

Symphony No. 2
(“Resurrection,” 1888-1894)
by Gustav Mahler

(Kalischt, Bohemia [now Kališřtř], Czech Republic, 1860 - Vienna, 1911)

- I. Allegro maestoso**
- II. Andante moderato**
- III. In ruhig fließender Bewegung [In a calm, flowing motion]**
- IV. Urlicht [Primal Light]**
- V. Im Tempo des Scherzo [In the tempo of the Scherzo]—
Allegro energico—Langsam [Slow]—Pesante**

Everything Gustav Mahler did was done on an exceptionally high level of intensity. His energy seemed boundless. His restless spirit was constantly preoccupied by life’s greatest questions, and although many of his contemporaries (writers, artists, philosophers) grappled with similar problems of disillusionment and searched for faith and reassurance, few made such heroic efforts to solve those problems as he.

Mahler’s Second Symphony is a powerful musical drama leading from an evocation of death to the triumphant resurrection. The first movement was originally conceived as an independent piece under the title *Todtenfeier* (“Funeral Rites”); the choral finale, using the “Resurrection” ode by 18th-century German poet Friedrich Klopstock (with additions by Mahler), provides a monumental counterweight. Three intervening movements were necessary to create a sort of bridge between these two mighty statements.

Mahler was 28 when he began work on this symphony and 34 by the time he completed it. The work’s long gestation period shows the inordinately difficult challenges it posed to the composer. When, in 1891, Mahler played the first version of *Todtenfeier* on the piano for the great pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow, the latter exclaimed: “If what I just heard is music, then I no longer understand anything about music!” Mahler was deeply hurt but undaunted. He did not abandon his artistic path, but neither did his admiration for Bülow diminish. And it was precisely Bülow’s

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funeral in 1894, where the chorus sang a setting of Klopstock’s hymn, that he received the decisive impulse that allowed him to write the finale. The premiere of the entire work took place under Mahler’s direction in Berlin on December 13, 1895.

The opening movement—the revised *Todtenfeier*—is based on two main themes: the funeral march, which becomes ever more excited and tragic, and a second melody which brings some hope. Then, at one point before the end of the development section, the horns begin to play a chorale-like melody, which expresses faith and confidence in the midst of all the turmoil. This quasi-chorale is then brutally silenced by a return of the funeral march, more violent than ever before. The tension rises to near-ecstasy; then, after an extremely harsh dissonance (the likes of which probably no one had ever written previously), we return to the music of the opening. The recapitulation has begun.

After the first movement, Mahler wrote in the score: “An interval of at least five minutes follows.” We don’t know whether he carried out this instruction, which strikes us today as somewhat exaggerated, in his own performances of the symphony. But it is clear why he wanted to insert a major caesura between the first and second movements: the contrast between the funeral march and the leisurely Ländler dance could hardly be greater. According to Mahler’s program (later withdrawn), this movement relates a cheerful episode from the deceased hero’s life.

The third movement scherzo is an expanded version of Mahler’s song “St. Anthony of Padua’s Sermon to the Fishes,” on a text from the German collection of folk poetry, *The Youth’s Magic Horn*. The song is about the futility of all human endeavor, but it treats the idea with a great deal of irony. In the symphony, Mahler used the “St. Anthony” song as a point of departure for something much more serious, as the development culminates in a visceral outcry of terror. At the end of the movement, though, the music returns to its initial calm state.

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If Mahler asked for a long pause after the first movement, the third, fourth, and fifth movements follow one another without any break at all. No sooner has the scherzo faded out than we hear a soft human voice as the contralto soloist enters without any accompaniment. The text she sings also comes from *The Youth's Magic Horn*: a song expressing faith in God and eternal life. It serves as a prelude to the great “Resurrection” finale, which opens on a note of despair recalling the climax of the third movement.

Mahler's great model for the last movement was obviously Beethoven's Ninth. The choral finale of that iconic work likewise proceeds from tragedy (the famous “Fanfare of horror”) to the Ode to Joy. But Mahler's “Ode to Joy” is more introspective than jubilant. As in Beethoven's piece, the entrance of the chorus is preceded by a long instrumental section. Mahler introduces a chorale theme that turns into a march, twice interrupted by subdued, fragmented, and plaintive motifs. During the second of these interruptions, we hear an offstage wind ensemble placed “at the greatest possible distance,” according to the composer's instructions. This concept of stereophonic sound was far ahead of its time in 1894. The materials of the offstage band and the onstage orchestra do not blend; instead, they exist side by side, remaining independent from one another.

Soon thereafter, *der grosse Appell* (“The Great Summons”) sounds. This is another stereophonic passage, with two trumpets on either side. The first pair is closer to the orchestra, the other one is placed farther away. The summons is answered by the frightened bird-sounds of the flute and piccolo. After the long march in regular 4/4 time, this new passage, which lacks meter altogether, takes us totally by surprise. The listener, who has been following events up to this point, doesn't know what to expect now. It is an unmistakable expression of uncertainty, a musical question mark as it were, and the response comes from the chorus, entering with Klopstock's hymn in a mysterious, barely audible *pianissimo*. “Rise again, yes, you will rise again,” sings the

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chorus, and from this point on, the music is a single uninterrupted rise. The tonality is rising along the circle of fifths: G-flat major (6 flats) is followed by D-flat (5 flats), A-flat (4), and finally E-flat (3). The orchestration gains in splendor and richness, and the music becomes more solemn and majestic. Life triumphs over death, all doubts are laid to rest, and the philosophical questions raised at the beginning of the work find their final answer.

Notes by Peter Laki



MOVEMENT 4

Urlicht

O Röschen rot!
Der Mensch liegt in größter Not!
Der Mensch liegt in größter Pein!
Je lieber möcht' ich im Himmel sein.

Da kam ich auf einen breiten Weg:
Da kam ein Engelein und wollt' mich abweisen.
Ach nein! Ich ließ mich nicht abweisen!
Ich bin von Gott und will wieder zu Gott!
Der liebe Gott wird mir ein Lichtchen geben,
wird leuchten mir bis in das ewig selig Leben!

—Des Knaben Wunderhorn

Primal Light

O little red rose!
Man lies in greatest need!
Man lies in greatest pain!
How I would rather be in heaven.

There came I upon a broad path
when came a little angel and wanted to turn me away.
Ah no! I would not let myself be turned away!
I am from God and shall return to God!
The loving God will grant me a little light,
Which will light me into that eternal blissful life!

MOVEMENT 5

Aufersteh'n, ja aufersteh'n wirst du,
mein Staub, nach kurzer Ruh'!
Unsterblich Leben! Unsterblich Leben
will der dich rief dir geben!

Wieder aufzublüh'n wirst du gesät!
Der Herr der Ernte geht
und sammelt Garben
uns ein, die starben!

O glaube, mein Herz, o glaube:
es geht dir nichts verloren!
Dein ist, ja dein, was du geseht,
dein, was du geliebt,
was du gestritten!

O glaube,
du warst nicht umsonst geboren!
Hast nicht umsonst gelebt,
gelitten!

Was entstanden ist,
das muss vergehen!
Was vergangen, aufersteh'n!
Hör' auf zu beben!
Bereite dich zu leben!

O Schmerz! Du Alldurchdringer!
Dir bin ich entrungen!
O Tod! Du Allbezwinger!
Nun bist du bezwungen!

Mit Flügeln, die ich mir errungen,
in heißem Liebesstreben,
werd' ich entschweben
zum Licht, zu dem kein Aug' gedrungen!

Sterben werd' ich, um zu leben!

Aufersteh'n, ja aufersteh'n wirst du
mein Herz, in einem Nu!
Was du geschlagen,
zu Gott wird es dich tragen!

Friedrich Klopstock--Gustav Mahler

MOVEMENT 5

*Rise again, yes, rise again,
Will you, my dust, after a brief rest!
Immortal life! Immortal life
Will he who called you, give you.*

*You are sown to bloom again!
The lord of the harvest goes
And gathers sheaves,
Us, who have died.*

*O believe, my heart, O believe:
Nothing is lost to you!
Yours, yes yours, is what you desired
Yours, what you have loved
What you have fought for!*

*O believe,
You were not born for nothing!
Have not lived for nothing,
Nor suffered!*

*What was created
Must perish;
What perished, rise again!
Cease from trembling!
Prepare yourself to live!*

*O Pain, you piercer of all things,
From you, I have been wrested!
O Death, you conqueror of all things,
Now, are you conquered!*

*With wings which I have won for myself,
In love's fierce striving,
I shall soar upwards
To the light which no eye has penetrated!*

I shall die in order to live.

*Rise again, yes, rise again,
Will you, my heart, in an instant!
Your own beating
Will carry you to God!*