In anticipation of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra’s presentation of Bernstein’s Mahler Marathon: The Sony Recordings at the David Rubinstein Atrium in Lincoln Center on February 25, 2018, several students from the University of Arizona’s Fred Fox School of Music wrote short introductory essays on each of Gustav Mahler’s symphonies and Bernstein’s relationships with them. Some of these students traveled to New York City in September 2017 to conduct research on Mahler’s music and other topics with the valuable help of Barbara Haws and Gabryel Smith at the New York Philharmonic Archives; this research was supported by the Daveen Fox Endowed Chair for Music Studies. Other students contributing to these program notes participated in a seminar on Mahler’s music during the Fall 2017 semester.

Please enjoy these wide-ranging essays and informative essays that showcase how Bernstein’s ideas about music intersected with Mahler’s fascinating and stirring works.

— Matthew Mugmon
Symphony No. 1 (1888)

The first performance given of Mahler’s stirring First Symphony took place in 1889 in Budapest, and it faced a difficult critical reaction. But ultimately, the four-movement work became one of Mahler’s most popular orchestral works. Mahler insisted that many of his works were not programmatic — that is, that they could not be understood strictly in terms of a written, concrete program, or narrative. Rather, he would say, his music was absolute — that is, understandable in more abstract, musical terms. Nonetheless, much of his music seems to stem directly from programmatic influences, like the music dramas of Wagner and the symphonic poems of Liszt, as well as folk tunes, nature, and Mahler’s own life. The First Symphony, with its clear references to Mahler’s own songs, is no exception.

Unlike many of Mahler’s other symphonies, Bernstein did not speak much of this symphony in general, so our understanding of his approach to it relies heavily on what we hear in recordings. The first movement of the begins with sounds clearly suggesting nature; one might envision walking through a misty forest during a time of quiet repose. A single pitch, A, spanning many octaves, is heard throughout the introduction, creating a sense of openness and an accord with natural divinity. Leonard Bernstein’s recording is entrancing from these opening moments; he draws the energy carefully out of each measure carefully.

After the first movement’s triumphant conclusion, a buoyant second movement continues with a jubilant sensibility and evokes the music one might expect to hear at a rustic café or pub. This movement is a scherzo, which suggests a light, playful, and even joking style. Bernstein captures this style perfectly, especially with the heavy emphasis on the first beat of a measure, creating a kind of “stomping” sound that is steady but never rush forward or spins out of control.

The third movement, by contrast, is dark and dreary, at least at first glance. The opening melody is familiar to those who sang it as a round in grade-school; the joyful folk tune “Frere Jacques” is played by a double bass soloist bassist in the beginning of the movement — only this familiar tune is placed in a minor key instead of a major one. In a Young People’s Concert from 1958, Bernstein made it a special point to highlight this moment as an example of musical humor. The following section of that movement is a dance-like passage that Bernstein and many others have suggested connects to Mahler’s Jewish identity, although it is more accurately considered to resemble central European folk music than anything specifically Jewish. In an unpublished typescript for his Young People’s Concert on Mahler from 1960, Bernstein planned to say that this section has “the flavor of a band playing at a Jewish wedding.” For unknown reasons, he deleted that remark before the broadcast.
The fourth and final movement is a wake-up call, beginning with a thunderous crash of percussion, what Mahler called the “cry of a wounded heart.” It sets off what might be heard as a battle in which the protagonist is victorious at the end of the movement — with none of the sense of ambiguity that ends Bernstein’s own compositions.

— Sean Copeland

**Symphony No. 2 (1888–1894)**

Throughout his collaboration with the New York Philharmonic, Leonard Bernstein conducted Mahler’s stirring, five-movement Second Symphony, “Resurrection,” in its entirety, 30 times starting in 1960 and ending in 1989 — representing more than half of the orchestra’s total performances of this work. Before Bernstein, the NYPO had performed the second symphony only 29, including the premier, conducted by Mahler himself in 1908. Bernstein also conducted it eight times with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and twice with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, among other groups; he also recorded the work several times. Within the last five years, it has been performed by approximately 30 orchestras, by conductors such as Christopher Warren-Green, Andris Nelsons, Benjamin Zander, and Eric Jacobsen.

Although it’s a popular work, it is also a challenging one to coordinate, as the final movement features choral forces and vocal soloists. The symphony requires a large orchestra — almost double the size what would have been used a century earlier but typical of Mahler. Additionally, he also includes off stage horns, trumpets and percussion in the fifth movement. A chorus and two soloists — soprano and alto — are also required. While choruses had been previously employed in symphonic works, at the time of its composition this symphony was only the seventh one to do so.

It was reported by Harriett Johnson, a *New York Post* columnist, that this symphony first caught the attention of Bernstein while studying with Serge Koussevitzky, perhaps as early as 1940. And while Bernstein was assistant conductor with the New York Philharmonic in 1943, another mentor, Artur Rodzinski, conducted it. In his dissertation, Christopher Jarrett Page has connected Bernstein’s performances of Mahler’s works to his having seen mentors prepare them. Whether or not this is the case with the Second Symphony, there is no doubt that Bernstein had a deep connection with the Symphony, as demonstrated by the occasions to which he chose to connect performances of the work — including as a tribute to the recently assassinated John F. Kennedy in 1963.
Of the musical memorial to JFK, Bernstein said, “There were those who asked: Why the Resurrection Symphony, with its visionary concept of hope and triumph over worldly pain, instead of a Requiem, or the customary Funeral March from the Eroica? Why, indeed. We played the Mahler Symphony not only in terms of resurrection for the soul of one we love, but also for the resurrection of hope in all of us who mourn him.” Looking back in 1969 at concerts from the late 1940s, Bernstein remarked, “In all the years I have performed [Mahler’s Resurrection] symphony, the performances I recall with most emotion were those we gave here in Israel nineteen years ago, during the war of Independence. This idea of Resurrection at that time was momentous; after all, this land had literally just been reborn. But still the ancient cycle of threat, destruction, and rebirth goes on; and it is all mirrored in Mahler’s music—above all, the expression of simple faith—of belief that good must triumph—En b’rerah! [There is no alternative.]”

Bernstein’s linkage of this work with larger issues is fitting, as it clearly reflects Mahler’s own fascination with death and rebirth. The first movement, which originated in a symphonic poem called “Totenfeier,” contemplates finite mortality through a powerful and profound funeral march. Bernstein called it “an extensive essay in grief.” The second movement, an ethereal ländler, reminisces on the joys of the past colored by the grief of the present, what Bernstein called “Mahler’s statement of what life could be like, or perhaps once was like in the bygone innocence of childhood.” In the third movement, Mahler, according to Bernstein, ridiculed “the lilting grace of the previous movement” in a confused, dance-like atmosphere that draws heavily on his own song “Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt” from the collection Des Knaben Wunderhorn.

Bernstein continued that “After an anguished climax the movement suddenly—almost abruptly—peters out into silence and the alto voice is heard in the gentlest tones, singing a song of faith which Mahler calls ‘Urlicht’ — primal light.” After this short movement, which is actually another Wunderhorn song, the “roar the final movement begins. It is a kind of music[al] depicting [of] the Day of Judgment with heavenly horn calls alternating with feverish marches, organlike chorales, and tortured writhings.” He continued, “The hushed entrance of the chorus in the middle of the movement puts an end to all the doubts, struggles, and pain of all the music that has gone before. From this moment on, the alto and soprano solos join with the chorus in the words ‘You will rise again, my dust, do not tremble, I die only to live. All you have suffered will bring you to God.’”

Mahler did not always provide such unambiguously triumphant conclusions, but his sense of drama and theatricality pervades his works. The Second Symphony is no exception, and it may well explain why Bernstein — who frequently composed for the theater — was so drawn to it. — Gavin Ely and Mariana Mevans Vidal
Symphony No. 3 (1896)

The story behind Mahler’s Third Symphony makes for fascinating case study on the idea of “program music” — that music can express a verbal narrative, rather than abstract musical qualities or emotions (usually called “absolute” music). Mahler apparently had a specific program in mind when composing the six-movement symphony, which lasts around an hour and a half, but he later discarded that program. This suggests that the symphony is, on the one hand, a testament of a triumph of a raw and unidentifiable music abstraction, representing perhaps “the gloomy rigidity of merely elemental being (the forces of Nature),” as Mahler scholar Peter Franklin put it. On the other hand, it demonstrates the power of vivid sounds to capture concrete images; when Bruno Walter went to visit Mahler in Steinbach the next summer and stopped to admire the mountain view, Mahler is famously reported to have said that he already “composed” the mountains in the form of music.” Even though Mahler had clearly been inspired by Nature, he ultimately left it to the listener to decide what to make of this symphony in particular and his music in general.

The symphony as a genre, and especially one as cornucopian as the Third Symphony, can be suggestive of everything and anything, and perhaps it is not the role of the composer to decipher its meaning. With Mahler’s help, though, we can decipher one aspect that lies in the center of literary inspiration for this composition — the idea of transcendence, especially as understood by the philosophers Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, both of whom were of great inspiration to Mahler. The idea of achieving joy and transcendence through suffering and pain is strongly manifested in the music and becomes central to the final three movements of this six-movement symphony.

The titles of the symphony’s movements are suggestive of literary inspirations. The opening movement, “Pan Awakes, Summer Marches In,” is a journey through prophetic sounds of brass and moments of unconstrained force. It is so vast in its conception that it almost seems like a symphony by itself. The second movement, “What the Flowers in the Meadow Tell Me,” is a kaleidoscope of mysterious and soaring melodies with its quickly changing tempi and moods.

The third movement, “What the Animals in the Forest Tell Me,” is yet another playful display of melodic and contrapuntal fireworks and of clever rhythmic devices, and its meditative and retrospective quality stands out. The fourth movement, “What Man Tells Me,” opens with ambiguous harmonies accompanied by a meditative alto solo that offers an emotional sensibility completely new to the symphony thus far. The fifth movement, “What the Angels Tell Me,” adds a children choir to the texture; musical narrative here seems to be developing very rapidly from a cheerful opening melody to foreboding sounds within the orchestra and back to a blissful fadeout. Finally, the sixth movement, “What Love Tells Me,” is perhaps the most retrospective and meditative of all with its string-driven intensity. It is beautifully paced, and harmonically it captures the dual nature of love — its power, as well as its deceptive and
tragic quality. Mahler later discarded the titles, but they provide a glimpse into the mindset of the composer.

Regardless of how one would listen to this overflowing work, with or without the awareness of the initial titles, it obviously possesses an intrinsic imperative evoking all kinds of moods and emotions. This made it a fitting choice for Leonard Bernstein to select the Third Symphony for his final concerts as music director of the New York Philharmonic, in 1969. Bernstein said (as quoted in Christopher Jarrett Page’s dissertation),

The identification is so strong on so many levels. Sometimes I feel as though I’d written this music myself. I chose the Third because it happens to strike a wonderful note between grandeur without being grandiose or pompous [and] a sense of farewell and nostalgia. There’s tremendous nostalgia in this symphony; it’s all about remembering, looking backwards and looking ahead. It just seemed to combine all the elements that fitted this occasion. It doesn’t have a finale like the Second, where bells peal and organs break out. Nor does it have an ending of resignation, like the Ninth, in which everything fades and floats heavenward in anticipation of death. I didn’t want to make the occasion either festive or funereal. On the other hand, it is an ending and there should be a definite finale.

Bernstein was not the first to sense a range of complex emotions in this work, despite the seemingly triumphant ending. When the composer Arnold Schoenberg attended the Vienna premiere in 1904, he wrote to Mahler: “I think I have experienced your symphony. I felt the struggle for illusions; I felt the pain of one disillusioned; I saw the forces of evil and good contending; I saw a man in a torment of emotion exerting himself to gain inner harmony. I sensed a human being, a drama, truth, the most ruthless truth!”

— Jakub Rojek
Symphony No. 4 (1899–1900)

The last of Mahler’s Wunderhorn symphonies, his Fourth Symphony was the first complete symphony Bernstein performed besides the Second Symphony and Das Lied von der Erde; he did so at the start of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra’s Mahler festival in 1960. Bernstein described the symphony as music of “utter charm and simplicity” that also embodied the duality of Mahler’s personality. Bernstein understood to be Mahler a “double man in every single part of his musical life,” a man whose existence was dictated by the same battle that gave rise to this symphony. The work suggests hunting horns, birdcalls, and forest murmurs, which Bernstein attributed to Mahler’s “childlike idea of beauty.” But despite Bernstein’s label of the Fourth Symphony as “happy and delightful” music, he identified a struggle beneath the surface. During the 1960 Young People’s Concert titled “Who is Gustav Mahler?”, Bernstein recounted Mahler to the audience as “one of the most unhappy people in history” as a result of “the battle that was always going on inside him.” Bernstein continued on to share his interpretation of the Fourth Symphony by adding, “In this very same symphony which is so happy and delightful, every once in a while you can hear this sad, crying voice, the other Mahler’s voice, as if his heart were breaking, right in the middle of all the happiness and gaiety.”

This symphony’s core is its finale, the song “Das himmlische Leben” (The Heavenly Life), which sets a poem from the collection Des Knaben Wunderhorn (The Youth’s Magic Horn). The song served as the inspiration for several themes and motives throughout each movement. The first movement of the symphony opens with a gesture that returns in the fourth movement, what Bernstein referred to as “Merry Christmasy” sleigh bells with flute; this is followed by a delightful melody played by strings and horns. The melody is a perfect example of Mahler’s connection to the Austro-German tradition, particularly the elegance of Mozart’s music.

This symphony also exhibits the modernist side of Gustav Mahler, at least according to Bernstein, who said, “In his Fourth Symphony he was already fiddling with... bitonality, atonality, polytonality.” An unusual approach to melody and harmony is most apparent in the violin solo at the beginning of the second movement; it utilizes the Phrygian mode, which Bernstein said suited Mahler’s “Jewish-Czech-Eastern turn of mind.” Bernstein added that the violin solo which Mahler “tuned up a whole tone, so as to sound like a somewhat crude country fiddle” incorporated the “deliberate use of wrong notes.” Mahler’s twentieth-century creativity also points to Bernstein’s argument that Mahler was a “double man,” as he noticed Mahler’s frequent use of orchestration more typical of the nineteenth than the twentieth century in that it was sometimes “plush, lush, and fat, in the good old Wagnerian tradition.” The juxtapositions of older and newer techniques contribute to a sense of what Bernstein called Mahler’s “loveable inconsistencies.”
Bernstein’s admiration of the Fourth Symphony is perhaps most evident in his description of the third movement, which features a “deeply tragic triple-song” among a French horn, oboe, and English horn that is “terribly moving – and utterly new for [Mahler’s] time.” Bernstein used this movement as evidence that Mahler was a modern composer: “That, my friends, is the sound of modern music, fresh, lean, and full of fresh air… a style of such economy, transparency, and reliance on horizontal writing, or counterpoint, that he fed directly into the new music of our time, that we call neo-classic.”

The fourth and final movement of the Fourth Symphony is one of peace and serenity, tinged with an ironic sense of longing. A glimpse of Mahler’s vulnerability, it is what Bernstein called “a man’s dream of childhood, peaceful, quiet, and contented” written paradoxically with “the knowing art of a very grown-up man.” In this movement, “Das himmlische Leben” is sung by a soprano, personifying a child in order to fulfill what Bernstein identified as Mahler’s “search for the state of pure, childlike peace and innocence that he yearned for so strongly.” The soprano sings of heavenly pleasures such as dancing, leaping, singing, and the vegetables growing in heaven’s garden. But just as the life/death and light/dark dualities existed within Mahler (according to Bernstein), so they existed within the words of song from the perspective of “a naïve, pure choir-boy… about how heaven is going to be when we get there — if we get there.” In a remarkable recording from late in his life, in 1987, Bernstein — perhaps realizing his vision of this as an ultimate expression of naivete — had the fourth movement sung not by an adult woman, as is traditionally the case, but by a boy soprano.

— Candice Sierra

**Symphony No. 5 (1901–2)**

When it comes to Mahler’s Fifth Symphony, Leonard Bernstein did not shy away from powerful imagery to demonstrate feelings about what might be Mahler’s most recognizable work. In his score of the work, held at the New York Philharmonic Archives, Bernstein wrote “Rage — Hostility. Sublimation by Mahler and Hearer.” Perhaps the opening of the first movement, with a trumpet solo that shares the short-short-short-long rhythmic pattern with Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, presages the sense of “rage” that will figure later on. Bernstein described the first movement as “angry bitter, sorrow mixed with sad comforting lullabies — rocking a corpse.” He once spoke very highly of the second movement, writing in a record review “I can humbly say that I only wish I had written it.” In his score, he called the movement an “Outburst of rage. More public version of private feelings in I. Ends with teeth still clenched, despite occasional hints of ultimate glory and salvation (chorale, marches).”

The next part of Bernstein’s personal commentary on Mahler’s Fifth Symphony shifts dramatically with the third movement, the scherzo: “To hell with it — let’s get drunk — a ball,”
he wrote in his score. This movement, a generally joyful scherzo, certainly captures a sense of celebratory abandon; it begins with a joyous horn flourish that offsets the somber trumpet solo from the very beginning of the symphony. But the Adagietto movement of this symphony, probably Mahler’s best-known piece, is one Bernstein connected to tragedy despite its place in the symphony after a celebratory movement, and despite its own apparent origins as a musical love letter to Mahler’s wife Alma. After Robert F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1968, Bernstein conducted it during the funeral.

The Adagietto is the most varied in terms of performance practice. Conductors active in the early twentieth century, such as Willem Mengelberg and Bruno Walter (both of whom were Mahler’s colleagues) conduct this movement at a fast pace, with times in the range of seven or eight minutes, perhaps supporting a view of the movement as a love letter. On the other hand, the German conductor Hermann Scherchen stretched this movement to a lengthy 15 minutes, suggesting perhaps a more tragic tone. Leonard Bernstein’s timings fell in the middle of these extremes.

Bernstein performed Mahler’s Fifth Symphony frequently compared to the other symphonies, and it clearly held a special and changing place in his imagination, even helping him cope with struggling to complete his own compositions: in January of 1963, shortly after his first time conducting the Fifth with the New York Philharmonic — and long before he associated it with the tragedy of RFK’s death, he wrote in a letter to David Diamond, “I have not yet finished my 3rd Symphony (Kaddish) which will be something when and if it gets written. I had hoped by now to have it complete... Last week had joy in it: Mahler #5. Glorious.” But one detail communicates the importance of Mahler’s Fifth Symphony to Leonard Bernstein more than any other: he was buried with a copy of the score of this very symphony.

— Jessica Berg and Jule Streety
Symphony No. 6 (1903–4)

Gustav Mahler composed his four-movement “Tragic” Sixth Symphony during the summers of 1903–4. While the origins of the “Tragic” moniker are often contested, the now commonly included nickname largely contradicts the events of Mahler’s personal and professional life of those years. He married Alma Mahler in 1902, and that marriage had produced two daughters by the summer of 1904. Professionally, Mahler was experiencing a number of successes with the Vienna Court Opera, where he served as artistic director and conductor. His own compositions were being performed at an increasing rate. Yet despite these causes for happiness, Mahler composed the Kindertotenlieder (Songs on the Death of Children) as well as the dark and “tragic” Sixth at around the same time.

Another mystery, besides the origins of the symphony’s nickname, is the movement order of the two inner movements. Mahler frequently changed his mind about this order. While the initial draft featured the Scherzo as the second movement and the Andante as the third, Mahler famously switched their order at the premiere in Essen in 1906. Mahler biographer Henry-Louis de La Grange cited both the original order and a 1919 telegram from Alma Mahler to the conductor Willem Mengelberg in which Alma confirmed that the order was Scherzo-Andante. While her confirmation may raise some skepticism, La Grange is quoted as saying that “it is extremely unlikely that, when she sent her telegram to Mengelberg in 1919, she merely stated her own preferred order of movements. It is far more likely that, ten years after Mahler’s death, and with a much clearer perspective on his life and career, Alma would have sought to be faithful to his artistic intentions.”

Leonard Bernstein’s public relationship with the Sixth began in the spring of 1967, when he conducted it for the first time with the New York Philharmonic. While he would lead the Vienna Philharmonic in two noteworthy performances (during the 1976 and 1988 seasons), the 1967 concerts would be his only performances of the work with the New York Philharmonic. This was the fourth time the symphony had been programmed by the orchestra, and perhaps the music was still fresh in subscribers’ minds, as it had been performed as recently as 1965 under the baton of William Steinberg. And the American premiere itself was relatively recent, with Dimitri Mitropoulos conducting the same group in 1947.

In his score of the Sixth, held at the New York Philharmonic Archives, we can see Bernstein’s fascinating annotations. In these notes, Bernstein labels the Sixth as “Opera Symphonica,” a term he assigns to Mahler’s symphonic works that demonstrate narrative, or operatic, qualities. Bernstein also notes that the Sixth is “the “most operatic of all,” clarifying that this is due perhaps the purely instrumental nature of the Sixth combined with the recitative-like style of the final movement. In his Young People’s Concert with the New York Philharmonic on Mahler
from 1960, well before he conducted the Sixth Symphony, Bernstein also discussed Mahler as “a natural operatic composer who did not write one.”

In his annotated score, Bernstein expands on the Sixth with a clear list of sonic qualities that he believes derive from Mahler’s use of German elements mixed with Italian opera. He writes that these basic music elements are “... driven to their furious ultimate power. Result: neurotic intensity, irony, extreme sentimentalism, despair (that I can’t go even further), apocalyptic radiance, shuddering silence, volcanic auftakten [upbeats], gasping luftpausen [rests], titanic accents achieved by every means (sonic and tonic), ritards stretched to near motionlessness, marches like a heart attack, old-fashioned 4 bar phrases punctuated in brass and fire, cadences that bless like the moment when an excruciating pain suddenly ceases.”

Probably the most stunning feature of the Sixth arrives in the final movement: the famous hammer blows, for which a percussionist is instructed to strike a crate with a hammer. We can look to Alma Mahler’s writings for a possible idea of programmatic meaning: “In the last movement he described himself and his downfall or, as he later said, his hero’s. ‘It is the hero, on whom fall three blows of fate, the last of which fells him as a tree is felled,’ were his words.”

While Mahler’s later revisions to the Sixth have reduced the number of hammer blows in the performance to two, the image of a performer raising the hammer is an iconic aspect of the Sixth Symphony.
– Neal Warner and John Willis

**Symphony No. 7 (1904–5)**

Although the reception of Mahler’s music was often controversial, the case of his Seventh Symphony — which Leonard Bernstein conceded was “the ugly stepchild of the Mahler symphonies” — is probably the most extreme. The piece embodies one of the most radical manifestations of Mahler’s modernist style: its combination of seemingly disparate movements, its audacious progression of distant-related keys, and its unapologetically somber quality, arguably make this the least popular of his symphonies. Between its completion in August 1905 and its premiere in September 1908, Mahler endured two devastating tragedies in his personal life. In 1907, shortly after he was diagnosed with a heart issue, his eldest daughter died of scarlet fever. It is not unreasonable to speculate that these two events deeply influenced his Seventh Symphony, and it might explain how a work with a seemingly cheerful and optimistic conclusion can, after a closer analytical scrutiny, paradoxically be interpreted as dismal reflection of the composer’s personal misfortunes.
Each of Mahler’s symphonies can be heard as a dialogue of some sort. For example, his Fifth Symphony evokes a dialogue of keys, while his Sixth can be interpreted as a conversation of themes that represent different members of his family. In this sense, the Seventh would be a dialogue of modes; it portrays a musical narrative based on the interaction between the joyful major mode and the somber minor mode. The first movement, for example, begins with a characteristic rhythmic pattern (short-short-long) in the strings and woodwinds. This pattern, written in B minor, would have been recognized by audiences of the time as the “death motive,” mainly due to its origins in the Italian operatic tradition, notably in Giuseppe Verdi’s operas.

Although this motive persists throughout the movement, its characteristic pathos is constantly counterbalanced by the insistent appearances of the major mode. Here, the struggle between the dark B-minor theme and its optimistic B-major counterpart represents an essential element of the movement’s expressive narrative. Both themes can be interpreted as musical agents, longing for inconsistent and opposing outcomes. On the one hand, the first theme aims for a pessimistic conclusion, depicts the darkness of the night and the inevitability of death. On the other, the B-major theme strives for a heroic ending, one that can do justice to the ecstasy of life. We can hear the climatic struggle of this optimistic theme at the end of the development section (toward the middle of the movement), when the B-major arpeggios in the harps seem to suggest that the struggle is over: light has finally vanquished darkness. Soon after, however, the death motive reappears, suppressing the bright quality of the previous theme and declaring its somber victory once and for all.

The second and fourth movements, respectively written in C major and F major, can initially be interpreted as two beacons, shedding light over the darkness of the other three movements. Mahler finished them in the summer of 1904, a year before he started composing the other three. At the time, he decided to name them Nachtmusik (serenades, nocturnes), apparently referencing the soothing nature of the romantic nocturnes—as in Chopin’s nocturnes, for example. However, as Leonard Bernstein noted in his most detailed comments about the work, quoted here from Christopher Jarrett Page’s dissertation on Mahler and Bernstein, “[t]he minute we understand that the word Nachtmusik does not mean nocturne in the usual lyrical sense, but rather nightmare—that is, night music of emotion recollected in anxiety instead of tranquility—then we have the key to all this mixture of rhetoric, camp, and shadows.” Bernstein’s interpretation suggests that Mahler’s use of Nachtmusik—which listeners might also have connected to Mozart’s playful serenade Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, or “A Little Night Music”—is ironic. The playful tone of these two movements of Mahler’s Seventh can be interpreted as a sarcastic pun within the symphony. Instead of counteracting the somberness of the other movements, they evoke “anxiety instead of tranquility,” contributing to the overall pessimistic narrative of the symphony.

The two Nachtmusik movements are separated by a Scherzo in D major. This third movement, appropriately named “Schattenhaft” (shadowy, ghost-like), is grim and, like its adjacent movements, sarcastic. In the middle section, for example, the oboes introduce a bright, waltz-
like theme in D major that is progressively “degraded” into a gloomy minor version of itself, caused by a persistent melodic minor-mode intrusion heard first in the violins and later in the flutes. Likewise, throughout the movement, the optimistic quality of the major key is offset by the insistence of the minor mode, the upsetting melodic turmoil of the violin’s glissandi, and the concealed thematic references to the first movement.

The brass fanfare at the beginning of the last movement promises a heroic ending, one that will redeem the pathos of the previous four movements. Described by Leonard Bernstein as “long and riotous,” the Rondo-Finale is as surprising as it is disconcerting. This movement, like the first, incorporates the major-minor (happy-sad) duality that characterizes the expressive narrative of the symphony. In this case, however, the light of the major mode eventually vanquishes the minor-mode darkness, fulfilling the promise of the heroic ending, but sacrificing the dramatic coherence established previously in the symphony. It is possible, therefore, to interpret the first and last movements as expressive counterparts. Unlike the major-minor thematic struggle that permeated the first movement, the major-minor dichotomy of the first and last movements permits them to work together and complement each other. After all, as Bernstein puts it, these two movements “are like two huge arms that hold the three shorter middle movements cradled between them.”

The entire contradictory tone of the Seventh Symphony can be understood as a reflection of the composer’s equally contradictory personality, at least as Bernstein portrayed it. Leonard Bernstein described Mahler as “split right down the middle,” and it is easy to see how this curious personal quality manifests in his music, and this piece in particular. “Of what other composer can this be said?” Bernstein asked. “Can we think of Beethoven as both rough-hewn and epicene? Is Debussy both subtle and blatant? Mozart both refined and raw? Stravinsky both objective and maudlin? Unthinkable. But Mahler, uniquely, is all of these—rough-hewn and epicene, subtle and blatant, refined, raw, objective, maudlin, brash, shy, grandiose, self-annihilating, confident, insecure, adjective, opposite, adjective, opposite.” The Seventh Symphony is no exception.

— Faez Abdalla Abarca
Symphony No. 8 (1907)

The year 1965 marked Bernstein’s first time conducting Mahler’s Eighth Symphony in its entirety. He did so under the theme of the New York Philharmonic’s 1965-66 season, “Symphonic Forms in the Twentieth Century.” In a letter dated January 28, 1965, Leonard Bernstein wrote to the composer David Diamond,

The whole year is devoted to a survey of the symphony in the 20th century, including all 7 of Sibelius, owing to his centenary. And that’s another reason for doing your 5th instead of the Rounds. There’ll also be some others you’ll love—Vaughan Williams #4, Aaron #3, Nielsen #3, Bartók 2-pno Concerto, & Webern Op. 2, Mahler #7, #8 & #9! A big year, a lot of work: I look forward to it.

Before 1965, Bernstein had only conducted Part One (Veni, Creator Spiritus), and it was for a momentous occasion: the inaugural concert in Lincoln Center’s Philharmonic Hall (now David Geffen Hall) on September 23, 1962. The concert also included the Gloria from Beethoven’s Missa Solemnis and the world premiere of Aaron Copland’s Connotations for Orchestra. Throughout the years that followed the 1965 performance, he conducted Mahler’s Eighth two more times, one with the London Symphony Orchestra on April 17, 1966, and the second one with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra on August 30, 1975.

Gustav Mahler finished his Symphony No. 8 in E-flat major during the summer of 1906. That year, he wrote to his friend, the Dutch conductor Willem Mengelberg, detailing his feelings after finishing his Eighth Symphony:

It is the biggest thing I have done so far. And so individual in content and form that I cannot describe it in words. Imagine that the whole universe begins to vibrate and resound. These are no longer human voices, but planets and suns revolving.

As a two-movement symphony, Mahler’s Eighth is formally unusual; its two parts are a setting of the Latin hymn “Veni, Creator Spiritus” (which is attributed to the Archbishop of Mainz, Hrabanus Maurus) and the last scene of Goethe’s Faust. These two parts state two different texts, feature two different languages, and evoke two different epochs, all while maintaining, as Henry-Louis de La Grange has suggested, a cohesive thematic material and a unified subject of hope and redemption for humanity. But unlike Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9 and Mahler’s Third Symphony, both of which also contend with the human condition, the Eighth strays from symphonic norms by incorporating the human voice from its beginning to its end.

Mahler’s Eighth was nicknamed the “Symphony of a Thousand” by the German concert manager Emil Gutmann because the forces required to perform this massive work consist of
two mixed choruses, a boys’ choir, eight soloists for the second half, and a full orchestra. This grandiose orchestral force showcases the direct influence of Mahler on Bernstein’s compositional style, ranging from orchestration to text setting elements.

Even though Bernstein did not discuss Mahler’s Eighth Symphony extensively or conduct it as frequently as he did many of Mahler’s other works, the impact this symphony had on the American composer and conductor resonates in his compositional output. The inclusion of a boys’ choir can be seen in Bernstein’s own music; for instance, his Symphony No. 3, “Kaddish” (1963), and MASS (1971) include a boys’ choir to suggest innocence, purity and hope. Furthermore, and in keeping with Bernstein’s detection of contrasts in Mahler, and the juxtaposition of different languages in Mahler’s Eighth Symphony, Bernstein blends Hebrew, Aramaic, and English in the Symphony No. 3 and English and Latin in MASS.

— Kathy Acosta Zavala

**Das Lied von der Erde (1908–9)**

Leonard Bernstein didn’t hedge his opinion: he called Das Lied von der Erde (The Song of the Earth) “essential Mahler and therefore his greatest work.” Whether one believes Das Lied to be Mahler’s “greatest work,” it does hold a special place among Mahler’s compositions— and in music history writ large — which can best be understood in a series of dichotomies.

First, *Das Lied* is split roughly into two halves with regard to form. It is nominally in six movements:

1. “Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde” ("The Drinking Song of Earthly Woe")
2. "Der Einsame im Herbst" ("The Solitary One in Autumn")
3. "Von der Jugend" ("Youth")
4. "Von der Schönheit" ("Beauty")
5. "Der Trunkene im Frühling" ("The Drunkard in Spring")
6. "Der Abschied" ("The Farewell")

But the final movement is roughly equal in length to the first five put together. Thus the listener experiences a set of five shorter songs that balance the half-hour single movement at the end. Digging further, the final movement comprises two poems, and is itself split in half by a lengthy orchestral interlude.

This discussion of form brings up another dichotomy: is the work a song cycle or a symphony?

Composed in 1908 and 1909, *Das Lied* is scored for tenor and alto soloists (Mahler indicated that a baritone could be used in place of the alto) and large orchestra. The large forces seem to suggest that it is a symphony, and yet the care with which they are deployed call to mind orchestrated songs. Indeed, in draft materials, Mahler seems to suggest that the work could be for orchestra or piano, and the work has also been arranged for chamber orchestra several
times through the decades, notably by Arnold Schoenberg and his protégé Erwin Stein. Mahler’s original orchestrations are so delicate and restrained that long passages can go by in the chamber arrangements in which the differences between the chamber and full version are negligible. Given Mahler’s love of blurring genres, apparent not only in his earlier symphonies but in his earliest mature work, Das Klagende Lied, perhaps Das Lied can best be seen as the culmination of the two main threads of his compositional life: song and symphony. It is not one or the other, but both.

The text is derived from Hans Bethge’s Die chinesische Flöte — a collection of adaptations and translations of traditional Chinese poetry. Mahler further adapted and added to these works such that the resultant text is considerably altered, both in detail and sometimes underlying meaning, from the original Chinese poetry (another division: one foot in the West, one in the East). The Eastern nature of the subject matter is further underscored by extended use of the pentatonic scale and brief appearances from the whole-tone scale, the celesta, and the mandolin.

One passage that uses these instruments is the end of the “Abschied” movement (the end of the entire composition), a stunning musical moment that has become iconic. Harmonically unmoving, it’s a sort of meditation on the pentatonic scale, a sound that would be often referenced (or even imitated) by composers of the coming decades, from Grofé’s Grand Canyon Suite to Copland’s Appalachian Spring. Leonard Bernstein specifically highlighted this moment at the conclusion of his 1960 Young People’s Concert on Mahler’s music, as an example of another dichotomy that he believed defined his music: that of Mahler as the “end of the whole romantic 19th century tradition of composing” and the “beginning of modern music, of what we call the music of our time.” Bernstein was effusive in linking the text of the poem to his vision of Mahler’s place in music history:

At the very end of the poem the singer says, ‘This beautiful world blooms again, every spring, over and over, forever.’ That means the promise of everlasting life at the end of life. But it means something else too. It is like Mahler’s personal farewell to the old Romantic kind of German music, as if he knows it’s all over, and now must begin a new kind of music, which he begins right then and there... But at the same time he doesn’t want to say good-bye to the old music; he loves all that Wagner and Schubert so much: so he says good-bye sadly, unwillingly, so that at the end of the piece when the singer says the German word ewig, meaning forever, she sings it over and over again, as if not wishing to let go of this beauty.”

Before conducting the end of the work, sung by alto Helen Raab, he offered one piece of advice to his audience of children: “If this magic stillness at the end makes you feel like not clapping, then just don’t. I’ll understand.”

They clapped anyway.
— Thomas Peterson and Erin Plisco
Symphony No. 9 (1908–9)

What can be said about Bernstein’s relationship with Mahler’s Ninth symphony that Bernstein didn’t already say himself? For Bernstein, the Ninth was a profound, prophetic vision of the future, both artistic and otherwise. Bernstein pictures Mahler as tortured “at knowing he was the end of the line, [that] the last point in the great symphonic arc that begin with Haydn and Mozart, finished with him... not in a pretty bow, by any means, but in the fearful knot made out of his own nerves and sinews.”

For Bernstein, Mahler’s Ninth had a clear, if foreboding, message, a “message too true, telling something too dreadful to hear,” and it was the nature of this message that was responsible for the “neglect” which Mahler’s music had endured following his death in 1911. So, what was this message? In a word, death. In the series of Norton Lectures he delivered at Harvard in 1973, Bernstein devoted the fifth talk to the “20th Century Crisis,” outlining what he envisioned as Mahler’s message of not one but three distinct but wholly complete “deaths.” The first death was Mahler’s own, something of which Bernstein claims Mahler was “intensely aware,” using the far-fetched idea that the opening measures were “an imitation of the arrhythmia of [Mahler’s] failing heartbeat.” The second death is the “death of tonality,” which for Mahler (according to Bernstein) meant the “death of music itself, music as he knew it and loved it.” Bernstein elaborates:

All his last pieces are kinds of farewells to music, as well as to life. Think only of Das Lied von der Erde, with its final Abschied, and that controversial unfinished 10th Symphony. Even that one, which tried to take a tentative step into the Schoenbergian future and which has undergone so many attempts at completion, even that 10th, remains for me basically the one completed movement which is yet another heartbreaking Adagio saying farewell. But it was one farewell too many. I’m convinced that Mahler could never have finished the whole Symphony even if he had lived; he had said it all in the 9th.

With regard to the “death of tonality,” the symphony’s continued failure to arrive at tonal resolution, its insistence on chromatic ambiguity, and ultimately its failed final resolution in the final movement (the symphony starts in D but ends tentatively in D-flat) create a discourse of death that is far more concrete than Bernstein’s initial claim of an arrhythmia at the opening. The third and final death, as Bernstein described it, was much broader — he called it the “most important vision” — “the death of society, of our Faustian culture.” This idea is an extension of the symphony’s tonal ambiguity, with the end of tonal paradigm as an analogue for the human condition. The “tonal precipice” upon which the symphony teeters becomes, for Bernstein, the tipping point of the entire tonal tradition, and this crisis becomes a mirror for larger crises of the 20th century — the shift of society from rural to urban, from pastoral to industrial, from faith to faithlessness, from God to science. The fate of the tonal symphonic tradition as
Bernstein defined it in Mahler’s Ninth is the realization of a sense of the end of Western society’s unbroken chain of cultural development, innovation, and invention.

For Bernstein, Mahler’s prophetic vision encapsulated an entire “century of death,” and yet even when we face this bleak vision of deaths to come — accepting, as it were, our own mortality — for Bernstein we are driven, especially by the arts, to “persist in our search for immortality.” We are obligated to share our “critical feelings about the past, to try to describe and assess the present,” so that we might project ourselves toward an uncertain future, but a future nonetheless. Despite this insistence on a future, if uncertain, and his apparent faith in the human spirit to persist, he believed the human spirit was, at its core, the ultimate source of ambiguity. It is this same ambiguity which, in Bernstein’s view, generated the dualisms often associated with Mahler — a composer and conductor, a Jew who was also Christian, “sophisticated yet naïve” and “the provincial and the cosmopolitan.” Bernstein believed these conflicts led to the dramatic and sometimes frantic turns of Mahler’s music as well as his “ambivalent tonal attitudes.” For all of our awareness of mortality, for all our persistence in our search for a future, for Bernstein it was creativity alone that took us beyond the limits of our material condition. And for Bernstein, Mahler was precisely the embodiment of this modern crisis, the innate ambiguities of this condition being particularly present in the finale of his Ninth Symphony, “which is a sonic presentation of death itself and which paradoxically reanimates us every time we hear it.”

Bernstein’s vision of the Ninth as a symphony of death, however, is not limited only to these broad strokes, he views each movement as a “farewell” of its own and in this way each movement forms a more nuanced discourse, a sort of itemized list of the dearly departed. The first movement, a loose sonata form, is described by Bernstein as “a great novel, a tortured saga of tenderness and terror... of tortured counterpoint and harmonic resignation... It's been a farewell to love, to D major, a farewell to the tonic.” Mahler’s second movement, then, is based on a series of dances that fluctuate between simple playfulness and tensions of unsteady harmony and rhythms. This struggle aligns well with Bernstein’s interpretation of the symphony, but at the same time it is for Bernstein “...a sort of super Ländler,” and in it “we’ve experienced a farewell to the world of nature. It’s been a bitter reimagining of simplicity, naïveté, the earth pleasures we recall from adolescence.” The third movement, called by Mahler a “Rondo-Burleske,” is described by Bernstein as “...again a kind of scherzo, but this time grotesque. A farewell to the world of action, the urban cosmopolitan life, the cocktail party, the marketplace, the raucous careers and careenings of success, of loud and hollow laughter.” The movement is characterized by an elaborate and virtuosic display of richly orchestrated counterpoint, one of the conspicuous aspects of Mahler’s late works.

The “tonal precipice” upon which the symphony teeters, for Bernstein, places the entire symphony “on the edge of death,” itself, and it is only in this context that Mahler presents his last movement, an Adagio. Bernstein envisions this Adagio as Mahler’s “final farewell,” and as a “prayer for the restoration of life, of tonality, of faith.” Bernstein elaborates:
This is tonality, unashamed, presented in all its aspects ranging from the diatonic simplicity of the hymn tune that opens it through every possible chromatic ambiguity. It’s also a passionate prayer, moving from one climax to another climax each more searing than the last, but there are no solutions. And between these surges of prayer there is intermittently a sudden coolness, a wide spaced transparency, like an icy burning, a zen-like immobility of pure meditation. This is a whole other world of prayer, of quiet acceptance, but again, there are no solutions.

It is here, in this Adagio, that the most explicit of Bernstein’s “deaths” is presented. The “dying away” that he describes in the final moment of the symphony is a most appropriate description. These final moments are evocative and conjure an image of a body slowly expiring and the sound of that body’s labored, final breaths. The final ruminations of this body’s dying mind are captured in the repetitive iteration of the same musical thought presented in an ever diminishing and slowing musical texture. This musical passing is not violent, but somber, and it is not bitter-sweet but a reverie of fond remembrance. The music here and its resemblance to death can fit anywhere into Bernstein’s overarching vision of Mahler’s Ninth as a symphony of death, but it somehow feels intensely personal; by virtue of the music itself we experience this dying away vicariously, we resign ourselves to the end of our own personal journey through Mahler’s Ninth. And in this moment, we are in need of no mediation — we understand completely. For Bernstein, his journey through the Ninth, as punctuated by these final moments, is exhausting and purifying — it is for him a type of “purgatory, justifying all excess,” where we “ultimately encounter an apocalyptic radiance, a glimmer of what peace must be like.”

We glean that what Bernstein saw in Mahler’s Ninth was not just the end of Mahler’s life, but the end of a whole way of life, a monumental and transformative threshold, a tipping point for all human history. His reflections on these subjects are what Bernstein called Mahler’s “last will and testament,” but Bernstein, some 60 years on, had at least some perspective. He had seen the “century of death” that Mahler supposedly foresaw. But Bernstein had also seen a century of new, if painful, beginnings. The optimism of his lecture series and his desire to teach a new generation about the masterworks of the past attest that where Mahler saw no solutions to the modern crisis, Bernstein used Mahler in the service of a larger point — that humanity must carry on courageously ahead.

— Olman Alfaro Portugal and Blake Cesarz
Symphony No. 10 (1910)

When Bernstein was asked in a 1989 interview with Jonathan Cott if he would conduct a revised or edited version of Mahler’s Tenth symphony, Bernstein’s response was striking: “I have one question. Will it give me an orgasm?”

Whether a serious comment or a casual quip, this was certainly an unusual criterion on which to base a decision about whether to perform a work — especially considering the somber circumstances of this work, which Mahler did not finish because of his death from a heart valve infection. Only the first movement, the Adagio, was complete at the time of his death, but significant amounts of material, and specific detail, survived of the remaining movements.

There have been numerous attempts by composers and musicologists to take Mahler’s personal sketches of his symphony and “finish” the five-movement work. Deryck Cooke’s is the most widely performed of the revisions, but reconstructing the work was an international affair: other attempts include the American composer Clinton Carpenter, the German composer Hans Wollschläger, and the English composer Joe Wheeler. The Adagio, as the lone movement completed by Mahler, is the one most often performed, and Leonard Bernstein refused to perform any movement besides it. Convinced that the end of Mahler’s life was all about tragedy and sadness, given issues with his marriage and health, Bernstein stated that performing the revised movements would be doing a disservice to Mahler: “Somehow I think he was unable to live through that crisis, because there was no solution for him; he had to die with that symphony unfinished.”

In his 20-minute-plus Adagio, Mahler traverses through contrasting themes that build up to a monumental climax. He also hints at atonality, or the lack of a sense of a particular key as a reference point. This new emphasis on dissonance foreshadows music by modernists Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg in the 1910s and 1920s. And Bernstein remained skeptical of Mahler’s compositional techniques in his Tenth Symphony, perhaps a reflection of his own skepticism toward atonality; he found it fitting that Mahler died with the symphony incomplete: “I have never been convinced of those rhythmic experiments (modernistic and innovative rhythms) in the Scherzo, of the flirtation with atonality. I often wonder what would have happened had Mahler not died so young. I am afraid that the unfinished 10th must remain, for the present at least, the final tragedy of Mahler’s life.”

— Dennis Senkbeil