# Time as a circular spectrum and the retrospective device in Gustav Mahler's Symphony no. 3 (1895–1896)

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The function of this chapter is to examine Mahler's philosophical concept of time and the embodiment of this within the programmatic and structural model of his six-movement Symphony no. 3. This chapter shall argue that the composer's newfound concept of time was borne out of Friedrich Nietzsche's fundamental doctrine in his book *Also Sprach Zarathustra*[1] (Thus Spoke Zarathustra) of 1885, from which Mahler drew directly in the fourth movement of his third symphony. It must be stated at this initial stage, however, that the contextual significance of Nietzsche's work extends far beyond the borders of the fourth movement, instead radiating from this crucial midpoint in both directions and acting as the central anchor from which all contributory philosophical expressions in the symphony evolve. The subject of Mahler's concept and treatment of time with regard to Nietzschean principals is but one of the ingredients exhibiting a contextual and often disguised correlation between the literary and musical works mentioned above.

In examining the composer's conscious reconditioning of philosophical thought as a result of his comprehension of Nietzsche's aforementioned book, I draw upon three interconnected spheres of time, whose dimensions, as I will illustrate, are addressed within the various philosophical-programmatic layers of Mahler's third symphony. These are the consideration of a universal quantity of time, the measured lifetime of man, and finally, the significant juxtaposition of night and day scenes respectively in the fourth and fifth movements. Within the compass of these three dimensions of time, the composer's concentrated awareness of self as an element of the larger whole of Mankind will be examined in four transitional and symbiotic parts: the process of *becoming*, what has now *become*, *what we have in us to*

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[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1969). Hereafter referred to as Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

*become* or the 'prospective self', and finally, the manifestation of a transcendent joy in *having been*.

The immediately apparent sympathetic association between Nietzsche's book and Mahler's third symphony is the extract from the concluding part of *Thus spoke Zarathustra*[2], *Zarathustra's* Roundelay, the so-called *Mitternachtlied* (Midnight song), which Mahler adopted to introduce the first vocal element into the symphony. The fourth movement, entitled 'What Night Tells Me', is representative of 'Mankind' within the ascending structure of the various stages of being in the work, and it is here that Nietzsche's words appear. A single alto voice opens with a foreboding call: 'Oh Mensch, gib acht' ('Oh Man, Take heed.').[3]

A brief examination of the programmatic contents of the original sketches of the symphony reveals an all-embracing passage of time, subdivided into six progressive stages of being, whose titles reveal an ascent characterized by an increasing complexity of consciousness and the eventual achievement of self-consciousness and retrospect, epitomized by the fourth 'Mankind' movement. (table 1)

First, it is worth considering what these titles alone disclose as an overall exercise in existentialism, propelled by an intrinsic necessity within the composer to fathom the truth of all things, including the nature and consequence of time and the profound consideration of its beginning and potential end. The very act of categorizing himself, along with the entire compass of all things, demonstrates Mahler's conscious endeavour to appease the symptoms of what David Holbrook appropriately terms the composer's 'existence-anxiety'.[4] It is significant to consider the irony in the fact that it is our intellectual inability to fathom the very magnitude of the universe that causes us to shrink back into the limits of our intellectual capacity, causing the symptoms of our 'existence-anxiety' to inevitably heighten.

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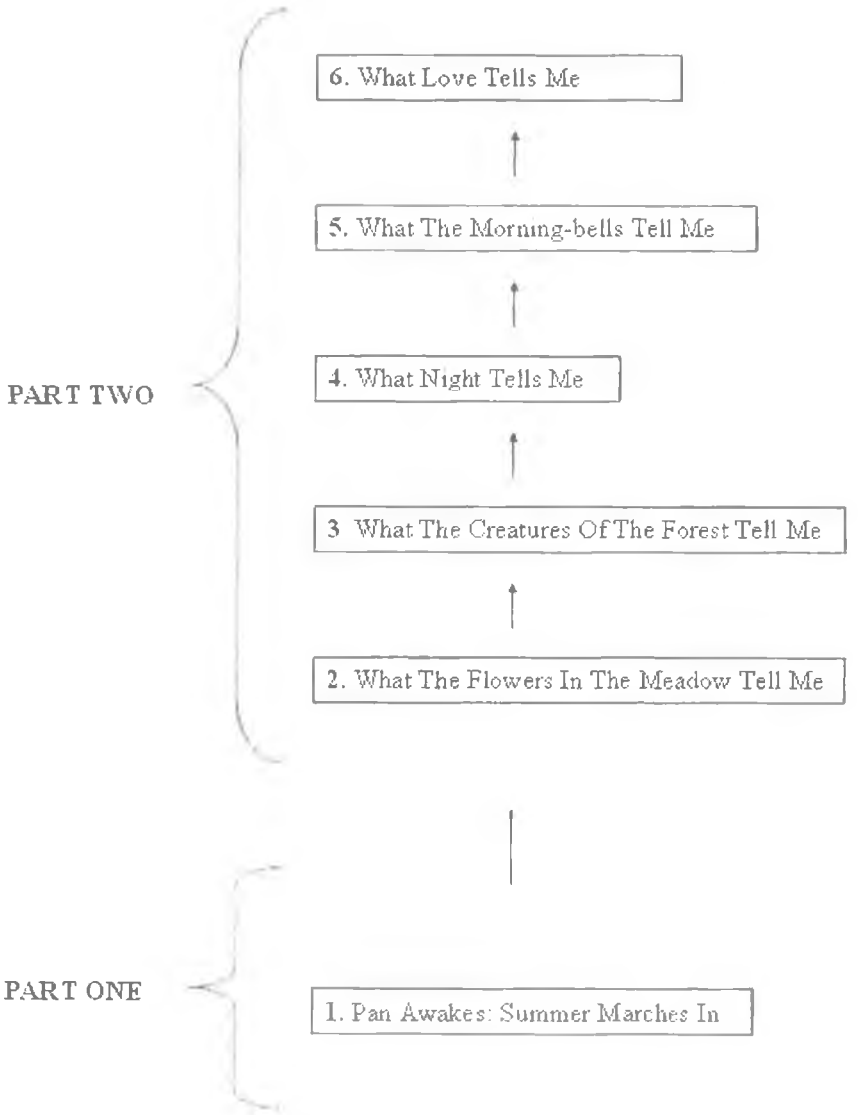
[2] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.*

[3] Gustav Mahler, *Symphony no. 3* (New York: Dover Publications, 1987), p. 92.

[4] David Holbrook, *Gustav Mahler and the Courage to Be* (London: Clarke, Doble and Brendon, 1975), p. 20. Hereafter referred to as Holbrook, *Gustav Mahler.*

**Table 1. Programmatic movement titles I–VI. Gustav Mahler: Symphony no. 3.**



It is therefore conceivable that man's most instinctual intellectual activity is to put into categorical order the truths he does possess, or those at least by which he chooses to abide. The symptoms of the composer's 'existence-anxiety' originate, I believe, in a scepticism shared with Nietzsche towards the 'solutions' provided by Christian teachings regarding the problems of existence. With the rejection of these solutions comes an inherent need for a replaced or renewed doctrine. For Mahler, this meant consciously instilling in himself a denunciation towards all truths previously ingrained upon his perception of the world. This act enabled the composer to strive towards the intellectual achievement of what Nietzsche termed 'sublimation',[5] which is the process of self-overcoming and the ultimate affirmation of self. What attracted the composer to the idea of such a radical disposal of all truths and values, which included the rejection of Christian principals, was his ultimate quest for renewed truth, which would inevitably enhance his confirmation of self, or his *Dasein*.[6]

At the turn of the nineteenth century, when some of the world's most controversial debates in religion, philosophy and science were taking place, this is exactly what Nietzsche's unprecedented philosophical reasoning offered the composer, who was essentially plagued by the unyielding hunger and drive of existential enquiry. First, in considering the relationship of Mahler's philosophical inclinations to the general *Zeitgeist* of the *fin de siècle*, we may draw upon Peter

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[5] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 10. Hereafter referred to as Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*.

[6] In German, *Dasein* is synonymous with existence: *(sein)* to be there/present; to exist. It is 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 characterizes the term as the 'affective relationships with surrounding people and objects' (Simon Blackburn: *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p.94).

Franklin's reference to the 'metaphorical circle' in relation to the self–affirming expressive function he endows to the various art forms:[7]

> The completion of the circle comes most finally during the period I have designated as the 'late nineteenth century': The deeply rooted 'instinctual' artistic activity now joins with the fruit of conscious, rational and 'scientific' experience to produce large-scale works in which we see intense and basic emotional expressions of desire and awe, of awareness and the fear of Death, often in the light of a rational feeling that there is no 'God', that man is mortal.[8]

Nietzsche's philosophy imparted new solutions to the questions Mahler so frequently posed rhetorically to his contemporaries:

> Why do we exist? [...] Have I really willed this life before I ever was conceived? [...] What is the object of toil and sorrow? [...] Will the meaning of life finally be revealed by death?[9]

The philosopher's topics of concern directly penetrated the very core of man's intellectual inquisition by continually addressing the fundamental question: Does existence have any meaning at all? For the composer, the confronting of such a question involved the consideration of his own mortality as the inevitable termination of physical identity, playing upon the possible pointlessness of man in the totality of things. This concept naturally intensified Mahler's symptoms of 'existence-anxiety' and in turn fuelled the procedure of creative reflection as a way of re-establishing his severed sense of *Dasein*. In addition to the process of creative reflection as a way of overcoming this concept, Nietzsche's

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[7] Peter R. Franklin, 'Mahler and the Crisis of Awareness' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of York, 1973), p. 41. Hereafter referred to as Franklin, 'Mahler and the Crisis of Awareness'.

[8] Franklin, 'Mahler and the Crisis of Awareness', p. 42.

[9] Bruno Walter, *Gustav Mahler*, trans. by James Galston (London: Severn House, 1975), p. 72.

theory of 'Eternal Recurrence of the Same'[10] served as an affirming alternative to this existential despair.

The first movement of the symphony, an extended dramatic sonata structure, occupies 'Part One' of an overall two-part temporal symphonic structure, which is noticeably 'top-heavy' in proportion. 'Part One' is of particular importance to our consideration of Mahler's intellectual hold on the concept of the beginning of time and the consequent inception of evolutionary existence, which progressively follows in 'Part Two'. The title itself of the first movement, 'Pan Awakes: Summer Marches In', corresponds to the internal two-part structure of the movement with an introductory section, the initial awakening of Pan leading to the summer or 'life-force' march theme. The introductory programmatic association with the Greek mythological god of Pan establishes the first fundamental inception of what I believe is a Nietzschean-inspired hypothesis.

In Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*[11] (1872), the philosopher laments the decline and eventual eradication of Greek culture and aesthetics, which once embraced the Dionysian world-view, that is, the continual affirmation of the 'infinite primordial joy in existence'.[12]

> With the death of Greek tragedy there was created an immense emptiness profoundly felt everywhere [...] "The great god Pan is dead!"[13]

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[10] Nietzsche's theory of 'Eternal Recurrence' is central to the majority of his literary works and is the basic conception of his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* of 1885. In Nietzsche's final book, *Ecce Homo*, the philosopher describes the idea of 'Eternal Recurrence' as 'the highest formula of affirmation that can possibly be attained.' Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 69.

[11] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of The Spirit of Music*, trans. by Shaun Whiteside, ed. by Michael Tanner (London: Penguin Books, 2003). Hereafter referred to as Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*.

[12] Patricia Merivale, *Pan the Goat-God: His Myth in Modern Times* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 179.

[13] Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 22.

Here, Nietzsche employs the image of 'immense emptiness' in his description of the nature of things following the annihilation of an aesthetic ideal, (the Greek artistic-aesthetic achievement of 'perfection'), while Mahler's interaction with the onset of existence, as revealed by the programmatic elements of the first movement, involves the conscious recommencement and reawakening of the acknowledged end of the Dionysian world-view. What is evident in this regard is a cyclical perception of time, where Nietzsche's metaphorical announcement of the death of Pan becomes the very origin for Mahler's conception of the onset of life, that is, the reawakening, or rebirth of the symbol of Pan. This ancient, symbolic and composite figure was essentially re-envisioned by the composer as a retrieval of the ideal 'life-force' from its previous state of 'non-existence' following its annihilation. This is where Mahler's contribution and indeed homage to Nietzsche's philosophical doctrine may be considered. Furthermore, it is significant to consider that the image of 'immense emptiness' generally tends to alleviate the intellectual difficulty one experiences in any attempt to comprehend the nature of things before the commencement of existence. Therefore, a cyclical theory of time can be understood as perhaps the most natural inclination of human reasoning with regard to such profound matters. In fact, these cyclical conceptions of time originate in ancient philosophical thought, particularly evident in the literature of the Pythagoreans. Part of the procedure of what Nietzsche affirmed as the 'revaluation of all values'[14] is the denial of the Christian explanation of the nature of time: its beginning, at the hand of a creator, and its everlasting essence.[15] Nietzsche solidly argued that the Christian teaching of the continuation of time in a life after death immediately relocates and depreciates the individual's 'will to power'

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[14] Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 10.

[15] Ibid. Nietzsche's use of the phrase 'Revaluation of all values' in the chapter entitled 'Why I am Destiny' (*Ecce Homo*) is followed by its definition: 'This is my formula for an act of supreme coming–to–oneself on the part of mankind which in me has become flesh and genius. It is my fate to have to be the first *decent* human being, to know myself in opposition to the mendaciousness of millennia ... I was the first to *discover* the truth [...]'. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 96.

(that is, his most instinctual human drive) in his own living world with promises of eternal life in another.

At the heart of Nietzsche's philosophy of time, which is an alternative to the Christian concept, is his most fundamental theory of 'Eternal Recurrence of the Same', a theme that fervently resonates throughout *Thus spoke Zarathustra.*[16] Nietzsche first introduced the concept of 'Eternal Recurrence of the Same' in his book, *The Gay Science* of 1884[17] with the following image:

> This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything immeasurably small or great in your life must return to you – all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over and over, and you with it, a grain of dust.[18]

This idea must not be confused with the Christian principal of 'Resurrection'– a concept that concerned Mahler in his preceding second symphony – for the idea of 'Eternal Recurrence of the Same' which is not associated with the return to a new ideal or 'heavenly' life, but the repetition of the same life, is a recurrence of the same to every imaginable degree. The very acceptance and overcoming of this idea is the one element, Nietzsche argues, that delivers meaning to an otherwise (and arguably) meaningless procedure. Most importantly, the adhering to the concept of 'Eternal Recurrence of the Same' enables one to base every decision and evaluation on what one would find most preferable in the repetition of the same for all eternity. This idea actively promotes the self-renewal and continual self-overcoming Nietzsche deems necessary to advance towards that which we have in us to become (otherwise known as our 'potential state') of which his literary character of Zarathustra is the metaphorical epitome. The physical or

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[16] Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra.*

[17] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

[18] Ibid., p. 74.

scientific reality of the theory of 'Eternal Recurrence of the Same' was, I believe, to both Nietzsche and Mahler entirely irrelevant, as it is the intellectual interaction alone with the concept that grants one the greatest opportunity to achieve a heightened and most faithful affirmation of present 'being'. In addition to this, the concept directly engages with the philosopher's theory of the ultimate striving towards the *Übermensch* (or 'over-man'), that is, the conscious process of chipping away at one's self in order to continually renew one's self, an endless striving towards the 'ideal' self–image; that which we have in us to become or the 'prospective self'. Similarly, the metaphorical figure of the *Übermensch* was intended to be, to the figure of Zarathustra, what humans are to our ancestral apes. It is the understanding of this, I believe, that attracted Mahler to a conscious adoption of the Nietzschean concept of time, as expressed in the symphony, in order to reaffirm his own sense of being and meaning in the world, ultimately providing remedy to the ever-worsening symptoms of his 'existence-anxiety'. In keeping with the gradually foreshortening measurements of time within the symphony, from the universal totality of time to the measured lifetime of man, the next level of philosophical-programmatic connotations can be examined in Mahler's setting of the Night-time and Daytime scenes in the fourth and fifth movements. As previously mentioned, the fourth movement, representing 'Mankind' in the 'evolutionary ascent', acts as the midpoint anchor of a Nietzschean-inspired programme, whereby, with the advantage now of consciousness and retrospection, the narrative voice of the symphony is channelled into a single focal centre of acute nocturnal deliberation. From this point, with one of the most significant features of human consciousness now present, that of retrospection, a blueprint of the gradual process of *becoming* (in both physical and philosophical contexts) can be traced, while the movement as a whole itself marks the concentrated nucleus of the spectrum by regarding what has now become. The acute sense of Mahler's coming to awareness of his own self (the *Sich-seiner-selbst-bewusst-werden)* is achieved effectively in the opening of the movement with his employment of an extended static and oscillating introduction in double bass and harp before the monotone alto calls for our attention and the song of man at midnight begins.

Mahler's utilization of the theme of Night for the setting of the text, which is Zarathustra's 'Midnight Song', corresponds directly with Nietzsche's recurring theme of Night as the occasion and messenger of universal truths. In a chapter entitled 'The Night Song' in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the philosopher states:

> Night has come: now my craving breaks out of me like a well; to speak I crave. Night has come; now all fountains speak louder. And my soul too is a fountain. [...] Thus sang Zarathustra.[19]

The opening of the text, Zarathustra's Roundelay, set by Mahler in the fourth movement reads as follows:

Oh Mensch! Gibt Acht!
Was Spricht die tiefe Mitternacht?
Ich schlief, ich schlief
Und aus tiefem Traum bin ich erwacht:
Die Welt ist tieft,
Und tiefer als der Tag gedacht.

Oh Man! Attend!
What does deep midnight's voice contend?
I slept my sleep,
And now awake at dreaming's end:
The world is deep,
Deeper than the day can comprehend.[20]

Here we see a two-fold expression demonstrated, whereby the immediately personal awareness of self takes the form of a warning, which is projected in the opening call of the movement with deliberate repetition towards the larger compass of mankind. While the 'voice of midnight' is acknowledged here as the metaphorical bearer of an undisclosed truth, the succeeding lines ('The world is deep, deeper than the day can comprehend') reiterate the recognition that what we strive

[19] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 130.
[20] Ibid., p. 333.

to know: 'those questions which are every man's', are essentially beyond our intellectual and conscious limits and this, in itself, is something which must be overcome.[21]

The composer's intentional endeavour to juxtapose the matter of reality and illusion respectively is demonstrated in the adjacent setting of the Night and Day themes of the fourth and fifth movements. The idea of waking day as the generator of truth, and dreaming night as the occasion of illusion is hereby inverted when we experience the blatant disparity of the succeeding fifth movement, as it jolts us from the preceding Midnight realm of inward sober stillness to an ultimately outward and public daytime affair involving children and chimes. Finally, the lively nature of the fifth movement only serves to further intensify the tranquillity and repossession of stillness and consciousness achieved in the final Adagio movement, entitled 'What Love Tells Me', which returns to the purely instrumental medium.

Despite the movement's dissociation from text, in contrast to its two preceding movements, the composer described the work, according to Bauer-Lechner's records, as 'perfectly articulate',[22] while additionally, he classifies the Adagio movement as a specifically 'higher' musical form, validating its intentional condition of transcendence:

> I concluded my [...] Third Symphony with [an] Adagio: that is, with a higher as opposed to a lower form. [...] 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. Everything is resolved into quiet "being"; the Ixion wheel of appearances has at last been brought to a standstill.[23]

Mahler's confirmation that the Adagio ceases the ever-revolving Ixion wheel of punishment concludes my demonstration by metaphorically attesting to the point that the movement's eventual narrative voice resists and transcends the promises of a Christian faith by annihilating

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[21] Holbrook, *Gustav Mahler*, p. 72.

[22] Natalie Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, trans. by Dika Newlin (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), p. 59. Hereafter referred to as Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*.

[23] Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, p. 59.

the pursuit of what is eternally ungraspable. Instead, the exertion and expression of human love, for Mahler, as the final movement verifies, is the most fundamental and functional pursuit when the concept of 'The Eternal Recurrence of the Same' is adopted, while, furthermore, it achieves the greatest assertion of being alive and the most effective encapsulation of a sense of *having been*.

Based on the arguments provided, this chapter concludes that Mahler's symptoms of existential anxiety and torment were consciously pacified through his profound comprehension of Nietzsche's life-affirming philosophy and indeed through the composer's own contribution to this doctrine. In Nietzsche's own words from the concluding part of *Thus spoke Zarathustra*:

> The mystery of the night drew nearer and nearer [...] "Was *that* —life?" I will say to death. "Very well! Once more!" I am content for the first time to have lived my life.[24]

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[24] Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, p. 326.

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