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The Symphony of Death or the Death of the Symphony? Observations on Mahler's Symphony No. 9

Abstract

A scrupulous study of facts related to Mahler's last completed work — his Ninth Symphony, made author of the article to revise a number of established views associated with this Mahler's composition and challenge, in particular, the programmatic “farewell” nature of the “Symphony of Death.”

Key words: Mahler, symphony, Ninth Symphony, programmatic music.

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«Симфония смерти» или «смерть симфонии»? (Наблюдения по поводу Девятой симфонии Малера)

Аннотация

Тщательное изучение целого ряда фактов, связанных с последним завершенным сочинением Малера — его Девятой симфонией, привело автора статьи к необходимости пересмотреть ряд устоявшихся взглядов, связанных с этим сочинением. В частности, автор подвергает сомнению мнение о программном — «прощальном» характере этой «Симфонии о смерти».

Ключевые слова: Малер, симфония, Девятая симфония, программная музыка.

Mahler's last completed work, the Ninth Symphony, has presented posterity with a formidable challenge. From a structural and harmonic point of view, this score is more complex than any of his earlier works, and its highly unusual movement sequence—two fast movements framed by two slow ones—seems to cry out for a programmatic explanation. Yet such an explanation has its own share of problems, giving rise to a debate that has gone on for almost a century. Many commentators have tried to frame that debate along the lines of the opposition between “program music” and “absolute music.” The composer himself felt this issue to be crucial; as is well known, he provided several of his earlier works with programs, only to withdraw them later. The extent to which the issue mattered to Mahler is just as apparent in the process of writing and revising these programs as in the fact of their eventual withdrawal. Yet from a 21st-century vantage point it is clear that the duality of program music and absolute music is by no means a mutually exclusive pair of opposites. On one hand, no “absolute” music is possible without “external” emotional and intellectual stimuli, and on the other, no “program”

music is viable if it is dependent on the program for its artistic integrity and cannot stand on its own feet as a composition with a solid, purely musical structure.

The mystique of the Ninth is greatly enhanced by the fact that it was premiered 13 months after Mahler's death. Thus the composer was unable not only to make any final revisions to the score but also to make any statements, oral or written, about the new work. Still, the Ninth has been interpreted, from the start, as conveying a specific message, and it has become commonplace to include it in Mahler's "Farewell" trilogy, along with the composer's previous work, *Das Lied von der Erde*, and the incomplete Tenth Symphony. Critics who attended the premiere of the Ninth heard a valedictory quality in the work. Of course, this was partly due to the fact of the posthumous premiere, yet the critics tried to support their emotional reactions by rational arguments as well. Mahler's first biographer, Richard Specht, heard "sunset" and "farewell" in the work. An anonymous reviewer went much further and exclaimed: "Whoever wants to learn how to cry should listen to the first movement of this Ninth, that grandiose and wonderful song of farewell for ever!" The reactions of Guido Adler, William Ritter, Bruno Walter, Willem Mengelberg and Alban Berg were all basically similar. Even the earliest listeners were aware of the musical connections between the Ninth and such vocal works as "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen" from the Rückert cycle, or "Der Abschied" from *Das Lied*. Decades later, Leonard Bernstein, in his celebrated Harvard lectures, certainly overdramatized Mahler's alleged "fear of death" and it is therefore understandable that Vera Micznik, in a 1996 study, fell into the other extreme and denied that the symphony might have anything whatsoever to do with death. Even Henry-Louis de La Grange has cautioned against the "farewell" interpretation in the expanded, English edition of his encyclopedic Mahler monograph.

It cannot be denied that Mahler was enjoying

excellent health at the time of composing the Ninth Symphony. He was looking forward to going to New York where, after his appearances at the Metropolitan Opera the previous season, he was about to take over the music directorship of the Philharmonic. The biographical facts show clearly that Mahler did not live in the shadow of death in the summer of 1909, and the symphony's middle movements have at least as much brio as any earlier work of his. The often-quoted, wrenchingly personal notations in the score, lamenting the passing of youth and the repeated uses of the word "Lebewohl" do not necessarily mean a farewell to life in general.

Nevertheless, it is important not to oversimplify the relationship between the composer's life circumstances and the music. Above all, we shouldn't believe that a composer can't write sad music in happy times and vice versa. If there ever was an artist whose personality was characterized by irresolvable contradictions, it was Mahler. Well versed in the Roman Catholic liturgy, Mahler must have been familiar with the Responsory text "Media vita in morte sumus" ("In the midst of life, we are in death"). No matter how much we are in the middle of life's hustle and bustle, the thought of death may always lurk there like a dark shadow that can never be completely driven away.

Is it possible objectively to examine the extent to which Mahler's Ninth can be considered a valedictory work? Can analysis hope to provide an answer to such a subjective question? This is certainly a legitimate question to ask since any analysis would be sterile without an affective relationship between the analyst and the work; yet that affective relationship can never be more than a purely personal matter if it cannot be supported by incontrovertible observations.

The central premise of the present study is that the farewell idea is manifest not only in the thematic and tempo characters of the symphony but also in the way in which the individual movements allude to movements in the earlier symphonies, reinterpreting them and comment-

ing on them. While commentators are justified in seeing the Ninth as the beginning of a new era that, tragically, was not to be, the work is also a summary, a look back. It is well known that Mahler's symphonies are pervaded by certain recurrent topoi such as the *ländler*, the chorale or the march. In the Ninth Symphony, Mahler polarizes these topoi more than ever, making them sound tragic or turning them into grotesque parodies. In the Ninth, a *ländler* or a march is no longer simply a *ländler* or a march, but rather a commentary on earlier *ländlers* and marches, sometimes leading to a total deconstruction—"death"—of those topoi. This fact makes it possible to interpret the Ninth as a kind of stocktaking, which may well include the thought of death, without our having to believe that Mahler felt near physical death at the time of writing the work.

Mahler himself compared his Ninth Symphony to his Fourth, surprising many commentators (even though he stressed that the new work was "completely different"). At first sight, the distance seems enormous between the Fourth Symphony's serene simplicity and naive heavenly bliss on one hand, and the tragic and sarcastic tone of the Ninth on the other. Yet on closer look, one begins to see the parallels between these two four-movement symphonies. Both proceed from a contemplative beginning towards more intense activity and then back to contemplation. The neo-classical idyll of the opening of the Fourth and the nostalgia of the "Andante comodo" in the Ninth stem from a common root: both themes move forward steadily but evenly, unlike what happens at the beginning of, say, the First Symphony where the music gets underway only gradually, and unlike the brass fanfares (very different from one another) that open the Third, Fifth, and Seventh Symphonies. In the opening movements of both the Fourth and the Ninth, some dramatic events eventually interrupt the initial calm.

The second movements of both the Fourth and the Ninth symphonies are distortions of the

Ländler topos. The scordatura violin solo of the Fourth was inspired, as Mahler himself disclosed, by Death playing his fiddle, while the Ninth offers an extreme exaggeration of the style of the *Ländler* and its more urbane cousin, the waltz. It is noteworthy that the violin section in the Ninth is instructed to play *wie Fiedeln* (like country fiddles), similarly to the violin solo of the Fourth.

The respective third movements are like night and day: the hymn-like Adagio of the Fourth is the total opposite of the "Rondo-Burlesque" of the Ninth. Yet each may be interpreted as a kind of extreme life experience; both the intense emotional outpouring and the cruel caricature of life's activities require to be followed by a retreat into some otherworldly vision. However, that vision in 1909 no longer manifests itself in the childish pleasures of the heavenly kitchen, but rather in an extremely pure instrumental song devoid of all concrete plot elements. Still, it is significant that the same performance instruction may be found at the end of both movements: *morendo*, and *ersterbend*, respectively. In the final analysis, we can see that the two symphonies that Mahler considered related both dealt with the transition from life to death, albeit in quite different ways.

Yet in the Ninth, several other strands from earlier symphonies come together as well. The unique tonal plan of the symphony (opening movement in D, finale in D flat) is the exact reverse of the plan of the Fifth (opening movement in C-sharp minor, finale in D). The energetic A minor of the Ninth's third movement echoes the tempestuous second movement of the Fifth; moreover, each symphony exhibits the unusual characteristic of having each movement in a different key (with the only exception of the third movement of the Fifth, which is in D major, like the finale). If we juxtapose the two sets of keys (Fifth: C-sharp minor – A minor – D major – F major – D major; Ninth: D major – C major – A minor – D-flat major), we may notice the pitch collection D – C sharp (D flat) – A, to which each

symphony adds one other key lower than D on the circle of fifths (F and C, respectively).

The first movement of the Ninth Symphony, like that of the Fifth, is in a slow tempo, and there is a definite connection between the “Andante comodo” of the later work and the funeral march of

the earlier one. The notation “Wie ein Kondukt” of the first movement of the Fifth returns in the recapitulation of the first movement of the Ninth: “Wie ein schwerer Kondukt.” The two passages are related through the use of the trumpet, as well as through a common, four-note descending motif.

1

In the Fifth Symphony, the funeral-march character appears at the very beginning, while in the Ninth, it does not occur until shortly before the movement's end. One might venture the hypothesis that the funeral march, and the thought of death it symbolizes, served as a point of departure in the Fifth Symphony, while in the Ninth it is presented as a conclusion, as a logical and inescapable final outcome. This unsettling vision, one must add, will be resolved at the end of the movement by the recall of the idyllic beginning.

Both symphonies traverse the phases of deep mourning, tempestuous outbursts and final resignation, but the order and relative emphasis of these phases are different in each case. In the Fifth,

these phases are spread over two movements: the “Wie ein Kondukt” opening and the second movement, marked “Stürmisch bewegt. Mit grösster Vehemenz.” The “Kondukt” movement already contains the first two of these elements (the second begins in m. 155); the second movement starts with the outburst and, after a long and complicated emotional journey, reaches a lyrical plateau before the final collapse. In the Ninth Symphony, a single movement, the opening “Andante comodo” encompasses all these contrasts. The resigned idyll with which the movement begins soon gives way to the first display of passion (m. 27); this material will later lead to the outburst marked “Mit Wut” (mm. 174ff).

2

After several cycles of nostalgic introspection and eruptions of anger, we finally reach the lamento of the “Wie ein Kondukt” section (Ex. 1/b). A curious intermediate stage in this process is the “Schattenhaft” episode that begins in m. 254. In his book on Mahler, Adorno spends some time on this passage, noting that this is the only occurrence of the word “Schattenhaft” in Mahler’s music outside the scherzo of the Seventh Symphony. As Adorno writes, “this simile, borrowed from visual space, adds a certain exteriority to the inner musical space.” This exteriority, however, concerns more than the relationship between music and the visual dimension. It also shows a new side of the “inner musical space” itself: instead of the phenomenon itself, it presents us with the mere shadow of that phenomenon, as if we were suddenly contemplating the world from the outside, not in itself but rather through one of its secondary manifestations. This explains the singular trajectory of the first movement: the *Lebewohl* which, to most commentators, represented the fundamental mood of the movement, is in fact the final result of a complex dynamic process that covers a wide range of extreme emotions. In other words, Mahler does represent death in the symphony, but he does so in conjunction with life as it passes; the two are inseparable.

The duality between “exteriority” and “inwardness” that Adorno talks about appears in the contrast between the symphony’s inner and outer movements as well. “*Rasch ins Leben hinein*” – wrote Goethe, whom Mahler venerated above all poets, in his poem “An Schwager Kronos.” This feeling, “quickly into life,” into the state of *media vita*, appears in the second and third movements of the Ninth Symphony. Yet again, this life is viewed “from the outside,” as it were. In the second movement, the *Ländler* turns into a caricature. It is no coincidence that this is the only Mahler symphony where the actual word *Ländler* is used in the score as a

character description. It is not the movement itself that Mahler calls a *Ländler*, only its tempo (“*Im Tempo eines gemächlichen Ländlers*”). Yet that tempo is only one of three that alternate throughout the movement; the first *Ländler* (etwas *täppisch und sehr derb*) is followed by a grandiose waltz fantasy built on two contrasting themes, and then by another, slower *Ländler*, which Adorno called “*überösterreichisch*.” The movement consists of the free development of these three groups of material. Several analysts felt that development to be “vulgar.” After the *schwerfällig* pedal points and dominant-tonic clashes of the opening section (mm. 10ff.), the shrill grace notes of the horns (m. 40), the tonal distortions (m. 90.), the wild fortissimos of the trombones and tuba (m. 148), and the increasing intensity of the recapitulations are almost reminiscent of Maurice Ravel’s *La Valse*, written a decade and a world war later. Adorno saw the earliest example of musical collage technique in this movement, while a recent study interprets it as a reflection of the decadent world of turn-of-the-century Vienna.

In this second movement, the devastating commentary concerns not a specific *Ländler* movement but rather the *Ländler* as such. This dance type is present in all the symphonies except No. 8. In the third movement, by contrast, he revisited a movement type that had only two precedents in his oeuvre, and thus the allusion is much more concrete. Both the Fifth and the Seventh Symphonies end with “*Rondo-Finales*,” building upon the classical tradition of the triumphant finale. In other works, he took pains to distance himself from that tradition. “*Mahler war ein schlechter Jasager*”—wrote Adorno, criticizing the finale of the Seventh; the philosopher claimed that the composer was “subjectively incapable” of happy endings. In the Ninth, Mahler seems to withdraw and annul all previous attempts at such endings. The shape of the themes alludes directly to the previous *Rondo-Finales*:

3 *Allegro giocoso. Frisch.* *Symphony No. 5: V / 72-75*
Leggiero

a 

Tempo I (Allegro ordinario) *Symphony No. 7: V / 6-10*
 Tr. 1.

b 

Allegro assai. Sehr trotzig *Symphony No. 9: III / 63-67*

c 

The clear diatonic structures of the Fifth and Seventh Symphonies are replaced by chromatic distortions in the Ninth, almost like the “mistunings” familiar from János Kárpáti’s Bartók analyses. As in Bartók, “mistunings” are tools of ironic alienation. The texture is strongly contrapuntal, but there are important differences in the actual working-out of that texture. The counterpoint in the Fifth Symphony is classical in a Bachian sense: the march theme is joined by

a countersubject moving in equal eighth-notes. In the Ninth, on the other hand, the march theme gets into an “argument” with its own fragments; in the course of the development, Mahler juxtaposes quarter-notes and eighths with quarter-note triplets. The second thematic group (m. 109.) provocatively introduces a quasi-popular song, incongruously using the whole-tone scale, creating a surprisingly “angular” effect.

L'istesso tempo
 4 **IV. 1** *Leggiero* *IX szimf. III / 109-116*



Particularly noteworthy is the episode that begins in m. 347, where a new espressivo melody, sharply contrasting with the previous materials, is formed out of a Doppelschlag motif derived from the preceding fugato. Suddenly, the cruel humor is swept aside, and for a moment it conjures up a lyrical idyll. In the sketches,

Mahler repeatedly uses the word “Schatten” at this moment. Similarly to the “Schattenhaft” episode in the first movement (or even more so), this section in D major seems to evoke an alternative reality. It is a vision that passes as quickly as it appeared as the clarinets transform the idyllic melody into a grotesque shriek (m. 445).

5 *Klar.* *IX szimf. III / 444-445*

ff *sf*

This musical “grimace” was a direct influence on the diabolical scherzo movements of Shostakovich. In the context of Mahler’s own works, its meaning probably lies in making Romantic feelings appear ridiculous. Although this episode is followed by a more or less conventional recapitulation, it cannot be “business as usual” after the shock: the shrill trills of the woodwind and the horns make the cruel caricature even more biting (mm. 538-541). The movement is finally crowned by a “Più stretto” coda, where the tempo increases to Presto, intensifying the emotions to a state of frenzy.

Human activity, the world of media vita has thus turned absurd: we must escape the whirlwind and recover the inner peace that has been lost. This is what the final Adagio accomplishes, regardless of whether or not we feel that we are actually saying farewell to life itself. The first slow finale in a Mahler symphony is found in the Third; it is a movement that, according to the composer’s original program, was about Love. Its broad cantilena, as many commentators have observed, is related to the D-flat major Lento as-

sai movement from Beethoven’s last string quartet, Op. 135. From a hymn-like opening, it gradually rises to the ecstatic fortissimo, with full brass and timpani, of the final section. The finale themes of the Third and Ninth Symphonies are sufficiently close to be comparable. The latter shares its D-flat major tonality with the above-mentioned Beethoven movement. Similarly to its counterpart from the Third Symphony, it is a regular period in common time, scored for strings alone. Yet on closer look, the differences seem even more important than the similarities. In spite of the 4/4 time signature, the theme from the Third Symphony emphasizes half-notes; the melody moves in halves and quarters, while a similar metric structure is notated with quarter- and eighth-notes in the Ninth Symphony. Even more significantly, the melody in the Ninth does not stay within the limits of the diatonic scale; it modulates freely and frequently, and even makes use of the whole-tone scale (negating the entire major-minor system), in a direct reminiscence of the Rondo-Burlesque’s second theme (see Ex. 4.)

6 *Langsam Ruhigvoll. Empfinden.* *III szimf. VI / 1-8*
VI. I G-Saite

pp

Sehr gebunden, sehr ausdrucksvoll gesungen
D-Saite

Molto adagio
Grosser Ton

IX szimf. IV / 3-11

In other words, the calming, lyrical melody once again appears in a cruelly “mistuned” form, as if it were no longer possible to sing an expressive major-mode theme without distortions, in the classical manner. Nor does the general form of the movement follow the cyclical crescendo surges of the Third Symphony (which is ultimately related to the vision of the Resurrection in the Second, or the Faustian apotheosis in

the Eighth). Rather, it is an emotionally much less balanced, meandering melody, interrupted by dramatic outbursts; it even recalls one of the most tragic movements of the “funereal” opening movement (Ex. 7). After the last fortissimo climax, this melody suddenly collapses, and literally disintegrates before the “ersterbend” ending. If this is not a musical image of dying, then nothing is.

7 *Tr.* *IX szimf. I / 44-45*

Tr. 1 IX szimf. IV / 118-119

Yet there are several ways to contemplate death. In a recent lecture, Morten Solvik compared the conclusion of the symphony to the farewell scene from Goethe's *Egmont*. This noble freedom fighter, imprisoned and condemned to death, anticipates his own imminent execution full of love for life, suffering but with his head held high. His words define a context for the Mahler symphony that the majority of previous commentators have not considered: this question need not be approached exclusively from the point of view of the composer's own concrete life circumstances.

Of course, the “ersterbend” ending of the Ninth was by no means Mahler's last word as a composer. Whatever we might think of the various reconstructions of the Tenth, the sketches seem to indicate that here the composer would have, in some way, effected a “return to life” (*retour à la vie*, as Kodály said of Bartók's First String Quartet). With some oversimplification, we may say of the opening Adagio that it picks

up where the last movement of the Ninth had left off. Here, as well as in the remaining four movements of the symphony, Mahler was struggling, as is well known, with the crisis in his private life, which came to a head during the summer of 1910. Although the ending, once more, is a soft, ethereal Adagio, we have reason to interpret that as a passionate declaration of love for Alma. (That was, at least, the opinion of Deryck Cooke, the author of the best-known and most successful realization of the Tenth.) “Für dich leben! Für dich sterben! Almschi!” -- wrote Mahler in the score, immediately before the ending. As we see, the thought of death is still present here, but then, it followed Mahler throughout his compositional career. The uniqueness of the Ninth Symphony, therefore, lies not in the idea of death per se, but in the singular way it was expressed, through direct references to concrete elements from the earlier symphonies -- references that amount to a complete “deconstruction” of the elements in question.

However much Mahler may have enjoyed life at the time of writing, the work itself represents the collapse of an entire world. And this collapse is not made any less tragic by the distant hope that on the ruins of the old world, a new one might be born some day.

Notes

1. Abendsonnen- und Abschiedstimmung // Illustriertes Wiener Extrablatt. 1912. Juni 27. See: *Floros C.* Gustav Mahler. Bd III: Die Symphonien. Wiesbaden, 1985. S. 268.
2. “Wenn einer das Weinen lernen will, dann höre er sich den ersten Satz dieser Neunten an, das große, herrliche Lied vom Nimmerwiedersehen!” // Fremden-Blatt. 1912. Juni 27. See: *Floros C.* Op. cit. S. 268.
3. Ibid.
4. Mengelberg’s notations in his personal copy of the score were published by Peter Andraschke. See: *Andraschke P.* Gustav Mahlers IX. Symphonie: Komposition-sprozess und Analyse. Wiesbaden, 1976. S. 80–84.
5. *Berg A.* Briefe an seine Frau (ed. Franz Willnauer). Munich, 1965.
6. *Bernstein L.* The unanswered question: six talks at Harvard. Harvard University Press, 1976. P. 319.
7. *Micznik V.* The Farewell Story of Mahler’s Ninth Symphony // 19th Century Music. 1996. 20/2. P. 144–166.
8. *Grange H.-L. de la.* Gustav Mahler. Vol. 4: A New Life Cut Short (1907–1911). Oxford, 2008.
9. Letter to Bruno Walter, April 1, 1910. “Es ist da etwas gesagt, was ich seit längster Zeit auf den Lippen habe – vielleicht (als Ganzes) am ehesten der 4. an die Seite zu stellen. (Doch ganz anders.)”
10. *Adorno T. W.* Mahler. Eine musikalische Physiognomik. Frankfurt, 1960. S. 98. The word also appears among the sketches of the third movement see below.
11. *Floros C.* Op. cit. S. 282. Quotes several examples.
12. *Adorno T.* Op. cit. S. 209.
13. *Draughon F.* Dance of Decadence: Class, Gender, and Modernity in the Scherzo of Mahler’s Ninth Symphony // Journal of Musicology. 2003. XX/3. P. 388–413.
14. *Adorno T.* Op. cit. S. 180–181.
15. *Floros C.* Op. cit. S. 287.
16. This conclusion is not weakened by the circumstance that, according to several scholars, the possibility of life after death is adumbrated at the end of the work.
See: *Hefling S.* The Ninth Symphony // The Mahler Companion. Oxford, 1999. P. 490.
17. *Solvik M.* The death of transfiguration: Memory and Demise in Gustav Mahler’s Ninth Symphony. Lecture at the annual meeting of the American Musicological Society kongresszusán. Indianapolis. 2010. Nov. 7.
18. On the Tenth Symphony, see: *Matthews C.* The Tenth Symphony // The Mahler Companion. P. 491–507; *Rothkamm J.* The last works // The Cambridge Companion to Mahler. Cambridge, 2007. P. 150–161; *Grange H.-L. de la.* Op. cit. P. 1452–1529.