

Mahler's Concept of Chinese Art in his *Das Lied von der Erde*

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In May 1998 a symphony orchestra, formed by a group of German musicians and vocalists,¹ paid a visit to Beijing and gave a very successful performance of Gustav Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* to Chinese audiences. Historically as well as culturally the programme was highly significant: almost ninety years after the completion of the work, *Das Lied von der Erde* received its Chinese première. This historic performance provoked great attention among the general public and attracted the interest of Chinese scholars and arts enthusiasts (an example being the former Chinese Vice-Prime Minister Li Lanqing²). Following the performance scholars soon began to research the sources of the original Chinese poems which inspired Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*. So far, most of the original Tang-dynasty poems have been identified and the discussion and investigation for the remaining unidentified poem, *Von der Jugend* (Of Youth), is ongoing.

Although Gustav Mahler had never been to China, nor was he familiar with Chinese poetry or Chinese music, he was the first influential Western composer to use ancient Chinese poems as the texts for an epoch-making symphonic composition. The upheaval of resigning from his job in the Vienna Court Opera, the death of his beloved oldest daughter, augmented by an acute awareness of his own physical limitations, meant Mahler was suffering deeply from so many unfortunate issues in his life at the time he encountered Hans Bethge's *Die chinesische Flöte: Nachdichtungen chinesischer Lyrik* – a collection of freely translated Chinese lyrics.³ The poems entranced him and

¹ My research on the name of this symphony orchestra is ongoing.

² All Chinese personal names in this article are in the original Chinese order: family name followed by given name.

³ Hans Bethge: *Die chinesische Flöte: Nachdichtungen chinesische Lyrik* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1907). Bethge's main sources for *Die chinesische Flöte* were earlier French and German translations of Chinese lyrics: Le Marquis d'Hervey-Saint-Denys's *Poésies de l'épilogue des Thang* (1862), Judith Gautier's *Le Livre de Jade* (1867) and Hans Heilmann's *Chinesische Lyrik* (1905). Thus Bethge's anthology is not a direct translation of the original Chinese poems, but a free imitation of other translations.

mirrored his mood. The expressions of misfortune and loneliness in the ancient Chinese poets inspired Mahler to set seven of the eighth-century poems that contrast strongly with each other in thought and mood into his song-symphony for tenor, alto and orchestra, *Das Lied von der Erde*. By composing *Das Lied von der Erde* and interpreting Chinese lyrics, Mahler not only left us the puzzle of investigating the original Chinese poems, but also built up a link between the two different cultures, more specifically, Western and Chinese aesthetics.

Oriental influences in music were fashionable in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries; many composers picked up the colour and rhythms of the East in varying dilutions and incorporated them into their sources. The Orient has indeed proved a rich source of inspiration to European culture. Since the western imperialistic powers further opened the 'gate' of China through the Second Opium War (1856–1860), a variety of Chinese art and culture was introduced to the West. The turn of the century witnessed a great vogue for Chinese literature in Europe, which had also put Bethge's text into Mahler's hands. Indeed, Mahler may have selected these particular seven poems from among the eighty-three paraphrases of the collection because the text highlights favourite tropes of the imagined Orient, such as stylised nature and fantastically constructed landscapes. In addition, Mahler felt free to change the words himself in order to fit his musical invention.

Part of the greatness of *Das Lied von der Erde* lies in the fact that it broke the boundaries of the traditional symphony and initiated new methods of symphonic composition. This piece fused into one artistic masterpiece many opposite but related concepts: Eastern and Western, ancient and modern, life and death, dream and reality, sadness and joy, gathering and separating, poetry and music, instrumental and vocal. This article will focus on the exoticism (or orientalism) of Mahler's compositional techniques in *Das Lied von der Erde*, namely Mahler's application of the Chinese pentatonic scale and orchestration in order to show how he presents his own image of Chinese musical elements. Such unique stylistic elements provide reasons for the reception and the popularity of *Das Lied von der Erde* in China as outlined in this article.

Mahler's Concept of Chinese Music

Numerous Western artists have gained inspiration from Asian culture at the turn of the twentieth century, among them the composers: Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, and Giacomo Puccini are most eminent. The interest of such artists in Asian culture reflects broader features of post-Romanticism—reaching for events that happened far away and long ago; searching for inspiration from ethnic arts; exploring the boundaries between heaven, earth and hell; inexhaustibly trying to answer the question about the meaning of life; and the desire to create engaging artistic masterpieces. Among the influential Western artists engaged in this search, Mahler was the first to select Tang poems as the textual sources for a large-scale symphonic work. He was one of the pioneers to fuse Eastern musical elements—including its distinctive musical forms, its pentatonic modal scale system, and its special instrumental tone colour—with Western music. In this, Mahler was unsurpassed in his lifetime. Exposure to Chinese music and related arts for Mahler was limited during his lifetime. It is possible that he might have had contact with Chinese culture and music in Vienna, Munich, and New York when he composed *Das Lied von der Erde* in the years 1907 and 1908. Hu Haiping is among a few scholars who have paid attention to this question, and in his paper, *Poetic Genesis and Musical Response in Gustav Mahler's Das Lied von der Erde*, Hu states:

Although almost no documents have been discovered thus far regarding Mahler's knowledge of Chinese music, to a degree we are able to trace the resource from which Mahler's materials were possibly derived. According to Mr. Peter Rietus, it seems fairly certain that Mahler had heard some Chinese music at the Chinese restaurants in Hamburg, and any publications on Chinese music up to 1907 and 1908 presumably had been noticed by him. In the library of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna, there is a copy of the book entitled Chinese Music, which was in the possession of Johann Nepomuk Fuchs, Mahler's conducting colleague at the Vienna Opera, with whom Mahler had a working relationship for several years. It is possible that Mahler might have had access to the book. In the recently published third (and last) volume of the Mahler biography, Mr. La Grange includes an extensive appendix concerning *Das Lied*. The author is convinced that Mahler acquired his knowledge of Chinese music

through some cylinder recordings given to him by his friend, the banker Paul Hammerschlag.⁴

– an opinion shared by Michael Kennedy:

At Toblach, Mahler was visited by the banker Paul Hammerschlag, who gave him some cylinders of Chinese music, recorded in China, which he bought in Vienna in a shop near St Stephen's Cathedral.⁵

In Mahler's case oriental materials were limited, but the imagination and creative energy were not. Mahler's *chinoiserie* in the music of *Das Lied von der Erde* is evident in two main aspects: use of Chinese pentatonic idioms and orchestration inspired by traditional Chinese instruments.

The Chinese Pentatonic Idioms

The pentatonic scale is used not only in China but also in Japan, the Far East, and Africa as well. Some folk music of Ireland and Scotland also employs the pentatonic scale system. The Chinese pentatonic scale is also called the anhemitonic pentatonic scale. It consists of no semitones but combinations of major seconds and minor thirds. It differs from the hemitonic pentatonic scales (with two semitones in an octave) used in Japan and ancient Greece, and the other kind of pentatonic scale (*slendro*) used in Java. Having frequently employed the anhemitonic pentatonic scale system along with the Tang poems in *Das Lied von der Erde*, Mahler created a Chinese atmosphere throughout the work. The Chinese pentatonic scale system consists of five modes, which are based on the first five notes given by the circle of fifths. They are:

⁴ Hu Haiping: 'Poetic Genesis and Musical Response in Gustav Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*' (unpublished MA diss., University of California, 1986), 65–66. Hereafter referred to as Hu: 'Poetic Genesis and Musical Response'.

⁵ Michael Kennedy: *Mahler*, 2nd edn (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1990), 157.



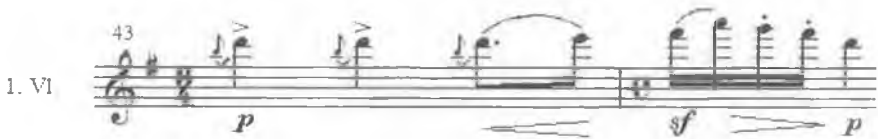
Gong Shang Jiao Zhi Yu (Gong)

宫 商 角 徵 羽 (宫)

Even though the example above is set on middle C, the five different kinds of mode can be based on any of the twelve notes in an octave of Western music. Mahler used the Chinese pentatonic modes to create motives and melodies for *Das Lied von der Erde* in several ways. The following sections A through C list some different ways in which Mahler used the pentatonic modes:

A. A motive or theme is in a complete pattern of a pentatonic mode and in a single *Gong* system. The music passage for first violin in Example 1 below is in D-*Gong*:

Example 1. Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde: Von der Schönheit*, bars 43–44, 1st Violin in D-*Gong*



The music played by oboes, clarinets, bassoons, and violins in Example 2 is in C-*Gong* with an 'outside' note of F in the *pizz.* chords played by second violin:

Example 2. Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde: Von der Schönheit*, bars 53–56, Oboes, Clarinets, Bassoons and Violins in C-Gong

Piu mosso subito

1.2. Ob.
3. Ob.
1.2. Kl. in B
1. Fag.
2.3. Fag.
1. Vi.
2. Vi.

The phrase for flutes in Example 3 is in D-Yu:

Example 3. Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde: Der Abschied*, bars 167–72, Flutes in D-Yu

1.2. FL.

The passage for flutes and oboes in Example 4 starts from F as the *Zhi*, and then ends in B-flat-Gong:

Example 4. Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde: Von der Jugend*, bars 97–100, Flutes and Oboes starting from F-Zhi and ending in B-flat-Gong

Tempo I subito

1. Fl.

pp

1. 2. Ob.

pp

B. Two closely related *Gong* systems work together in counterpoint (see Examples 5 and 6). In Example 5 the passage for first violin is in B-flat-*Gong* and the vocal music is in D-*Yu*, which belongs to F-*Gong* system – the closest *Gong* system to B-flat-*Gong*:

Example 5. Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde: Der Abschied*, bars 235–46, 1st Violin and Alto Voice, modes in counterpoint

1. Vl.

tempo pp

Alto

Ich wand - le auf und nie - der mit mei - ner Lau - fe

The music for flutes in Example 6 is in E-*Yu* (of G-*Gong* system) with two ‘foreign’ notes C (bar 507) and E-flat (bar 518) while the vocal line is in C major or C-*Gong*:

Example 6. Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde: Der Abschied*, bars 499–540, Flutes and Alto Voice in different modes

The image displays a musical score for Example 6, featuring Flutes (1.2.3 Fl.) and Alto Voice (Alt.-St.) parts. The score is divided into four systems, each with a flute and an alto voice line. The first system (bars 499-510) shows the flute playing a melodic line with a *pp* dynamic and the alto voice part. The second system (bars 511-522) continues the flute line with a *p* dynamic and includes the lyrics "Erscheine mir" above the staff. The third system (bars 523-534) shows the flute line with a *pp* dynamic and the alto voice part. The fourth system (bars 535-540) shows the flute line with a *pp* dynamic and the alto voice part. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

C. A motive shifts between two different but closely related *Gong* systems, similar to the way music shifts from tonic to subdominant in Western music (see Example 7a and 7b):

Example 7a. Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde: Von der Schönheit*, bars 1–3, 1st Violin, modes shifted

The image displays a musical score for Example 7a, featuring the 1st Violin (1. VI.) part. The score is marked "Comodo Dolcissimo" and "pp". The violin part consists of a single melodic line with various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings. The score is divided into two systems, each with a violin line.

Example 7b. Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde: Von der Schönheit*, bars 22–23, 1st Violin, modes shifted



These melodies in the first violin start on D-Gong and then switch to G-Gong. In this case the C natural in bars 2 and 23 are passing tones that function as the bridge to link two closely related Gong systems.

Mahler was not only the first Western symphonic composer to use ancient Chinese poems as the textual source in a large-scale composition; he was however among the first Western composers to try to apply the Western harmonic system to the pentatonic scale system. Since a traditional Chinese pentatonic scale has no semitones or leading-note, the Western harmonic function of I-IV-V-I (tonic-subdominant-dominant-tonic) is impractical in regular Chinese pentatonic music. For this reason, the harmonic release of tension from dominant chord to tonic is not present in Chinese pentatonic music, as compared to Western music. This phenomenon makes the cadence of a section or movement end smoothly; therefore, it can easily connect to the next section or movement. Having been influenced by the Chinese anhemitonic pentatonic scale system, Mahler chose to use this type of 'smooth' cadence in all movements of *Das Lied von der Erde*. This type of cadence is not heard regularly in Mahler's other symphonic compositions, and can be identified as a significant characteristic of his *chinoiserie*.

The Tone Colours of Chinese Instruments

Most post-romantic composers, especially the Impressionists, recognised the orchestration and tone colours of instruments with their endless possibilities as one of the most powerful methods of composing. Mahler was not an impressionist, but with regard to this musical exploration he made his own discoveries during the same years that the impressionistic composers flourished. He carefully chose his instruments and orchestrated with the utmost craftsmanship in *Das Lied von der Erde*, which can be demonstrated in two areas: the

compact style of orchestration and the timbre of some special Chinese instruments. Chinese traditional music for instrumental ensemble is generally monophonic. While some standard Western compositional methods such as thematic development, motivic contrast, and thematic transformation are generally not suited to Chinese music, the simple and compact style of orchestration used in Chinese traditional instrumental compositions became one of Mahler's most effective music-making devices.

Das Lied von der Erde is composed for a symphony orchestra with triple winds in addition to a full section of brass, two harps, a percussion group, strings, and vocal soloists. Mahler makes economical use of these instruments in his orchestration. He rarely uses *tutti* orchestra. Some instruments play for less than a hundred bars in this sixty-minute composition. He does not make extensive use of the brass section for doubling passages of music with the woodwinds and the strings. Despite its large orchestration, the music of *Das Lied von der Erde* is chamber-like in numerous passages. In some cases, the vocal line is given an instrumental countermelody or simply behaves as part of the heterophony. Most of the time this compact style creates a wonderful and memorable effect. The last three repetitions of the word 'Ewig'⁶ give the vocalist a four-bar melody with slurred, dotted half-notes on e' and d'. Mahler did not give the tonic note c' at the ending to the vocal solo part; instead, he orchestrated two pedal-like, sustained a's for flute and oboe, with the C major chord played by trombones, celesta, harp, and strings, making the ending of this large-scale symphonic piece extremely simple and tidy. The tonality of the ending is not easily distinguishable. It could be C major, A minor, or an anhemitonic pentatonic mode of C-Gong or A-Yu. This obscure tonality, which has not only very light orchestration but also very soft dynamics (*ppp*), produces the effect of, in Mahler's own words, 'Gänzlich ersterbend'⁷ (dying away to nothing).

Two of the Chinese poems used in *Das Lied von der Erde* mention the plucked instrument *Qin*. One of these poems is *Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde*: 'Hier, diese Laute nenn' ich mein! /

⁶ Gustav Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1988), 146 (bars 509–512). Hereafter referred to as Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 145–146.

Die Laute schlagen und die Gläser leeren (Here, this lute I name my own! / To stroke the lute and to drain the glasses). The other is *Der Abschied*: *‘Ich wandle auf und nieder mit meiner Laute / Auf Wegen, die vom weichem Grase schwellen’* (I wander to and fro with my lute / On pathways which billow with soft grass). All German and French translations use the word ‘lute’ to refer to this Chinese plucked instrument *Qin*. The instrument mentioned in Tang poems is, however, the Chinese zither, a horizontally played plucked instrument. (See Figures 1 and 2)

Figures 1 and 2.⁸



Qin 琴 (the Chinese zither) which accompanied performances of the original poems

For thousands of years in China the zither has been played only as an instrument for solo or chamber music since it has no sound-box to create enough volume to join a big ensemble. Judith Gautier inserted twelve Chinese ink-brush paintings in her second edition of *Le livre de jade*. Among them are two that depict events related to music. Both of them have the main figure playing some Chinese plucked instruments, holding them horizontally or semi-vertically.⁹ Since Mahler might have had a chance to study this edition, he is likely to have had some visual ideas about Chinese plucked instruments. It is also possible that he had heard some live performances of Chinese instrumental ensembles or an

⁸ Source, Yue: *An Appreciation of Chinese Music*.

⁹ Judith Gautier: *Le livre de jade: Poesies traduites du Chinois*, 2nd edn (Paris: Félix Juven, 1902), 20, 48.

original recording of their music before 1908 in Toblach, Vienna, Munich, or New York.¹⁰

Traditional Chinese instrumental ensembles consist of four main sections: winds, strings, plucked instruments, and percussion. Any Chinese instrumental ensemble must include some plucked instruments, even if the ensemble is very small, with as few as three or four players. Chinese plucked-string instruments appear quite exotic to Western musicians and music-lovers since there is no comparable instrumental section in Western symphony orchestras or chamber ensembles. They are so exotic that they deserve further comment. There is a Chinese plucked instrument called *Pipa* (the Chinese lute), played by capped fingers (a picture of a Chinese woman holding the *Pipa* is included in Figure 4), which has been one of the most popular plucked instruments used in Chinese music since the Tang dynasty (See Figures 3 and 4).

Figures 3 and 4.¹¹



Mahler sought to emulate the sound of the *Pipa* 琵琶 (the Chinese lute) in his setting

¹⁰ Hu: 'Poetic Genesis and Musical Response', 66.

¹¹ Source, Yue: *An Appreciation of Chinese Music*.

As Jiang Pu-Qi points out, '[the] *pipa* has many similarities to the mandolin. Both originated in the Middle East. The *pipa* has four strings, tuned a-d'-e'-a', while the mandolin also has four groups of strings tuned g-d'-a'-e''.¹² Therefore, their registers are very close to one another.

It is possible to view Mahler's music for the mandolin in *Das Lied von der Erde*, particularly at the end of *Der Abschied* (Farewell), as the result of his imaginative imitation of the sound of ancient Chinese plucked instruments. Jiang gives further information arguing that:

Mahler used the mandolin in his symphonies only twice before *Das Lied*. One instance is a 77-bar segment in the fourth movement, the *Serenade* of his seventh symphony (1904–05, revised 1909); the other takes up 37 bars of music in the second part of his eighth symphony (1906–07). In these two symphonies, Mahler mainly doubles the mandolin with the other instruments, such as the harp or guitar. Both of these examples were written shortly before *Das Lied*.¹³

In *Das Lied von der Erde*, Mahler uses the mandolin in thirty-three bars: eight bars in *Von der Schönheit* (Of Beauty) (bars 53–60) and twenty-five bars in *Der Abschied* (Farewell) (bars 229–36, bars 509–14, and 11 single crotchets from bar number 534 to the end of the work). On these occasions Mahler brings the mandolin to the surface of the orchestra: once it plays a chord in *ff* (in the fourth movement), and the other time it plays rapid repeated note in a tremolo-like style (see Examples 8 and 9). While the rhythmic patterns Mahler wrote for the mandolin music in *Von der Schönheit* cannot be found in Symphonies 7 or 8, they are suitable to be played on the *Pipa* with its characteristic playing method of *Sao* 扫 (see Example 8):

¹² Jiang Pu-Qi: 'An Integration of Ancient Chinese Poetry and Western Post-Romantic Music: A Study of Gustav Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*' (unpublished PhD diss., University of Cincinnati, 2003), 86. Hereafter referred to as Jiang: 'An Integration of Ancient Chinese Poetry and Western Post-Romantic Music'.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 86.

Example 8. Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde: Von der Schönheit*, bars 53–58, Mandolin



The register of this melody is also in the typical range of the *Pipa*. Another main melody for mandolin in bars 509–14 of *Der Abschied* could be played on the *Pipa* with its typical melody-playing method of *Lunzhi* 轮指 (the equivalent of the *tremolo* for guitar or mandolin) to get a legato and *ppp* sound (see Example 9):

Example 9. Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde: Der Abschied*, bars 509–14, Mandolin



So far no written documents have been found to confirm whether Mahler had any chance to see or to hear a *Pipa* while he was composing *Das Lied von der Erde*. He had been inspired by Tang poems, either by their texts or by their related paintings, to imagine and create a Chinese atmosphere in the work. The use of the mandolin, a popular European folk music instrument, in his symphonic piece to imitate the tone colour of Chinese plucked instruments is just another example of his *chinoiserie*.

Chinese Reception of *Das Lied von der Erde*

Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* was introduced to Chinese musicians through audio recordings in the 1950s. Audiences within the People's Republic of China heard a live performance of *Das Lied von der Erde* (sung in German) only in the late 1990s.¹⁴ Since then, Chinese scholars

¹⁴ See n. 1.

like Qian Renkang¹⁵ have been continuing to search for the origins of the *Das Lied* texts, and in recent years the work has become a popular subject for academic research and artistic interpretation in China.

On 14 December 2000, the Central Conservatoire of Music, Beijing University and the Association of Chinese Musicians jointly organised a conference in Beijing to discuss the possible origins of the Chinese poems which Mahler adapted for *Das Lied von der Erde*. Over thirty Chinese literature experts, arts scholars, specialists and musicologists from many institutions in China contributed to this conference. The conference also provided us with a detailed summary and review of the extent of Mahler studies in China during the twentieth century and a successful response to the acceptance of Chinese culture in Western music history. The sources of the six movements of *Das Lied von der Erde* originated from seven Tang-dynasty poems which are identified as follows: The original Chinese version of the first movement *Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde* (The Drinking Song of the Sorrow of the Earth) is Li Bai's 'Bei Ge Xin' 《悲歌行》 (The Song of Sorrow). The original source of the second poem *Der Einsame im Herbst* (The Lonely One in Autumn) is now identified as Qian Qi's 'Xiao Gu Qiu Ye Chang' 《效古秋夜长》 (Imitation of Old Poem: Long Autumn Nights).¹⁶ It is widely believed that many Chinese poems were not translated in their entirety by Judith Gautier in her *Le livre de jade* – in this case, Gautier only translated four lines out of ten of the original Chinese poem for her *Le soir d'automne* (The Autumn Night).¹⁷ As one of the main sources of Hans Bethge's *Die chinesische Flöte*, the inconsistent and careless misattributions made by Gautier in her translations of

¹⁵ Qian Renkang is a distinguished musicologist retired from the position of Director of the Research Institute of Music at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. He contributed to Donald Mitchell's book. See Donald Mitchell: *Gustav Mahler iii: Songs and Symphonies of Life and Death* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2002), 456.

¹⁶ Qian Qi (钱起) was identified in 1999 as the author of the original Chinese text for the second movement (*Der Einsame im Herbst*) of *Das Lied von der Erde* by two Chinese scholars, Ren Yiping and Lun Zhenglun, after many years of research and discussion. See Ren Yiping and Lu Zhenglun: 'Solving the Mystery Regarding the Tang Poem for the Second Movement of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*', *Guangming Daily*, 23 December 1999.

¹⁷ Fusako Hamao: 'The Sources of the Texts in Mahler's *Lied von der Erde*', *19th-Century Music* 19/1 (Summer/1995), 83–91.

Tang poems are directly responsible for the confusion and controversy relating to the poems chosen by Mahler for *Das Lied von der Erde*.

However, the poem used in the third movement *Von der Jugend* (Of Youth) is still a puzzle. The identity of this poem by Li Bai cannot be confirmed due to the heavily altered text. However, Jiang suggests a very possible and rigorous solution to this ‘mystery’ in his paper:

(...) [The] text of Mahler’s “Von der Jugend” was a free translation based on Li Bai’s original poem with many imaginative changes made by French and German translators. Considering Gautier’s first edition of *Le livre*, with its use of “Selon” before all Chinese poets’ names, the authorship of the text of the third song-movement in Mahler’s *Das Lied* should be identified as 据李白原诗 (*Ju Li Bai yuan shi* - based on the original poem of Li Bai).¹⁸

The poem used in the fourth movement *Von der Schöheit* (Of Beauty) has been identified as Li Bai’s ‘*Cai Lian Qu*’ 《采莲曲》 (Lotus-Collecting Song). The fifth movement *Der Trunkene im Frühling* (The Drunkard in Spring) is based on Li Bai’s ‘*Chun Ri Zui Qi Yan Zhi*’ 《春日醉起言志》 (Feelings while Drunk on a Spring Day). The sixth and the finale *Der Abschied* (The Farewell) is a combination of Meng Haoran’s ‘*Su Ye Shi Shan Fang Dai Ding Da Bu Zhi*’ 《宿业师山房待丁大不至》 (Staying in the Teacher’s House in the Mountains and Waiting for a Friend [called] *Ding Da* in Vain) and Wang Wei’s ‘*Song Bie*’ 《送别》 (Farewell).

Owing to the influence of ‘Left-wing’ ideology, Mahler’s music did not receive sufficient serious academic attention before the 1980s and used to be described as ‘decadent’, ‘pessimistic’ and ‘negative’ in many books on Western music written in China. The reforms which have taken place in China since the 1980s have provided a great impetus for cultural exchange between China and the rest of the world. Many famous Western interpretations of Mahler’s works have been translated into Chinese and introduced to Chinese readers,¹⁹ and some Chinese

¹⁸ Jiang: ‘An Integration of Ancient Chinese Poetry and Western Post-Romantic Music’, 32.

¹⁹ Such as Bruno Walter: *Gustav Mahler* (Vienna: Herbert Reichner Verlag, 1936) Chinese trans. Ma Nan: *Gustav Mahler* (Beijing: People’s Music Press,

music scholars have begun to research Mahler and his music with more objective attitudes.²⁰ In *Lectures on the History of Western Music* 《西方音乐史教程》, Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* is edited as a required music example of the later Romantic period.²¹ In *A History of European Music* 《欧洲音乐史》, Yu Runyang comments in the chapter on Mahler: 'In *Das Lied von der Erde*, Mahler has shown his yearning for life through understanding the Chinese notion of human life and arts.'²² In addition to such general histories, Dr Li Xiujun of China Conservatoire of Music in Beijing published a new book called *Symphonies of Life and Death: The Music World of Gustav Mahler* in 2005. (See Figure 5) It is the first book on Mahler's symphonic works as a whole by a Chinese musicologist. Mahler's extraordinary compositional structures and techniques in *Das Lied von der Erde* are examined in detail in this book.

1987) and Kurt Blaukopf: *Gustav Mahler oder der Zeitgenosse der Zukunft* (Wien: Verlag Fritz Molden, 1969) Chinese trans. Gao Zhongfu: *Mahler* (Shanghai: Shanghai Music Press, 1992).

²⁰ Li Xiujun: *Lectures on the History of Western Music* (Changchun: Jilin Sound & Video Press, 2001), 109–111 and Yu Runyang: 'Mahler and Strauss', *A History of European Music*, ed. Zhang Hongdao (Beijing: People's Music Press, 1983), 387–394. Hereafter referred to as Li: *Lectures on the History of Western Music* and Yu: 'Mahler and Strauss'.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

²² This author's translation of Yu: 'Mahler and Strauss', 389–390.

Figure 5. The Cover of Dr Li Xiujun's Book on Mahler's Symphonies

Symphonies of Life and Death
The Music World of Gustav Mahler



Das Lied von der Erde has also been translated into modern Chinese language and performed on stage – the new Chinese language version of Gustav Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* – ‘Chen Shi Zhi Ge’ 尘世之歌 (See Figure 6 and 7) was premièred by the Jiangsu Symphony Orchestra on 22 and 25 November 2005, on the famous stages of the Nanjing Arts Academy Concert Hall (See Figure 8) and the Shanghai Concert Hall.

Figure 6 and 7. The posters for the Shanghai premiere of the Chinese language version of 'Das Lied von der Erde' – 《尘世之歌》



Figure 8. A picture taken at the Nanjing première of the Chinese language version of ‘*Das Lied von der Erde*’, Nanjing Arts Academy Concert Hall, Nanjing (22 November 2005)



Two internationally celebrated singers: the mezzo-soprano Yang Qing (杨清) and the tenor Gu Ping (顾平) sang the leading roles. The work was translated into Chinese and published in a Chinese edition by a very well-known Chinese musicologist and music educator Professor Liao Naixiong (廖乃雄). The work was conducted by the Associate Professor of Conducting at the University of Memphis, Dr Jiang Pu-Qi (江浦琦), who has felt a deep connection to *Das Lied von der Erde* since discovering the music in the 1960s while he was a conducting student in China. According to Dr Jiang: ‘One and one-third billion Chinese have never heard *Das Lied von der Erde* sung in Chinese; I wanted them to hear it. As a Chinese music scholar, I feel this is my responsibility.’²³

It is important and necessary to point out the ‘special’ feature of the orchestration of these two performances – Dr Jiang replaced the Mandolin with the *Pipa*. This approach significantly illustrated the

²³ This author’s telephone interview with Dr Jiang (29 June 2007).

possibility of Mahler's imitation of the tone colours of Chinese instrument in *Das Lied von der Erde*. The two performances were immensely successful. The audience did not disperse until Maestro Jiang had returned to the stage for bows and applause at least five times! And all the reviews and critiques by Chinese journalists and critics about this work were positive and supportive.²⁴

Das Lied von der Erde has also inspired the younger generation of Chinese musicians. In 2003 a well-known young Chinese composer, Ye Xiaogang, re-composed a Chinese version of *Das Lied von der Erde* but maintained Mahler's original title and six-movement structure – *Das Lied auf der Erde* (The Song about the Earth). Ye Xiaogang used several original Chinese poems by the same poets to present the ups and downs of life and to convey a feeling of human compassion in his music. The work is scored for soprano solo and large orchestra with a huge percussion complement. In recent years the piece has been performed frequently by China Philharmonic Orchestra during their international tours. Ye's *Das Lied auf der Erde* can be viewed as a musical and artistic response of Chinese composer to Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*.

Within the confines of an article these reception issues can only offer a brief summary of the recent research, reception and current interpretations of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* in China. As the investigation of the remaining unidentified poem *Von der Jugend* (Of Youth) is still continuing and more young Chinese scholars and artists are taking part in the study and interpretation of Western music, Mahler's music (especially *Das Lied von der Erde*) will indeed expand its popularity in China and effectively promote the cultural communications between China and the Western world.

Conclusion: *Das Lied von der Erde* – A Cultural Integration

The limited knowledge Mahler had about Chinese arts, especially Tang poetry, did not limit his creative imagination. Mahler was the first Western composer to understand the melancholy of Li Bai and other Tang poets. Mahler was also highly inspired by the adventurous spirit of the ancient Chinese poets to search for the final resolution of his own battle with destiny by withdrawing from society and becoming one with

²⁴ As stated by Dr Jiang during this author's telephone interview (29 June 2007) and Cao Shaode: 'The Première of Liao Naixiong's translation of *Das Lied von der Erde*', *Chinese Musicians*, 17 December 2005.

nature. When Mahler tried to frame the lyrics of *Das Lied von der Erde* he sought to meet the challenge of all great Western and Asian artists: to find a truly peaceful resting place for heart and mind on earth, through his use of Eastern poetry in Western music. Even though every historical period, nation and artistic genre has had its own individual principles, significant commonalities do exist. For this reason, artists throughout the world can communicate and connect with each other.

Chinese artistic thinking always has some degree of ambiguity, so that the audience can experience a freedom of imagination. Chinese poetry usually uses words efficiently in a leaping-forward expression. The poetic style of *Das Lied von der Erde* combined with its musical abstraction, offers listeners a great atmosphere in which they can give free reign to their imagination. Mahler's addition of his own texts with some special music figures allows an even greater degree of imagination, which holds a stronger resonance for the audience. This is one of the reasons *Das Lied von der Erde* is ever more appreciated by both Western and Asian audiences, since the piece was premièred about ninety years ago.

In conclusion, Chinese artistic thinking always emphasizes the universalities relating to the human condition. Mahler adopted a similarly universal perspective when he fused seven Chinese poems into one symphonic piece. His editing and unifying made the text more meaningful and colourful. The music in *Das Lied von der Erde* shook the spirits of a wider range of people than simply the Chinese. From this point of view, *Das Lied von der Erde*, as a whole, reached levels of achievement higher than the individual ancient Chinese poems and all of their translated versions. But most importantly, it is indeed a brilliant representation of Mahler's concept of Chinese art and a significant example of cultural and artistic integration.

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