

Existentialism and the 'object of toil' in Mahler's Third Symphony

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The portrait we currently possess of Gustav Mahler reveals one consistent feature of his personality, which I believe holds the initial key to an eventual understanding of the meaning of his symphonic works. What Friedrich Nietzsche termed 'the problem of life' not only consumed the composer wholly throughout his career, governing most of his creative output, but essentially, it characterized him.¹ The incessant agitation and dissatisfaction distinctive of Mahler's demeanour among acquaintances in his 'private sphere' is evident particularly in the records of the composer's conversations and articulations on life, death, philosophy and God.² For example, in Bruno Walter's *Gustav Mahler* the author presents an image of a man continuously tormented by the questions and problems of human existence.³ Following a conversation between the two men Walter records the composer's relentless questioning:

Whence do we come? [...] Have I really willed this life, as Schopenhauer thinks, before I ever was conceived? [...] What is the object of toil and sorrow? How am I to understand the cruelty and malice in the creations of a kind God? Will the meaning of life finally be revealed by death? [...] In such and similar words, laments,

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche: *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 8.

² The duality of Mahler's personal behaviour is discussed elsewhere with reference to what I differentiate as his 'public' and 'private' behavioural spheres, a concept originally propounded by Peter Franklin in his article 'A Stranger's Story: Programmes, Politics, and Mahler's Third Symphony', *The Mahler Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 172.

³ Bruno Walter (b. Berlin 1876, d. California 1962) was a German conductor and composer who first became acquainted with Mahler in 1894 while working at the Hamburg Opera. He is author of three books on Mahler, one of which, entitled *Gustav Mahler*, was first published in Vienna, 1936.

astonishment and horror would pour from him as from a gushing spring.⁴

In this paper I will explore two distinctive characteristics (one as a consequence of the other) of Mahler's philosophical intellect that may be considered accountable for the inception and consistency of such questioning in the composer, the result of which, as I will argue, fundamentally impelled the structural and philosophic–expressive design of the Third Symphony. Particular emphasis will be placed here on the final instrumental Adagio movement entitled *Was mir die Liebe erzählt* 'What love tells me' with regard to its intended achievement of transcendence as a resistance to certain Christian principles, as well as its vital role in providing a remedy to Mahler's apparent 'existence-anxiety' by ultimately reinforcing the composer's *Dasein* capacity.⁵

Mahler was born in July 1860 to Jewish parents in the little village of Kalischt, which is situated in the Bohemian portion of today's Czech Republic. Before his first birthday Mahler's family moved to the Czech city of Jihlava, then part of the Austrian Empire, situated approximately five hours by train to the north west of Vienna. At fifteen years of age Mahler entered the Vienna Conservatory, where he became a member of the *Pernerstorfer* Circle, a group of Viennese intellectuals who sought to revive the essence of German *Völk* by means of radical social change and renewal.⁶ It was as a result of the composer's

⁴ Bruno Walter: *Gustav Mahler*, trans. James Galston (London: Severn House, 1975), 128. Hereafter referred to as Walter: *Gustav Mahler*.

⁵ David Holbrook: *Gustav Mahler and The Courage To Be* (London: Clarke, Doble and Brendon, 1975), 20. Hereafter referred to as Holbrook: *Gustav Mahler and The Courage To Be*. Holbrook refers to Mahler's symptoms of agitated questioning as his 'existence-anxiety', 20. It is also important to note that my use of the term *Dasein* does not conform entirely to Heidegger's context of the term, but instead is used here to represent Mahler's awareness and comprehension of his own 'being' in the world. Heidegger generally characterized the term as the 'affective relationships with surrounding people and objects' (Simon Blackburn: *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 94).

⁶ Members of the Circle included Siegfried Lipiner (a poet, translator and journalist who exercised a considerable philosophical influence on Mahler), Hugo Wolf and Victor Adler, among others. The group's main intellectual influences included Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer and Richard Wagner. For further commentary on the Pernerstorfer Circle see William J.

youthful affiliation with the *Pernerstorfer* Circle that he first became acquainted with the works of esteemed philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer, fuelling the composer's life-long propensity towards metaphysical and existential enquiry.

Maher's continuous searching up and out for answers throughout his life, his unrelenting quest for a solution (or indeed a *new* solution) to the problem of existence, presents a desperate, almost physical looking for and effort to see truth in the world around him. From as early as 1880 the composer's poetic endeavours exhibit the inception of essential philosophical inquisitions that were to become engrained in his ethos for the remainder of his life, as well as providing a vital blueprint through which the development of his philosophical aesthetics is traceable. The gravity of Mahler's aforementioned pursuit to 'see' truth in the world resounds in the final sentence of a sketch poem he wrote for *Songs of a Wanderer* in 1883:

The Sphinx stares grimly, ominous with question,
Her stony, blank grey eyes tell nothing, nothing,
No single, saving sign, no ray of light:
And if I solve it not, my life is forfeit.⁷

In his book *Gustav Mahler and The Courage To Be*, David Holbrook alludes to the composer's evident preoccupation with eyes and light, 'seeing' and 'being seen', as a symptom of Mahler's critical awareness of the possible pointlessness of his own existence. The composer's persistent questioning is significant in this context and articulates his struggle to fathom the meaning of human existence. Holbrook appropriately refers to these questions voiced by Mahler as the '*Dasein* questions', stressing how the confirmation of the 'I Am' feeling was for the composer his most vital intellectual need.⁸

In addition to the composer's incessant need for a confirmed sense of *Dasein* and his constant testing of the *Dasein* feeling against the possibility of his ultimate nothingness, I believe that this apparent 'existence-anxiety' was propelled by his coming to an awareness and

McGrath's *Dionysian Art and Populist Politics in Austria*, (London: Yale University Press, 1974).

⁷ Holbrook: *Gustav Mahler and The Courage To Be*, 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

recognition of his own mortality as the only inevitable termination of physical identity. In this regard it is credible to consider this recognition as an eventual consequence of what may be described as Mahler's rejection, or at least scepticism, of the 'solutions' already present in Christian ideology. As Bruno Walter outlines:

'Death is our door' to the Christian. To the humanist this is a false belief, for death is the end of identity, not the beginning, and he requires a new concept of Time, in which his meaningful life 'can have existed', and is therefore eternal, in that its sometime existence can never be denied.⁹

At this point, the succession of intellectual–philosophical positions of the composer can be understood as follows:

- | |
|---|
| <p>1. Rejection of Christian 'solutions' = 2. 'Existence-anxiety'
= 3. Need for <i>Dasein</i> feeling</p> |
|---|

Mahler's eventual knowledge and acceptance of the solution to the 'terrible Unknown' as being humanly and 'eternally ungraspable' instead reconciles itself with a joy in having been, an exertion of the *Dasein* quality through the expression of love between human beings.¹⁰ It is within the final Adagio movement, *Was mir die Liebe erzählt* 'What Love tells me', of the Third Symphony, I believe, that this credo is revealed, whereby the encapsulation of this concept in the programmatically indebted Adagio successfully establishes the ewig (eternal) as the transcending crown of the work. Consequently, the *Dasein* feeling is pronounced here within what Walter has described as 'a new concept of Time'—the joy in having been. In a letter to Siegfried Lipiner, dated August 1895, Mahler elaborates on the meaning of the

⁹ Walter: *Gustav Mahler*, 78.

¹⁰ Natalie Bauer-Lechner: *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, trans. Dika Newlin, ed. Peter Franklin (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), 62. Hereafter referred to as Bauer-Lechner: *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*.

final movement, ‘Over and above it all, eternal love acts within us—as the rays come together in a focal point. Do you understand now?’¹¹

In order to grasp the context in which Mahler speaks of the final movement I will first examine the general history and content of the symphony as a whole.

Mahler’s Third Symphony was composed during the summers of 1895 and 1896 in Steinbach-am-Attersee, a small village enveloped by the Austrian Alps.¹² During the summers spent composing there Mahler corresponded regularly with his confidante Natalie Bauer-Lechner, author of *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*. In her book she records some of the composer’s remarks on the Third Symphony:

It is the best and most mature of my works. With it I shall conclude my “Passion Trilogy” [...] at first, people won’t understand or appreciate its gaiety; it soars above that world of struggle and sorrow in the First and Second, and could have been produced only as a result of these.¹³

After a period of continuous shuffling and rearranging of the various movements Mahler produced the following final sequential structure, presenting six individually entitled movements which are categorized into two main parts. The first movement, *Der Sommer marschert ein* ‘Summer Marches in’, which follows the introduction (‘Pan awakes’) *attacca*, occupies Part One, while the five remaining movements form Part Two. Figure 1 displays the inverted succession of the movements, where the ascending progression of the various stages of being is apparent, from the untamed forces of nature and inorganic matter, to vegetation and animal life, through to mankind and angelic spirits of naïvety to the final transcending resolution unveiled in the last movement. This progression adheres to the composer’s own description

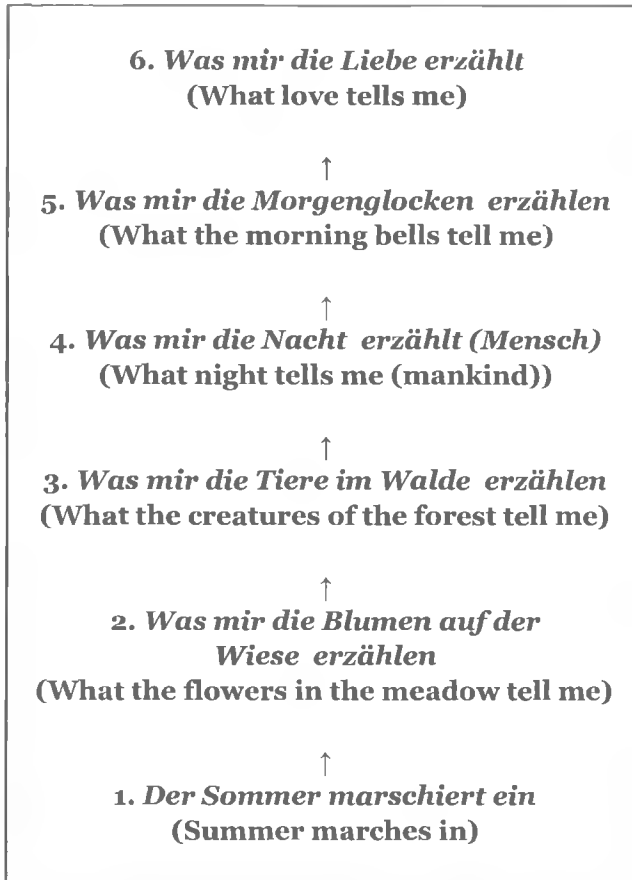
¹¹ Peter Franklin: *Mahler: Symphony No. 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 49. Hereafter referred to as Franklin: *Mahler: Symphony No. 3*.

¹² Sketches of the first movement of the Third Symphony bearing the autograph ‘Steinbach 1893’ are currently held at Stanford University Library. The autograph is however presumed to be in Natalie Bauer-Lechner handwriting and for this reason the year 1893 is not generally included in references to the period of composition.

¹³ Bauer-Lechner: *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, 40.

of the work in a letter to Richard Batka, dated 18 February 1896, as an intended expression of 'evolutionary development'.¹⁴

Figure 1.



The first movement deposits the fundamental seed from which an unmistakably Nietzschean flavoured programme is to flourish,

¹⁴ Kurt Blaukopf: *Mahler · A Documentary Study* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 204. Hereafter referred to as Blaukopf: *Mahler · A Documentary Study*.

articulating the initial release of Apollonian and Dionysian forces which are present throughout the symphony.¹⁵ The title originally disclosed by Mahler in 1895 for the entire work, '*Meine fröhliche Wissenschaft*' literally (My Joyful Knowledge), clearly alludes to the title of Nietzsche's book *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* of 1882,¹⁶ while the employment of an epitomizing extract from the latter's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* in the fourth movement of the symphony *Was mir die Nacht erzählt* ('What Night tells me') further reinforces the work's intricate fusion within the fabric of a Nietzschean context. The introduction to the first movement, entitled 'Pan awakes', represents Pan's beckoning the onset of summer, or the 'life force' borne out of the icy deadness of winter.¹⁷ A battle ensues, which bears summer's monumental triumph over winter. In the composer's own words 'Summer, in his strength and superior power, soon gains undisputed mastery'.¹⁸

This metamorphosis establishes the beginning of an essential process of becoming, from which the subsequent successive orders of being can thus evolve. Mahler described this progression within the first movement to Natalie Bauer-Lechner in June 1896:

¹⁵ To clarify, Apollo, the Greek mythological god of light and poetry, represents the spirit of order, rationality and intellectual harmony, while Dionysus, the god of wine, is representative of the spirit of ecstasy, intoxication, and the spontaneous will to life. The terms 'Apollonian' and 'Dionysian' are introduced and discussed at length in Nietzsche's first book *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), whereby the fusion of the two forces or 'artistic impulses' is deemed by Nietzsche as the essential prerequisite of art and tragedy, a unification, he believed, that has not been achieved since ancient Greek tragedy.

¹⁶ 'And I'll call the whole thing "*Meine fröhliche Wissenschaft*"—for that's just what it is!' Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, 'Steinbach am Attersee, Summer 1895', 41. Mahler eventually withdrew the title before the score was published, along with the movement's programmatic titles, but its original employment will be regarded in my contextual analysis of the symphony as analogous to the relevance of the latter.

¹⁷ Pan, the Greek mythological God of mountain pasture, hunting and rustic music, is presented in mythological imagery as a half-man, half-goat figure. The goat-god is also associated with inflicting sudden fear on man in vast and lonely places, hence the word *Panic*.

¹⁸ Bauer-Lechner: *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, 41.

[...] Captive life [,] struggling for release from the clutches of lifeless, rigid Nature [,] [...] gradually breaks through, out of soulless, petrified matter.¹⁹

The second movement, *Was mir die Blumen auf der Wiese erzählen* 'What the flowers in the meadow tell me', follows after a fixed pause and marks the commencement of the Symphony's 'second part'. Its archaic blend of Minuet and Scherzo material in a short and symmetrical *A-B-A-B-A* structure immediately discards any possibility of equilibrium to follow the substantial lengthy first movement. At times, undertones of a more ominous spirit are subtly interwoven, presenting the formidable face of nature, momentarily shattering its deceptive façade of elegance and beauty. The composer's dissatisfaction with the general reception of the piece is indicative of an unrecognised Dionysian spirit:

It always strikes me as strange that most people, when they talk about 'Nature', think only flowers, birds, forest breezes etc. Nobody knows the god Dionysus, Great Pan.²⁰

The third movement, *Was mir die Tiere im Walde erzählen* 'What the animals in the forest tell me', presents a scherzo based on a *Wunderhorn* setting, with the initial charm of the piece soon perishing also into a more sinister domain as the cuckoo falls to his death.²¹ The animals mourn for the Cuckoo's call, but sorrow is quickly replaced by a newfound joy in the melody of the Nightingale.

The fourth movement, *Was mir die Nacht erzählt* 'What Night tells me' is representative of 'mankind' in the ascent and introduces vocal elements into the symphony for the first time. The text, which is Zarathustra's roundelay, the so-called *Mitternachtlied* ('Midnight Song') from the concluding part of Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, is the first to introduce vocal elements into the work and is described by Mahler as 'the awakening from a confused dream—or rather a gentle awakening to consciousness of one's own reality', a

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁰ Blaukopf: *Mahler · A Documentary Study*, 204.

²¹ *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* ('The youth's enchanted horn') is an anthology of folk poetry by Arnim and Brentano from which Mahler drew material for his Third Symphony.

translation derived from the German: *Sich—seiner—selbst—bewusst—werden*.²² From this crucial point in the process of becoming, emphasis is redirected to a concentrated acknowledgment of what *has now become*. The opening vocal gesture calls 'O Mensch, Gib Acht!' ('Oh Man, Take Heed!'), over a faintly oscillating accompaniment, before the prospect of eternal 'joy' is articulated and rationalized only by the existence and acceptance of 'sorrow' in the scheme of life:

Oh Mensch! Gibt Acht!	Oh Man! Take Heed!
Was Spricht die tiefe Mitternacht?	What does deep midnight's voice contend?
"Ich schlief, ich schlief—	I slept my sleep—
aus tiefem Traum bin ich erwacht:—	And now awake at dreaming's end:—
Die Welt ist tief,	The world is deep,
Und tiefer als der Tag gedacht.	Deeper than the day can comprehend.
Tief ist ihr Weh—,	Deep is its woe—,
Lust—tiefer noch als Herzelied:	Joy—deeper than heart's agony:
Weh spricht: Vergeh!	Woe says: Fade! Go!
Doch all' Lust will Ewigkeit—,	But all joy wants eternity—,
Will tiefe, tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!"	Wants deep, deep, deep eternity!" ²³

This symbiotic dichotomy of forces, their dual dependency and opposing strengths, plays a recurring theme throughout the symphony. The arrival of summer for instance is dependent on its struggle with the adversary, winter. The sensation and recognition of joy is heightened only by the preceding experience of sorrow.

The fifth movement is a celebratory event with children and chimes, almost jolting us from a preceding realm of encapsulated inward stillness to an ultimately outward and public affair. The gradual awakening to an awareness of one's own self is short lived as here, in the fifth movement, we have returned to a blissful and naïve 'dream' of angels and bells.

The final Adagio movement returns to the purely instrumental medium, manifesting within itself a resolution to all that came before, while repossessing (but now on a solely instrumental plane) the intense stillness and acute sense of consciousness that is characteristic of the

²² Franklin: *Mahler: Symphony No. 3*, 66.

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 333.

fourth movement. The lively nature of its preceding movement, with ringing bells and voices, serves to further intensify the tranquillity and resolution achieved in the Adagio. Mahler's classification of the final movement as a specifically 'higher' musical form validates its intentional condition of transcendence: 'I concluded my Second and Third Symphonies with Adagios: that is, with a higher as opposed to a lower form'.²⁴

Despite the movement's appropriate dissociation from text, contrary to its two preceding movements, the composer describes the work as 'perfectly articulate', indicating that his comprehension of 'higher' forms includes purely instrumental or 'absolute' works where a transcendence of word as the carrier of meaning is achieved: 'What was heavy and inert at the beginning has, at the end, advanced to the highest state of awareness: inarticulate sounds have become the most perfectly articulate'.²⁵

Furthermore, Mahler refers to the Adagio's achievement in halting the 'Ixion wheel' in the following extract from Natalie Bauer-Lechner's account: 'Everything is resolved into quiet "being"; the Ixion wheel of appearances has at last been brought to a standstill'.²⁶

The composer's confirmation that the Adagio hinders and indeed ceases the revolving wheel of punishment is crucial to my case that the movement's narrative 'voice' resists and transcends the dogma of Christian 'suffering', while additionally marking the final annihilation of the 'suffering' of searching, endured by Mahler in vain, for answers that are ultimately unattainable within the limits of his living life. The realization and acceptance of his earthbound temporality, the fate of which, as he comes to understand, is eventual annihilation; a subsequent return to his original 'state' of non-existence, is what heightens his resolved sense of quiet "being".

I feel that human life is symbolized by the child's crying for bread and the answer of the mother, consoling it with promises again and again.
[...] Everything is withheld until—as with the dead child—it is too late.

²⁴ Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, 67.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 67. The Ixion wheel refers to the Greek mythological king of Thessaly (named Ixion) who, on committing parricide and attempting the rape of Hera, was punished by Zeus by being bound to an ever-revolving Ixion wheel.

[...] The slow monotonous response of the mother—of Fate, is in no particular hurry to satisfy our cries for bread.²⁷

The final Adagio, I believe, suggests no comfort to be found in the ‘promises’ of faith, but rather in seeking a joy in *having been*, exerted through the act and expression of human love, which Mahler acknowledged as the only truly eternal human quality and greatest assertion of being alive.

²⁷ Holbrook: *Gustav Mahler and The Courage To Be*, 52.

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