

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911): Symphony No. 1 in D Major, “Titan” (1887-1888)

Listening to Mahler is an immersive experience. He once shared with the composer Jean Sibelius that “A symphony must be like the world. It must contain everything.” His music is famous for both its gargantuan proportions and for its complex allusions to the physical and the metaphysical. In his first symphony we hear passages that evoke the natural beauty of the Austrian countryside—the break of dawn, birdcalls, folksongs—but also passages whose emotional communication seems much more subjective and psychologically complex. How are we to react, for instance, when Mahler, in the third movement, reimagines a children’s song as a funeral march, and then interrupts this odd procession with a sentimental pop song and a klezmer band? What’s it all mean? For me, it helps to understand something of the world Mahler lived in.

During his lifetime, Mahler was better known as a conductor than a composer. He would compose during summers in a small cabin in the Austrian alps and conduct during the fall and winter concert season in Vienna. He thrived in the seasonal rhythm alternating between the natural beauty of the mountains and the intellectual and artistic bustle of the city. In addition to being a hub for music, Vienna was also the wellspring for the new science of psychology, and the theories of consciousness proposed by another of Vienna’s most famous residents, Sigmund Freud. In fact, Mahler eventually spent at least one session on Freud’s famous couch exploring the new field of psychoanalysis. Similar to Freud’s interest in recurrent dreams as a window into the subconscious mind, Mahler’s music returns again and again to melodies and themes he has explored in prior works. He once remarked that “composing is like playing with building blocks, where new buildings are created again and again, using the same blocks. Indeed, these blocks have been there, ready to be used, since childhood, the only time that is designed for gathering.” If this sounds a bit Freudian, that’s exactly where we’re headed. Rather than the more linear path that we hear in works by Beethoven or Brahms, where musical motives and themes usually follow a logical progression, we are instead dropped into a more episodic dreamlike narrative. Themes and musical styles are often juxtaposed in strange and surprising ways. To borrow from a recent film title, it can be “everything, everywhere, all at once.”

Mahler’s life experience was filled with the kinds of crises of modern identity that psychoanalysis sought to ameliorate. He famously described himself as “thrice homeless, as a native of Bohemia in Austria, as an Austrian among Germans, as a Jew throughout the world—always an intruder, never welcomed.” Ever the outsider, he had tried his best to assimilate. His musical language was that of the German symphonic tradition. He revered Wagner, a virulent anti-Semite, and championed his operas. He also converted to Christianity and wrote music inspired by overtly Christian themes and texts. But these actions were never sufficient. His critics were often direct and vicious. Rudolph Louis, a German musical critic and popular author of several composer biographies and harmony textbooks wrote:

If Mahler’s music would speak Yiddish, it would be perhaps unintelligible to me. But it is repulsive to me because it *acts* Jewish. This is to say that it speaks musical German, but

with an accent, with an inflection, and above all, with the gestures of an Eastern, all too Eastern Jew. So, even to those whom it does not offend directly, it cannot possibly communicate anything. One does not have to be repelled by Mahler's artistic personality in order to realize the complete emptiness and vacuity of an art in which the spasm of an impotent mock-Titanism reduces itself to a frank gratification of common seamstress-like sentimentality.

The stinging phrase "impotent mock-Titanism" was a direct shot at Mahler's first symphony. As originally conceived, it was a 5-movement tone poem called "Titan," inspired by a Romantic novel by Jean Paul of the same name. The work's mix of musical styles "high" and "low" and of music of varied origin didn't fit his critics' ideas for a unified work of art. It was, however, true to Mahler's credo that a symphony should attempt to "embrace the entire world." This was *his* world and *his* experience, which included, of course, music that might sound at any given moment Jewish, Christian, German, Austrian, or Bohemian. We hear all of these in the Symphony no. 1 in D Major.

Movement I: Spring and No End

The work opens with a quiet, gorgeous curtain of strings. In one program for the piece, Mahler related that the beginning signifies the "awakening of nature from a winter's sleep." We hear distant awakening fanfares and the calls of a cuckoo. As a principal melodic theme, Mahler uses a melody from a previous work, a song which carries the text, "Isn't it becoming a fine world? Chirp, Chirp! Fair and sharp! How the world delights me!"

Movement II: Under Full Sail

The music here takes the form of a Ländler, a spirited Austrian folk dance in triple time, which bookends a slower waltz section.

Movement III: The Hunter's Funeral Procession

Mahler wrote to a friend suggesting a possible program for the famous third movement:

On the surface one might imagine this scenario: A funeral procession passes by our hero, and the misery, the whole distress of the world, with its cutting contrasts and horrible irony, grasps him. The funeral march of "Bruder Martin" [Frère Jacques] one has to imagine as being played in a dull manner by a band of very bad musicians, as they usually follow such funeral processions. The roughness, gaiety, and banality of this world then appears in the sounds of some interfering Bohemian musicians, heard at the same time as the terribly painful lamentation of the hero.

Later, he recalled the movement in more personal terms, as "heart-rending, tragic irony, and is to be understood as exposition and preparation for the sudden outburst in the final movement of despair of a deeply wounded and broken heart." As in the first movement, Mahler references a melody from a previous composition, a song entitled "Die zwei blauen Augen": "The two blue eyes of my darling/they have sent me into the wide world. I had to take my leave

of this well-beloved place! O blue eyes, why did you gaze on me? Now I will have eternal sorrow and grief.”

Movement IV: From Hell to Paradise

Mahler sets his initial musical hellscape in the key of F minor, a far distance tonally from the work's heavenly ending in D major. For melodic material, he draws from a number of sources with Christian symbolism, including “inferno” and “cross” motives from Liszt's “Dante” Symphony, and a “Grail” motive from Wagner's opera *Parsifal*. He shared hints to a narrative for the movement with his close friend, Natalie Bauer-Lechner, an Austrian violist: “The last movement, which follows the preceding one without a break, begins with a horrible outcry. Our hero is completely abandoned, engaged in a most dreadful battle with all the sorrow of this world. Time and again he and the victorious motif with him is dealt a blow by fate whenever he rises above it and seems to get hold of it, and only in death, when he has become victorious over himself, does he gain victory. Then the wonderful allusion to his youth rings out once again with the theme of the first movement. (Glorious Victory Chorale!)”