Program Notes

by April L. Racana

15 Feb | 17 Feb | 20 Feb

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)
Symphony No. 9 in D major

The last complete symphony composed by Mahler, this Ninth Symphony, is often grouped in a trilogy with his two other late symphonic works: *Das Lied von der Erde* and the unfinished Tenth Symphony. There are some who say Mahler intentionally avoided labeling *Das Lied von der Erde* as his ninth symphony, due to his superstitious nature, given that both Beethoven's and Schubert's last complete symphonic works were their ninth, and Bruckner's ninth was left incomplete due to his death.

Regardless of this purported hesitancy to commit to writing his ninth symphony, Mahler began composing this work in the spring of 1909, completing it in April of the following year. And perhaps in an attempt to cheat fate, the composer almost immediately began work on his tenth symphony. But before he could complete the Tenth Symphony, Mahler died in May of 1911. The Ninth Symphony had yet to be performed publicly, but on June 26, 1912 Mahler's last complete symphony was premiered by Bruno Walter directing the Vienna Philharmonic.

Partially due to this performance just over a year after his death, and also partly due to his continuous search for answers about death (and life) that pervaded many of his works, including this one, Mahler's Ninth Symphony

is often seen as his farewell symphony. It had only been a few years prior to his writing this work, that Mahler's four and half year old daughter, Maria, succumbed to scarlet fever and diphtheria in July of 1907. Shortly after he had buried his daughter, Mahler was informed that he himself had a serious heart condition. Hence his renewed obsession with life and death was not without reason.

In 1908, Mahler's wife Alma rented a house in the South Tirol Mountains in an attempt to give her husband the respite he needed. Having previously been active his whole life in the outdoors it was quite an adjustment for the composer with his weakened heart condition. In a letter to Bruno Walter, Mahler expressed some of his frustrations:

> "I confess that…this is the greatest calamity that has ever befallen me. … Where my 'work' is concerned, it is rather depressing to have to begin learning one's job all over again. I cannot work at my desk. My mental activity must be complemented by physical activity.… An ordinary, moderate walk gives me such a rapid pulse and such palpitations that I never achieve the purpose of walking – to forget my body.… For many years I have been used to constant and vigorous exercise, roaming about in the mountains and woods, and then, like a kind of jaunty bandit, bearing home my drafts. I used to go to my desk only as a peasant goes into his barn, to work up my sketches."

When Bruno Walter indicated that he thought Mahler might be making more of his illness than was warranted, Mahler responded strongly:

> "It is only here, in solitude, that I might come to myself and become conscious of myself. For since that panic fear which overcame me that time, all I have tried has been to avert my eyes and close my ears. If I am to find the way back to myself again, I must surrender to the horrors of

loneliness.… But it is certainly not that hypochondriac fear of death, as you suppose. I had already realized that I shall have to die. But without trying to explain or describe to you something for which there are perhaps no words at all, I'll just tell you that at a blow I have simply lost all the clarity and quietude I ever achieved; and that I stood vis-à-vis de rien, and now at the end of life am again a beginner who must find his feet."

Mahler's continuous struggle with life and death seems to have found its most profound voice in the Ninth Symphony. The range of emotions the composer explores throughout this work expresses his tremendous struggle with facing both aspects of humanity. The work itself is out of balance with the usual form, using four movements instead of three, which are arranged in an unusual sequence: opening with a slow movement *Andante comodo*, followed by two faster dance-like movements – *Ländlers* and *Rondo Burleske*, and closing with an even slower fourth movement, *Adagio*.

The opening of the first movement, with its halting rhythm, is said to represent the composer's own faltering heartbeat, which persists throughout the movement. An interval of a falling second can be heard in many variations as well, taking as its model it seems, the 'farewell' motif from Beethoven's Piano Sonata '*Les adieux*', another reason that this work is considered by some to be the composer's farewell symphony.

The scherzo that follows presents three dances with alternating tempos. The opening ländler is marked in Mahler's own words: *'etwas tappisch und sehr derb'* which can be translated as leisurely, clumsy, heavy-footed and coarse. The second dance is more like a waltz at a quick pace. And the last, another ländler, is performed at a slower tempo than the first. The third movement's burlesque is marked *sehr trotzig*, or in other words, very defiant, and leaves the audience in no doubt with its frenzied pace and demands on the musicians at hand.

The closing *Adagio* brings the work full circle and recalls not only the motifs found in the previous movements, but hearkens back to lieder composed in prior years, including *Das Lied von der Erde*, as well as *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, and even *Kindertotenlieder* written two years prior to his daughter's death, yet written to lament the deaths of children. At this point, one can sense in Mahler's musical gestures a resolution, reconciling years of struggle as he comes to terms with life and death and finds a sense of peace. As Bruno Walter stated: "*Der Abschied* might well have been used as the title of the ninth symphony…[It] grew to be a tragically moving and noble paraphrase of the farewell feeling. A unique soaring between farewell sadness and a vision of Heavenly Light…"

Work composed: 1912 **World premiere:** 1912, Wien
Instrumentation: Piccolo, 4 flutes, 4 oboes (4th doubling on english horn), 3 clarinets, Es clarinet, bass clarinet, 4 bassoons (4th doubling on contra bassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, 2 timpani, percussions (glocken spiel, tamtam, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum,3 deep bells), harp, strings

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