

**Symphony No. 5,
Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)**

Trauermarsch. In gemessenem Schritt. Streng. Wie ein Kondukt
Stürmisch bewegt, mit größter Vehemenz
Scherzo. Kräftig, nicht zu schnell
Adagietto. Sehr langsam
Rondo-Finale. Allegro - Allegro giocoso. Frisch

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? This lust for struggle seems an excessively Victorian view point, that should rightly have died with Mahler in 1911.

“Mahler had not much to say in his Fifth Symphony and occupied a wondrous time in saying it. His manner is ponderous, his matter imponderable.” (New York Sun, December 5, 1913). Here is a view that somehow discounts the colossal vision, the colossal orchestra, the chromatic pull and the alternating delicacy or fury that is so raw in its delivery that it is occasionally disconcerting. The emotion is not in question. The critics ability to register and receive the emotion *is* in question. This symphony provides just such moments where emotions are raw and real, but delivered with such poise and portent that the journey is not one for the faint of heart. It is this titanic human involvement in the divine arena that most characterizes Mahler's music. Whereas with Bruckner's work, for instance, we are privileged to walk the length of a cathedral, enjoying the vignettes afforded by the lady chapels, - with Mahler we are taken by force or trance from A to B and thrown down a disheveled mess, only then realizing that the rest of the alphabet is still to go.

Mahler represents titanic struggle and insists that you struggle with him, here on earth. There are precious few moments of spiritual salvation, which he himself sparingly provides. It is the work of the outsider constantly struggling to be accepted. Even in *Iglau* where the family initially set up home, - consider the influences that would command him most. Was he a Jew surrounded by Catholics? Was he part of a German enclave surrounded by Czech Moravia. Was he a pacifist in a garrison town? Was he

taught that life was fleeting and precious, solidly enforced by the experience of so much untimely death? What did that shape in his ability to portray extreme pain? These questions raise more issues that can be readily answered, but one must take all of them into account if one is to begin to understand. Mahler's nine symphonies and the beginning of the tenth speak to all of this. They are also connected to two other things, the phases in his personal life and the thematic material from song cycles. The early works, Symphonies 1-4 are very much a part of the thematic material of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and its connected work *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*. The latter is part of the first symphony and also is a font of creativity into the *Wunderhorn* songs, so that much of the language and intent is joined. Mahler's 5th, 6th and 7th Symphonies move in a different ambit, where there is more struggle, more titanic depth, more emotion and larger scope. The fifth provides the pivot from one phase to the other. By the time Mahler is contemplating the 8th and 9th symphonies and *Das lied von der Erde*, he has suffered ill health himself, married Alma Schindler creating a frenetic wave of anti semitism, and fathered two daughters one of whom would tragically succumb to scarlet fever in 1907. It seems that for Mahler the tragedy in his music mirrors the tragedy in his life and his efforts to shape it from a sense of inadequacy mirrored his own instabilities.

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. This new approach allows us to perceive the music of Mahler as it really is, - spiritual, emotional and at the same time visceral, human, and bloody, with a 'no prisoners' attitude. For the Symphony Orchestra of India to perform this work marks a rite of passage - more so than performing the introspective Symphony No. 4. The fifth symphony, in every sense, is titanic in its struggle, tragic in its depth, beautiful in its emotion and triumphal in its ascendancy.

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