

Notes on the Program

By Arthur R. Smith

Although we may think of Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) first and foremost as a symphonist today, during his life he was best known as a brilliant conductor, particularly of opera. He had the top job with the Vienna Opera (and for a brief, tantalizing moment, at the Met, a Tristan that is on any time-traveling opera lover's bucket list). Mahler ceded the composition of opera itself to Richard Strauss (his daunting, prolific and successful contemporary) but embodying texts in music was central to his career as composer, from his earliest student songs, through the symphonies with their often extensive vocal and choral parts.

We begin with one of his last works, the symphonic song cycle, and perhaps his crowning achievement, *Das Lied von der Erde*, composed in 1907-09, and premiered in 1911, six months after Mahler's death. Of the late romantics (he is often grouped with not only Strauss, but Bruckner and Wagner), Mahler is unique in his ability to contrast the most peaceful repose with torrents of intense emotion. Not all of his songs contain both these moods and contrasts, but many of the best do and our opening work, the second song from *Das Lied*, is a fine example. "Der Einsame im Herbst" (The Lonely Man in Autumn) draws on Chinese poetry, as do all the works in the set, and opens with a restless scale passage—in the orchestral version taken by the oboe, that loneliest of instruments. Declamatory interruptions from the singer speak of bitterness and the need for rest, but instead the nervous first theme returns, starting one direction, then splitting off, turning back on itself, questioning.

Next we hear settings of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (the Youth's Magic Horn), a collection of folk songs and poems published in 1809 and the poetry of Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866). Both were sources that Mahler returned to repeatedly and provided foundations for many of his works. Music historian Michael Kennedy,

among others, terms Mahler's second, third and fourth symphonies "Wunderhorn Symphonies," and numbers five, six and seven the "Rückert Symphonies"—even in purely instrumental works such as the Fifth symphony, Mahler concerned himself with poetic ideas and textual background.

The collection of songs we hear this evening begins in a lyric mode, and, in the main, fit more comfortably into the traditions and subjects of the lied: they are inward looking, speaking of nature and love, with more straightforward melodic arcs (rather than turbulent and even clashing textures that we have just heard). Still, if a tad more traditionally romantic, these *Rückert* settings, songs 3-7, are still fully characteristic of Mahler. Chord sequences, for instance, unfold over long, long periods, evoking in the listener an almost physical need for a musical idea to be completed. This yearning—in theme and in musical language—is particularly redolent in "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen" perhaps Mahler's greatest song. The opening piano lines (given to the English horn in the orchestral arrangement) begin, draw back and begin again, resolutions are glimpsed and then dissolved. The step-wise vocal line lingers as well, winding above the piano part, and evoking—much like Strauss' *Four Last Songs*—a world beyond time.

This group concludes with two *Wunderhorn* settings, "Revelge" and "Der Tamboursg'sell." Both are marches in a mode Kennedy terms Mahler's "military nocturnes," noting that the sounds of marching and military brass so prevalent in his music may result from his living in a time and place where regiments tramping through the town center would have been a regular activity. The marchers in both these death-soaked songs are grim: dead soldiers in "Revelge", marching in skeleton ranks back from battle, and a condemned drummer boy on the way to execution in "Der Tamboursg'sell."

The rest of tonight's journey begins with a return to *Wunderhorn*, a setting of "Wo die schönen Trompeten blasen" (1898). The "splendid" trumpets are once again heralds of tragedy. Their empty sound begins the haunting story (perhaps literally) of a young soldier bidding farewell to his sweetheart. His sweet *Ländler* three-quarters waltz tune contrasts with her anguished verses and repeated trumpet calls, now ghostly, and marked "*ppp*."

Coming full circle we end with the last movement of *Das Lied*, "Abschied," in English, "Farewell," a culmination of many aspects of Mahler's art. He worked on it in the summers of 1907-09, during time off from conducting and travel. This was a period in which he had become aware that his previously robust health was beginning to fail

him (he died of an infection in 1911) perhaps, like Schubert, having some sense that it was time for last things. Its scale-- nearly 30-minutes in length--goes beyond what we are used to in song, and the musical texture, the drama and shape, push against the boundaries of the form. Familiar ideas--echoes of marches, the lyricism of the Rückert songs, restlessness, ardor, repose, and stretching of harmonies as far as seems possible, and then just that bit further--all recur. The protagonist's journey, like the music, stops and starts, subtle variations coloring the scene as the singer bids farewell to his friend. At close, an ending as quiet as anything in Mahler, the music bids farewell to us as well, with the word "eternally" vanishing into the distance.