Gustav Mahler – Symphony No. 3 in D Minor

Gustav Mahler

Born July 7, 1860, Kalischt, Bohemia.
Died May 18, 1911, Vienna, Austria.

Symphony No. 3 in D Minor

Mahler spent the summer of 1893 in Steinbach on the Attersee near Salzburg. That year he became a “summer composer,” establishing the pattern that would suit him the rest of his life—working on his music during the long summer days in the countryside, then returning to the hectic life of a conductor and the tiresome chores of administration during the season in the city. The next summer Mahler had a tiny hut built, precisely to his specifications, on the edge of a giant meadow and right on the shore of the lake, where he could compose undisturbed. (Years later, the man who built the cabin remembered that Mahler said he composed more easily when he could hear the water.) He furnished it with a piano, a writing desk, a bookcase, and a wood-burning stove; from the windows he could see only the lake and the mountains beyond.

The hut is still there, now planted incongruously in the middle of a trailer park. Vacationers swim and play, suspicious of the occasional tourist intent on visiting the cabin where Mahler wrote his Third Symphony, the one inspired by the forces of nature he found in Steinbach, far from the noise of the city and the hubbub of society. Though Mahler enjoyed irony—it colors much of his music—he surely would not appreciate the shouts of children and the aromas of the modern barbecue penetrating the room that became an almost sacred place for him during the summers of 1895 and 1896. He went there every day to write this symphony, beginning around 6:30 in the morning. Breakfast was brought to him on a tray. He was not to be disturbed unless the door to the hut was open. A scarecrow was installed in the meadow to discourage loud birds. Villagers were told to stay away; nearby peasants bribed not to sharpen their scythes. He would break late each afternoon for lunch, a nap, reading, and a walk. For two summers this music was his life.

The history of this symphony is disorderly; like most of Mahler’s early symphonies it took time and thought to reach its final, satisfying form. Movements were rearranged; the narrative “program” was refined, debated, and ultimately discarded; titles were proposed, changed, and dropped. The music itself is wrapped up in the history of Mahler’s other works—of earlier songs and later symphonies, and of the ways all these compositions influenced and shaped one another. The genesis of Mahler's Third Symphony is so curious it sounds haphazard in the retelling: the first movement
was added after the other movements were finished and the original finale was removed and set aside, only to turn up later as the last movement of Mahler's Fourth Symphony. The resulting work, with six movements divided into two large parts, is no more idiosyncratic than the way it evolved.

Perhaps it is simplest to begin where Mahler began. The first music he sketched in the hut on the Attersee, in June 1895, is the charming minuet that is now the symphony's second movement. It was, as Mahler recognized, "the most carefree thing that I have ever written—as carefree as only flowers are. It all sways and waves in the air . . . like flowers bending on their stems in the wind." But, as Mahler later realized, when this one movement was performed on its own—it was the first music from the symphony ever played in public—it gave people the wrong impression. "It always strikes me as odd that most people, when they speak of 'nature', think only of flowers, little birds, and woodsy smells. No one knows the god Dionysus, the great Pan."

Nature was Mahler's chosen subject, one that he absorbed daily in his mountain retreat, staring out the window as storms swept across the lake, or walking in the forest after a long day's work. He later wrote to the soprano Anna von Mildenburg: "Just imagine a work of such magnitude that it actually mirrors the whole world—one is, so to speak, only an instrument, played on by the universe. . . . My symphony will be something the like of which the world has never yet heard! . . . In it the whole of nature finds a voice." In fact, when Bruno Walter went to visit Mahler in Steinbach the next summer and stopped to admire the mountain view, Mahler said, "No need to look. I have composed all this already." Mahler played through the score at the piano. "His whole being seemed to breathe a mysterious affinity with the forces of nature," Walter wrote. "I saw him as Pan."

In the summer of 1895, Mahler's work evolved into a seven-movement symphony, with a large-scale introductory movement before the flower minuet and the song "Das himmlische Leben" (Heavenly life), composed in 1892, as the finale. Here is the schematic program for the symphony as Mahler envisioned it in August 1895, at the end of the first summer's work:

 Symphony No. III
 'THE JOYFUL SCIENCE' [Die fröhliche Wissenschaft]

 A Summer Morning's Dream
 I Summer marches in.
 II What the flowers in the meadow tell me.
 III What the beasts of the forest tell me.
 IV What the night tells me. (Alto solo.)
 V What the morning bells tell me. (Women's chorus with alto solo.)
 VI What love tells me.
 Motto: 'Father, behold these wounds of mine!
 Let no creature be unredeemed!'
 (from Des Knaben Wunderhorn)
 VII Heavenly life [Das himmlische Leben]. (Soprano solo, humorous.)

The symphony's title, taken from Nietzsche's book of the same name, was added at the end of the summer. The sequence of the central movements, over which Mahler had previously fussed, now expressed "the successive orders of being," as Mahler put it: flowers, animals, man, and angels. Of the movement addressed to love, Mahler wrote, "I could almost call this movement 'What God tells me!'"
The following summer, Mahler wrote the unexpectedly vast and complex opening movement, which depicts summer marching in and sweeping winter away. It is a kind of summation of all the other movements that Mahler nevertheless placed first, not last. By now, however, a child's vision of heavenly life was the wrong finale, even though it had served as the musical destination all along, with traces of its melodies and sounds imbedded throughout the symphony. The great and spacious slow movement (What love tells me) would stand at the end instead, unconventional as a finale, perhaps, but music destined to be followed by nothing but silence.

At the beginning of the summer of 1896, when Mahler was unfolding the giant canvas of his first movement, he wrote to Natalie Bauer-Lechner:

> It has almost ceased to be music; it is hardly anything but sounds of nature. I could equally well have called the movement "What the mountain tells me"—it's eerie, the way life gradually breaks through, out of soul-less, rigid matter. And, as this life rises from stage to stage, it takes on ever more highly developed forms: flowers, beasts, man, up to the sphere of the spirits, the "angels." Over the introduction to this movement, there lies again that atmosphere of brooding summer midday heat; not a breath stirs, all life is suspended, and the sun-drenched air trembles and vibrates. At intervals there come the moans of the youth—that is, captive life—struggling for release from the clutches of lifeless, rigid Nature. At last he breaks through and triumphs.

Ultimately, as with his First and Second symphonies, Mahler decided audiences did not need to know any of the things that inspired this music, and he chose to delete the titles altogether. When the complete symphony was performed for the first time in 1902, it was simply listed as Symphony no. 3, and the movements were labeled only with generic tempo markings. Listeners could make of it what they wished. When Arnold Schoenberg attended the Vienna premiere in 1904, he wrote to Mahler: “I think I have experienced your symphony. I felt the struggle for illusions; I felt the pain of one disillusioned; I saw the forces of evil and good contending; I saw a man in a torment of emotion exerting himself to gain inner harmony. I sensed a human being, a drama, truth, the most ruthless truth!”

We do not know how Mahler responded. We only know that for Schoenberg the struggle within man was an issue worthy of such music, just as for Mahler, the subject was nature, in its most complete form.

A few details, and some essential information. The first movement is approximately one-third of the entire symphony; it is one of the largest single movements in all music, and one of the most original and daring in the variety of music it includes. The opening theme, for eight horns, might well be a child's song. It is followed by a panoramic view of a great landscape. Summer marches in, from afar.

The next four movements are relatively brief character pieces—with flowers, animals, people, and angels as their generating images. The second movement, the flower minuet, includes music that previews “Heavenly Life,” even though that now belongs to the next symphony. The third movement, a kind of scherzo, is an orchestral version of the setting of “Ablösung im Sommer” (Relief in summer), a song from Des Knaben Wunderhorn (The youth's magic horn). Here is the text of the song, unsung, but felt throughout the music:

> Cuckoo has collided with a green willow tree,  
cuckoo is dead—he lies dead!  
Who should pass away the time for us all summer long?
Ah! Mrs. Nightingale will do that—
she sits on the green branch,
that small and graceful nightingale,
that lovely and sweet nightingale.
She hops and sings, she's cheerful all the time,
when other birds are silent.

We're waiting for Mrs. Nightingale,
she lives in the green copse
and when the cuckoo's time is up
she'll start singing!

There are two trios, the first a vision of birds and beasts at play; the second a still summer day, disturbed only by the distant, long-drawn-out call of the posthorn. The movement ends with a great eruption of sound, as if Pan has arrived to transcend the world of birds and animals.

The fourth movement introduces the sound of the human voice. This is a setting, for contralto, of the “Midnight Song” from Nietzsche's Also sprach Zarathustra. It is as still and powerful as anything in music. The fifth movement, just four minutes long, follows without pause, shifting from the hush of midnight to the brightness of angels and morning bells. The text is drawn from Des Knaben Wunderhorn. The voices are those of women's chorus, children, and the alto soloist; the violins are silent throughout. Again there are glimpses of “Heavenly Life.” This brief and rowdy episode, full of laughing children and angels, clears the air for Mahler's great hymn to love.

The final movement does not need description. It is marked: "Slow. Calm. Deeply felt." It tells us, in unforgettable ways, how deep Mahler's understanding was, though he was only thirty-six years old, and how vast was his vision, even from the window of his tiny hut.

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