

Gustav Mahler
Symphony No. 4 in G

GUSTAV MAHLER was born in Kalischt (Kaliste) near the Moravian border of Bohemia on July 7, 1860, and died in Vienna on May 18, 1911. Except for the finale, which was composed as a song with piano accompaniment in February 1892, he wrote his Fourth Symphony between June 1899 and April 1901. He continued, however, on the basis of his experience conducting the work, to tinker with the orchestration. The score published in 1963 by the International Gustav Mahler Society, Vienna, incorporates the composer's final revisions, made after the last performances he conducted with the New York Philharmonic in January 1911. Mahler led the first performance of the work on November 25, 1901, with the Kaim Orchestra of Munich; the soprano was Margarete Michalek.

THE SCORE OF MAHLER'S SYMPHONY NO. 4 calls for an orchestra of four flutes (third and fourth doubling piccolo), three oboes (third doubling English horn), three clarinets (second doubling E-flat clarinet, third doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, timpani, bass drum, triangle, sleigh bells, glockenspiel, cymbals, tam-tam, harp, and strings, plus solo soprano.

Many a love affair with Mahler has begun with the sunlit Fourth Symphony. Mahler himself thought of it as a work whose transparency, relative brevity, and non-aggressive stance might win him new friends. In the event, it enraged most of its first hearers. Munich hated it, and so did most of the German cities—Stuttgart being, for some reason, the exception—where Felix Weingartner took it on tour with the Kaim Orchestra immediately after the premiere. In a letter of September 1903, Mahler refers to it as “this persecuted stepchild.” It at last made the impression he had hoped for at a concert he conducted in October 1904 with the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam (the program: Mahler Fourth—intermission—Mahler Fourth).

The very qualities Mahler had banked on were the ones that annoyed. The bells, real and imitated (in flutes), with which the music begins! And that chawbacon tune in the violins! What in heaven's name was the composer of the *Resurrection* Symphony up to with this newfound naiveté? Most of the answers proposed at the time were politicized, anti-Semitic, ugly. Today we perceive more clearly that what he was up to was writing a Mahler symphony, uncharacteristic only in its all but exclusive involvement with the sunny end of the expressive range. But naive? The violin tune, yes, is so popular in tone that we can hardly conceive that once upon a time it didn't exist,* but it is also pianissimo, which is the first step toward subverting its rustic simplicity. Then Mahler marks accents on it in two places, both unexpected. The first phrase ends, and while clarinets and bassoons mark the beat, low strings suggest a surprising though charmingly appropriate continuation. A horn interrupts them midphrase and itself has the very words taken out of its mouth by the bassoon. At that moment the cellos and basses assert themselves with a severe “as I was saying,” just as the violins chime in with their own upside-down thoughts on the continuation that the lower strings had suggested four bars earlier. The game of interruptions, resumptions, extensions, reconsiderations, and unexpected combinations continues—for example, when the violins try their first melody again, the cellos have figured out that it is possible to imitate it, lagging two beats behind (a discovery they proffer with utmost discretion, pianissimo and deadpan)—until bassoons and low strings call “time out,” and the cellos sing an ardent something that clearly declares “new key” and “second theme.”

“Turning cliché into event” is how Theodor W. Adorno characterized Mahler's practice. Ideas lead to many different conclusions and can be ordered in so many ways: Mahler's master here is the Haydn of the London symphonies and string quartets of the 1790s. The scoring, too, rests on Mahler's ability to apply an original and altogether personal fantasy to resources not in themselves extraordinary. Trombones and tuba are absent; only the percussion is on the lavish side. Mahler plays with this orchestra as though with a kaleidoscope. He can write a brilliantly sonorous tutti, but he hardly ever does. What he likes better is to have the thread of discourse passed rapidly, wittily from instrument to instrument, section to section. He thinks polyphonically, but he enjoys the combining of textures and colors as much as the combining of themes. He values transparency, and his revisions, over ten years, of the Fourth Symphony are always and consistently in the direction of achieving a more aerated sound.

He could think of the most wonderful titles for the movements of this symphony, he wrote to a friend, but he refused “to betray them to the rabble of critics and listeners” who would then subject them to “their banal misunderstandings.” We do, however, have his name for the scherzo: “*Freund Hein spielt auf*” (“Death Strikes Up”).* Alma Mahler amplified that hint by writing that here “the composer was under the spell of the self-portrait

by Arnold Böcklin, in which Death fiddles into the painter's ear while the latter sits entranced." Death's fiddle is tuned a whole tone high to make it harsher (the player is also instructed to make it sound like a country instrument and to enter "very aggressively"). Twice Mahler tempers these grotesqueries with a gentle Trio: Willem Mengelberg, the Amsterdam conductor, took detailed notes at Mahler's 1904 rehearsals, and at this point he put into his score that "here, he leads us into a lovely landscape." (Later, at the magical turn into D major, with the great harp chord and the violin glissandi crossing in opposite directions, Mengelberg wrote "*noch schöner*" ["still more beautiful"].)

The Adagio, which Mahler thought his finest slow movement, is a set of softly and gradually unfolding variations. It is rich in seductive melody, but the constant feature to which Mahler always returns is the tolling of the basses, *piano* under the pianissimo of the violas and cellos. The variations, twice interrupted by a leanly scored lament in the minor mode, become shorter, more diverse in character, more given to abrupt changes of outlook. They are also pulled more and more in the direction of E major, a key that dramatically asserts itself at the end of the movement in a blaze of sound. Working miracles in harmony, pacing, and orchestral fabric, Mahler, pronouncing a benediction, brings us back to serene quiet on the very threshold of the original G major, but when the finale almost imperceptibly emerges, it is in E. Our entry into this region has been prepared, but it is well that the music sounds new, for Mahler means us to understand that now we are in heaven.

On February 6, 1892, Mahler had finished a song he called "*Das himmlische Leben*" ("Life in Heaven"), one of five Humoresques on texts from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* ("The Boy's Magic Horn"). *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* is a collection of German folk poetry, compiled in nationalistic and Romantic fervor just after 1800 by two poets in their twenties, Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim. That, at least, is what it purports to be: in fact, the two poets indulged themselves freely in paraphrases, additions, and deletions, fixing things so as to give them a more antique and authentic ring, even contributing poems all their own. However that may be, their collection, whose three volumes came out between 1805 and 1808, made a considerable impact, being widely read, discussed, criticized, and imitated.

A number of composers went to the *Wunderhorn* for texts,* none more often or more fruitfully than Mahler, who began to write *Wunderhorn* songs immediately after completing the First Symphony in 1888 (he had already borrowed a *Wunderhorn* poem as the foundation of the first of his *Traveling Wayfarer* songs of 1884-85). The *Wunderhorn* then touches the Second, Third, and Fourth symphonies. The scherzo of No. 2 was composed together and shares material with a setting of the poem about Saint Anthony of Padua's sermon to the fishes, and the next movement is the song "*Urlicht*" ("Primal Light"). The Third Symphony's fifth movement is another *Wunderhorn* song, "*Es sungen drei Engel*" ("Three Angels Sang"), and until about a year before completing that symphony, Mahler meant to end it with "*Das himmlische Leben*," the song we now know as the finale of the Fourth. That explains why the Third appears to "quote" the Fourth, twice in the minuet, and again in the "*Drei Engel*" song: those moments prepare for an event that was not, after all, allowed to occur (or that did not occur until five years and one symphony later).

For that matter, Mahler had to plan parts of the Fourth Symphony from the end back, so that the song would appear to be the outcome and conclusion of what was in fact composed eight years after the song. From a late letter of Mahler's to the Leipzig conductor Georg Göhler, we know how important it was to him that listeners clearly understand how the first three movements all point toward and are resolved in the finale. The music, though gloriously inventive in detail, is of utmost cleanness and simplicity. The solemn and archaic chords first heard at "*Sanct Peter in Himmel sieht zu*" ("Saint Peter in heaven looks on") have a double meaning for Mahler; here they are associated with details about the domestic arrangements in this mystical, sweetly scurrile picture of heaven, but in the Third Symphony they belong with the bitter self-castigation at having transgressed the Ten Commandments and with the plea to God for forgiveness. Whether you are listening to the Fourth and remembering the Third, or the other way around, the reference is touching. It reminds us, as well, how much all of Mahler's work is one work. Just as the symphony began with bells, so it ends with them—this time those wonderful, deep single harp-tones of which Mahler was the discoverer.

The poem is a Bavarian folk song called "*Der Himmel hängt voll Geigen*" ("Heaven is Hung With Violins"). On the text:

Saint Luke's symbol is a winged ox.

Saint Martha, sister of Lazarus, is the patron saint of those engaged in service of the needy. In life, Saint Luke tells us, she “was cumbered about much serving,” and it seems that nothing has changed for her in heaven.

On Saint Ursula and the eleven thousand virgins, I quote Donald Attwater’s indispensable *Penguin Dictionary of Saints* (Penguin Books, 1965):

An inscription on stone found at Cologne records, not very clearly, the rebuilding by one Clematius of a memorial church on the site of the martyrdom there of a number of maidens, of whom no names or other particulars are given. This inscription was cut in the late fourth or early fifth century and it provides all that is known historically about those martyrs who became known as SS. Ursula and the eleven thousand virgins.

They are not heard of again for some 400 years, when in the ninth century the ramifying legend appears as taking shape. The kernel of its developed form...is that Ursula, to avoid an unwanted marriage, departed with her company from the island of Britain, where her father was a king; on their way back from a visit to Rome, they were slaughtered by Huns at Cologne on account of their Christian faith. During the twelfth century this pious romance was preposterously elaborated through the mistakes of imaginative visionaries; a public burial-ground uncovered at Cologne was taken to be the grave of the martyrs, false relics came into circulation and forged epitaphs of non-existent persons were produced. The earliest reference which gives St. Ursula the first place speaks of her ten companions: how these eleven came to be multiplied by a thousand is a matter of speculation.*...It seems that some young women were martyred at Cologne at an early date, but nothing else remotely resembling historical fact can be said about them.

Michael Steinberg

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THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCE of Mahler’s *Symphony No. 4* was conducted by Walter Damrosch at a concert of the New York Symphony Society on November 6, 1904, with the soprano Etta de Montjau.

THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCES of music from Mahler’s *Fourth Symphony* were of just the third and fourth movements, on January 30 and 31 and February 5, 1942, with Richard Burgin conducting and Cleora Wood as soloist. It was Burgin who then conducted the first complete BSO performances of Mahler’s *Fourth*, on March 23 and 24, 1945, with soprano Mona Paulee, subsequent Boston Symphony performances being given by Bruno Walter with Desi Halban; Burgin with Anne English, Nancy Carr, and Virginia Babikian; Erich Leinsdorf with Anne Elgar; Colin Davis with Judith Raskin; Klaus Tennstedt with Phyllis Bryn-Julson; André Previn with Kathleen Battle; Seiji Ozawa with Frederica von Stade, Battle, Roberta Alexander, Christine Schäfer, and Barbara Bonney; Previn with von Stade (the most recent Tanglewood performance, on July 6, 1996); Simon Rattle with Dawn Upshaw; Bernard Haitink with Ana Maria Martinez; and James Levine with Heidi Grant Murphy (the most recent subscription performances, in November 2005, followed by a performance at Carnegie Hall).

* -As a matter of fact, Mahler’s biographer, Henry-Louis de La Grange, identifies allusions to two Schubert piano sonatas in this theme and in the one of the finale (respectively, the first movement of the sonata in E-flat, D.568, and the finale of the sonata in D, D.850).

* -“Freund Hein”—literally this could be rendered as “Friend Hal”—is a fairy-tale bogey whose name is most often a euphemism for Death.

* -The Brahms Lullaby must be the most famous of all *Wunderhorn* songs.

GUSTAV MAHLER

Symphony No. 4 (Finale)

DAS HIMMLISCHE LEBEN

Wir geniessen die himmlischen Freuden,
D'rum thun wir das Irdische meiden.
Kein weltlich' Getümmel
Hört man nicht im Himmel!
Lebt Alles in sanftester Ruh'!
Wir führen ein englisches Leben!
Sind dennoch ganz lustig daneben!
Wir tanzen und springen,
Wir hüpfen und singen!
Sanct Peter im Himmel sieht zu!

Johannes das Lämmlein auslasset,
Der Metzger Herodes drauf passet!
Wir führen ein geduldig's,
Unschuldig's, geduldig's,
Ein liebliches Lämmlein zu Tod!
Sanct Lucas den Ochsen thät schlachten
Ohn' einig's Bedenken und Achten,
Der Wein kost kein Heller
Im himmlischen Keller,
Die Englein, die backen das Brot.

Gut' Kräuter von allerhand Arten,
Die wachsen im himmlischen Garten!
Gut' Spargel, Fisolen
Und was wir nur wollen!
Ganze Schüsseln voll sind uns bereit!
Gut' Äpfel, gut' Birn' und gut' Trauben!
Die Gärtner, die Alles erlauben!
Willst Rehbock, willst Hasen,
Auf offener Strassen sie laufen herbei.
Sollt ein Fasttag etwa kommen
Alle Fische gleich mit Freuden angeschwommen!

Dort läuft schon Sanct Peter
Mit Netz und mit Köder
Zum himmlischen Weiher hinein.
Sanct Martha die Köchin muss sein.

Kein Musik ist ja nicht auf Erden,
Die uns'rer verglichen kann werden.
Elftausend Jungfrauen
Zu tanzen sich trauen
Sanct Ursula selbst dazu lacht!
Cäcilia mit ihren Verwandten
Sind treffliche Hofmusikanten!
Die englischen Stimmen
Ermuntern die Sinnen!
Dass Alles für Freuden erwacht.

From "Des Knaben Wunderhorn"

LIFE IN HEAVEN

We enjoy heavenly pleasures
And therefore avoid earthly ones.
No worldly tumult
Is to be heard in heaven.
All live in gentlest peace.
We lead angelic lives,
Yet have a merry time of it besides.
We dance and we spring,
We skip and we sing.
Saint Peter in heaven looks on.

John lets the little lamb out,
And Herod the Butcher lies in wait for it.
We lead a patient,
Innocent, patient,
Dear little lamb to its death.
Saint Luke slaughters the ox
Without any thought or concern.
Wine doesn't cost a penny
In the heavenly cellars.
The angels bake the bread.

Good greens of every sort
Grow in the heavenly vegetable patch.
Good asparagus, string beans,
And whatever we want!
Whole dishfuls are set for us!
Good apples, good pears, and good grapes,
And gardeners who allow everything!
If you want venison or hare,
You'll find them running on the public streets.
Should a fast-day come along,
All the fishes at once come swimming with joy.

There goes Saint Peter running
With his net and his bait
To the heavenly pond.
Saint Martha shall be the cook.

There is just no music on earth
That can compare to ours.
Even the eleven thousand virgins
Venture to dance,
And Saint Ursula herself has to laugh.
Cecilia and all her relations

Make excellent court musicians.
The angelic voices
Gladden our senses,
So that all for very joy awake.