Mahler's Song of Himself - Why Has His Music Become So Easy to Understand?

Jay Reise
MahlerFest, August 2021

Précis: *Mahler's music was considered difficult in his time. The audience that attended the world premiere of his Fifth Symphony in 1904 was very different from that of today. The average concert goer might hear a Mahler symphony perhaps once or twice in his or her lifetime. Compare that to his enormous popularity now. What are some of the elements that have brought about such an extreme change?*

1. Like many at this festival - and this should come as no surprise - I am a confirmed Mahler fanatic. Mahler's music has been a principal influence on my composition and I taught my students at Penn how to write songs in his style. However, this is my first opportunity to present some of my personal ideas on Mahler in a general talk and I would like to thank MahlerFest and Ken Woods for inviting me.

There are mountains of books and articles on virtually every aspect of Mahler's life, and many writers have addressed the reception of Mahler's music over the years. I use as my starting point - or rather pick up from and am responding in large part to - Norman Lebrecht's 2010 volume *Why Mahler? How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed Our World*. I have also relied extensively, as does everyone, on Henry-Louis de la Grange's indispensable 4,500-page biography.

I have borrowed the subtitle from Alban Berg's 1924 essay, "Why is Schoenberg's Music So Difficult to Understand?" It comes as no surprise that Berg would pose this question given the rejection of Schoenberg's music by the Viennese concert public and critics. Schoenberg's non-tonal or atonal music challenged audiences in a way that music never had before, and that challenge still resonates today.

Mahler's music was considered difficult as well at the beginning of the 20th century. But unlike Schoenberg, Mahler has evolved into one of the most popular classical composers of all time. Why has his music become "so easy" to understand, or to put it into a term that is so "us" - user friendly? I'll give it away at the beginning – *much* of it is singable and *all* of it is emotional.

2. In his own time, Mahler's music was heavily criticized but not altogether rejected by Vienna and the international music community, a number of early critical reviewers even acknowledging that the composer was something of a genius and one should follow his work with interest. The premiere of the Eighth Symphony, the last to be performed in his lifetime, was an enormous success. So despite his oft quoted, "My time will come," (more on that later) he did enjoy significant acclaim that would have been the envy of many of history's composers.

The premiere of the First Symphony was a different matter. Mahler wrote of the early performances, "My symphony was received with furious opposition by some and with

wholehearted approval by others. The opinions clashed in an amusing way, in the streets and in the salons!".

Following its New York premiere in 1909, a three-line headline indicates that audiences and critics, having heard the chatter from Europe, were wary. "New York for First Time Hears Titan Symphony - Philharmonic Society, Led by Composer, Plays Well - Theme Easily Understood." You can almost hear a shout of joy in that last phrase, "Theme Easily Understood". In the body of the review, the unnamed critic said the symphony was "...received with courteous applause, much dubious shaking of heads and no small amount of grumbles."

Grumbling audiences, that's nothing new. I was reminded recently of Mahler reading comments on Mozart by his contemporary, the composer Carl von Dittersdorf who wrote: "Mozart was unquestionably one of the greatest original geniuses, and I have never yet known any composer who possessed such an astonishing wealth of ideas. I wish he were not so lavish in using them. He does not let his listener get his breath back, because while one wants to think about a beautiful idea, another, even more splendid, takes its place and banishes the former..."

Mahler too, with his abrupt shifts, changes of mood, complex polyphony and wealth of ideas, can often seem to exhibit substance and caprice at the same time, especially to the new listener who is "trying to get his breath back" over the course of more than an hour. Both Mozart and Mahler challenged their audiences by presenting what was perceived by many to be an overabundance of material that was difficult to digest.

In the reviews of a performance of Mahler's Fourth Symphony in 1904, shortly before the premiere of the Fifth, critics objected to the seeming arbitrary contrast between the grotesque and the naive and variously remarked that, "the themes seemed to be merely strung together without form or style in a manner sometimes musically offensive;" "His music has no well-defined perspective, structure or development but instead an overabundance of 'effects';" "In turning his back on all the rules, Mahler has lost himself in a thicket."

The criticisms of Mahler's music almost always centered on length, repetition, formal incoherence and naiveté. Toscanini never conducted even one of Mahler's symphonies saying they were tedious: "Believe me," he said, "Mahler is not a genuine artist. His music has neither personality or genius. . . . At every step - you fall, not into a commonplace, but into some triviality. . . . Add to this, technical difficulty and exaggerated proportions."

Mahler’s symphonies today, however, are orchestral staples around the world, and most leading orchestras make a point of including at least one in each season's offerings. In 2016, a BBC Magazine survey of 151 conductors ranked three of Mahler's symphonies in the top ten symphonies of all time. He was the only composer to have three symphonies on the list - 9, 2 and 3. Beethoven and Brahms each had two.

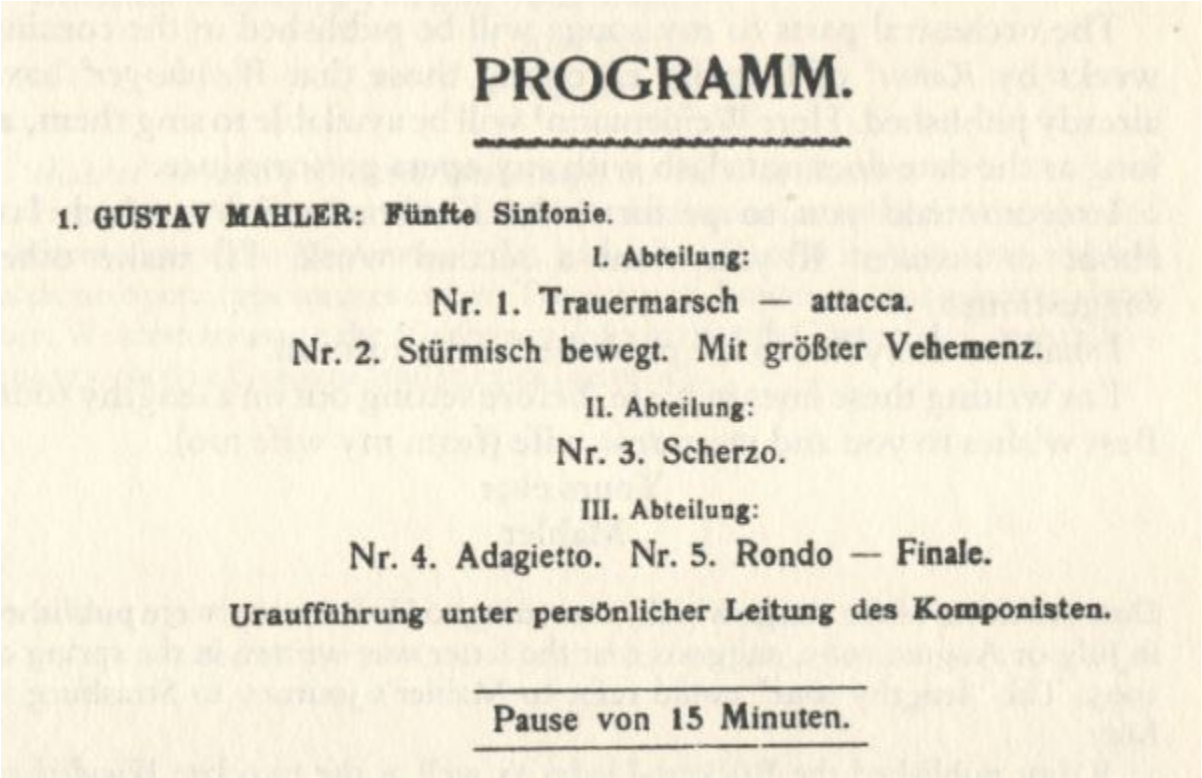
What has brought about this transformation? Why has Mahler's music gone from being difficult and daunting in his own time to being so desired and demanded by audiences today?

3. First a few words about audiences. When I taught music theory at Penn, we covered the usual topics in harmony, counterpoint, modulation and so on, and then proceeded to study and write music in the styles of the great composers. A student once asked, "Was Mahler thinking of all that theory when he wrote this song?" I'll save my specific response to that for later. But I always felt in class that as we isolated and deciphered every note, and accounted formally for every measure and word of text, that somehow the *crux* of the music - what it was really all about, where it came from, the emotional connection - was missing. And to me that was the student's real question. I certainly wanted to avoid my students' remembering my classes as Richard Wagner recalled his own theory training. Wagner, in his typical style, said of his instructor: "His teaching and exercises soon filled me with the greatest disgust, as to my mind it all seemed so dry. For me music was a spirit, a noble and mystic monster, and any attempt to regulate it seemed to lower it in my eyes. I gathered more instruction about music theory from The Fantasy Tales of ETA Hoffmann than from my teacher." Audiences are generally looking for emotion and this spirit Wagner describes in music as well as the other arts. Perhaps arguably that's the primary reasons they come to concerts.

The audience that attended the world premiere of Mahler's Fifth Symphony on October 18, 1904, in Cologne, in the heart of the German Empire, conducted by the composer, was a very different one from us who will be listening to tonight's performance. The average concert-goer in those times would have occasion to hear a Mahler symphony only a few times in a lifetime. Compare to nowadays with our numerous recordings, YouTube access and yes - entire festivals dedicated to presenting Mahler and his music.

Let's follow for a few moments an imaginary concert-goer attending the "World premiere under the personal direction of the composer" as it says on the second line from the bottom on the program. He or she sits down and - without a pre-concert talk, let alone day-long symposium - begins to read the program:

1. Gustav Mahler: Fifth Symphony.



PROGRAMM.

1. GUSTAV MAHLER: Fünfte Sinfonie.

I. Abteilung:

Nr. 1. Trauermarsch — attacca.

Nr. 2. Stürmisch bewegt. Mit größter Vehemenz.

II. Abteilung:

Nr. 3. Scherzo.

III. Abteilung:

Nr. 4. Adagietto. Nr. 5. Rondo — Finale.

Uraufführung unter persönlicher Leitung des Komponisten.

Pause von 15 Minuten.

Example 1. Program for the world premiere of Mahler's Fifth Symphony.

The new symphony is the first piece on the program .....(works by Schubert and Beethoven followed the intermission.)

Our listener does not know this, but the symphony is to be the first work on the program because Mahler said he always "wants the players to have sufficient strength at the end of the piece and not be exhausted from earlier efforts on the program". Mahler also probably had the attention span of his audience in mind. Of course in our time Mahler symphonies generally conclude the program.

It is also noteworthy that the designation of a key for the piece is missing. This was a standard feature on the program and it continues with tonal music to this day. Symphonies are listed, for example, as Mozart: Symphony No. 40 in G minor K. 550. Mahler, however, proclaimed - apparently only to friends and colleagues from what I can find - “From the order of the movements (where the first movement usually stands, now comes the second); it is difficult to speak of a key for the ‘whole Symphony’, and to avoid misunderstandings the key should best be omitted.” This sounds pretty confusing. But we have still another problem: regarding Mahler's statement, "where the first movement usually stands, now comes the second " - was there a program note explaining this oddity? No, because Mahler felt that program notes were a hindrance to appreciating the piece. One reviewer of that New York premiere of the First complained, "...for the first time in a generation at least, the official programme contained neither description nor analysis of the composition." So with the 1904 program, our listener has neither a sense of the key of the work, and its implications for the tonal design of the piece, nor any program notes to provide a context for some of the seeming peculiarities in the program.

Our audience member attending the world premiere continues reading: Part I.

Part I? Here's another oddity. Symphonies are in movements, usually four - not parts, and here we have - as we look down the program - three parts and five movements. The 1904 concert-goer who has heard either Mahler's Second or Third Symphonies or an early performance of the First, will not be taken completely unawares since they too are cast in more than the standard four movements and have massive first movements which seem somewhat separate from the remainder of the symphony. The audience at the premiere in Cologne that venerated Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, and of course Johannes Brahms would hardly think of such a structure as a symphony, but rather as more of a program symphony in the manner of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*. But there is no program in Mahler's new symphony, not even program notes. All the great symphonists in the German/Viennese tradition generally sought to fulfill the terms of the symphony with its four logically placed movements and resulting formal clarity. In 1901, Mahler had actually told his friend and pining admirer Natalie Bauer-Lechner that for the Fifth Symphony he was he was planning a "regularly constructed symphony in four movements, each of which exists for itself and is self-contained, linked to the others solely by a related mood." But it seems plans were altered somewhere along the way and the Fifth turned out to be anything but "regularly constructed." After Mahler and Strauss, the appellation "symphony" took on a larger definition, meaning a significant orchestral work of large proportions. That is the way most listeners interpret the term today. Thus what may have been perceived as confusions or challenges to the German/Viennese symphonic tradition by the 1904 audience are not even issues today.

I mentioned Brahms, in 1904 the late Herr Brahms; he died in 1897. Mahler knew Brahms personally and conducted his symphonies regularly - but he did express some serious reservations. He wrote in a letter, "Brahms' themes are often beautiful, but only very rarely does he know what to do with them." Thematic development was a big issue to turn of the century audiences. In our own time it seems we do not much consider development per se - we seem to be listening and looking more for what I might describe as a sustained interest of the narrative, again more a feature of the symphonic poem - and Mahler's music.

Mahler's statement about Brahms' lacking development "chops" might be something of an indicator of what he felt were the confines of expression imposed by the traditional approach towards the symphony. Further, I almost get a sense of disdain from Mahler for what he might have perceived as Brahms' somewhat academic approach. This gets into the Brahms vs Wagner, progressive/conservative discussion that was very hot at the time. I will not get into that but will only mention that Mahler was a confirmed Wagnerian. And in opera of course the developing narrative dominates.

Mahler might be different from other composers in that there is nothing he writes specifically to fulfill any academic symphonic formal need or concern. Beethoven liberated

transitions into something equal in interest to the main material. Mahler similarly changes key areas and moves into new sections as all part of a continuous uninterrupted intimate narrative. On a personal note, I never question where I am in a Mahler movement, no matter how long or formally diffuse it might be, because I find I am always happy to be at that spot in that moment and I think today's listeners sense this as well.

Continuing with the concert program: Movement 1: *Funeral march. In a measured step. Austere. Like a funeral cortège*. This is a far cry from the established norm of the day where the initial tempo of each movement was listed, usually in Italian, as in say, Beethoven's 9th Symphony: Allegro ma non troppo ("fast, but not overly so"). A funeral march might serve as a slow movement as in Beethoven's *Eroica* but here, in Mahler's Fifth, it is presented at the beginning of the symphony. This is indeed odd --- except perhaps to Mahler's mother, had she been alive in 1904. Mahler's first composition, written with her encouragement at age 6, was a "Polka with Introductory Funeral March".

Getting back to our patron, who continues to explore the program: we see the word "attacca" at the end of the first movement. This term, meaning to attach two movement without pause, does not appear in the manuscript or any edition of the score that I have seen. All editions have a fermata – a hold – at the end of the movement. Mahler is indicating on the program to the audience that he would be moving straight into the second movement without there actually being a break between movements, that the momentum and line of the first movement would carry into the second. (I have seen several conductors take a normal pause between these movements; in one the audience actually began to applaud.)

2nd movement: Violently agitated, with much vehemence. At this point, just from reading the program, we are quite removed from our standard symphonic expectations. So far, rather than the usual Adagio-Allegro opening movement followed by, say, a Lento slow movement, we are presented with a Funeral March and then some kind of vaguely described movement that promises to be contentious. AND we are still unaware that the two movements somehow represent, in Mahler's words, a switch from the "normal practice".
All this confusion even before the piece starts!

4. Today I think we are less concerned about musical form and design. Despite our obvious sound bite-imposed limitations I think we have grown accustomed to more free and open forms of artistic expression and presentation. Our earbuds enable us to enjoy "Mahler on the Go." Further, and perhaps most significantly in this pandemic period, we find we are able to put on a Met Broadcast, or a film, a baseball game or a Mahler symphony and then on a whim, suddenly hit PAUSE, get up and go do something else and then resume at our leisure. For better or worse - presentation through today's variety of media has made experiencing art more consumer-friendly, certainly more convenient than it was in the past. Media has enabled us, to some extent, to bend and even distort - if not completely destroy musical pacing to fit our own personal time. The other day I asked my Amazon Alexa to play some Mahler. She responded

with her usual, “Shuffling songs by Gustav Mahler,” and then proceeded to play the last 4 minutes of the Eighth Symphony. "Well," I thought, "she knows her Mahler." That is certainly a grand highlight in the symphony, one we used to blast out the window in college. Mahler and company in soundbites may be how coming generations will learn their musical heritage - on *their own* time. It seems again that perhaps some of the formal and temporal problems that challenged the 1904 audience may not as pressing or even relevant to us in 2021 (and beyond) as they were back then.

I have spoken of Mahler’s going outside and beyond the expectations of the listeners of his time. Mahler's symphonies are in many other ways those of an outsider. It is well-known that he so viewed himself saying, first regarding his nationality, "I am thrice homeless, as a native of Bohemia in Austria, as an Austrian among Germans, and as a Jew throughout the world. Everywhere an intruder, never welcomed." And then musically, "My time will come when [Richard] Strauss's is up...". (I'll have more on that later.)

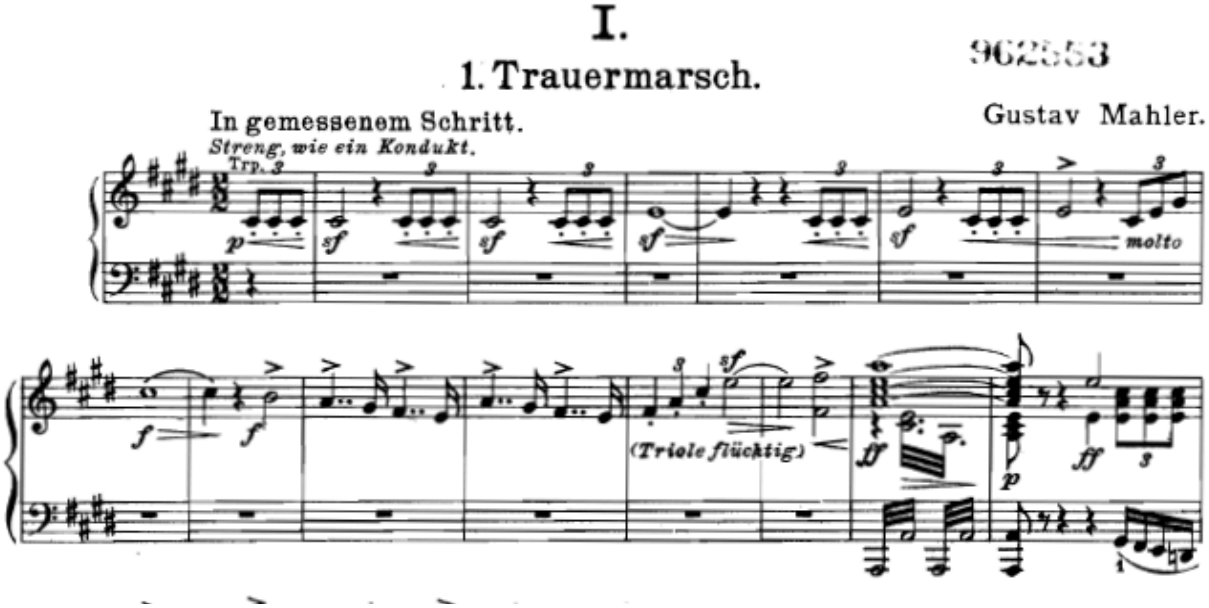
As an outsider artistically, Mahler continually defies the norm, the expected. He is a composer of extremes. Of the 11 works he called "symphonies" (including the cantata-symphony *Das Lied von der Erde*), only four of them (1-4-6-and 9) have the standard four movements, and those pieces sharply challenge expectations of symphonic form.

I would suggest that another outsider feature of his music is that despite his being one of the most significant composers of symphonies, the instrument that dominates his oeuvre is the human voice. Almost 50% of his symphonies contain the voice and some include full-fledged songs, (2-3-4-8). Is there anyone before Mahler who included solo orchestral songs as movements in a symphony? Even Schubert and Schumann, both master lieder composers, never introduced songs into their symphonies. As for Mahler's non-symphonic works - the early cantata *The Song of Lamentation*, the song-cycles *The Youth's Magic Horn*, *Songs on the Death of Children*, the *Songs of a Wayfarer*, the songs for voice and piano, the orchestral songs - we find that all of Mahler's non-symphonic non-juvenilia works are vocal, *all* of them. To Bernard Haitink, Mahler was a composer of songs, and while "he wrote symphonies of immense scope, still the song is always the germinating factor."

5. This leads me to the Fifth Symphony, a non-vocal work, that I think has a major "inner vocal" compositional component. In this purely instrumental piece, we discover that many of the themes are nonetheless very melodic, eminently singable - and of course "easily understood" as our 1909 critic would have it. Some passages are even operatic – as might be expected from the leading opera conductor of his day. Other sections are more animated, angular and nervous. In all of these formats Mahler presents what Stephen Johnson calls "arresting sound symbols", as he puts it in his fascinating book on the Eighth Symphony. The animated passages are often highly contrapuntal and replete with clear "sound symbols" - diminished seventh chords, snarling brass and aggressive percussion. They serve often as foils

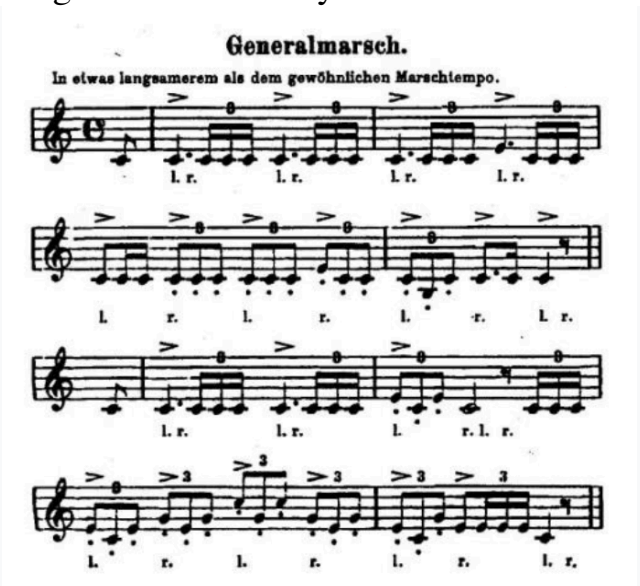
and can seem at times almost like "anti-song" for their angularity and frequently dizzying fragmentation.

With these ideas in mind let's have a listen to a few of the main themes in the Fifth:



Example 2. Mahler Fifth Symphony, opening

While not vocally derived, the trumpet solo at the opening of the first movement was inspired by the "Presentation March of the Austro-Hungarian Army", a typical military fanfare that Mahler heard as a child coming from the military barracks near his home.

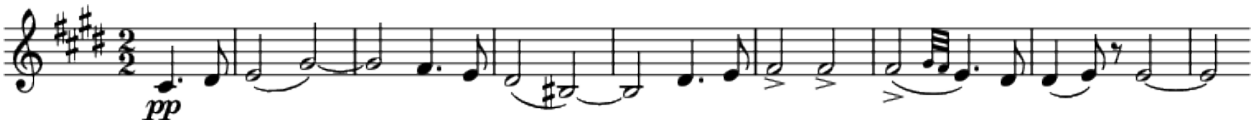


Example 3. Presentation March of the Austro-Hungarian Army

That's the "hook", the recognizable "arresting sound symbol", a trumpet fanfare with echoes of Beethoven's Fifth as Ron Nadel points out in the MahlerFest booklet. Mahler uses only the skeletal shape and rhythm of the actual march which is of course much more simple

than his version. He then makes a lot more of it by casting it in minor and veering off dramatically in the fourth measure. The full orchestra then comes in with menacing snare and bass drums - "arresting sound symbols" - suggesting war.

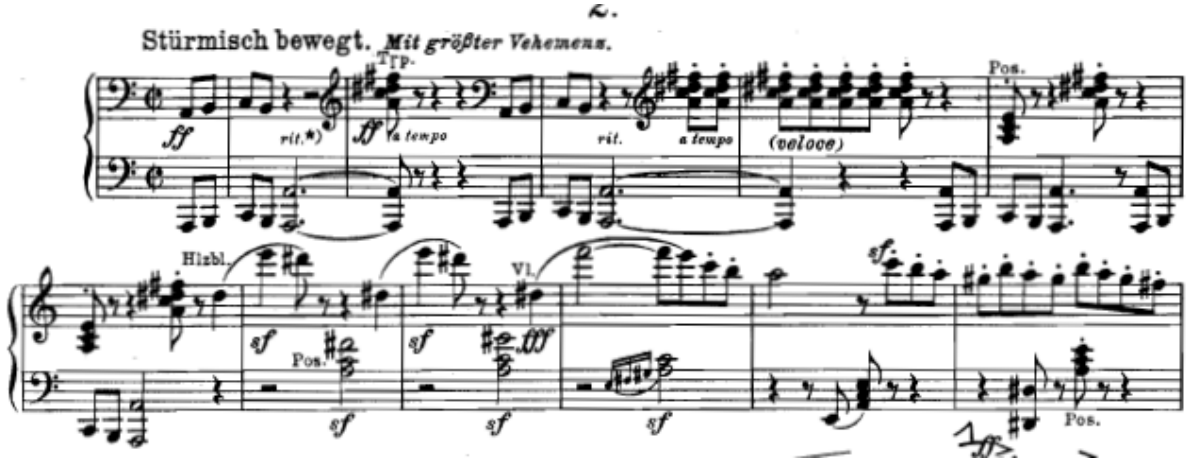
The contrasting funeral march that follows, however, is a dark songful lament. It reminds one of small-town processions one can hear all over the world.



Example 4. Mahler Fifth Symphony, 1st mvt.

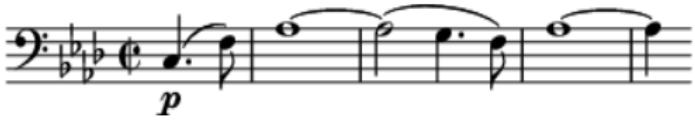
One would have no trouble accepting the opening trumpet fanfare in an opera (like Aida), and the funeral music as an aria theme (say as in Tosca).

The beginning of the second movement - *Stürmisch bewegt, mit größter Vehemenz* (Violently agitated, with much vehemence) - is a different matter. This is quintessential dramatic orchestral music, cast in a manner that I think of as "anti-song," full of angularity, agitation and registral disjointedness. The line or thread - the *hauptstimme* if you will - though often fragmented, is invariably crystal clear, as always with Mahler, and there are no particular extra-musical symbols, I believe, beyond Mahlerian angst:



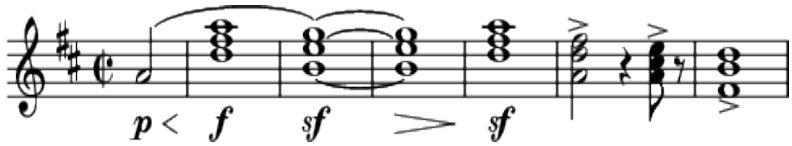
Example 5. Mahler Fifth Symphony, 2nd mvt.

The second theme is simple but somewhat charged, and again, could come from an opera or song:



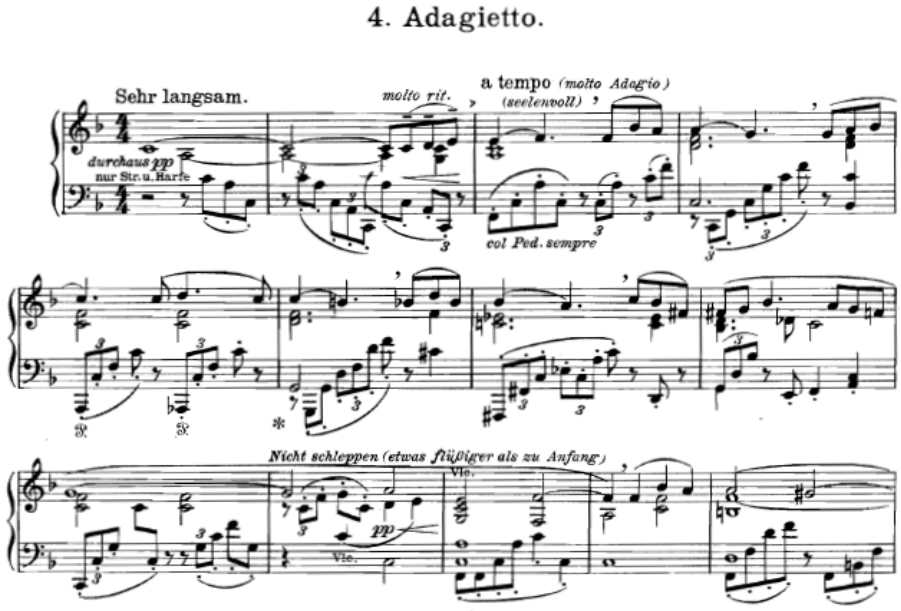
Example 6. Mahler Fifth Symphony, 2nd mvt.

In the climactic theme of triumph, a variation of which will be heard in the last movement, one can easily imagine a full Hallelujah-like chorus similar to those of Mahler's 2nd and 8th symphonies. In typical Mahler style, this triumph is quickly reversed to agitation and angst:



Example 7. Mahler Fifth Symphony, 2nd mvt., chorale theme

Skipping over Part 2 and moving on to the first section of Part III, we come to the famous Adagietto's whose sublime song characteristics are obvious:



Example 8. Mahler Fifth Symphony, 4th mvt.

The Adagietto is the poetic heart of the symphony. It is Mahler's single most well-known statement and has been heard in many films, movies, television programs, etc. A love-song to his wife, the ever-flighty Alma, it seems to have an air of restive calm that is uncommon to the genre.

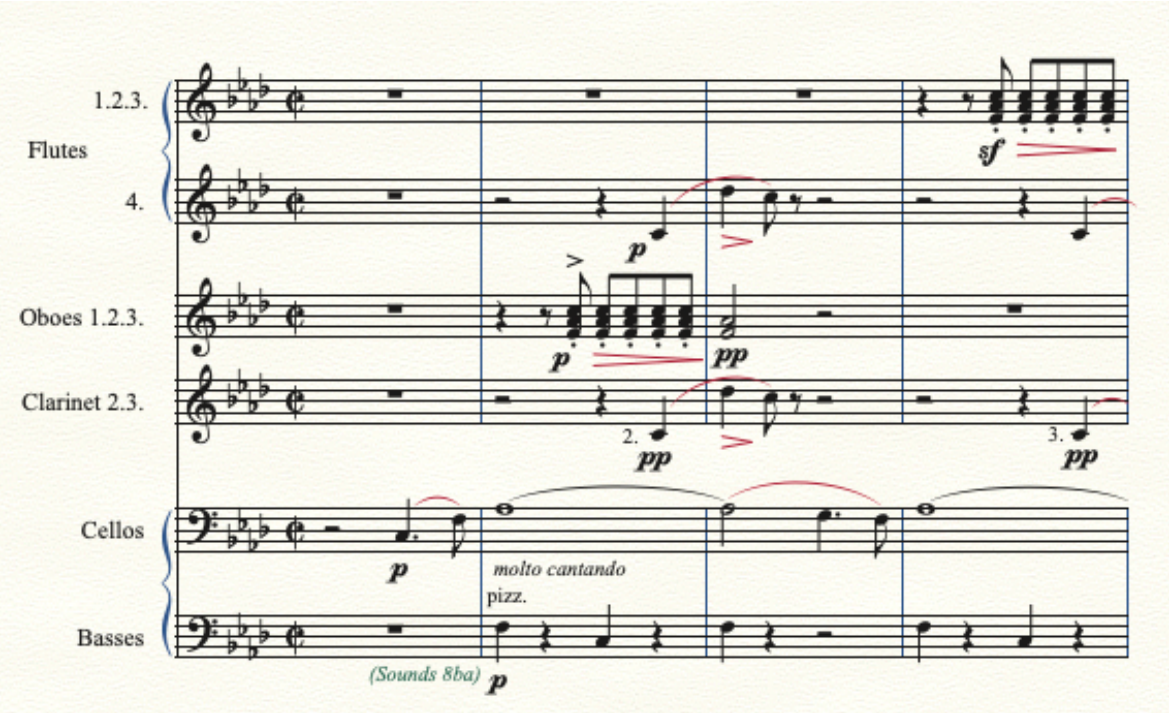
What is it that is so attractive about this movement; what "hooks" us? [See Example 8.] It starts with the obvious simple rising upbeat (m.2) - five scalar notes - over a lush unfolding string orchestra accompaniment, ornamented by glowing sonorities from the harp. The first four rising notes are pulled by the gravity of the 5th note, the tonic F, literally pulling us via voice leading into the sound-world of the piece. Such simple and accessible melody is a characteristic

of much of the music most celebrated by audiences at large. Even the anti-Romantic Stravinsky, who is not known as a great melodist, said, "I am beginning to think, in full agreement with the general public, that melody must keep its place at the summit of the hierarchy of elements that make up music. Melody is the most essential of these elements, not because it is more immediately perceptible, but because it is the dominant voice of the symphony." This assessment seems to continue with audiences today.

6. Is this Adagietto sentimental? Yes, sentimental in that it expresses and is intended to express feeling. The word "sentimental" does not carry only a pejorative meaning, and Mahler, to my mind, is as I have indicated first and foremost about emotion and feeling. The hyper-modern Arnold Schoenberg defended Mahler's apparent sentimentality by suggesting that "one ought not to look at the theme, but at what comes out of it." And that - Mahler's way - I think is what counts for a lot of his ever-growing appeal.

As we have seen, Mahler was accused in his time of banality and naiveté by critics. Were the Adagietto perhaps written in a more straightforward and less sophisticated way - say, without the dramatic and innovative shifts of register, or the far-reaching harmonies, or if it had steady duplets rather than triplets in the accompaniment - it might be the case. But the refinement of the execution, the shining presence of the harp - which for all the color and character it brings, perhaps surprisingly never carries the melody - the assemblage of the whole movement and all its details, elevates what could be banality in lesser hands. Mahler consistently delivers the expected and the "easily understood", but always along with the unexpected, the new and the fresh, brilliantly calculated and masterfully executed from the conspicuous level of the melody to the most hidden and subtle colorings of the accompaniment. Mahler once made a remark that I think reveals something of his strategy for transcending the banal - “All that is not perfect down to the smallest detail is doomed to perish.”

As one goes further into Mahler's music, one observes a vast array of surrounding elements - ornaments, contrapuntal echoes and snippets, secondary themes and motives, percussion enhancements, instrumental colorings, etc. surround the straightforward melodic material. Here Mahler presents the second theme cited above (Example 6) but unlike the usual rendering of a lyrical melody on its initial presentation, this theme is commented on and accompanied by three other discreet figures.



Example 9. Mahler Fifth Symphony, 2nd mvt. (Score in C)

The theme is in the cellos, very suave - *molto cantando;* the bass provides the traditional cliché accompaniment; the oboes and then the flutes have a chattery comment, and the fourth flute and clarinets provide a pleading motive. That makes four separate elements, three of which are melodic or motivic, and it's only the first statement of the theme. The development of these elements is technically complicated but the clarity is always sure. This is not just a fancy way of introducing the theme; the two motives will be developed with extensive counterpoint along with the main melody. Notice how clear it all sounds because the elements are assigned contrasting gestures and dynamic envelopes. The theme is long and *legato*-smooth, the bass plays *pizzicato*, the oboes and flutes are staccato, and the clarinets' and fourth flute's motive is melodically short and angular (note how effective is that clipped final note). This might all seem like theory shop-talk, but I think it has had a telling effect on the perception of audiences: with repeated listenings audiences have taken in these telling particulars over the years - they continue to absorb the rich details of Mahler's musical mosaics, and the more they listen the more knowledgeable and attracted they become.

Arnold Schoenberg, who began a 1912 memorial essay on Mahler with the words "Gustav Mahler was a saint", addressed the issue of banality in Mahler's music in another essay of that same year. Schoenberg said, "I must confess that I, too, at first considered Mahler's themes banal... although the whole work had always made a profound impression on me... I conclude then that his themes are actually not banal. Consider this, if they were really banal I should find them far more banal today than formerly..." - with the implication that the work would not continue to make an increasingly fine impression. Consider this: Schoenberg's slow acceptance, followed by appreciation and then devotion – total commitment - perhaps in a way parallels the evolution of the popularity of Mahler's music with the public over the last 130

years; Mahler's music has made and continues to make an increasingly fine impression with audiences.

Mahler did have some advocates, other than Schoenberg and his circle, who understood him much as we do. Allan Lincoln Langley[1], a music essayist, composer and conductor with the New York Philharmonic in the 1920s wrote perspicaciously about banality in Mahler in the Musical Quarterly, April 1926, a mere 15 years after Mahler's death, "The folk-music spirit accounts for much in Mahler's music that the opposition considers banal, for the simple reason that much of the folk music of all nations has frequently an element of banality about it. Many a folk-song is genuine, but at the same time it is esthetically ordinary and reflects the banality of the "folk" crowd or individual in that crowd. Embracing humanity as he saw it, Mahler was in that respect a realistic idealist. He did not embellish the folk-spirit, but reflected it in his music as it actually is, and in my opinion it is a virtue and not a defect in Mahler that at times he did not shrink from a refined sort of banality when his ideas demanded it".

So - Mahler embraces it all - the charged emotions, the flirting with banality, hair-raising drama, orchestral mood painting, friendly folkish numbers, profoundly spiritual songs and choruses, klezmer, erudite counterpoint, rare and distant progressions, charmingly simple harmony - it's all there. And we recognize all those "arresting sound symbols" quite easily; they speak directly to us - they are in our world. But many composers' works contain elements of somberness, joy, love and all the rest. What is singular about Mahler's music - to us? I think one element is that many composers produce music that is appropriate to the mood but Mahler is able to go a step further and express his own very personal emotional response to the mood. Expressing oneself, exposing oneself emotionally - both as artist and audience - is perhaps more accepted in our world than it was in 1904, and today's audience seems to understand and take this in better than many of Mahler's contemporaries did - especially the critics.

7. Mahler presents many contrasts and even contradictions as we have seen, but probably none so extreme as this bringing together the banal and the erudite. Perhaps this is why the naiveté so inflamed the highbrow critics. Mahler once said, “A symphony must be like the world: it must contain everything.” Mahler in his music sings a life-long "Song of Himself" as he attempts to fuse the contradictory entities of banality and erudition into high culture. Similarly, and with even greater frankness, the ever-popular Walt Whitman famously wrote in his signature poem Song of Myself: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes)." To me, this describes Mahler to a tee. Both Whitman and Mahler declared they were portraying the entire world and themselves through the lenses of their beings, complete with all of life's strange and beautiful self-contradictions. And their enlarged self-views seem to resonate with many of our own (usually hidden) self-perceptions.

---

[1] I discovered Mr. Langley's article after I had written the bulk of the present piece including the passages on Strauss and Whitman. The then rare insights of Langley and Schoenberg seem to have gained traction with audiences through the decades. Mahler had his champions early on but those happy few are now legions.

Also like Mahler, Whitman recognized suffering and tragedy. Again in "Song of Myself": "I am possess'd! Embody all presences outlaw'd or suffering, See myself in prison shaped like another man, And feel the dull unintermitted pain." Allan Langley too recognized a connection between the composer and the poet, writing: "[Mahler's music] was humanity revealed, with no lies, no extenuations, no hypocrisy, no omissions. Beauty shone out fully as often as it does in human affairs; banality was there to torture, and disappointment to corrode. It was all in the music - one felt in Mahler a kinship to the oracular confessor, Walt Whitman [who wrote]: "*I* am the man-*I* suffered, *I* was there." "I am the man-I suffered, I was there." That certainly sounds like a Mahler lament.

The lamenting Mahler - *Das Klagende Lied - The Song of Lament*. Much of Mahler's music can be described by this title of his earliest published piece. Through his music, his "Song for Himself", Mahler mourns life where joys are short-lived, loves remain unconsummated, and tragedies are devastating. Sorrow, sympathy and longing are found, at least to some extent, in all of his works. Victories are occasionally there - say, the endings of the Second and Eighth Symphonies, but they seem somehow temporary, waiting for the next distressing news to arrive as it usually does in the work that follows. The upbeat ending of the Fifth Symphony for example is followed by the Tragic Sixth. The Eighth is followed by - - -

Ah, what followed the Eighth. We in 2021 have knowledge that the audience within Mahler's lifetime did not have - the posthumous tragic last works - *Das Lied von der Erde*, and the Ninth and unfinished Tenth Symphonies. Knowing them greatly colors our perceptions and experiences of the earlier works. We know the even greater profundity of Mahler's sorrow, the intense and passionate struggle for life resulting in those deep laments which to us is probably the single most definable characteristic of his work. We today, part of the historical collective audience, have learned the late works over the decades, and in a concert, have the patience – are able to have the joy - to wait for the catharses that follow the grieving and sorrow.

8. Many composers, like Mahler, allude to tragedy, as well as spirituality, heroism, nature, the cosmos, God and humanity, etc. as forces behind their musical inspiration. But even as Mahler references those things, it is clear his reactions to his surroundings and the unfolding circumstances of his life are his main inspirations; his self-perceived persona is the force generating the art-object he calls a symphony. Like Marcel Proust in literature, each phrase is a part of his vast psychological autobiography. And as Proust's novel is not about its plot but rather about its author, Mahler's symphonies are not about symphonies - they are about Mahler. It is for this reason that I think Mahler never wrote an opera - ironically perhaps, because the medium is too impersonal. In opera, philosophies, ideas, love declarations and laments are presented through the mouths of characters. Mahler preferred to use the orchestra as the sole vehicle for his own voice. Although we know of Mahler's interest in philosophy and his referencing it in some of the initial versions of the early symphonies, his symphonic music ultimately does not ultimately preoccupy itself with philosophical statements or analogies such

as Strauss's Zarathustra. And this is why perhaps the Eighth Symphony stands somewhat apart in Mahler's oeuvre - it is the least personal and most operatic of all his works.

Richard Strauss's music was more popular than Mahler's, and the latter once quipped "My time will come when Strauss's is up..." Strauss wrote his own "Hero's Life" into his tone poems. But Strauss presented himself as he wanted others to see him - as a champion, a quester, a victim of the critics, even a hen-pecked husband - in short, a fictional character. Mahler on the other hand, always presents himself in a manner that is disarmingly – at times painfully - real: as an inner soul, a haunted loner, a disappointed lover, a fearful child, a man struggling against death. Alma wrote that his excessive undeniably puerile demands were suffocating, and reading his letters, one (for once) believes her. Mahler's over-the-top emotions are not only represented in the music - they *are* the music. The difference between Strauss and Mahler is that one observes Strauss; one lives Mahler. Or as Langley would have it, "In Richard Strauss the pictorial element of the program dominates that of the mood, while in Mahler the pictorial element is subservient to a portrayal of psychic states." And through that emotional identification, I think many have found in Mahler's music an epiphany that lasts a lifetime.

My earlier phrase, "one lives Mahler" is I think borne out by the reactions expressed by so many of his admirers. They are not of the same vocabulary as has been used for even the most famous composers. Here is a small sampling of reactions to experiencing Mahler's music. Henry-Louis de la Grange said: "I believed in Mahler from the first day I heard his music; something happened inside me." Raisa Gorbachev on the Fifth Symphony: “I’ve been shaken by this music. It left me with a feeling of despondency, that there is no way out.” Ken Woods: On first hearing *Das Lied* as a child, "I felt like I had gone on a great journey." Conductor Hermann Scherchen:"I was smitten by the ...vast spaciousness of his symphonic vision." Mental health advocate John McManamy: "I popped in the CD, and with the opening bars of the solo trumpet I was hooked." Bruno Walter on *Das Lied*: "I was profoundly moved by that uniquely passionate, bitter, yet resigned, and benedictory sound of farewell and departure, that last impression of one upon whom rested the finger of death."

Listen to those words: "I believed... Something happened inside me. Smitten. ...the finger of death. I was hooked." What other composer has been described in such extreme, almost visceral terms? No surprise - there is a website: The "I Am Addicted to Mahler Thread".

One of my favorite descriptions comes from Norman Lebrecht: "Among three thousand people in a concert hall you are always alone when Mahler is played." This sense of individual contact may have special appeal for a wide audience today in the FaceBook age where products are so tailored to the desires of the individual. Further, the introverted milieu that our earbuds enable us to experience encourages us - and I expect especially young people - to join Mahler *personally* in his expressive and complex world.

Dislike for Mahler is also extreme. Toscanini said on first encountering the score of the Fifth Symphony: " I read it immediately, or rather devoured it--but unfortunately, during this ferocious musical meal, the initial joy and curiosity gradually waned, changing in the end into a sad, very sad hilarity. Believe me, Mahler is not a genuine artist."

From what I see online, Mahler burn-out seems not uncommon, but to burn out one has to have overindulged. Here is a comment from a chatroom: "Can I really claim that Mahler is my favourite composer if I no longer listen to any of his music?... But now, I find myself avoiding the Ninth Symphony ... because of its very angst, its sheer nakedness of emotion, leaves me feeling hollowed out and exhausted every time I listen to it." Mahler provokes responses in listeners that are beyond the usual scope and tone of normal musical critical discourse, whether it be amateur or professional.

Wagner too has certainly been described in terms suggesting obsession, addiction and the like, and he is probably the only composer who comes close to Mahler in that way. But with Wagner, we lack several of Mahler's main attributes - namely a depth of sympathy, sensitivity and humanity. Yes, there are moments of these in Wagner but they are not convincingly presented as central topics, even in *Parsifal* where the sympathy seems contrived, designed to fulfill a fairy tale conception of virtue. Similarly the final exchange in *Die Walküre* between Wotan and Brünnhilde is moving, but even here we are affected by the tragic outcome of the dilemma rather than humanitarian concerns - indeed, we suspend our disbelief to the extent of ignoring the awful humiliating act being committed.[2]

9. That Mahler could be idolized in 2021 makes sense in that he lived sufficiently long ago to seem legendary but recently enough that we can readily identify with him. I was born in 1950 and have always felt a shudder at the thought of how my hero could have suffered just a few years prior. As for me, I was fortunate to have classical music around me as a New York kid and I became familiar with Mahler during the centenary celebrations. I saw Leonard Bernstein conduct the Second and Third, Mitropolous the Ninth, and Bruno Walter in *Das Lied* with Maureen Forrester. I met Bruno Walter backstage and still have a treasured inscribed photo. So I was indoctrinated at an early age.

One reason I believe strongly in the vocal foundation of Mahler's work is because when I was in the fourth grade I could "sing", or perhaps better described, make vocal sounds that followed the thread of the entire first movement of the Second Symphony. I simply adored it and played the Herman Scherchen recording constantly. I never stopped to ask myself why I liked it so much. Certainly none of the comments I see ascribing to Mahler visions of class struggle, pre-world war prophecy, the death of a society and its rebirth, or even innocence opposed to sophistication - a topic in this essay - were on my mind.

---

[2] I have written on this topic, "Searching for the Roots of Madama Butterfly", Opera Company of Philadelphia Program, 1990-1991 Season pp. 26-29, 47. See my website: https://www.jayreise.com

My first "transcendental experience" so to speak, with Mahler's music, came at about age 10. I was playing with marbles on the living room floor. (Kids amused themselves in simpler ways than now.) A broadcast of *Das Lied* was on the radio. At some point in the *Abschied* I seemed to lose track of time, space and motion. (No, I did not fall asleep!) I was jolted back to reality when the applause started. In some ways I have never left the Mahler of that experience, that moment, and here I am decades later as entranced as ever. I readily acknowledge that everyone does not react that way, and that not everyone likes Mahler; that's true of everyone and everything in the arts. But clearly enough of the public - musicians and listeners - present and buy his music sufficiently to place him high on the charts.

10. To conclude: Other composers also now have numerous recordings and are on the Web. Why is it Mahler who has won the hearts of today's concert-going public to such a great extent? I think the key word may be right there - "heart" - insufficient and banal as it may at first sound. Mahler himself said, "Where do people keep their ears and *hearts* [my italics] if they cannot understand this?" It seems that the public indeed has - over the decades - opened their ears and hearts. Unlike the earliest audiences, more and more of us have had the desire and willingness to take on Mahler's unique emotional frankness. And with his last three works *and* our intrepid media we now have windows into his complete musical personality. Today's public *looks* for personality and emotion in music - even demands it, and there is no composer whose music seems to be more consistently emotional and magnetically fascinating than Mahler's.

"Too much going on!" the critics said. After the premiere of the Fifth, Mahler said, "I wish I could conduct the first performance fifty years after my death!" *That* was prescient - in 1961 an eager audience, of which some of us were a part, was indeed ready. And we do not seem to have lost momentum.

I return to the student who asked if Mahler was thinking of the intricacies of music theory when he composed. My response was that I think Mahler - like all the other great common practice composers - sang to himself and wrote it down as quickly as he could. He created the choral Eighth Symphony in just two months, and later said, "It was as if it had been dictated to me."