
Wednesday 10 January 2007, 7.30pm

Staatskapelle Dresden
Daniel Harding *conductor*



Mahler Symphony No. 9 81'

There will be no interval in this performance.

Barbican Hall



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Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Symphony No. 9

1. *Andante comodo – Allegro*
2. *Im Tempo eines gemächlichen Ländlers. Etwas täppisch und sehr derb*
[In the tempo of a leisurely Ländler (country waltz). Rather clumsy and very coarse]
3. *Rondo (Burleske): Allegro assai. Sehr trotzig* [Very defiant]
4. *Adagio: Sehr langsam und noch zurückhaltend* [Very slow, even held back]

When Gustav Mahler died in 1911, just a few weeks short of his 51st birthday, he left two works complete but unperformed: the symphonic song-cycle *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth) and the purely orchestral Ninth Symphony. When these works were heard for the first time, in the year following Mahler's death, many listeners were struck by their intense preoccupation with mortality – highlighted in the texts of the song-cycle and clear enough in the expressive tone of the Ninth Symphony. The composer Alban Berg, who revered Mahler, described the symphony's first movement as 'the expression of an exceptional fondness for this earth, the longing to live in peace on it, to enjoy nature to its depths – before death comes. For he comes irresistibly. The whole movement is permeated with premonitions of death.'

It is easy to see why Mahler might have been haunted by thoughts of death at this time. He was approaching 50 when he completed his Ninth Symphony and, for most people, this particular birthday is an important milestone on the road from birth to death. But Mahler also had serious health problems. In 1908 a doctor had diagnosed a heart lesion, a condition that could only get worse. In the previous year, the elder of his two daughters, Maria, had died of scarlet fever. All this was well known in musical Vienna when the Ninth Symphony was premiered. Speculation soon became certainty: Mahler must have known that he was going to die, and that the Ninth Symphony was to be his 'Farewell to Life' – the title that his teacher Bruckner had given to the last movement of his own (incomplete) Ninth Symphony.

But there are good reasons to be wary about accepting this reading unconditionally. Mahler may have been shaken by the discovery of his heart problem, but it wasn't until the very last year of his life that he began to slacken the pace of his frantically busy life. In 1909, the year after the ominous diagnosis, he had accepted a three-year contract to conduct the New York Philharmonic Orchestra (his first season included an astonishing 46 concerts!). Then, in 1910, Mahler had begun, and very nearly finished, a Tenth Symphony – another ambitious orchestral work. The Tenth Symphony seems to begin where the Ninth left off but – after undergoing a kind of musical 'dark night of the soul' – it eventually works through to a very different, more positive conclusion. It could well be that Mahler thought that the danger of imminent death was past – for the moment at least – and that he could now look forward to exploring new musical paths; the Tenth Symphony is full of pointers to possible ways ahead.

And if the idea of mortality does haunt the pages of his Ninth Symphony, we should be wary of concluding that Mahler was thinking exclusively of his own end. In the final bars of the symphony, before the music yields completely to silence, the violins recall the final lyrical phrase of the fourth of Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs on the death of children). There are good reasons why Mahler might have wanted to recall that idea so near to the end of the Ninth. Not only had he lost a daughter shortly before he began the symphony but, in his own childhood years, six of his siblings had died in infancy. His beloved younger brother Ernst died at the age of 13 after a long illness, during which, Mahler's



widow tells us, Mahler 'scarcely left his bedside and never tired of telling him stories'. His sister Justine apparently suffered recurring hallucinations of death. And if, as the psychiatrist Kay Redfield Jamison argues in her fascinating book *Touched with Fire*, Mahler was manic-depressive, that would almost certainly have heightened any tendency to brood on death since over-occupation with mortality is a common symptom of the manic-depressive character. One could say that death was a constant and vivid presence for Mahler. Why else would there be so many funeral marches in his symphonies and song-cycles?

The Music

When Berg wrote of the presence of death in the Ninth Symphony, he wasn't simply giving voice to a fanciful personal interpretation; the music is full of details that reinforce his words. From very early on – almost from the opening bars – the first movement is dominated by a two-note falling figure, like a sigh (first heard on second violins). In the finale this figure returns, but it now drops by two steps, clearly spelling out the leading motif from Beethoven's Piano Sonata 'Les Adieux' (The Farewells). (It was a work Mahler had played in his teens, to great effect.) Beethoven marked his motif 'Le-be-wohl' (Farewell). In Mahler's first movement the two-note sighing version of the 'Farewell' motif emerges after a short introduction in which cellos and low horn spell out a strange, faltering rhythm; the conductor Leonard Bernstein compared this to Mahler's erratic heart-beat. The exquisite long violin melody that grows from the first sighing figures returns many times during the course of

this substantial movement. Between its appearances there are contrasted episodes: by turn impassioned, frantic, resigned and eerie. One passage – introduced by the 'faltering heart' rhythm on horns, followed by sinister drum taps – is unmistakably a funeral march. Towards the end of the movement comes a sinister, skeletally scored passage, in which Mahler treats his large orchestra as if it were a much smaller chamber ensemble. It is as though the orchestra itself were fragmenting, breaking down. But it is the sense of the sweetness of life that prevails in the movement's final bars, the orchestration wonderfully delicate and imaginative to the very end – magically scored for piccolo, harp and string harmonics.

After this, the second movement comes as a surprise. Suddenly we are transported to an Austrian beer-garden, with rather brash, heavy-footed dance tunes. In fact three kinds of *Ländler* (country cousin to the sophisticated Viennese waltz) alternate in this movement: the 'leisurely' first theme; a faster, more boisterous dance-tune (it becomes positively thuggish later on); and a gentle, sentimental slow waltz, leading off with a return of the first movement's two-note 'sigh'. Comical though a lot of this music is, there is something disquieting about it, especially in the coda, where the character of the first *Ländler* tune turns dark and grotesque.

All this is brusquely thrust aside by the *Rondo* – or 'Burleske', as Mahler subtitled the third movement. Brilliantly, sometimes garishly scored, this is the moment at which Mahler shows off his contrapuntal skills with splendid panache. But a lot of this music has a sarcastic

tone, confirmed by Mahler's dedication of this movement 'To my brothers in Apollo' – a raspberry directed at the musical pedants who had previously found fault with his compositional techniques. At the heart of this movement is an extraordinary bittersweet episode, introduced by a sugary slow tune on a solo trumpet. It seems to aspire to higher things, but that aspiration comes to nothing, with mocking sneers on high clarinets. The energetic counterpoint resumes, and the movement ends as it began, full of sound and fury.

Finally comes the *Adagio*. In placing the slow movement last, Mahler may have been thinking of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* Symphony or, again, of Bruckner's Ninth – both works are overshadowed by thoughts of death. The intensely expressive rising figure (on violins) that features at the beginning of this movement strongly recalls the opening of Bruckner's last *Adagio*. But what Mahler achieves is utterly personal. The first theme (on full strings)

spells out Beethoven's 'Farewell' theme in full, and there's also a striking echo of the Victorian funeral hymn 'Abide with me'. The resemblance may be coincidental but it is also possible that Mahler heard the hymn on one of his visits to New York. This richly sonorous music for full strings alternates with weird, sparsely scored passages of skeletal sounds. Eventually the 'Farewell' theme builds to a massive, desperate climax, which seems to be striving for the transcendent glory of Mahler's Eighth Symphony (even to the extent of a quotation from No. 8 on horns). The striving is in vain, however, and the rich textures gradually thin out into the near-emptiness of the final bars: the silences between the slow, quiet phrases are almost unbearably poignant, like the pauses between the breaths of a dying man. At last the music fades into nothingness.

Stephen Johnson © 2007

In the composer's words

The 'works' of this person or that ... are the ephemeral and mortal part of him; but what a man makes of himself – what he becomes through the untiring effort to live and to be – is permanent ... What we leave behind us is only the husk, the shell. *The Meistersinger*, the Ninth, *Faust* – all of them are only the discarded husk! No more, properly speaking, than our bodies are. I don't mean that artistic creation is superfluous. It is a necessity of men for growth and joy, which again is a question of health and creative energy. But what actual need is there of notes?

Mahler, in a letter to his wife, Alma, while he was sketching the Ninth Symphony in 1909



Simon Fowler ©

Daniel Harding *conductor*
 Daniel Harding is Music Director of the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, Principal Guest Conductor of the LSO and Music Director of the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra. His previous positions include Music Director of the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen, Principal Guest

Conductor of the Norrköping Symphony and Principal Conductor of the Trondheim Symphony Orchestra.

In the 2004/05 season, he made an acclaimed debut with the Vienna Philharmonic conducting Mahler's Symphony No. 10. He has subsequently returned to conduct the orchestra in the Vienna Festwochen and on tour to Rome and Salzburg. Other guest engagements include the Berlin Philharmonic, Leipzig Gewandhausorchester, Santa Cecilia Orchestra of Rome, Orchestre des Champs-Élysées, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Filarmonica della Scala and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, as well as the Staatskapelle Dresden. In North America, his appearances include the Philadelphia Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Chicago, Atlanta, Baltimore, Houston and Toronto Symphony Orchestras.

He is a regular visitor to the Aix-en-Provence Festival, where he has conducted new productions of *Così fan tutte*, *Don Giovanni*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *La traviata*, *Eugene Onegin* and *Die Zauberflöte*. Other engagements include *The Turn of the Screw* and *Wozzeck* at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden; *Don Giovanni* at the Salzburg Festival; *Die Zauberflöte* in Vienna; *Jenůfa* at Welsh National Opera; and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* at the Bayerische Staatsoper, Munich. He opened the 2005 season at La Scala, Milan, making his debut there with *Idomeneo*. This season he returns to La Scala to conduct *Salome* and he will conduct *Le nozze di Figaro* at the Aix and Salzburg Festivals.

He records exclusively for Deutsche Grammophon. Previously a Virgin/EMI artist, his releases on that label include Mahler's Symphony No. 4, *Don Giovanni* and *The Turn of the Screw* with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra; Beethoven Overtures and Brahms's

Symphonies Nos. 3 and 4 with the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie; and works by Britten with Ian Bostridge and the Britten Sinfonia.

Staatskapelle Dresden



Matthias Kreuziger ©

The Staatskapelle Dresden celebrated its 450th anniversary on 22 September 1998. It is one of the oldest orchestras in the world, having performed

continuously for over four and a half centuries. In 1823, Beethoven declared: 'It is generally said that the Hofkapelle in Dresden is the best orchestra in Europe'. For Wagner it represented a 'miraculous harp', and Richard Strauss called it 'the best opera orchestra in the world'. After recording Strauss's *Salome* in 1991, Seiji Ozawa said, 'This orchestra is a dream', and for Sir Colin Davis it is 'the most individual orchestra'.

The excellence of its music directors and its internationally renowned instrumentalists have characterised the orchestra and its sound. The conductors with which it has been closely associated include Heinrich Schütz, Carl Maria von Weber, Richard Wagner, Fritz Reiner, Fritz Busch, Karl Böhm, Rudolf Kempe, Kurt Sanderling and Herbert Blomstedt. Bernard Haitink succeeded Giuseppe Sinopoli as Chief Conductor between 2002 and 2004. In the 2007/08 season Fabio Luisi will take up his appointment as General Music Director of the Saxon State Opera and the Staatskapelle Dresden.

The orchestra's international reputation as the 'Strauss Orchestra' continues today. As composer, conductor and friend of the orchestra for more than 60 years, Richard Strauss gave the first performances of nine of his operas in Dresden (including *Salome*, *Elektra* and *Der Rosenkavalier*) and he dedicated the *Alpine Symphony* to the Staatskapelle.

The Staatskapelle Dresden tours frequently to the world's musical centres including, since 2000, Japan, China, South Korea, Taiwan and the United States, as well as throughout Europe.

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