PROGRAM NOTES

Gustav Mahler – Symphony No. 4

Composition History

Mahler composed this symphony between June 1899 and April 1901 and conducted the first performance on November 25, 1901, in Munich. The score calls for a soprano solo (in the fourth movement) and an orchestra consisting of four flutes and two piccolos, three oboes and english horn, three clarinets, E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, timpani, bass drum, triangle, sleigh bells, glockenspiel, cymbals, tam-tam, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately fifty-five minutes.

Performance History

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Mahler’s Fourth Symphony were given on subscription concerts at Orchestra Hall on March 3 and 4, 1916, with Marcella Craft as soloist and Frederick Stock conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on May 4, 5, and 6, 2006, with Isabel Bayrakdarian as soloist and David Zinman conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on July 24, 1971, with Elly Ameling as soloist and István Kertész conducting, and most recently on July 21, 2006, with Anna Christy as soloist and James Conlon conducting.

For the record

The Orchestra recorded Mahler’s Fourth Symphony in 1958 with Lisa Della Casa as soloist and Fritz Reiner conducting for RCA, in 1974 with Judith Blegen as soloist and James Levine conducting for RCA, and in 1983 with Kiri Te Kanawa as soloist and Sir Georg Solti conducting for London.

Gustav Mahler

Born July 7, 1860, Kalischt, Bohemia.
Died May 18, 1911, Vienna, Austria.
Symphony No. 4

The worlds of song and symphony are regularly intertwined in the work of Gustav Mahler. We are not surprised when his symphonies break into song, and we know that certain purely instrumental movements are arrangements of earlier songs. One of his last works, *Das Lied von der Erde*, is indeed both song and symphony—the inevitable climax of a career that continually shuffled and blended genres in its search for the ideal form to say what Mahler alone had to tell us.

Still, it is hard to understand how one small song—"Das himmlische Leben" (Heavenly life), the one that serves as the finale for this symphony—can have inspired, influenced, and shaped so much important music. At one point, Mahler remarked that "Das himmlische Leben" had given birth to five different symphonic movements, but even that statement doesn't suggest the central role the song played in his output over the span of a decade.

Although it is the last music we hear in this symphony, the song was Mahler’s starting point. We must first turn to Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano, who, in the early years of the nineteenth century, published an anthology of seven hundred traditional German poems known as *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The youth’s magic horn). Carl Maria von Weber was one of the first composers to see the musical potential of this collection, and, by coincidence, it was his copy of the *Wunderhorn* poems that Mahler picked up one day in 1887, while he was visiting the home of the composer’s grandson. Although it was the grandson’s lovely wife Marian who captured Mahler’s attention that year, this book of old folk poetry had the more lasting impact. He picked a few poems and set them to music at once. For the next fourteen years, Mahler used *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* as the source for all but one of his song texts. On February 10, 1892, he completed a setting for voice and piano of the poem "Der Himmel hangt voll Geigen" (Heaven is hung with violins), a child’s naive picture of celestial bliss. Mahler wrote his own title, "Das himmlische Leben," at the top of the page. A month later, he finished the orchestral version, colored by the sounds of a harp and the tinkling of bells. Mahler had a special affection for the song and he often included it in concerts of his music. But when it came time to publish his *Wunderhorn* settings, “Das himmlische Leben” was held back.

Mahler had decided to use the song as the finale of his Third Symphony instead. The rest of that symphony was conceived as a sequence of answers to life’s questions, concluding with "What the child tells me," or "Das himmlische Leben." But as work neared completion, Mahler lopped off the finale and carried it with him to his next symphony; however, one can easily find music in the symphony that predicts and prepares us for the song that is no longer there. The fifth movement, for example—another *Wunderhorn* text, scored for children’s voices—originally was intended as a companion piece to “Das himmlische Leben,” and it comes from the same world of angels and bells.

And so it became the role of the Fourth Symphony to finish the story of the Third. That now meant placing “Das himmlische Leben” as the last chapter of the Fourth Symphony—the finale not of one, but, in a sense, of two symphonies. However, to think of the Fourth as a sequel to the Third is to limit our understanding of two works related in complex ways. Mahler's Fourth Symphony, like all his major scores, reflects and draws on other music he was writing around the same time. The Fourth Symphony not only looks back at the Third, but glance ahead at the *Kindertotenlieder*, the five Rückert songs, and the opening of the Fifth Symphony. These are all members of an extended family, and each casts its own shadow on the others.

In planning his Fourth Symphony—much more so than the Third—Mahler relied on “Das himmlische Leben” as the governing material, both of the music and of the overall idea—the story behind the notes in the score. Mahler knew how his piece would end before he wrote his first page; he then had to work backwards in a sense, so that his song would appear as the logical destination of the three new movements. With this goal in sight, he conceived a symphony that would explore the road from experience to innocence, from complexity to simplicity, and from earthly life to heaven. This symphony, unlike his previous three, was never saddled with an explanatory text that the composer would later regret (and ultimately suppress); Mahler was already moving toward an inner drama that could be expressed exclusively in musical terms.

To convey the journey toward innocence, Mahler’s first three movements gradually diminish in complexity as they approach the pure and serene threshold of the finale. The key scheme also supports the drama, beginning in G major and then moving into the fresh world of E major for the finale, an unexpected—yet preordained—destination.

Mahler suggests his goal with the symphony’s very opening bars, scored for the sleigh bells and piping flutes that will later greet us in heaven. In a work full of flashbacks and fast-forwards, this is a momentary glance and no more. Mahler quickly
introduces a lovely melody, "childishly simple and quite unselfconscious," in his own words, that, like many simple materials in music, will lead to the most complex developments. The movement is one of Mahler’s most brilliant large-scale canvases, a perfect foil to the naïveté of the ending.

Here Mahler is writing with a new-found clarity—a transparency that allows us to hear everything on the page, even in the most complex polyphonic passages. The climaxes are still dense and staggering (despite the smallest orchestra of any Mahler symphony), but the surrounding landscape is lean and exposed. At the movement’s turning point, events unfold almost too quickly to follow: there is a snatch of the song of heavenly life; the trumpet suggests the march we now know from the Fifth Symphony; the symphony’s opening melody returns unexpectedly; and the recapitulation begins before the development is even over. Mahler has compressed time in a way that is virtually new to music. The childishly simple melody, left hanging by a thread, now continues as if undisturbed.

Although Mahler left no titles for the movements in this symphony, fearing “their banal misunderstandings,” we know that the second movement originally was inscribed “Friend Hein Strikes Up,” after a character in German folklore, a sinister pied piper who plays his violin and leads his victims toward death. Mahler assigns the central role to the solo violin, instructs him to tune his instrument up a whole tone (to give it a harsher sound), and to play it "wie ein Fiedel"—like the fiddle one knows from the street, not the concert hall. The two landler-like trios hint at the music of "Das himmlische Leben" to come.

Mahler once admitted that the slow movement, a spacious and magnificent set of variations, was inspired by “a vision of a tombstone on which was carved an image of the departed, with folded arms, in eternal sleep.” There is one immense uproar near the end that would surely raise the dead, however, and when this great wave erupts from G major and plants us for the first time squarely in E major, the gates of heaven are within sight. But first we sink back into G major to await the song from which this music first sprang.

And then, with a few bucolic phrases from the winds and the gentle plucking of the harp and strings, we hear the human voice for the first time in this symphony. A soprano sings of an innocent pastoral world and Mahler’s pen sketches cloudless blue skies and the eternity of E major. Angels bake bread, the singer reports, Saint Peter fishes in a pond stocked daily by God, and “there’s no music at all on the earth / Which can ever compare with ours.”

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*