PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

Gustav Mahler
Born July 7, 1860, Kalisch, Bohemia.
Died May 18, 1911, Vienna, Austria.

Symphony No. 5

Mahler composed his Fifth Symphony in 1901-02 and conducted the first performance in Cologne on October 18, 1904. The score calls for four flutes and two piccolos, three oboes and English horn, three clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, six horns, four trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, harp, bass drum, cymbals, small bass drum, snare drum, glockenspiel, slapstick, tambourine, triangle, and strings. Performance time is approximately seventy-two minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Mahler's Fifth Symphony were given at Orchestra Hall on March 22 and 23, 1907, with Frederick Stock conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performance was given on May 30, 2006, with Daniel Barenboim conducting. The Orchestra first performed the Adagietto movement at the Ravinia Festival on July 6, 1963, with Aaron Copland conducting. The Orchestra first performed the complete symphony at Ravinia on July 20, 1978, with Lawrence Foster conducting, and most recently on July 6, 2007, with James Conlon conducting.

The lone trumpet call that opens this symphony launches a whole new chapter in Mahler's music. Gone is the picturesque world of the first four symphonies—music inspired by folk tales and song, music that calls on the human voice and is explained by the written word. With the Fifth Symphony, as Bruno Walter put it, Mahler "is now aiming to write music as a musician." Walter had nothing against the earlier works; in fact, he was one of the first serious musicians to understand and to conduct those pieces long before it was fashionable to champion the composer's cause. Walter simply identified what other writers since have reemphasized: the unforeseen switch to an exclusively instrumental symphonic style, producing music, in Symphonies 5 through 7, that needs no programmatic discussion.

In fact, the break in Mahler's compositional style is neither as clean nor as radical as we might at first think. The trumpet call that opens this symphony is a quotation from the climax of the first movement of the Fourth Symphony—a direct link, in other words, with the world Mahler has left behind. And Mahler has hardly given up song for symphony. In fact, the new focus on purely instrumental symphonies seems to have freed Mahler to produce, at the same time, an extraordinary outpouring of songs, including most of his finest. And, although they are not sung—or even directly quoted—in Symphonies 5 through 7, their presence, and their immense importance to Mahler, is continually felt. The great lumbering march that strides across the first movement of this symphony, for example, shares much in spirit, contour, and even detail with the first of the Kindertotenlieder and the last of his Des Knaben Wunderhorn settings, "Der Tamboursg'sell" (The drummer boy), both written while the symphony also was taking shape.

Mahler was a "summer composer," as he put it, compressing a year's pent-up musical work into the one holiday he enjoyed as a professional conductor. "His life during the summer months," his wife Alma later recalled, "was stripped of all dross, almost inhuman in its purity." He wrote night and day, and several projects took shape in his head at once. In June of 1901, he settled in a villa at Maiernigg on the Worthersee, where, before the summer was over, he wrote four of the Rückert songs, three of the Kindertotenlieder (also to texts by Rückert), and "Der Tamboursg'sell," and drafted two movements of his Fifth Symphony. Each piece, dating from the same time, shares something with the others—the kind of cross-referencing that is at the heart of Mahler's working method.
Although Mahler left no scenario to follow for this symphony—no outward sign that this is explicit, programmatic music—it is so obviously dramatic music. For Donald Mitchell, perhaps the most important Mahler scholar writing today, the Fifth Symphony "initiates a new concept of an interior drama." The idea of a programmatic symphony has not vanished, "it has gone underground, rather, or inside."

Mahler has even left us a few clues, not dictating what the music should mean to us, but suggesting what it meant to him. The central scherzo is "a human being in the full light of day, in the prime of his life." And the famous Adagietto is, if we believe Willem Mengelberg's assertion, Gustav Mahler's declaration of his love for Alma, presented to his wife without a word of explanation.

As in the later Seventh Symphony and the projected Tenth, the Fifth Symphony is divided into five movements. But more important are the numbers defining three basic parts, with the weighty scherzo standing alone in the middle. Part 1 views life as tragedy, moving from the bleak funeral march of the first movement to the deflated climax of the second. The third part approaches, and ultimately achieves, triumph. Part 2, the lively scherzo, is the hinge upon which the music shifts.

The first movement caused Mahler considerable trouble. He continued to retouch the orchestration until 1907, three years after the first performance, and as late as 1911, the last year of his life, he said:

I cannot understand how I could have written so much like a beginner. . . . Clearly the routine I had acquired in the first four symphonies had deserted me altogether, as though a totally new message demanded a new technique.

Mahler had written funeral marches before—the first three symphonies all include them—but this is a new kind of funeral music: tough as nails, lean, scrubbed clean of simple pictorial touches. It is a much more concise movement than the tremendous march that opens the Resurrection Symphony. Here the march gives way to a defiant trio—a terrible outburst of grief; then the cortège returns, followed by the trio, now dragged down to the march’s slow, lumbering pace. Near the end there is a new idea, full of yearning—a rising minor ninth falling to the octave—that will find fulfillment in the second movement, just as that movement will echo things already developed here. The trumpet calls the first movement to a close, in utter desolation.

The second movement is both a companion to and a commentary on the first. It is predominately angry and savage music, with periodic lapses into the quieter, despairing music we have left behind. There is one jarring moment, so characteristic of Mahler, when all the grief and anger spills over into sheer giddiness—a momentary indiscretion, like laughter at the graveside. The music quickly regains its composure, but seems even more disturbed. Near the end, the trumpets and trombones begin a noble brass chorale, brave and affirmative. For a moment it soars. And then, suddenly, almost inexplicably, it loses steam, falters, and falls flat. It is one of Mahler's cruelest jokes.

The great central scherzo caused problems at the first rehearsal. From Cologne Mahler wrote to Alma:

The scherzo is the very devil of a movement. I see it is in for a peck of troubles! Conductors for the next fifty years will all take it too fast and make nonsense of it; and the public—oh, heavens, what are they to make of this chaos of which new worlds are forever being engendered?

It is hard to know just how fast Mahler felt this music should go—it is marked "vigorously, not too fast"—and today his peculiar mixture of ländler (a nice country dance) and waltz (more upscale) seems neither chaotic nor nonsensical, although it is still provocative. The whole is an ebullient dance of life, with moments of simple nostalgia, and, when the horns seem to call across mountain valleys, an almost childlike wonder.
The much-loved Adagietto is really the introduction to the finale, incomplete on its own, not so much musically as psychologically. Ironically, for many years this was one of the few Mahler excerpts ever played at concerts; it was later borrowed, carelessly, as movie music for Death in Venice, and won still more new converts. Here Mahler finds a fresh kind of lyricism which he gives not to the winds, which so often sang in the earlier symphonies, but to the strings alone, over the gentle, hesitant, almost improvisatory strumming of the harp.

This must have been very persuasive to audiences not yet ready for Mahler's tougher, more complex movements. But it is by no means simple music, and although there are fewer notes on the page than usual, Mahler is no less precise in demanding how they should be played. (The first three notes of the melody, for example, are marked pianissimo, molto ritardando, espressivo, and crescendo.) And, if this is a song without words, it is intimately related to perhaps the greatest of all Mahler songs, the Rückert setting "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen" (I am lost to the world), written that same summer.

A single note from the horn—so fresh and unexpected, with the sound of strings still in our ears—calls us back to earth. The finale begins at once with the suggestion of one of the Wunderhorn melodies, and then changes direction. This is radiant music, so infectious that part of the Adagietto even turns up, virtually unrecognizable in these up-tempo surroundings. Mahler's Fifth is his Eroica, moving from tragedy to triumph, and his triumph could not be more sweeping. Ultimately, the same brass chorale that fell to defeat in the second movement enters and carries the finale to a proper, rollicking conclusion.

Finally, a word about Mahler’s choice of key. The Fifth Symphony begins in C-sharp minor and ends five movements later in D major. Until Mahler’s time, it was customary to begin and end in the same key (or to finish in the relative major if the piece started in the minor), and some of Mahler’s symphonies do that. But many do not, and this kind of progressive tonality, as it is often called, is an essential part of his musical language, an example of how he helped to stretch the boundaries and the meaning of tonality. In the Fifth Symphony, it underlines the “inner drama” of the music: the struggle to rise from C-sharp to D, and from minor to major, underlines the music’s quest to rise from tragedy to victory.

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For the Record


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