



MAHLER'S FIFTH

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Sunday, October 23, 2022 · 7:30pm
Peoria Civic Center Theater

Peoria Symphony Orchestra
George Stelluto, Conductor

SYMPHONY NO. 5 IN C-SHARP MINOR

Part I: Trauermarsch
In gemessen Schritt, streng, wie ein Kondukt
Stürmische bewegt, mit grösster Vehemenz

Part II: Scherzo

Part III: Adagietto
Rondo-Finale

Gustav Mahler
(1860-1911)

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from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

Maestro's Musings

I shudder at the funeral call,
Trumpet-laden with foreboding.
The battle is on! The effort is all!
Bidding farewell, I embrace what?

The fight continues as a kind of dance
Smug life grins sardonically,
The heroic horn bids me forward
I might actually win...

With one last tender message
I bid my muse adieu, the cause is lost,
But my undying love makes it bearable
And the passionate tears flow

But she touches my heart saying:
"Fight on, salvation is near!"
Clouds part, heavens break open,
Erasing all my fear.
—G. Stelluto

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Written by Michael Allsen ©2022

This concert is dedicated to a single, massive work, Gustav Mahler's fifth symphony. Scored for an enlarged orchestra and lasting well over an hour, the symphony has several large, triumphant moments, but it also has moments of quiet intimacy, as in the serene Adagietto.

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Symphony No. 5 in C-sharp minor

Mahler's fifth symphony was composed during the summers of 1901 and 1902. Mahler conducted the premiere in Cologne on October 18, 1904. Duration 69:00.

Background

The year 1901 was one of the most significant of Mahler's life. He acquired property at Mayernigg, near Lake Wörther, the beloved summer retreat where most of his late works were composed. There were professional changes as well. Early that year, health problems, apparently caused by overwork, forced him to step down as conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic. (From all accounts, the musicians of this democratically run orchestra had long chafed under Mahler's authoritarian style. During his absence, they quickly elected another conductor, even before Mahler had a chance to resign officially!) However, the most important event of 1901 was meeting Alma Schindler at a dinner party. Mahler was almost instantly attracted to this brilliant and beautiful 20-year-old, who was a composer in her own right. For her part, Alma Schindler was just a bit awed by the conductor and composer, who was twice her age. A romance blossomed quickly, and they were married on March 2, 1902. Marriage was a very good thing for Gustav, though Alma's musical career was cut short at his insistence: she was to be his partner in most things, but there was room for only one composer in the family. Alma was able to take care of the day-to-day details of housekeeping and business that he found so irritating, leaving him free to compose.

The composition was almost exclusively limited to summer holidays, and the time Mahler spent at Mayernigg was jealously guarded. According to Alma's diary, he maintained a strict regime. He rose at dawn and tromped up to his "composition cottage" in the woods — a small shed that contained little besides a desk and a piano. His breakfast was brought up by a maid, who according to Alma, was

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October 23, 2022

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terrified of Mahler, and would leave the tray and run. He would work in solitude all morning, and after lunch would hike or row with Alma. Even during the afternoons and evenings, he would be working on compositional problems, and would suddenly break away from guests or other activities to work for hours at a time. *Symphony No. 5* was composed during two of these holidays, in 1901 and 1902.

Though this work, which Mahler originally nicknamed the “giant symphony,” was essentially complete in 1902, it was to be revised extensively many times. After a preliminary sight-reading in 1904, he deleted many of the percussion parts that were prominent in the first version. (Alma writes in her diary of “sobbing aloud” when she heard the percussion drowning out the rest of the orchestra.) Though the premiere went well later that year, he made significant changes before conducting the work in Amsterdam in 1906 and revised it yet again for a performance in 1908. It was not until shortly before his death — and after completing four more symphonies — that Mahler wrote to a friend: “I have finished the Fifth. I had to reorchestrate it completely, I don’t understand how I could have gone so completely astray—just like a beginner. The routines I had established with the first four symphonies were entirely inadequate for this one — for a completely new style demands a new technique.”

This “completely new style” represents a break from what he had done in the first four symphonies. Despite their variety in style, all of these were programmatic. All of them are also based in some way upon Mahler’s musical settings of the folk-style poems from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (“The Boy’s Magic Horn”). In *Symphony No. 5*, Mahler rejects the idea of an extramusical program and breaks with the use of vocal music and text that had been so much a part of the second, third, and fourth symphonies. The symphony also makes a musical break from his previous works. It was during this period that Mahler began to study the works of J. S. Bach. (The only printed music in Mahler’s “composition cottage” at Mayernigg was a prized set of the Bach *Complete Works*.) A newer, more intellectual contrapuntal style is heard in this symphony.

What You’ll Hear

Symphony No. 5 is set in five movements, which Mahler organizes into three parts. The funeral march and second movement constitute Part I; Part II consists of the gargantuan *Scherzo*, and Part III includes the *Adagietto* and *Rondo-Finale*. The symphony begins with a solemn fanfare from a solo trumpet — this rhythm pervades much of the movement’s music. Mahler titles the movement *Trauermusik* (funeral music) and gives the direction *In gemessenem Schritt, streng, wie ein Kondukt* (“In measured step, stern, as in a funeral procession”). The opening fanfare leads into a somber march for brass and sad string melody. The trumpet fanfare appears again, and there is an almost violent middle passage that breaks the solemn march and moves towards an angry climax. Once again, the trumpet interjects, and there is a long concluding passage that returns to the defeated tread of the opening march. The movement dies away quietly and gradually.

Mahler considered the funeral march to be an introduction to the second movement, marked *Stürmische bewegt, mit grösster Vehemenz* (“Stormily agitated, with the greatest vehemence”), which begins without a pause. The movement, set in a greatly expanded sonata form, begins with a furious figure in the basses that the brasses answer with equal rage. The mood breaks suddenly, and the cellos play a sad tune that recalls the march of the first movement. The development begins with a recitative-style line for the cellos that Mahler marks *Klagend* (“grieving”). This section builds gradually through restatements and recombination of his themes, over a vast stretch of musical time, before culminating in a titanic brass chorale — Mahler marks this moment in the score *Höhepunkt* (“pinnacle” or “climax,” as if we could fail to

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notice!). When the opening theme returns, it is almost an afterthought. It builds toward a second peak but then subsides to fade away to nothing. Mahler specifies a long break after the close of this movement.

The title *Scherzo* (Italian for “joke”) usually implies a light, humorous, fast-paced movement. While there is certainly humor to be found in this movement, it is not lightweight — at over 800 measures, it is the longest section of the piece. Mahler wrote to Alma while he was rehearsing for the premiere, describing it as “the devil of a movement. I see it is in for a lot of trouble. Conductors for the next fifty years will all take it too fast and make nonsense of it; and the public — what are they to make of this chaos of which new worlds are forever being engendered, only to crumble into ruin the moment after? What are they to say to this primeval music, this foaming, roaring, raging sea of flashing breakers? Oh, that I might give my symphony its first performance fifty years after my death!”

The main theme is stated by all four horns, and the opening panel is a series of several dance melodies — mostly in the rough-edged character of the Austrian country Laendler, but occasionally lapsing into a citified waltz. The lengthy trio uses a more reflective idea stated by a solo horn, which is then developed. Just when everything seems to be dwindling to a close, the strings begin an upbeat Laendler tune and sweep the rest of the orchestra toward a climax (listen for a prominent woodblock solo). The horns enter again and there is a varied restatement of the opening material, with dense contrapuntal elaboration. The coda turns briefly to the darker mood of the trio, before ending abruptly with a final horn fanfare — a formal trick Mahler certainly learned from the *Scherzo* movements of his hero, Beethoven.

Part III of the symphony begins with the dreamy *Adagietto*. This movement scored simply for strings and harp is dwarfed by the movements that surround it and shows Mahler’s more introspective side. It is based on two long melodies sung by strings, mounts to a subdued peak, and then fade away. As in Part I, there is no break between this movement and the next.

The *Rondo-Finale* begins with a wonderful passage in which sustained tones from the horn are answered by solo woodwinds. This leads to an Austrian country-band passage that serves as the refrain in this movement. The refrain closes as the cellos begin vigorously laying out an agitated line that becomes the subject of an extended fugue. The refrain returns and another contrapuntal episode begins, eventually moving toward a new version of the *Adagietto*’s main melody. This becomes a theme for a series of loosely-structured variations, as the movement works inexorably towards a *Höhepunkt* — again, a triumphal brass chorale, now decorated by the strings and woodwinds playing the fugue subject. There is little that remains unsaid at this point, and the movement comes quickly to a close. ♦

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