

Program Notes for the Subscription Concerts

by April L. Racana

The 858th Subscription Concert

Bunkamura Orchard Hall, 15 February

The 859th Subscription Concert

Suntory Hall, 25 February

The 91st Subscription Concert

Tokyo Opera City, 26 February

Wolfgang Amadus Mozart (1756-91)

Piano Concerto No.20 in D minor, K. 466

Orchard

- I Allegro (ca. 13 min.)
- II Romance (ca. 9 min.)
- III Allegro assai (ca. 8 min.)

By the time Mozart had left the service of the Archbishop in Salzburg to pursue his musical career in Vienna in 1781, he had already composed six piano concertos. But it was during his years in Vienna that he not only relied on additional compositions in this genre to establish himself both as a composer and as a pianist, but also depended on them for financial support. Some might say he was in fact shrewd in his timing for composing and presenting some of these works for public, as many were premiered during the Lenten season when the majority of theatres in the region were closed, so that competition for an audience was greatly reduced.

His business acumen aside, Mozart's renown for his mastery as a concerto composer continues to this day. Scholars point to his development as a composer

through his various concerti, the first of which was composed when he was still a child at the age of eleven. The last was composed in 1791, the same year of his death. The first concerti were more along the lines of arrangements of other composers' sonatas, with the addition of orchestral interludes and accompaniments. But it wasn't long before he created his own thematic material on his way to composing 27 piano concertos, more than any other composer.

The *Piano Concerto in D minor No. 20* was the first of only two concerti that were composed in a minor mode. Premiered on February 11, 1785 in Vienna with Mozart himself as the soloist, the finale was not even rehearsed, since, as related by his father Leopold who had arrived the day before the premiere, his son was still supervising the copying of parts. In addition, the cadenzas were not written out and are believed to have been improvised for that first performance. In fact, it seems

the composer never got around to writing out his cadenzas for this work, so that the most well known cadenzas for this dramatic ‘revolutionary’ work were written out by none other than Beethoven, who himself had improvised his cadenzas at a memorial concert for Mozart on March 31, 1795. And although the intensity of the minor key

pervades throughout, the composer brings us to a brilliant close in D major, reflective of the 18th century tradition and perhaps a nod to the hope of overcoming the difficulties in revolutionary times.

Instrumentation: flute, 2 oboes, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings, solo piano

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) Symphony No. 5 in C-sharp minor

Orchard

- I In gemessenem Schritt Streng
Wie ein Kondukt (ca. 12 min.)**
- II Stürmisch bewegt. Mit grösster
Vehemenz (ca. 15 min.)**
- III Kräftig, nicht zu schnell
(ca. 17 min.)**
- IV Adagietto (ca. 9 min.)**
- V Rondo - Finale (ca. 15 min.)**

Mahler’s Fifth Symphony marks, at least in hindsight, the beginning of what is termed his middle period, together with his Sixth and Seventh Symphonies. Not only had the composer begun his fourth decade, but he also had a nearly fatal health scare when he experienced a major hemorrhage in February of 1901. In spite of this incident he was on the top of his game professionally as the principal director of the Vienna Philharmonic and as director of the Vienna Court Opera. He was established well enough that he was even able to retreat to his own villa in

the south of Austria, where he began sketching out the first movements of this work during the summer of 1901.

It was later that same year he met Alma Schindler, whom he married shortly thereafter. The following summer found the composer completing the final movements of this work with his new wife at his side and a baby on the way. Apparently, Alma was a great support for Mahler, on a personal as well as professional level, being a musician and composer herself. Not only did she provide inspiration for his creative juices, (the *Adagietto* has been said to be a love song written for her), but she also acted as copyist for him. And when copying parts of the Fifth Symphony she even provided critique for her husband, pointing out a passage where the percussion seemed a bit on the heavy side. Mahler agreed and made the necessary changes.

There is a marked shift in his symphonic writing during this middle period, whether due to his personal circumstances or whether he was simply maturing as a composer, is left up to much debate. However, one can easily discern a distinct departure from the previous symphonic works whose focus was the infusion of song with symphony. Although there are still passing references to lieder he was composing at the time, the focus was away from programmatic music. Instead, the development of intricate instrumental themes can be heard, especially reflecting the study of Bach’s counterpoint techniques as Mahler masterfully weaves those throughout the work.

Although the Fifth Symphony is divided into five separate movements, these movements have been delineated into three over-arching parts. Part I includes the opening *Funeral March* as well as the second movement, *Allegro*. The former acting as an opening prelude of sorts to the latter, and the two presented in reverse of the traditional symphonic format, with the faster movement delayed. The *Scherzo* is the centerpiece of the work and makes up the whole of Part II. It is said to give a nod to Strauss, and in all its complexities it juxtaposes the *ländler* and the *waltz*. Referring to his move away from the integration of song with symphony, Mahler stated: “The human voice would be absolutely out of place here. There is no need for words, everything is purely musically expressed.” Part III is made up of the final two movements of the

symphony. The *Adagietto* utilizes only strings and also acts as a prelude to final movement, *Rondo-Finale*. It is here where his use of counterpoint is perhaps developed to the greatest extent.

The work was premiered in October of 1904, in Cologne, after numerous revisions. Following this first performance Mahler is quoted as saying: “Nobody understood it. I wish I could conduct the first performance fifty years after my death.” Perhaps as a consequence of this perception he continued to revise the work for many years afterward, with a final revision in 1911 just prior to his death. After this last revision, Mahler again acknowledged his move into a new period of his creative life when he commented:

“I have finished the Fifth. I had in fact to re-instrumentate the whole of it. I simply cannot understand how I could have fallen back into such beginner’s errors at that time. Evidently the routine I had developed in the first four symphonies let me down completely on this occasion – when a completely new style required a new technique.”

Instrumentation: 4 flutes (doubling on piccolos), 3 oboes (doubling on English horns), 3 clarinets (doubling on E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet), 3 bassoons (doubling on contrabassoon), 6 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, bass drum with cymbals, snare drum, tamtam, cymbals, triangle, slapstick, glockenspiel), harp, strings

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) Symphony No. 6 in A minor "Tragic"

Opera City

Suntory

- I Allegro energico, ma non troppo**
(ca. 22 min.)
- II Scherzo** (ca. 14 min.)
- III Andante moderato** (ca. 11 min.)
- IV Finale** (ca. 32 min.)

Mahler had acknowledged, after completing revisions to his Fifth Symphony, that he had begun developing a new style of symphonic writing in what is now termed his 'middle period' which included the Sixth and Seventh Symphonies as well. He was apparently continuing to move away from programmatic music and focus on more purely instrumental writing (without infusion of lied and vocal parts as he had previously done in his first three symphonies). However, the tragic intensity of *Symphony No. 6* seemed to surprise many as it was in such strong contrast to what was going on in his personal and professional lives.

Not only was Mahler holding the prestigious position as the director of the Vienna Court Opera, but he also continued his post as principal director of the Vienna Philharmonic. He had established his summers as a time for retreat where he could focus on his compositions at his new villa in southern Austria. And in 1901 he had met Alma Schindler whom he married and brought with him to his new retreat the following summer with their first child on the way. It was in the summer of 1903 with

his newborn daughter joining them, that Mahler began composing his Sixth Symphony. And the summer after, with his second daughter in tow, he completed the work. It is perplexing to some then, the serious underlying tone of the entire symphony, the only symphonic work that ends firmly in a minor tonality with seemingly no hope.

The 'fate' theme that is prevalent throughout the work is characterized by the strong marching rhythm underneath the harmonic shift from A-major to A-minor tonality. Mahler described the work as representative of the 'hero' who attempts to persevere but ultimately is cut down by three fateful 'blows'. Some have drawn parallels to the composer's own life as if he had written this work in a prophetic manner predicting his own downfall, his wife Alma seemingly supporting this theory:

"No work had poured from his heart so directly as this one. We were both in tears. So deeply did we feel this music and the sinister premonitions it disclosed. The Sixth is Mahler's most personal creation and a prophetic one at that. In it...he truly anticipated his own personal life."

The events to which his wife was referring, the three 'blows' that came after the work was premiered included, in 1907, him ultimately losing his post as director at the Vienna Opera due at least

in part to strong anti-Semitic sentiments at the time. During the summer of the same year when on their usual retreat, his elder daughter contracted scarlet fever and died. And the third and proverbial final blow came when he was diagnosed with a serious heart condition, that "fell(ed) him as a tree is felled."

It is difficult not to draw parallels between the ensuing events in Mahler's life and the fateful themes in this work. Especially when so much of his work was intent on exploring humanities' ways of dealing with life and death issues. But whether Mahler was composing in a prophetic way, or simply further exploring life and death will continue to be discussed by scholars it seems. Mahler himself stated: "My Sixth will present riddles, the solution of which only a generation will dare to apply itself which has previously absorbed and digested my first five symphonies."

The first movement is presented in traditional classical form complete with repeated exposition and presenting not only the 'fate' theme but also the contrasting 'Alma' theme in the violins. Originally Mahler had written the *Scherzo* movement to

follow, but when rehearsing for the premiere decided to move the slower third movement, *Andante Moderato*, to follow the first instead. The first edition had already been printed, but the composer requested that future printings switch the two movements. Some believe Mahler later reverted to the original form, so essentially there are two versions that are performed. In the 'fateful' finale, the composer made revisions as well, originally indicating three 'blows' to highlight each climax in the final movement. But later revised the work including only two – some say for structural reasons others believe it was due to his superstitions and close relationship he felt with his ill-fated 'hero'.

Instrumentation: piccolo, 4 flutes (doubling on piccolos), 4 oboes (doubling on English horns), English horn, 4 clarinets (doubling on E-flat clarinets), bass clarinet, 4 bassoons, contrabassoon, 8 horns, 6 trumpets, 4 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, snare drum, tamtam, cymbals, triangle, deep bells, cowbells [Herdenglocken], xylophone, glockenspiel, hammer, rute), 2 harps, celesta, strings

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