

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Symphony No. 4

As is often the case with music criticism, the most appealing thing about Mahler was often used most to damn him. What he achieves and delivers to the listener is everyone's dream. The pinnacle of Everest, the Gordian knot unraveled, the boundless ocean, the power of God, the heat of hell, the silent night, the helpless child – he delivers it all in understandable language so that we might enjoy the fringe benefit of the experience. What happened? All those things require deep, profound understanding that comes from years of quiet contemplation and rectitude, with the understanding that we may not achieve the knowledge at all.

The mood of criticism was that he must therefore have cheapened all those things, to bring them to us so readily. Are we happy to see the peak of the mountain even if it seems to be a facsimile image? Is Mahler's music bought too cheap? This seems an excessively Victorian view point, that should by rights have died with Mahler in 1911.

A life that started with a traumatic childhood, some vital sensations of which would permeate his work, blossomed into a career that was laden with honors. As early as his studies in Vienna, that lasted all of one year, he had distinguished himself as a unique musician. The same man who led the Vienna State Opera and the New York Philharmonic was to lead musical thought in the minds of those who were part of the natural progression, like Schoenberg. In addition his music would also craft a new international taste in music that comfortably brought us into the 20th century. The Mahler revival of the 1950's, on the hindsight of two bloody world wars, arrived at just the right moment of historical acceptance, valuing the very essence of his music 'front and center' in ordinary life with real gut-wrenching feelings of joy and anguish.

So when talking of his Fourth Symphony, - 'clocking in' at about an hour – his shortest – it is perhaps useful to examine the background to it and why it remains one of his most real and relevant works. The first five symphonies are known generally as the *Wunderhorn* symphonies because of their use of material written for his song cycle *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* – the Youth's Magic Horn. The working and reworking of this thematic material thoroughly permeates the first five symphonies. Then there are the song cycles *Rückert Lieder* and especially *Kindertotenlieder* giving voice to Mahler's obsession with the death of children – and it is this obsession, in my view, that most clearly defines the material of the Fourth Symphony. Written in 1900, the song on which it is based "*Das himmlische Leben*", presents a child's vision of Heaven. It is thematically foreshadowed in the earlier movements and sung in its entirety by a soprano in the work's fourth and last movement. The sopranos who tackle this part do so more successfully if they realize their role as angelic boys – using a 'treble'- like pure quality in their voice.

The reason for the obsession with the death of children is not hard to fathom. Gustav Mahler was the second son born to Bernhard and Marie Mahler whilst they were still in the village of Kaliste. The first son Isidor born two years earlier, died in infancy. The family moved to what is now Iglau in Germany – and though family life progressed rapidly, out of the twelve children that were to be born to Bernhard and Marie in Iglau – only six survived. By 1890 he had lost

his father, his mother and his sister and though pursuing a very active musical life, with public accolades one wonders where his thoughts drifted in his quieter moments. When harangued after his marriage to Alma Schindler and with anti-semitism on the rise, the family retired to Maiernigg in the summer of 1907. It was here that both his daughters Anna and Marie contracted scarlet fever and diphtheria. Anna recovered but Marie did not, providing the most tragic and personal view to date, for the composer, in a very long line of *Kindertoten*. The setting of this wonderful text – with its joyous and happy innocence speaks to the thoughts of where children might go when they die and would surely have sustained Mahler in 1907.

Das himmlische Leben

(aus Des Knaben Wunderhorn)

Wir genießen die himmlischen Freuden,
D'rum tun 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 d'rauf passet.
Wir führen ein geduldig's,
Unschuldig's, geduldig's,
Ein liebliches Lämmlein zu Tod.
Sanct Lucas den Ochsen tät 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!

Heaven's Life

(From Des Knaben Wunderhorn)

We enjoy heavenly pleasures
and therefore avoid earthly ones.
No worldly tumult
is to be heard in heaven.
All live in greatest 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 lambkin out,
and Herod the Butcher lies in wait for it.
We lead a patient,
an 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 roebuck or hare,
on the public streets
they come running right up.

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

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 must 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.
There is just no music on earth
that can compare to ours.
Cecilia and all her relations
make excellent court musicians.
The angelic voices
gladden our senses,
so that all awaken for joy.