artist's quality: the first and better way, to produce his work; the second, which I must now use: to communicate to others one's own faith in that work…
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> "In reality there is only a single towering goal for which an artist strives: to *express himself!* If he succeeds in that he has won the greatest success an artist may achieve; beside that everything else is minor. Self-expression embraces all: death, resurrection, fate, etc., as well as the lesser, though not unimportant human problems…
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> "I believe that Mahler simply did not notice that his themes were banal. And to be sure, for a single reason: *that they are not banal.* I must confess here: I also belonged at first to those who found these themes banal. I believe it important to admit that I was Saul before I became Paul, for it may be deduced there-from that I too was misled by that fine sense of discrimination of which his opponents are so proud. Rather, only now have I come to heed that *fine* sense no longer, since my ever growing impression of the beauty and grandeur of Mahler's work has convinced me that such judgments arise not from a truly fine sense of discrimination, but on the contrary, from the total lack of ability to discriminate.
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> " I had found Mahler's theme banal, although the work as a whole had made a great impression upon me. Today I could no longer maintain such a stand, even with malice. Just think! If those themes were really banal, I could not help find them still more banal today than I did at first. Banal means rustic, signifying a retarded state of culture. Such a state of culture does not imply anything bad or false. It merely represents something superseded, obsolete, once-right, but no-longer-true. The peasant behaves not badly, but in an out-dated manner, aping those of a once higher cultural state. Banality, then, implies an out-dated state of manner and outlook of the more cultured; not banality from the outset, but merely grown to be such when supplanted by the succeeding stratum of cultural progress. But it can never become valid again; once rendered banal, it must remain banal. And when I now declare that I can no longer find these themes banal today, I know they could never have been banal; for a banal idea that is an idea that strikes me as outmoded, trite, can seem to me, upon further acquaintance, only more banal, more trite. Certainly, never more significant. Furthermore, when I keep discovering in this idea, the more I contemplate it, (and this is my experience with Mahler) new facets, fresh beauties, splendors, then there can be no doubt: the idea is the very opposite of banal. It is not something that has been long since by-passed for reasons that cannot be misunderstood, but rather something the inmost meaning of which has yet to be fathomed, something that was too deep to permit immediate grasp of more than its outer form. And in reality it has gone thus not only with Mahler; almost all the other great composers were subjected to the censure of banality. I need only mention Wagner and Brahms.
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> "Equally silly is another criticism hurled against Mahler: that his themes are unoriginal. In the first place, just as in art the isolated detail, so in music the theme alone, is not the main thing. For an artwork, like a living organism, emerges an entity. Exactly as with a child, it is not just an arm nor a leg that is first created. Not the themes, but the entire work is the inspiration. Not his is the true gift of invention who creates a good theme but rather his who conceives a whole symphony at once. In the second place, however, Mahler's themes are original. Naturally, one who singles out the first four notes will detect reminiscences, but he is no less ridiculous than one who hunts for original words in an original poem. The theme consists not of a few notes, but of the musical products of these notes. The little structure we call a theme should never be the sole yardstick of the large form of which it is the relatively smallest element. Schopenhauer once remarked that the most unusual things have to be said with the most usual words. That must be of necessity be the case with music as well; that the most unusual things have to be said with the most usual sequences of tone. One is most tempted to go further; that is unnecessary for a musical composition to have an original theme. Otherwise Bach's Chorale-Preludes would not be works of art. Yet art-works they certainly are." [2]

To some extent Mahler himself must be held responsible for the timorous pre-disposition of the musical world, conductors as well as music-lovers, toward the *Sixth.* The references to the work's content and complexity in his letters are confused and confusing. In 1904 he wrote to Richard Specht:

> My *Sixth* will pose riddles the solution of which will be possible only to a generation that has already accepted and digested my first five." [3]

The work was then complete in concept, but probably still in rough sketch form.

In a letter to Bruno Walter in the summer of 1906 Mahler, in his usual exuberant, elated manner following the completion of a symphony, scolds him with good-natured impatience for quixotically condemning as unsound one of Wagner's polemics in favor of program-music.

> "True, just as in all art, the utmost purity of the means of expression is desirable. When making music one should not seek to paint, describe, etc. Yet whatever the music one creates it

[2] *Rede über Mahler.* Translated by Gabriel Engel from experts included in a privately printed pamphlet issued by Schoenberg's friends and pupils in celebration of his 60th birthday. The complete text will be included in the collection of Schoenberg's writings to be issued in the fall of 1948 by the Philosophical Library Inc., 15 E. 40th Street, New York, N.Y., under the title, STYLE AND IDEA.

[3] This letter as well as the others that follow, is translated by Gabriel Engel from Mahler's *Briefe,* (Vienna, 1924), by kind permission of Alma Mahler Werfel.

> cannot help being the complete human – feeling, thinking, breathing, suffering.
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> "In a word, one who lacks the necessary genius should keep hands off; but he who has it need fear nothing. All this arguing about the exact nature of a work of musical art strikes me as though one, having begotten a child, starts breaking his head afterwards over whether it is really a child, begotten with proper intentions, etc. In short, one has made love and succeeded: That's that! And if one does not and cannot love, why there just is no child. Again that's that! And if one does and can – well, there is a child. Again that's that!
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> "My *Sixth* is done. I believe I have succeeded. A thousand times that's that!"

And then came the premiere at Essen, with its hostile critical reception, nothing new to Mahler, who had learned to take rebuffs from the press in his stride. Bravely he wrote to Mengelberg preparing the *Sixth* for its Amsterdam premiere:

> "My *Sixth* appears to be too hard a nut for the tender little teeth of our critics of today. Just the same it manages to push its way through the concert halls."

Shortly after his Mahler sent his friend Joseph Reitler, conferring in Paris with the conductor Colonne, who wished to introduce a Mahler symphony there, the following amazing note:

> "Under no condition will I advise the *First*. It is very difficult to grasp readily. I would rather recommend the *Sixth* or *Fifth*."

It seemed now that the *Sixth* was not such a tough nut to crack, after all.

By then, however, the damage was done. Bogey gossip he had unwittingly helped further by sanctioning dour programmatic allusions to the score, added to the snide remarks of jealous musicians of note concerning the precocious cowbells and hammer and the inanities and insanities of the orchestration, had transformed the symphony's hoped-for laurels into a crown of thorns.

> My Sixth will pose puzzles that can only be broached by a generation which has imbibed and digested my first five.
>
> -- Gustav Mahler

Following the few performances during Mahler's lifetime the *Sixth* remained virtually taboo. Most surprising has been the attitude of Mahler devotees toward this mistakenly neglected work. Paul Bekker, author of a monumental German tome on Mahler's symphonies, published in 1921, may be regarded as the spokesman for the majority of these. He said:

> "It would not be right, in order to overcome the antipathy to it inspired by its exceptional content and form, to call for more frequent performances of this symphony as a separate work."

Heard as entirely separate entity, with a message complete in itself, Mahler's *Sixth* might well persuade the listener that the composer was a pessimist. Yet the same listener hearing the *Fifth* independently, with its enthusiastic message of joy and love of life, could not help concluding by the same logic that Mahler was the very voice of affirmation. The truth, however, is that each of these works, indeed every one of Mahler's symphonies, stresses a different facet of the complete "human" mentioned in his letter to Walter. Man's ever-changing experiences in life exert subtle influences over his spiritual alchemy; they cause changes in his "feeling, thinking, and suffering" which determine his consequent spiritual state.

If I may use the apt contrast of Milton's immortal odes, the tragic Finale of the *Sixth*, a veritable Ode to Human Suffering, is but the momentary *Il Penseroso* of an artist, whose inner life was one vast *L'Allegro*, ecstatic with the urge and the felicity for self-expression. Viewed from the first movement's arduous ascent to life's topmost summit, whence the homely echo of cowbells still tinges the transfigured revelation of eternity with mundane limitation, this Finale may well reflect Mahler's hopeless struggle to maintain his lofty ideals at the Viennese Opera against the stumbling-blocks set in his path by malicious, powerful opponents, envious of his high artistic authority. For years Mahler suffered under the premonition that this episode would end tragically for him, as it did, though not till some seasons after its probable prediction in the foreboding hammer blows of the *Sixth*.

Only absolute belief in their indispensability could have caused Mahler to introduce the hammer and cowbells, scored here for the first time in any symphony. Those who suspect that he might have hit upon such precarious tonal timbres out of a desire for sensational effect, need only be reminded that he would transport a special set of cowbells, constructed according to his own specifications for this work, hundreds of miles to insure accurate rendition of the desired timbre. Mahler's conception of the hammer blow, on the other hand, seems never to have been adequately realized. Paul Bekker, who attended some of the performances, concludes, naively enough, that this failure was perhaps intentional: that it supports the validity of Mahler's symbolism by suggesting MAN's insurmountable limitations, the vanity of his effort even so much as to mirror the voice of Fate. The score calls for "a short, powerful, but dully echoing stroke of unmetallic character." Paul Stefan hints, "Like a falling tree." In a letter dated Aug. 18, 1906, to Mengelberg, in a quandary about the hammer blow, Mahler said:

> "Too bad you told me so late just how you felt about the hammer blows. I can make no change now, as I gave my *imprimatur* to the publisher weeks ago. Frankly, I felt just as you do about the matter, but forgot to note the change. Well, let's try it your way in Amsterdam and perhaps it can be appended somehow to the score later."

The original score shows that Mahler did omit the third and most fateful of the hammer blows (as published in the study-score released after the world premiere). However, the published version greatly intensifies the work's sensational appeal. Perhaps this fact will continue to influence the conductors of its rare performances to retain the third stroke. Once heard it cannot be forgotten. Whenever the work is performed listeners will be told about it in advance and they will await it expectantly. It is literally the death blow. Why did Mahler change his mind about mirroring the very stroke of death in tone? Perhaps superstition had something to do with it. Yet artistic integrity actually demanded that it be omitted. The two preceding hammer blows were warnings, premonitions, sufficiently somber to lend conviction to the description "Tragic". The third, followed by the mourning choir of trombones, involves an almost photographic bit of realism, violating the pure symbolism Mahler really intended, but apparently himself understood clearly only after it was too late to amend the score in press.

Just another word about the cowbells and hammer. At the American premiere, in almost every detail a perfect presentation of the work, these two important symbols, so difficult of realization in accordance with Mahler's intent, might possibly have been improved upon. The cowbells, rather spasmodically sounding, seemed somewhat harsh and over-prominent. The score stresses particularly that the bells be rung "at a distance." As this sound, in particular, tends to produce a disturbing audience-reaction, aside from feeding the hostile critic's penchant for gibes, it should be most meticulously tested before a performance. The greatest feasible distance from which the bells would be sufficiently perceptible to show that they are related to the score would be the proper distance. As for the right timbre, one would have to unearth Mahler's own specially constructed cowbells to know the exact truth in that regard. The score reveals the unbroken, gently waving line Mahler used for his cowbell notation, indicating that he desired a soft, unbroken tone, but the timbre he fancied may remain a mystery forever. The hammer blow at Carnegie Hall was startling, sharp, and penetrating, in all, surely impressive, yet as a symbol of Fate not over-convincing.

At first perhaps, some of the hostile scribes were driven by urgent deadlines to snap judgments, the equally ready retraction of which might have involved some sacrifice of authority and pride. With each fresh ovation granted a Mahler Symphony their stand grows more puzzling, almost seeming the expression of a planned, hammer-like

attitude already notorious in America in Mahler's lifetime. At any rate, the hammer and cowbells provided their now very banal remarks about Mahler's alleged banality with a grateful point of departure. Gleefully, they rose to an all-time low of superficial condemnation. To them we heartily recommend the telling words of Schoenberg on the nature of banality (with special emphasis on Mahler's art). By his own confession once in agreement with them, this man, one of the foremost creative artists of all time, is not merely a great musician, but a keen esthetician as well. Having survived a half-century of critical buffetings, with his artistic integrity unscathed, he recently viewed with whimsical pardonable irony a belated American Academy of Arts award in recognition of a lasting contribution to art, already realized in great measure just about the time of the world premiere of Mahler's *Sixth.*

**FIRST MOVEMENT**

Listening to the opening strains one seeks in vain to single out a definite lesser melodic component corresponding to the traditional concept of "first theme." There is here no cadence, no marker for the quick, facile analyst. One is swept along by an impassioned march-like outburst of lyricism, the vehicle of a number of motivating sources. It surges impetuously onward by ramifications rhythmically ever new. Through sixty measures of alternate wide leaps and zig-zag rushes it pursues its breathless way. It is not just a theme; it is a march-song of symphonic scope, an integral creation of the process known to musical rhetoric as "free fantasy". The powerful forward urge of this march is not the expression of restlessness. It mirrors the heroic determination of man's will to surmount all obstacles.

A singular motive, of grim, relentless power gives the first hint of tragic outcome for all the earth-bound aspiration just presented. A word about the origin and nature of this fateful motive, destined for a paramount role in the symphony, may be of interest. At the end of the opening movement of Mahler's *Second* there occurs a particularly gloomy, brief episode, reflecting the victory of death over life. It involves an instant change of mood from major to minor by the depression of the middle tone of a major triad. The aptness of this harmonic transformation as a symbol of the shadow of death ever-impending over life must have struck Mahler when planning the *Sixth*. No less singular than this fate motive itself is the instrumental dress in which he arrayed its initial appearance. Trumpets and oboes sound it simultaneously, the former graded from *ff* to *pp*, the latter from *pp* to *ff*, the darkening of orchestral timbre, as the dimmed brilliancy of brass gives way to the increased nasal volume of woodwind. Whether or not one favors such intricacies of dynamics in mingled timbres, this is a characteristic example of the meticulous virtuosity Mahler brought to the scoring of the *Sixth*, that seems worth pointing out. Echoes of the fate-symbol's harmonic change haunt the brief, mysterious chorale that follows, softly chanted by the woodwind. Gradually the air grows more peaceful and cheerful, to greet the advent of the light-hearted song-theme, which seems at first nothing more than the idealized chorus of a Viennese popular song, characterized by short, separated phrases, alternately amorous and lilting.

Ah, the song-theme, into which symphonists have traditionally poured the utmost melodic magic of which they were capable! Yet certainly not so Mahler, especially in this simple, diatonic song-theme. Obviously its chief mission is not of a cantabile nature; it is above all the vehicle for two contrasted motives, destined to high importance in the movement's development. Therefore the listener should realize that instead of compact themes the exposition of Mahler's *Sixth* is devoted to contrasted moods, presented in freely evolving, song-like structures, the primary aim of which is not to sing, but to convey the motives, the characters in the symphonic drama about to unfold. So numerous are they, especially in the opening march, that Mahler, eager to familiarize the listener with the essential particles flashing by with kaleidoscopic swiftness, resorts to the classic device of repetition. In view of the brevity of this exposition and the enhanced comprehension of the ensuing development a second hearing of the many motives would afford, Mahler's demand for such a repetition should not be ignored.

As first heard, but a simple melody clothed in simple harmonies, it returns shortly a transformed creation, impetuous, joyful, resplendent in a luxurious contrapuntal garb of supporting voices. After full, satisfying expression it subsides in a dreamy cadence.

The extended development section falls into four divisions, separated by the strongly contrasted moods which hold successive sway. The first of these exploits a number of varied rhythmical motives drawn from the march, culminating in a new, more impassioned march-melody freely evolved out of those motives. The listener becomes aware of the lessening weight of conflict, the melodic line almost attaining an air of open exultation as it ascends to a more ethereal plane.

"Gradually more sustained," says the score. The violins leap jubilantly upward, to become transfigured in whispered closely harmonized *tremolo* suggesting the rarefied atmosphere of a lofty summit. Faintly echoing out of the valley below rises the homely sound of cowbells. A choir of eight muted horns and trombones intones the chorale-theme. This passage, a marvel of orchestral color achieved by purely indigenous means, is one of the most felicitous instrumental inspirations of a composer whose pioneering achievements at the threshold of twentieth century economy of instrumental means are still regarded by experts as the supreme models in their field.

The song-theme, hitherto only an occasional, fragmentary apparition in the development, now flowers into a full-blown, tender melody in the solo flute. Inverted it gains immeasurably in grace and expressiveness. Transmuted by this brightening magic the stormy march re-enters regenerated, now major, strong and confident, bolstered by a powerful orchestral setting. The song-theme, eloquent in the violins, ascends to the brilliant plane of the D-major, where it achieves its fullest, warmest utterance.

Ominously a shadow of the original, dark march-mood looms up in the trombones over aroused, pulsing basses. Alarmed, the entire orchestra falls upon it with full force, "as though bursting in, furious with anger," hints Mahler in score. In the stirring passage that ensues, Mahler's inexhaustible polyphonic resourcefulness is revealed in the masterful way he marshals the multitude of motives in ever new combinations. The brass now takes charge, dispelling every vestige of the somber elements that threatened. The song-theme, rising in the trumpets, becomes a veritable hymn of triumph. Unbounded joy fills the air as the movement draws to a close.

**ANDANTE**

Mahler decided that the placid *Andante*, third movement in the original score, would serve to better advantage if heard immediately following the dynamic, exciting first movement. Certainly, its marked contrast of spirit affords the listener grateful relaxation. Yet there is a more valid reason for the change. The Scherzo includes dark motives that attain full significance in the Finale. Closer to the latter in content, it is in that respect a preparation for it.

The opening theme of the Andante, set in major, and entrusted mainly to the violins, is a tender love-song, of deceptive simplicity, if one passes too lightly over the striking injection of evasive touches of minor in the melodic line. Those more intimately acquainted with Mahler's individual characteristics will appreciate their significance. They know Mahler's irresistible urge to parody and satire, sometimes not even sparing the lugubrious air of a funeral march. Yet the subtle interchange of the theme's major and minor moments is firmly based on the fate-symbol. Early in its unfolding is heard a plaintive motive, aptly set for the oboe, its rocking rhythm much like a lullaby-fragment. This lullaby-motive becomes one of the principal vehicles of the movement, a dream of love, peace, and contentment colored by a profusion of typically Mahlerian instrumental imagery. In a polyphonic setting enriched by ever-varied re-echoings of this motive in strings and woodwind the love-song attains increased ardor, gradually luring the entire orchestra into warm participation. Finally it subsides ina gracious, leisurely cadence amid a rich interplay of imitative voices.

A few measures in minor cast a momentary shadow, quickly dispelled by an exultant outburst of the lullaby-motive in the trumpets, over an impressive hymn-like melody in the horn choir. The mood at this point is closely akin to that of the Finale of the *Fourth*, Mahler's Ode to Heavenly Joy. Cowbells, heard faintly, as from a valley deep below, bear the everyday world's last greeting to the intrepid mountain-climber (the human will) on the lonely lofty summit he has scaled. The very

gates of Heaven seem to open before him, revealing indescribable super-earthly splendors. Swiftly the veil is drawn, Yet vestiges of the celestial vision survive in the violin's ecstatic countermelody as the love-song returns with almost devotional fervor in horn and woodwind. Interpolations of the lullaby-motive enhance the breath-taking beauty of this passage, one of Mahler's most felicitous polyphonic inspirations.
Again the melancholy minor theme, horns and deep strings predominating, yields to the broad-winged countermelody of the violins, awakening the whole orchestra to full-throated, ardent participation in the love-song. The first them is not heard again. The movement draws to the close along a fine spun, ever softer strand of motives, rising and falling like sighing heartbeats in the breast of the lonely one whose yearning evoked the song.

**SCHERZO**

The swiftly changing panorama of dance elements, by turns graceful, lumbering, lilting, whirling, presents a weird, shadowy world of rhythmic life gripped by the fantastic spell that sways the Scherzo. A vividly picturesque creation in A-minor, the symphony's reigning key, it is the typical goblin-haunted Mahler scherzo, the proving-ground of an almost uncanny display of tonal wit. Yet it never bursts forth into merry laughter. Instead of humor it offers the wild cachinnation of lurking demons; in place of a smile of cheer, a gargoyle leer. The opening theme (rather, a succession of varied dance-themes) reveals several salient points in common with the march of the first movement, the highly serious mood of which it seems at times openly to parodies.

Especially striking is the delicately constructed oboe theme in major, corresponding to the trio section in the classical scherzo. Labeled *Altväterisch* (in archaic style) it pretends to evoke a memory of pre-Haydn Austrian folk music, where the oboe was the melody-carrying instrument. Yet even here the unsettled rhythm, alternately 3/8 and 4/8, shows a Mahler not just making, but rather poking fun. Nevertheless, the charm and pseudo-naiveté of this passage are irresistible.

The fate-motive, dormant throughout the Andante, reappears here, adding am ominous element to the fantastic spell. At first it takes the form of a sudden, shattering outburst of trumpets, too brief to dispel the spirit of the dance. At the end, with trumpets muted, it is a descending succession of sardonic, nerve-tingling utterances, lending the close an air of dire foreboding. The scene is now set for the mighty, tragic Finale.

**FINALE**

In the Finale the dark elements lowering over the Scherzo burst forth with utmost power to present the fateful solution to life's problem. Hitherto but scattered phenomenon, since the content of the earlier movements did not require their planned union, they are now subjected to close integration. The listener becomes aware that all that preceded was a preparation for this titanic welding of forces. The heroic ascent of the mountain-climber (the human will) only to awaken at the summit to the insuperable limitations of the earth-bound mortal; the idyllic invocation to love and peaceful contentment, a fleeting, yearning dream; the diabolic mockery of malicious demons; and over all, the shadow of inevitable Fate, a warning apparition, briefly glimpsed at widely separated moments of portent, foretelling the tragic outcome.

Set in a tremendously magnified sonata-form framework, introduced by an extended *sostenuto* passage 114 measures in length, this Finale is the longest instrumental closing movement in the symphonic literature. From the viewpoint of intent, as well as extent, the preliminary *Sostenuto* is a direct offspring of the introduction to Mahler's *First*, that magic spell woven by young genius over a weirdly colored 64-bar organ-point. That initial haunting prelude raised the curtain, not on a single movement, nor just on one symphony, but in fact on that entire enchanted quartet of major works known to the world as Mahler's *Wunderhorn* Symphonies. The introduction to the Finale of the *Sixth*, a grim creation, equally purposeful, more profound, is the eloquent prelude to tragic disclosure. This Finale is unique, even with Mahler, being the only tragic closing movement in all his symphonies. Every other one (the song cycle *Lied von der Erde* excepted) ends on a major note of dazzling apotheosis.[4]

The Finale's principal divisions are set off by the three much-discussed hammer blows, the first marking the beginning of the development, the second its close, and the third (the blow Mahler afterwards wished to omit) bursting in on the coda's opening phrase. This added formal function enhances the hammer's tragic symbolism, giving it authority over the form of the movement, as well as over its content.

The violins leap aloft in C-minor along an impassioned melodic line as free as the flight of a cadenza. Descending they are overtaken by the fate-motive, blared forth by the horn choir, and forced to enter the symphony's ruling tonality, A-minor, foreordained key to the Finale's gloomiest revelations. In no other Mahler symphony does a single tonality play so significant a role. Clearly, he regarded A-minor as tragedy's own peculiar tonality, for he set it to rule over the opening movement, Scherzo, and Finale.

A fresh motive, beginning with an octave-leap, lugubrious in the tuba, is but an inversion of the first march-motive. Startled reiterations of an upward-rushing phrase are familiar from the Scherzo. Accentuated march-motives of brighter cast fail to achieve definite major tonality in the horns. Fantastic fragments of themes unite ever more closely in polyphonic embrace, to flower somberly in a softly muttered, yet "heavily accentuated" (Mahler) funereal chorale in the deeper-toned wind instruments. The march-motives seek thematic integration on a brighter plane, but the fate-motive, masterful in the trumpets, bars the way. Again and again it frustrates them, pointing the way in gradually livelier tempo to the mighty *Allegro Energico*, the Finale proper.

The first theme, like the march-song of the opening movement, is not a theme in the traditional sense, but rather a theme-group, a larger song-structure of almost spontaneous growth, each succeeding motivated portion of it seeming to issue from the previous one by a sort of dynamic self-evolution. The octave-leap continues prominent in this rhythmic outburst of stormy passion. The fate-motive sounds more threatening than ever in an angry rhythmic variation by trombones. An accentuated melody, product of the octave-leap and the chorale, bravely shakes off the latter's funereal air and mounts by daring leaps and punctuated rhythms to an exultant climax in the trombone choir. In this suddenly brightened atmosphere is born the second theme.

Of combined heroic and lyric cast, the song-theme presents in the definite major tonality the aspiring melodic line denied thematic fulfillment by the fate-motive in the preliminary *Sostenuto*. Horns, then woodwind, deliver its opening phrases, whereupon the violins, warm and sensitive, transmute the rhythmic strain into a song of soaring lyricism. A shadow in minor hovers over the cadence, evoking familiar dire motives. Yet only for moments is the smooth tide of the theme stemmed. It rises again, more impulsive and impassioned than at first, a veritable hymn of joy, luxuriously colored by alternate instrumental groups of varied timbre, the violins contributing to the background a particularly striking series of closely harmonized *tremoli*. The very peak of triumph appears at hand – then suddenly, the first crushing blow! The hammer of Fate has struck. The orchestra recoils, as though paralyzed by the shattering edict. Austere motives of the funeral chorale in diabolic augmentation leap to the foreground, dragging in their wake the terrifying fate-motive.

What now? Panic – but not for long. Presently, the still indomitable will to resistance, mirrored in rapid, driving motives in strings and woodwind and excited rippling of the harp. A new melody, rich in heartfelt lyricism, brings reassurance in trumpet and horn. In the clash of these elements of darkness and light the principal song-theme reappears, transformed by inversion and clouded in minor. "Everything with rough strength", hints the composer, as swiftly pounding rhythms in woodwind and trumpet and a depressing motive in the basses strive in vain to thwart the song's purpose. They are put to rout by the march-song, which now enters in a "fiery" (Mahler) re-creation, clearing the

[4] Recent opinions may view the endings of Mahler's symphonies in different light. The Ninth Symphony, for example, ends with a coda with multiple *morendo* ("dying away") markings, and can hardly be interpreted as 'dazzling'. (Ed.)

path for the returning melody of reassurance. Brighter and surer than at first it soars aloft on broad wing, bearing a message of hope. This time its flight is unhampered, attaining completion in an extended melodic line of transfigured lyricism, its cadence evoking further affirmation in an eloquent re-birth of the song-theme itself. Then, at the very threshold of supreme fulfillment, the fateful hammer strikes again. Once more the mighty edict of Fate, but this time unaccompanied by the Fate motive, a psychologically sound omission, tending to enhance the motive's effectiveness later in the Finale's tragic climax. Again, the struggle of the stricken will to survive, reflected in fleet, panicky runs in the strings.

The trombones, in a broad, powerful cadenza-like passage, inspired by the octave-leap, parallel the first strains of the preliminary *Sostenuto*. The recapitulation here begun is comprehensive, embracing not only the themes of the *Allegro Energico*, but the introductory *Sostenuto* as well. In no respect a mere repetition, this restatement has the air of thematic consummation. It is a fresh presentation of the principal ideas in new, more impressive instrumental garb, rich in polyphonic revelations of melodic facets hitherto scarcely suggested. Here for the first time the fate-motive is granted full thematic formulation. The octave-leap yields its noblest fruit in a heroic four-part fugato in the brass choir. The melody of reassurance becomes a hymn of triumph in the horns, last and most convincing reflection of the human will to win to the topmost summit.

The violins have just entered upon their final impassioned cadenza, a restatement from the *Sostenuto's* beginning, when the third and last hammer blow falls. Yet the cadenza continues on, descending into the unfathomable depths. There remains only the dark fundament of tonality – A-minor, pedestal for the foreordained triumph of tragedy. Gloom invests the hushed closing measures, a brief, mournful epilogue, based on the octave-leap, intoned in canon-style by trombones and tuba.

The curtain falls on darkness. Yet there is left not death, but only night, a night that ends a dark chapter in Mahler's vast symphonic autobiography. Further chapters, some brighter than any that have gone before, are yet to come – the new dawn of the *Seventh* and the transfigured choral *Eighth*, "Symphony of a Thousand", aptly called by one of Europe's outstanding composers "the world's greatest "*Te Deum*", rounding out Mahler's second symphonic tetralogy, of which the *Sixth*, with its somber finale-nocturne, constitutes but a dark, yet very great, intermezzo.

# *Mahler in History*

## Mahler's Sixth: Rare Symphonic Work Impresses Critic in First American Performance

**by Warren Storey Smith**

The following article appeared in the Boston Post on December 21, 1947. It was reprinted in Chord and Discord 2(5): 64-65, 1948. The Chicago Mahlerites reproduces it in *Naturlaut* with the kind permission of Mr. Charles Eble of the Bruckner Society of America.

That we are too familiar with certain important works and woefully ignorant of others was the burden of last week's discourse. The compositions chosen to point the moral were Handel's "Messiah", immediately impending from the Handel and Haydn Society, and Mozart's "Idomeneo," which we get this afternoon, at the Opera House, from the New England Opera Theatre. The point could have been made just as well citing two symphonies, each their composer's sixth, one of which has just been played here for the hundredth time (speaking in round numbers), while the other was receiving in New York its first American performances. The pieces in question? Tchaikovsky's "Pathetic" and the so-called "Tragic" Symphony of Mahler.

Back in 1933 Dr. Koussevitsky proudly announced his intention of playing the only Mahler Symphony still unknown in this country, but it remained for his one-time protégé, Dimitri Mitropolous, as acting conductor of the New York Philharmonic-Symphony, to turn the trick. Some difficulty with the Symphony's Leipzig publisher was the reason given for Koussevitsky's failure to come across with the threatened premiere. Mitropolous has his troubles, too, but they were slightly different. Mahler's music is now in the public domain, but it seems that the orchestra parts of the Sixth went up in smoke when Leipzig was bombed. Scores of the work are scarce, but one was forwarded from London and from it parts were copied. And so, 41 years and six months after the Sixth was first heard, at Essen, the brilliant and indefatigable Greek maestro gave it to the United States. There were three performances, on Dec. 11, 12and 13, and it was the last of these that your deeply impressed correspondent heard, as one of a Carnegie Hall capacity audience that received the work with cheers and shouts of "Bravo," fully deserved by composer, director and orchestra.

Even in Europe performances of the Mahler Sixth have been few and far between. From the very outset, it was destined to the black sheep of the Mahler flock. Not because it was weak – it is, in fact, one of the most firmly-knit, most consistently powerful; of his creations – but because, unlike its fellows, it bids us not to hope but to despair. There are, of course, relieving episodes: the slow movement is an idyll, serenely beautiful; the second subject of the otherwise somber first movement has sweep and passion; the trio of what may be the termed the grimmest of symphonic scherzos, is pleasant, if not exactly gay. But whereas the other eight symphonies and "The Song of the Earth" have their bitter, their sorrowful or their ironic pages, they nevertheless all end in major, whether the mood be one of triumph, elation, calm resignation or blissful contentment. The Sixth alone withholds this ultimate consolation.

"The symphonic gradations and climaxes of the final movement," writes Bruno Walter, Mahler's most devoted disciple, "resemble in their dismal power the towering waves of the ocean that rush at the ship and wreak destruction." Nor does Mahler soften the blow through a merciful brevity, as does Tchaikovsky in the finale of the "Pathetic". On the contrary, this concluding movement lasts close on half an hour, with only passage here and there to offset the prevailing gloom. Without resorting to hyperbole, you can call it both terrible and terrifying. It has at times a nightmarish quality. Were a contemporary composer possessed of Mahler's remarkable powers, both of musical invention and of orchestration, he might thus paint the darkest side of our unhappy day. The three New York audiences that cheered the symphony could hardly have enjoyed this finale. Enjoy is not the word. Let us rather say that the responded instinctively to something by which a more innocent generation would have been shocked and repelled. In fact, we know that in the past the Sixth has had this very effect.

Like most of the Mahler symphonies, the Sixth calls for a huge orchestra – incidentally, Mr. Mitropolous conducted it, as he does everything, from memory – and included among the percussions are cowbells, (used with enchanting effect in the Andante, as a symbol of loneliness), a "rute" (as sort of a birch brush applied to the bass drum) and a hammer. "Thus Fate knocks at the door," said Beethoven of the opening of his Fifth Symphony. In the Mahler Sixth it strikes us down.

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