



Mahler meets **Klezmer**
Program Notes

Mahler meets Klezmer

Titans of Sound



Program Notes

by Peter Laki

Overture to *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (1782)

by Wolfgang Amadè Mozart (Salzburg, 1756 - Vienna, 1791)

The *Abduction from the Seraglio* (“Die Entführung aus dem Serail”) was the first opera Mozart wrote after his move to Vienna in 1781. Having spent some time in the Imperial capital a child and visited again as a teenager, he was now making his debut there as a mature composer and permanent resident. The *Abduction from the Seraglio*, premiered at the Burgtheater on July 16, 1782, was a great success that went a long way not only toward establishing Mozart’s reputation in Vienna, but also toward the advancement of German-language opera in general (the primary language of opera being Italian in those days).

A turning point in Mozart’s career, *The Abduction* was just as important to him for personal reasons: after all, the heroine’s name is Konstanze, and Mozart married Konstanze Weber on August 4, 1782, less than three weeks after the premiere.

The opera’s libretto was by Viennese playwright Gottlieb Stephanie Jr. after a play by C .F. Bretzner of Leipzig. The action takes place in Turkey and revolves around the rescue of three Europeans from captivity. This gave Mozart the opportunity to bring in elements of “Turkish music,” as he had done earlier in his Violin Concerto No. 5 and the “Turkish Rondo” from the Piano Sonata in A major. In the opera, Mozart used a (for him) unusually large percussion battery, compete with bass drum, cymbals, and triangle. His simple and repetitive melodies carried Turkish connotations, as they were reminiscent of the music of the Janissary bands that could sometimes be heard on the streets of Vienna.

The Overture to *The Abduction from the Seraglio* is a dashing movement in a *Presto* (very fast) tempo. There is, however, an unexpected slow middle section where the tonality changes from the major to the minor mode. This lyrical passage anticipates Belmonte’s aria, which opens Act I. (Belmonte is the amorous young nobleman who comes to liberate his fiancée Konstanze and two other characters from the seraglio.) After this short intermezzo, the *Presto* tempo returns. In the opera, the overture has an open ending that is immediately followed by Belmonte’s aria (now in major). There is, however, a concert ending available when the overture is performed by itself. It was written by Johann Anton André (1775-1842), a contemporary composer and music publisher who printed many Mozart first editions, and whose father Johann, incidentally, had written his own *Abduction from the Seraglio* opera a year before Mozart.

Mahler meets Klezmer

Titans of Sound



Program Notes

by Peter Laki

Concerto for Klezmer Clarinet (2009)

by Wlad Marhulets (b. Minsk, Belarus, 1986)

Belarusian-American composer Wlad Marhulets has won numerous prizes and awards for his concert and film music. One of his most successful pieces to date is his Concerto for Klezmer Clarinet. In his comments below, Marhulets explains how he came to write the work.

Klezmer music came crashing into my life when, as a sixteen-year-old living in Gdańsk, Poland, my brother Damian brought home a CD by a band called Klezmer Madness, featuring the clarinetist David Krakauer. This was music that was so boldly Jewish, so full of wild energy that a kind of madness enveloped my senses as I listened to it. And even though at the time I had high hopes of becoming a successful visual artist, I decided to become a musician on the spot.

Soon I was a clarinetist writing tunes for my own special klezmer band. As we toured all over Poland, I was elated to have at last found the means of exploring and feeling empowered by my own heritage. Indeed, in a way, this madness made me feel fearless. A mere five years after that fateful day, I was living in New York and studying composition with John Corigliano at The Juilliard School. When in New York, I reached out to David Krakauer. When we met, I told him my story and I gave him a CD with my compositions. David was incredibly kind to me and it truly felt great to finally meet the man who had such an impact on my life. A few days later, I received my first commission as a composer. I was to write a Concerto for Klezmer Clarinet for David Krakauer.

Klezmer, in essence, describes secular musical tradition of the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe. The first part of the Hebrew word, *kli*, means vessel, and the second half, *zemer*, means song. This vessel of song is stylistically influenced by the indigenous music from various countries in Eastern Europe, particularly from Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, Ukraine, Greece, and Turkey. Some of the most popular klezmer dance forms include Freylekh (based on traditional Bulgarian and Romanian dances with 3+3+2 rhythm), Waltz (coming from Russia and Poland), Kolomeike (fast Ukrainian dance in 2/4), and others. The late 20th century was the time of revival of klezmer music. Numerous musicians combined klezmer with free jazz, funk, hip-hop, drum & bass, concert, and folk music. Hence, klezmer is not a distinct musical style, but rather a mixture of multiple influences. It constantly evolves and reinvents itself.

Concerto for Klezmer Clarinet is scored for full orchestra with the addition of a drum set and an electric bass. Polystylistic in nature, the concerto juxtaposes traditional klezmer forms with contemporary orchestral writing. It was premiered on December 1st, 2009 by David Krakauer and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, with Andrew Litton conducting.

Mahler meets Klezmer

Titans of Sound



Program Notes

by Peter Laki

Symphony No. 1 in D major (1884-88)

by Gustav Mahler (Kalischt, Bohemia, Austrian Empire [now Kaliště, Czech Republic], 1860 - Vienna, 1911)

In the four years that elapsed between the first sketches of Gustav Mahler's First Symphony and the completion of the score, Mahler changed his city of residence three times. In 1884, he was assistant conductor at the Kassel opera house; by 1888—after brief stints in Prague and Leipzig—he had been appointed to his first important post as Director of the Royal Opera in Budapest (he was still only 28).

Like the hero of his first great song cycle, Mahler had been a *fahrender Geselle* ("wayfarer"), anxious to become a *Meister* ("master"). *Geselle* was the traditional title given to young artisans who had passed the apprenticeship stage and often wandered from place to place assisting more experienced masters before setting up shop themselves.

Within a few short years, Mahler emerged as one of the foremost conductors of his time. His other great ambition, to scale the heights of fame as a composer, took much longer to realize. Mahler, who in 1897 became the director of the Vienna Opera, was universally acclaimed as a conductor, but his compositions remained controversial during his entire lifetime.

The First was perhaps the most poorly received of all of Mahler's symphonies. Audiences in Budapest, Hamburg, Weimar and Vienna were equally bewildered by what they saw as total musical chaos and an unacceptable mixture of conflicting emotions.

Even though Mahler has long been recognized as the great composer he was, we can perhaps understand these initial negative reactions. Many composers had written masterpieces in their twenties, but few had ever been so independent from their predecessors as Mahler. As the composer himself remarked, Beethoven had started out as a Mozartian composer and Wagner as a follower of Weber and Meyerbeer; but he, Mahler, "had been condemned by a cruel fate to being himself from the start." In later years, Mahler would speak about the universality of the symphony and the necessity for it "to embrace everything." This heaven-storming attitude is already evident in the First Symphony, and it accounts in no small part for the difficulties encountered by Mahler during the work's genesis, both before and after the Budapest premiere in 1889.

At the first performance, this work had five movements. It was given under the title "Symphonic Poem in two parts"—the first three movements comprising Part I and the last two forming Part II. (The idea of grouping some movements together in "parts" returned later in Mahler's Third and Fifth Symphonies.) The title "symphonic poem" alluded to the existence of a literary or dramatic inspiration, but its source was not revealed. When the work was performed again in 1893, however, Mahler gave it a new title, *Titan*, after the novel of the same name by German Romantic writer Jean Paul (1763-1825), who had been a major inspiration for Robert Schumann as well. After 1896, this title was removed, and the second movement ("Blumine") was eliminated.

Mahler meets Klezmer

Titans of Sound



Program Notes

by Peter Laki

Symphony No. 1 in D major (1884-88)

by Gustav Mahler (Kalischt, Bohemia, Austrian Empire [now Kaliště, Czech Republic], 1860 - Vienna, 1911)

Mahler's hesitation over whether or not to publish a program for the symphony—he wrote several over the years, only to retract them all later—reveals something essential about the composer and his work. In a sense, the intense dramatic quality of the symphony was an indication that there must have been some kind of a literary program behind it. But Mahler was all too aware of the dangers inherent in revealing such programs: verbal commentaries are always inadequate, and they may even create the false impression that the music is nothing but the “realization” of a literary program. The so-called “programs” can be understood at best as attempts on Mahler's part to verbalize—sometimes after the fact—the emotions that had led to the composition; and his contradictory statements on the issue indicate that he was always struggling to explain his music in words.

In the case of Jean Paul, at any rate, there can be hardly any question about a concrete program, only about subtle influences. The writer's complicated and sometimes bizarre plots, his difficult style and eccentric humor make it almost impossible for a composer to do more than render a general feeling after reading the novels. The “titans” in the novel *Titan* (1800-03) are characters whose actions know no limitations as they place themselves above all social rules. In the context of the symphony, the “titan” seems to be little more than a metaphor for the boundless energy embodied in the music. The same seems to be true of the subtitle “From the Days of Youth: Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces” given Part I in October 1893. This phrase comes from the title of another Jean Paul novel, but appears here simply to allude to life's “good and bad times” in general.

Some “flower, fruit and thorn pieces” from Mahler's own personal life also helped shape the composition. During his tenure in Kassel, Mahler fell passionately in love with a soprano from the opera company named Johanna Richter. This affair inspired the “Songs of a Wayfarer” (on Mahler's own texts), three of which are quoted in the First Symphony.

Despite these literary and personal experiences, the real “story” lies in the way Mahler expanded on conventional symphonic form to produce a monumental work that, although complex, is not as confused as the contemporaries thought. Some of the procedures he used have literary parallels without being influenced by any concrete program: the recall of the first movement's material in the finale is definitely dramatic in nature (like when a long-absent character in a novel suddenly returns), and the extended passage in slow tempo in the same movement is like a parenthesis or a sub-plot. On the other hand, some of the procedures he used are eminently musical, like the creation of some of the musical types that would remain present throughout his entire symphonic output: the second-movement *Ländler* is a prototype of many a later Mahler movement, and the third-movement funeral march ushers in a long line of Mahlerian marches. But let us start at the beginning.

Mahler meets Klezmer

Titans of Sound



Program Notes

by Peter Laki

Symphony No. 1 in D major (1884-88)

by Gustav Mahler (Kalischt, Bohemia, Austrian Empire [now Kaliště, Czech Republic], 1860 - Vienna, 1911)

The first movement was called, at the time when the movements still had titles, *Frühling und kein Ende* ("Spring Without End"). We witness the gradual awakening of spring, with a single perfect fourth (which Mahler called "a sound of nature" in the score) over a sustained pedal. Everything grows out of this one interval, like a tree from a small seed. Even the call of the cuckoo, evoked by the clarinet, is a perfect fourth, although this bird knows only thirds in reality. This fourth generates the main theme of the movement, based on the second of the Wayfarer songs: "Ging heut morgens übers Feld" (I Walked This Morning Through the Field).

It is said that Mahler had to change the beginning of the second-movement *Ländler* (at one time called *Mit vollen Segeln* ["Under Full Sail"]), because it sounded too much like one of Bruckner's themes. As it is, the theme sounds distinctly Mahlerian, echoing the early song "Hansel and Gretel" written around 1880. A simple tune, rather unassuming in itself, is played with great rhythmic energy, and is soon taken up by the full orchestra (with a large brass section comprising seven horns and four trumpets!), as tempo marking changes to "Wild." In the words of the late Michael Steinberg, former Program Annotator for the San Francisco Symphony, the Trio "fascinatingly contrasts the simplicity of the rustic, super-Austrian material with the artfulness of its arrangement. It is an early instance of what [German philosopher and musician] Theodor W. Adorno perceived as the essence of Mahler, the turning of cliché into event."

The third movement, which must be preceded by a long pause, had been variously called "A la pompes funèbres" ("In the Manner of a Funeral March"); "Funeral March in Callot's Manner"*; and, perhaps most surprisingly, "Gestrandet!" (Stranded!). The immediate inspiration came from a then-popular woodcut by Moritz Schwind (who, in his youth, had been a friend of Franz Schubert) called *The Huntsman's Funeral*, in which the hunter is buried by the animals of the forest. The first audiences clearly didn't know what to make of this movement, in which they couldn't fail to recognize the popular "Frère Jacques" melody, surprisingly transposed into a minor key. The "alienation" of this familiar tune results in a mixture of humor, tragedy, mystery and irony for which there had hardly been a precedent in the history of music.

Mahler meets Klezmer

Titans of Sound



Program Notes

by Peter Laki

Symphony No. 1 in D major (1884-88)

by Gustav Mahler (Kalischt, Bohemia, Austrian Empire [now Kališřě, Czech Republic], 1860 - Vienna, 1911)

This grotesque funeral march evolves into an openly parodistic section whose unabashedly schmaltzy themes, played by oboes and trumpets, are reminiscent of the klezmer music Mahler had heard as a boy in Bohemia. As a total contrast, Mahler introduces two quotations from the last "Wayfarer" song, almost transfigured and painfully nostalgic ("Auf der StraÙe stand ein Lindenbaum" -- "By the Road Stood a Linden Tree," and "Die zwei blauen Augen von meinem Schatz" -- "My Sweetheart's Two Blue Eyes"). A more subdued recapitulation of the "Frère Jacques" tune and the klezmer material ends this unusual movement.

The finale, which follows the funeral march without a pause, is the longest and most complex movement in the symphony. It represents a progression from tragedy to triumph like many earlier symphonic finales, but the contrasts between the various emotions are exceptionally polarized. The movement lacks tonal unity as it opens in F minor and closes in D major: in the 1880s, this was quite a revolutionary move. In between, we hear a lyrical second theme that seems to come from a completely different world. Exuberant climaxes are followed by relapses into despair, alongside numerous recurrences of materials from the first movement, as mentioned above. The work ends in a radiant D-major coda proclaiming the final victory.

** Jacques Callot was a 17th-century French engraver whose satirical etchings anticipate those of Goya by a century; he was well remembered by German Romantic writer E.T.A. Hoffmann, whose *Fantasiestücke in Callots Manier* ("Fantasy Pieces in Callot's Manner") had inspired Schumann's piano cycle *Kreisleriana*. It is interesting that, in the First Symphony, Mahler was inspired by two of Schumann's favorite writers, Jean Paul and E.T.A. Hoffmann.*