Mahler Symphony No. 4

Czech Philharmonic

Semyon Bychkov

CHEN REISS

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Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Symphony No. 4 in G Major (1899-1900)

1	I. Bedächtig, nicht eilen	17. 10
2	II. In gemächlicher Bewegung, ohne Hast	9. 23
3	III. Ruhevoll, poco adagio	21. 23
4	IV. Sehr behaglich *	8. 51
	Total playing time:	56. 49

* **Chen Reiss**, soprano

Czech Philharmonic
conducted by **Semyon Bychkov**

Semyon Bychkov & Czech Philharmonic
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Expressing the polyphony of life

Semyon Bychkov on Mahler's symphonies

Leningrad 1960s, Capella Hall, mid-morning. Silence. A miracle of sound is born in the magical acoustic of this venerable concert hall. A young boy studying at the Glinka Choir School, which sits adjacent to the Capella, comes several times a day to listen to the Philharmonic orchestra rehearsals during the 10-minute breaks between his classes. He hides unseen behind the stage and finds himself transported into an unknown world of incandescent beauty from which he will never want to escape. He forgets to return to classes and, walking in the city later that day, sees a poster announcing a performance of the Third Symphony of Gustav Mahler. What he had just heard were the opening sounds of the symphony's Finale. Before he knew anything about this music or its creator, he felt Mahler saying 'What Love Tells Me'. On this day my need to live with Mahler's music was born.

Discovering Mahler's music is akin to discovering life itself. Experiencing it, is to be drawn into his world and values. What emerges from his music, his letters and, the testimonies of those who knew him is the duality of this man. Being a creator and interpreter all at once, he invents the sounds which re-create the world of nature and humans.

To create he must rise above the world in order to see its complexity. Paradoxically, the conflicts co-exist and intertwine, resolve and enter into new confrontations. There can be no end to them and therefore no beginning.

To re-create he must live inside the world and bear the brunt of its contradictions.

He had less than 51 years to realize the fundamental questions of our existence

and even less time to answer them. Yet, it was long enough to express the polyphony of life: its nobility and banality, its reality and otherworldliness, its childlike naivety and inherent tragedy. He wouldn't provide all the answers but, the most important question about the immortality of the world and our place in it, he answered at the end of his Second Symphony.

He was 34.

Semyon Bychkov

The Czech Philharmonic and Mahler

As is well known, Mahler was born and grew up respectively in the Bohemian village of Kaliště and in the nearby Moravian town of Jihlava, both places in what is now the Czech Republic. It is that Bohemian village and that Moravian town where one can find the roots of Mahler's music and the inspirations for his great symphonic world. It is therefore not entirely surprising perhaps that there should be a rich Gustav Mahler tradition at the Czech Republic's first and oldest orchestra, the Czech Philharmonic, its beginnings dating back to September 1908, when the world premiere of his Symphony No. 7 was given by the orchestra under the baton of none other than the composer.

Perhaps the greatest landmark in the Czech Philharmonic's Mahler history is the recording of his Symphonies Nos. 1-9 and of the first movement of his Symphony No. 10 made with Václav Neumann conducting between 1976 and 1982 (almost in parallel with the recording of the same repertoire by the Bavarian Radio SO and another famous Czech Rafael Kubelík).

It was also, among many others, chief conductors Ančerl and Bělohlávek, under whom the Czech Philharmonic regularly played Gustav Mahler. Interestingly, the latter maestro's last appearance with the Czech Philharmonic, before his premature passing in May 2017, featured the composer's Symphony No. 5.

In the past ten or so years, the orchestra has gone from strength to strength, expanding its subscriber base in Prague, going on high-profile tours, making first-class recordings (both audio and video) and – most importantly perhaps — always enhancing its already superior artistry. With the orchestra on such a good form and with Semyon Bychkov at the helm, we have embarked on a new Gustav Mahler journey, hoping to bring something very special, something truly outstanding.

Czech Philharmonic Management

Roguishness and Deep Mysticism

At the end of his Fourth Symphony, Mahler presents a vision of paradise. The text, sung 'with childlike, cheerful expression' though 'absolutely without parody', is taken from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. Mahler had long cherished this collection of folk verse, first published at the beginning of the 19th century. Like much of the poetry chosen and adapted by its editors, Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano, the words at the end of Mahler's Fourth Symphony are totally frank, describing a 'heavenly life' that has no equivalent on earth. Even our music, including Mahler's own, we imagine, cannot compare to that of heaven.

The juxtaposition of innocence and experience — there is, after all, still butchery above, thanks to Herod and St Luke — provides a key to the Symphony's entire musical narrative. Semyon Bychkov describes it as 'an adult telling a story

to a child as one would and should to an adult. It is also a child telling a story to an adult as if to a child. Pure dialectics. At the bottom, this is what Mahler himself was.' With the jangling of a jester's cap at the beginning of the work (recalled in the Finale), the second movement's chilling dance, the seraphic yet earthly visions of the third movement and the heavenly existence described in the fourth, this is a Symphony that tells of a life entire. But it is a life constantly in touch with childish impulses; for Mahler, that meant the Bohemian village of Kaliště, where he was born, and the nearby Moravian town of Jihlava, where he grew up.

Those early days were far from idyllic, though they were filled with music, both from the local barracks and from the staff at home and in Mahler's father's tavern, who taught the young composer a number of native songs. Josef Bohuslav Foerster, one of Mahler's close friends in adulthood, claimed that 'in his earliest youth he spoke Czech and that Czech folk songs were a great influence on the composition of many of his later works'. Mahler never officially learned the language at school, though his ability to communicate with a driver on an 1897 trip to Moscow derived from his knowledge of the Slavic tongue. He could even correct the German translation of Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*, thanks to his familiarity with Karel Sabina's original libretto.

Most crucial, however, was the lasting impression made by the folk music of Bohemia and Moravia, as is often witnessed in the lilting melodies of his symphonies, many of which were written long after Mahler had left the Czech lands. In them, we hear the echoes of Kaliště and Jihlava, as well as the sylvan spaces beyond. For as Sigmund Freud, another German-speaking Jew born on Czech soil, made clear, childhood is the most significant stage in our development. How right, then, that the Fourth Symphony, weaving infant memory and adult certainty – and vice versa – is where the Czech Philharmonic and Semyon Bychkov are beginning this new survey of Mahler's output.

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By the time he began his Fourth Symphony, in the Alpine surroundings of Alt-Aussee during the summer of 1899, Mahler was a man of daunting celebrity and even more impressive intellectual fibre. He was understandably exhausted, however, when he left Vienna for his summer holidays that June, after another season as director of the Court Opera, with all its machinations and attacks from the press. Instead of beginning a fresh project, he first decided to revise his Third Symphony, completed in 1896, as well as the much earlier *Das klagende Lied*. Both were instructive when it came to writing the Fourth Symphony, which he started the following month.

Mahler originally conceived the work in six movements, as a kind of light-hearted complement, a satyr play, to the Third Symphony, with more or less the same structure. (Two years earlier, Strauss had written *Don Quixote* and the comparably serious *Ein Heldenleben* with the same contrasting aims.) According to Mahler's synopsis, undoubtedly dating from before 1899, there were to be three orchestral movements, each followed by a song:

No. 1 'Die Welt als ewige Jetztzeit'
[The World as Eternal Now], G major
No. 2 'Das irdische Leben'
[The Earthly Life], E flat minor
No. 3 'Caritas' (Adagio), B major
No. 4 'Morgenglocken' [Morning Bells], F major
No. 5 'Die Welt ohne Schwere' [The World without Gravity], D major (Scherzo)
No. 6 'Das himmlische Leben'
[The Heavenly Life], G major

From this, it is possible to pick out the final four-movement scheme, though elements found homes in other symphonies too: 'Morgenglocken' became the penultimate movement of the Third and 'Die Welt ohne Schwere' probably turned into the central Scherzo of the Fifth. But one significant element remained: the spirit of a subtitle, 'Humoreske'.

Considerably less droll were the Fourth Symphony's unspoken associations with *Das klagende Lied*, the proofs of which Mahler corrected immediately before beginning work on his new score. The cantata's dark, Cain and Abel-like story, first sketched when he was a student, spoke of enduring grief over the many siblings Mahler had lost in childhood. More recently, there had been the threefold tragedy of 1889, when his mother, father and sister Leopoldine all died in quick succession, leaving Mahler head of the family, as well as again in 1895, when his younger brother Otto took his own life.

Mahler himself was to come close to death in 1901, when he suffered a life-threatening haemorrhage. Obliged to rest, he checked the initial proofs of the symphonic 'Humoreske' he had completed at his new summer retreat in Maiernigg in Carinthia the previous year, and confronted the darker truths beneath the music's gleeful veneer.

The first movement, with a 'grazioso' theme in G major, nonetheless strikes a relaxed mood, as if strolling through the countryside with a happy yodel. Yet the attendant jester cannot be forgotten, not least during the development, when his wit becomes caustic and the Classical delineation of key centres is decidedly less clear. Even the climax, calling on the entire orchestra, seems to crumble before our ears, as Mahler delivers some of the thorniest music he wrote, with the fanfare that would launch his Fifth Symphony buried within. But no sooner have the skies darkened than they clear for the recapitulation, where only a brief hiatus ahead of the final cadence offers a moment of pause.

If the first movement often reminds us of a clown — or an equally unpredictable child — the Scherzo is far from a joke. This is Mahler in *danse macabre* mood, as established in the Second Symphony and would return in the Seventh and Ninth. The composer's Dutch advocate Willem Mengelberg noted Hans Holbein's *Totentanz* woodcuts as a point of reference, while Alma stated that her husband's inspiration had come from Arnold Böcklin's 1872 *Self-Portrait with Death Playing the Violin*. Others, pointing to the overwrought violin solo, with strings tuned up a tone, have heard a re-creation of the tavern scene from Lenau's Faust, where Mephistopheles snatches an instrument 'from the hands of a lethargic fiddler and draws from it indescribably seductive and intoxicating strains'.

Only the third movement, with its long breathful melody, seems to fit Mahler's own, somewhat evasive description of the Symphony:

"Think of the undifferentiated blue of the sky, which is harder to capture than any changing or contrasting shades. This is the basic tone of the whole work. Only once does it become overcast and uncannily awesome — but it is not the sky itself which grows dark, for it shines eternally blue. It is only that it seems suddenly sinister to us — just as on the most beautiful day, in a forest flooded with sunlight, we are often overcome by a shudder of dread panic. The Scherzo is so mystical, confused and uncanny that it will make your hair stand on end. But you'll soon see, in the following Adagio — where everything sorts itself out — that it wasn't meant so seriously after all."

Recalling the innately humane music of 'Mir ist so wunderbar' from Beethoven's

Fidelio, a perennial feature of Mahler's repertoire, this slow movement provides an earthly equivalent to the Finale of the Third Symphony, with even more variations on a theme.

Suddenly, Mahler's sunlit forest, like the one surrounding his new composing hut at Maiernigg, is swept away. The strings leap into the air and the trumpets and horns announce the celestial city that will be described in the Finale. The soprano's poem, originally named 'Der Himmel hängt voll Geigen' in *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, came from a folk song that was as prevalent in the undulating landscape of the Bohemian-Moravian Highlands, where it may well have reached the ears of the young Mahler, as it was in Bavaria.

But regardless of whether this Symphony is the adult Mahler telling a story to his childish self or the remembered child telling a story to one of Europe's most famous musicians, it cannot evade another crucial conversation: with the spectre that is always at the edge of joy, tolling deeply in the harp's final notes. These are the tensions at the composer's core, what Mahler described as the text's 'roguishness and deep mysticism', revealed in the concentrated form of his Fourth Symphony.

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Chen Reiss
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“Das himmlische Leben” (lyrics of fourth movement)
(Text: Des Knaben Wunderhorn, Band 1, 1806)

Wir genießen die himmlischen Freuden,
drum 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!
Sankt 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!
Sankt 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.

We enjoy the heavenly pleasures
and avoid the earthly things.
there is no worldly tumult
in Heaven!
Everything lives in the gentlest peace!
We lead an angelic life!
Despite that, we are very merry:
we dance and leap,
hop and sing!
Saint Peter in the sky looks over us.

Saint John has let his little lamb go
to the butcher Herod.
We lead a patient,
innocent, patient,
a dear little lamb to death!
Saint Luke slaughters oxen
without giving it thought or attention.
Wine costs not a penny
in Heaven’s cellar;
and angels bake the bread.

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 Sankt Peter
mit Netz und mit Köder
zum himmlischen Weiher hinein.
Sankt Martha die Köchin muss sein.

Kein’ Musik ist ja nicht auf Erden,
die uns’rer verglichen kann werden.
Elftausend Jungfrauen
zu tanzen sich trauen!
Sankt Ursula selbst dazu lacht!
Cäcilia mit ihren Verwandten

Good vegetables of all sorts
grow in Heaven’s garden!
Good asparagus, beans
and whatever else we wish!
Full bowls are ready for us!
Good apples, good pears and good grapes!
The gardeners permit us everything!
Would you like roebuck, or hare?
Out in the open
they run by!

Should a fast-day arrive,
all the fish
swim up to us with joy!
Over there, Saint Peter is running already
with his net and bait
to the heavenly pond.
Saint Martha must be the cook!

No music on earth
can be compared to ours.
Eleven thousand maidens
dare to dance!
Even Saint Ursula herself is laughing!
Cecilia and her relatives

sind treffliche Hofmusikanten!
Die englischen Stimmen
ermuntern die Sinnen,
dass alles für Freuden erwacht.

are splendid court musicians!
The angelic voices
rouse the senses
so that everything awakens with joy.

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Acknowledgements

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Sit back and enjoy