

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

Fri. September 15, The 895th Sundry Hall Subscription Concert**Gustav Mahler** (1860-1911)

Symphony No. 2 in C minor, “Resurrection”

One of the great composers in the Austro-German tradition, Mahler was well known as a conductor as well. He completed nine symphonies and numerous orchestral songs, not only expanding the size of the ensembles, but also incorporating new instrumental explorations in various combinations. In addition, he infused song (or ‘lied’) into his symphonies. His exposure as a child to a large repertoire of folksongs had great effect on his themes, as can be heard in this symphony, as well as many of his other works.

Mahler’s Second Symphony, subtitled *Auferstehung* (Resurrection), initially began as a one-movement symphonic work called *Todtenfeier* (Funeral Rite) in 1888, which he had written immediately following his First Symphony and intended as a tribute to the hero from that work. Work on the *Andante* that would ultimately become the second movement began the following year, but it would take several more years before the remaining movements took shape.

Mahler went to Hamburg in 1891 where he became acquainted with Hans von Bülow and in September of that year played *Todtenfeier* for him, receiving less than warm accolades for his work. However the composer persevered and by the summer of 1893 he had completed the *Andante* begun earlier. He also began work on a scherzo, which was based on a song written for *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* called *Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt* (St. Anthony of Padua’s Sermon to the Fish), and would become the third movement. Another *Wunderhorn* song Mahler composed about the same time, *Urlicht* (Primal Light) would also find its way into this symphonic work as the fourth movement, with an alto soloist introducing the first vocal sounds of the work that would lead into the final movement with its choral climax. (Some scholars have compared this to Beethoven’s use of a vocal soloist in his Ninth Symphony before the introduction of the chorus in the last movement.)

The closing chorale Mahler envisioned was a struggle for the composer, uncertain as to what text to use. It wasn’t until the spring of 1894 that he heard Friederich Gottlob Klopstock’s *Die Auferstehung* (Resurrection Ode) at the funeral of his mentor Hans von Bülow, and realized then that this was the text he was meant to use to close his Second Symphony: “It flashed on me like lightning, and everything became plain and clear in my mind!” Mahler would complete the entire work within three months, adding text of his own to Klopstock’s to complete the finale. Although the first three movements were premiered in March of 1895

