<u>On Music, on Mahler and on the Quest of Sincerity</u>

Gustav Mahler's Farewell Trilogy and further thoughts

by
Yoel H. Gamzou

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Part I

On Music, on Mahler and on the Quest of Sincerity

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most challenging and controversial questions has always been – is there a meaning to music? Is there meaning to art? And if so, how are we to understand it?

I am a conductor - not a scholar, nor a musicologist. My intention with this article is not to dive into a scholarly analysis of Mahler's music - that is a venture whose relevance I find very debatable. I would like to simply try and portray my own connection and approach to Mahler's music, through the point of view of a performer, not of a scholar. By diving into those endless universes, I may be able to shed some light on that which, in my view, inspires a composer and defines his urge and ability to compose – and ultimately also defines for us the realm of the musical experience.

My journey with Mahler started very early; when I was 7 years old, my mother leisurely put on an old LP-record of Mahler's Seventh Symphony, conducted by Leonard Bernstein. I was immediately hooked. It didn't take long until I was hypnotized by the piece – I can very vividly remember wearing out those old black records to complete exhaustion, hearing the piece for hours and hours non-stop.

It is very difficult, perhaps impossible, to depict music in words. If I were to try and explain what Mahler means to me, I would do great injustice both to the music and to the experiences I was so fortunate to have had through it. If I had to try very hard and think what it is that makes Mahler so extraordinary, what makes his music so incredibly complete – I would come to the conclusion that it is the fact that it encompasses the entire spectrum of human dimensions and emotions (in the broadest sense of the word) which makes it so unique. I have never encountered an equivalent musical experience, where I felt that within one piece – one universe – such an incredibly vast range of worlds and planets, of pictures and landscapes, of rivers and mountains – but primarily an incomprehensibly unique and complete spectrum of human dimensions - was to be experienced.

It would lead too far, were I to try and discuss the question "why is one a musician?", or in fact "what makes an artist". What is it that "makes" us make music, that "forces" us to do so? What is it that makes an artist not be able ***not*** to make music? What is it that takes our lives over and gives us ultimately no choice – for it chooses us rather than we choose it? Is it a selfish, self-indulgent urge? Is it all about "self-expression" and "own statement", or are we perhaps mere selfless slaves of our art? Is talent the simple and random luck of being able to excel at a measurable craft, or is it a blessing (which is simultaneously a curse!) that summons us, that entrusts us with a mission, which we do not have the right to refuse?

For me personally it has always been clear that we are here for a reason – some of us discover it earlier than others, some of us are more aware of it than others – some even spend their entire lives denying their real vocation. But ultimately, the "reason" is there. I was very lucky to have discovered very early on which channel it is, through which I am supposed to serve humanity. It must be made clear that all of the above must not necessarily be interpreted in any spiritual way, and no religious undertones should be read. Whether one's calling is a heaven-given message or a psychological illusion each and every one of us creates for themselves is totally irrelevant. Its ultimate presence is to my view indisputable. It has always been clear to me – or at least for as long as I can remember – that I have a mission at hand which I was ordered to fulfil. It has taken me some years to understand and fully comprehend in what form I was to go by this task, but its presence was unavoidable and its power was impossible to ignore. I strongly believe that it is only through the awareness of this sort of "calling" that I had the strength to deal with the challenges that life laid upon my way.

It was no later than at the age of twelve or thirteen that I first came across Mahler's Tenth Symphony. I was very fortunate to have been a complete "virgin" in all respects concerning this work – I had never seen or heard any "completed version" of this unfinished masterpiece – nor was I in any way involved in the decades-old debate around this enigma. My first contact with this monster was its naked and painfully sincere self.

After observing those "sketches" for a mere moment, the extent of the piece became immediately clear to me – this was not a torso of drafts, nor was it the faint, scattered thoughts of a dying genius. It was an entire universe – a universe which had something to say to us all that no other work of art had ever been able to say. A sacred universe, which has been laying silently in its casket for almost a hundred years.

Just as much as a priest lives for the privilege and duty to serve his god, so do certain musicians go by their way, as servants of their art - in awe of the titans who have moulded this nest of tradition and continuity. It has always been clear to me that the driving force behind the perseverance and discipline (which are so crucial on the path of any sincere artist!) I am so fortunate to have, have always resulted from such a conviction. Since a very tender age, it has always been clear to me that I am here for a reason and that I have to fulfil a certain purpose – and this purpose, I later understood, was to create, preserve and eternalize the legacy of Gustav Mahler.

It is hard to explain to those who do not wish to be convinced, that those monumental and arguably pretentious words are in fact utterly selfless. For it has never ever been about me – as I am nothing but a mere tool, a fortunate tool indeed – but only a mere element which has the privilege of serving a much higher and most revered cause.

2. INTERPRETATION AND THE ROLE OF THE PERFORMER

It is very important for me to briefly touch on a subject which I believe is strongly misunderstood by many of my colleagues and equally so by our listeners. What is the role of the performer in the creation of a musical work?

A piece of music is not created by the composer, as he sits in his dusty attic and struggles with his capricious and evasive inspiration. A piece of music comprises of two equally essential and equally crucial phases – composition and performance. The incredibly complex dependency between the two has been the cause of some of the most exceptional musical experiences in history as well as some of its most bitter failures. But ultimately both performer and composer must accept that they alone cannot create a piece of music – for there is no music without its performers, just as much as there is no performance of a piece of music without a written score.

The composer's role in the process of creation is in fact complete by the moment he has put the last drop of ink on his manuscript – the first phase in the piece's "pregnancy" is then complete – but just as much as a fertile male is not enough to produce an embryo, so is a score still very far from a born child.

This leads us to one of the most frequently discussed topics among musicians and a subject which has reached an utterly absurd status – some performers' utterly ridiculous quest to be "authentic to the score". Thousands of books have been written on this subject, lives have been spent, careers have risen and fallen, millions of conversations have been chewed over and over – how can we, interpreters, be as loyal as possible to the written text.

"Authenticity and loyalty to the score" – one of those statements that every conductor dropped here and again in one interview or another, followed by an aloof facial expression and a tap on the very-well-combed hair-do. What do we actually mean by that? And how arrogant are we actually, to speak of such values which nobody is able to fulfil? I find it ever more shocking to encounter colleagues who come up to me, armed by a typical salon-aura and a self-important face, with the essentially redundant question – "so is the conductor a mere servant of the score or an Artist (with a capital "A" of course) who is after the self-indulgent temptation of self-expression?".

In fact, the ancient quest of "doing what the composer wanted" is a match lost before started. An old colleague of mine once said to a very well-known conductor who tried to preach to him on his manner of interpretation: "until you find Beethoven's phone number I'm going to go on doing this piece exactly in the tempo I like". Away from anecdotes, it is indeed clear that none of us is able to go and ask old Ludwig for his preferred interpretation of any of his pieces. The simple truth is that when dealing with most of the repertoire, one has to face a very plain fact– the composer is in most cases dead. And with him is his so-called "real intention" gone forever. Even more importantly, it is strongly debatable whether this intention – in case the composer were to be alive – is in fact as relevant as some of those who have elevated it to a sacred pedestal believe.

The highest moral code which has always guided me when trying to do a work-of-art, or in this case a piece-of-music justice, has been the essential and extremely important difference between being loyal to the **written note** – a certain obsessive tendency of many contemporary colleagues to escape to the realms of "authenticity" through pedantic occupation (irresolvable by definition) with trivial details – and being loyal to the **spirit** of the music and the reason for which it exists and was created. Of course this is a dangerous statement and must not be taken as an invitation to charlatanism – it is indeed the details which comprise a work of art, and those must not be compromised on the quest to grasping the spirit of a piece. But the occupation with trivia and its portrayal as essence is futile and degrading to the genius behind the piece. Sadly it is through those means that so many mediocre colleagues have been able to compensate their lack of talent and the absence of anything substantial to say – and have gone on to make impressive careers with the false claim to be "serving the master's real intention".

In my opinion, there is one essential, fundamental issue which differentiates two kinds of artists - the reason behind the creation and the driving force which makes an artist able to produce.
I believe there are two kinds of artists – there is the Artist with a capital "A" – who struggles, doubts, lives, says, hears, sees and eventually expresses – that is, creates - for his very own sake and in order to leave a mark to posterity; and there is the artist who is a mere servant of his art, who is nothing more than a filter which lets his art express itself through him. This is not to say that the latter is in any way selfless or altruistic, or worse, void of any personal fingerprint – for it is the filter which shapes the final result; but there is indeed an overwhelming and striking difference between the two – and this difference is very apparent in the final result.

In music, I believe these two contrasting identities are also very present and widespread. A possibly debatable, but nonetheless very obvious example for such two prototypes is Gustav Mahler and Richard Wagner. Whenever experiencing the "universe" which Richard Wagner left us, it has been impossible for me to ignore the monumentally-imposing quantities of "self" that gush out of every note. It always seems to me as if Wagner generously blessed every element of his creation with such an inexhaustible degree of his own ego that I am sometimes under the impression every single note or word which came out of his pen constantly screams "I am Richard Wagner" while laying its fist on the table. I find it hard to adhere to any conclusion other than Wagner having used music, as well as poetry, as a mere tool to adulate, glorify and worship himself and make sure his legacy is engraved on the stone of posterity with ink nobody will ever be able to remove.

This somewhat extreme view may be debatable, but its contrasting difference to a completely different type of composer, the one who composed because ***he simply had to***, because music possessed him and left him no choice – the composer who was never able to draw from his success and recognition the fuel to his motivation, and who submitted himself and his destiny to the unpredictable powers of inspiration (or the lack of!) and the uncontrollable will of the Creator Spiritus – is quite apparent and requires no further explanation.

It is my most sincere conviction that Gustav Mahler, having experienced next to no recognition as a composer during his lifetime (or at most, in negligible amounts, especially in comparison with the almost-disturbingly enthusiastic and occasionally quasi-hypocritical, euphoric success his music nowadays enjoys), created music because he simply had to. He was a servant of art, a servant of this force which is so much stronger than all of us which takes over our destiny and does not leave us the choice but to serve it and do it justice – and his body, his biography, his spirit and his destiny were nothing but secondary elements to an existence which was a simple filter – a filter to music which <u>created itself through him</u> – and a filter which managed through almost complete self-sacrifice to allow some of the most divine visions ever put on paper to write themselves through his hands and ears.

At the end of the day, whatever we do during our lifetime, we all realize at one point or another that we are mortal. On the other hand music can survive us in years, decades and centuries. It is also every interpreter's decision whether he wants to dedicate himself and his life to the memory of a dead man or to the legacy of a spirit. The final and most essential question is – has the composer written his music in order to be remembered, in order to put ***<u>his</u>*** mark on history, or has he written those works for the sake of music? It is exactly for this reason that the composer's "intention" – whatever this may mean - is irrelevant for the process of interpretation, as performance is for music, not for the composer - just as much as the composer wrote music for music and not for himself.

Music happens in the moment it is performed – tragically, or magically, depending on how one wants to look at it – it never really happens, for the moment when it happens is already the moment after it's gone. Music is after all a memory of an event past – and this memory forms in the spirit of each one of the listeners. On this process we musicians have absolutely no control.

The composer's masterpiece lands at the hands of the interpreter who is expected to make music out of ink – he is to take those dots and lines, those mere indications which can be understood in a million different ways, and turn them into sounds. The interpreter's take on these indications is directly and tightly dependant on his own persona and the "baggage" he brings with him – his experiences, personality, thoughts, feelings and ultimately and most importantly, his own personal and unique breath and pulse, which make his interpretation unique and his performance inimitable.

The subject of interpretation-tools and the interpreter's palette is a vast, independent area which I will only touch on with great discretion, as I cannot do it justice in those mere few lines. Very simplistically and briefly put, I believe there are two major elements which form the two most important tools in the interpretation of music - contrast and pulse.

It is through contrast – the extremes – whether in terms of tempo, dynamic, articulation, colour, character, etc., that we can portray those incredibly varied universes which were laid to us on paper. When the music pushes its own limits in every bar, we interpreters cannot continue the process of creation with an attitude any less courageous than our predecessors on the line – the composers. And pulse – it is indeed all about pulse. Pulse is our breath, and pulse makes tempo. The very odd modern tendency to standardize tempo – or so to say, to execute one entire movement or piece in one tempo, is most curious and incomprehensible. Our tempo is directly based on our breath – a beat of a bar is a heartbeat – and tempo is the pulse of our body. A human being breathes quite differently in different situations, within different emotions, in different states; a situation of excitement would evoke a very different pulse to total boredom, melancholia would lead to a very different heartbeat than euphoria and expectation. Similarly, a human being experiences different emotions and lives different situations in every single day of their lives. In those situations, his or her body breathes very differently and is constantly confronted with a new mental and physical state.

A piece of art is ultimately a microcosm of life – a concentrated, condensed message which depicts the exact same things we face in our life, in miniature form. How are we to interpret this message with a so strikingly untypical and unnatural artificial monotony?

When interpreting Mahler's music, the necessity of those two elements is particularly striking. The mystery and challenge of facing his music involve giving ugliness just as much importance as beauty – but of course, it is through ugliness that one defines beauty. Mahler's legacy is in many ways a combination of the tragic and the beautiful – the possibility to express the darkness and emptiness of the world which lost so many of its values, to experience death and the fear of the unknown, through beauty – and the lack thereof.

Performance is ultimately there to convey and enable an aesthetic stimulation, an intellectual challenge, but primarily to give a message which evokes a spiritual and emotional experience. Sadly, many people are afraid of the vast dimensions of music and its unpredictable effect on one's emotions – so they stick to all those measurable elements – this realm of details in which they feel all too comfortable. Why? Because it is definable, it has a beginning and an end, it has logic, it has rules, it is predictable, it is perfectible – it is safe.

3. TONALITY AND NATURE – THE CRISIS IN EUROPEAN MUSIC

I believe it is clear to us all, that classical music has been in a state of crisis for nearly 100 years. When the average age of the concert-goer is 60+ and the most popular repertoire is over 200 years old, it is clear that there is a problem. Classical music lost its relevance because it has become a stagnated, stiff tradition of reproducing old masterpieces according to a must-not-be-challenged array of rules deeply rooted in the tradition of mediocrity. The relevance of music has always been fuelled by the constant evolution and incessant introduction of new music - and "new music" faced a monumental crisis 100 years ago which forced it to split into two directions – "classical music" and "popular music". Those horrendous and utterly faulty terms have initiated one of the most tragic notions in the history of music and art in general – "music for the people" and "music for musicians". The isolated bubble of so-called "new-classical-music" distanced itself from its original public to such an extent that nowadays so-called "new music" can either be consumed in off-off-scene fringe-institutions or it is cleverly-wrapped in "traditional" programmes (primarily because the institution has to fulfil certain "duties" to receive their funding) between two other "accessible" pieces so the public doesn't stay at home.

It is shocking how many people are unaware of the extent of the disaster – we are constantly training young generations of musicians to continue preserving something which is dead. And by that, I definitely do not mean that the masterpieces of previous centuries lost their relevance – all to the contrary. But that we performers are losing our relevance if we develop and grow in a context which is dead and void of any relevance to its time.

The unavoidable question which arises is – why? What is the reason for this catastrophic development? I shall try to draw some very basic lines to the roots of the problem. Ever since the end of the "renaissance" period and up until the First World War, classical music was based on an extremely strong system – Tonality.

Tonality is not only a set of rules or a bunch of major and minor keys. Tonality is a system which only gives titles and figures to phenomena which have always been there – long before human beings decorated this planet. Tonality is based on the natural overtones – and those have existed long before anybody spoke of a dominant or a tonic. The octave, the fifth and in fact the triad have been sounded by any string which has vibrated on this planet for millions of years. Only that they have only become an octave, a fifth and a triad after we have perceived them. Tonality is ultimately the culmination of the process in which mankind became aware of nature's most intimate secrets, and managed to mould it into a musical universe unique in its magnitude - a form of explainable, retraceable structures which document our awareness of those gifts of nature.

Tonality is nature's language – it lets nature speak to us, it lets nature offer itself in its utmost vulnerability and entrusts us with the fragile and sacred task of moulding it into music. Tonality is so rooted in nature that its appreciation is in no way dependant on culture, education or background; it is independent from tradition and habits; it is floating above those artificial manmade divisions of countries and languages. It is universal because it has been there long before us – waiting for us to finally become aware of its relevance and scope.

Western music has been based on this secret up until Gustav Mahler's death. Even other cultures were (albeit indirectly) thoroughly related to it and intrinsically weaved with its unavoidable majesty. The reason why tonality has such a strong effect is that it is not a manmade theory – we did not construct it, we only explained and became aware of what nature laid in front of us, waiting to be perceived, explored, elaborated, and moulded into art.

In the beginning of the 20th Century, many artists, in all fields, felt a deep urge to revolt against all things past. Mostly resulting from the historical texture and the deep frustration under monarchical regimes and exhaustion of repetitive wars, people wanted a change and they stepped into the twentieth century with the vow to search for something new. Artists were always society's most radical face, and this time too, they searched for their own way, in their art, to negate all things past and replace tradition with innovation.

This need manifested itself in music in a misconception which led to a catastrophic result – tonality was seen as a system – a system as decadent and rotten as the monarchy, a system which was essentially "wrong" only because it was instated by the old generation. But in fact tonality is not a system – but a phenomenon one cannot remove or ignore – because nature, as well as our instincts and urges, will always be one step ahead of our minds.

An alternative was needed – and a new system was found. Soon enough Arnold Schönberg came up with a new invention – the 12 Tones System – a system which is entirely retraceable, definable and can be understood through a set of rules. On the surface, a totally valid and legitimate concurrence to tonality. But the natural and inexplicable force in tonality, the dissonant and its urge to resolution, the triad and its incomparable purity, the eternal cycle of the fifths – cannot be replaced by a system of numbers and rules which are based on a human-being's construction.

The 12-Tone-System failed the test of history miserably, as it failed to offer any experience but an intellectual one, in the process of making or listening to music. One cannot have a spiritual or emotional experience through a dimension which is not natural, for it is not we who created the spirit, but nature. For a hundred years, mankind has been fighting with the aftermath of that disaster – because people need music. And people need music through which they can experience emotions, and those emotions were nowhere to be found in the elitist, rationally-constructed "new-classical-music". And that is exactly when a different branch of music – the so called "popular music" became necessary.

Ever since the beginning of the 20th Century, and the occurrence of humanity's most unimaginable horrors, mankind has had the need to reject beauty and express its pain through destruction. It seems that we have lost the ability to appreciate beauty and are afraid of what it can mean to us. But an artist cannot cease to search for beauty, because beauty is complete and so is the ideal of inspiration. It is complete.

We stopped looking for beauty in art – but art is about beauty just as much as it is about its opposite. We can only experience completeness through the thirst and craving for beauty – for it is an essential human need, deeply rooted in our "DNA". But completeness and real beauty can only be reached through the occupation with ugliness – for it is the horror which created peace, for it is the dissonant which creates the resolution. A neat performance is a consonant without tension, it is utopia without resistance, it is a realm of pastellic memories without any contour.

Gustav Mahler's message is understandable beyond language. It is, as music in general, a universal language, speaking to layers of the human spirit which are earlier and more instinctive than rationalizations and structure. Mahler himself said: "Music represents the whole human being - feeling, thinking, breathing, suffering". For it is the entire spectrum of human emotions and dimensions which is to be found in the realm of his music.

Music is the art closest to life – by the moment it happens, it is already gone. But is it eternal? The artist's greatest mission is to search – to ask questions – not to find. Great music too, offers questions, not answers.

4. PROGRAMME IN MUSIC AND THE VALIDITY OF PROGRAMMATIC ANALYSIS

One of the most controversial and frequently discussed subjects among Mahler-scholars and musicians in general is the aspect of programme in music and in Mahler's oeuvre in particular. It is known to us all that Mahler had originally made some programmatic annotations to some of his early pieces (those can be traced in scores, letters, notes and memoirs of his colleagues), but later on completely rejected this notion and opposed any attempt to "explain" his music and insisted it was to be experienced as absolute.

By doing so, Mahler primarily wanted to prevent people from the cliché, from experiencing the result – the music – as a story, by making it illustrative, by turning it simplistic and banal. I strongly believe that programme in Music is only relevant as a tool assisting the composer at the process of composition. As far as we are concerned, the result must be able to stand by itself. The differentiation between absolute music and programmatic music is ultimately irrelevant, for it is merely a differentiation between the process of composition (which may rely on programme) and its result in performance (which is absolute). A work of art is a process, and different artists go by this process in different ways. "Programme" is in fact a mere tool assisting certain composers to let the music flow through them. It is in fact a tool for the composer just as the landscape is for the painter – but do we need to see the actual field or river a painter depicted in order to appreciate the finished painting?

My wish is to approach the contents in Mahler's music not through a trivial, cliché of programmatic symbolism, but rather to understand the content and the baggage which defined the man who was the "filter" of this music and more exactly, the way those, as well as his search, his struggles and his doubts, primarily with himself, manifest themselves in the purest form of music.

One must be careful that a programmatic occupation does not turn into a voyeuristic urge in which we listeners/interpreters want to invade the most intimate and fragile inner-world of the composer with the pretext of wanting to "understand him better". If we are not able to "understand" the music through the music itself it means that either we haven't tried hard enough or the music is not good.

One must add that this inner-world which we try to expose to daylight is to be handled with extreme tenderness – there is nothing more sickening than the all too common kitschy, cheap attempts to reduce every composer's intimate processes to Hollywood soap-operas and simplistic pseudo-Freudian anecdotes.

It must be made clear that there is an essential difference between a simplistic attempt of programmatic analysis in which one explains every note and word with some biographical anecdote, and a sincere dive into the baggage of the composer which made him become what he was – through which music later flowed in whatever way it did. One must not forget the fundamental difference between meaning in music and programme in music – for a story does not necessarily have a meaning and a meaning does not always bring with it a story.

One hears often of Mahler's so called "struggles and fixation with death". Was Mahler's occupation with death a dark obsession with the sinister and the macabre? Was he chronically pessimistic and melancholic? Or perhaps the constant obsession with those subjects was only there to serve as a form of therapy or rather self-therapy for him to be able to deal with some of his own fears and anxieties, those fears so known to so many fellow artists and human beings?

In a sense, indulging in resolving one's own fears and anxieties is anything but an unusual notion. Many artists derived their urge of creation from the need to answer certain questions and resolved certain doubts which perturbed them and didn't let go. One finds all throughout Mahler's letters and writings such statements as "In death one becomes victorious over oneself" and "One defines life through death" – are these enlightened observations or self-constructed optimism?

His search, his struggle and his doubts, primarily with himself, manifest themselves in their purest form in his music. In order to understand Mahler's legacy and message to us (but not his music!), we need to understand the forces he was struggling with, the things which occupied him and the epic questions he tried to relate to.

Musicians, scholars and listeners have always tried to pursue one form or another of analysis to "better understand music". I personally find Musicological analysis to be in most cases utterly superfluous; understanding themes and keys usually brings neither musicians nor listeners any further in understanding the meaning of the music.

One does wonder whether those who are so keen on sticking to this safe ground of measurable, definable elements and analyzing all artistic output in such terms – whether they only do so because they are not able to conceive meaning in music and can only deal with it as a logical, retraceable and reconstructable process, in which one can follow a certain sequence of steps in order to produce a good result. Once again, this is a far more comfortable alternative - it has logic, it has rules, it is predictable, it is perfectible – it is safe. But as stated above, great art offers questions – not answers.

Part II

Gustav Mahler on Life and Death / The Farewell Trilogy

1. INTRODUCTION

Being an interpreter, and as such automatically a filter myself too, I can only see, hear and feel things through my own baggage and using the tools which my "mental infrastructure" equips me with. In this chapter I will try to depict the way Mahler's message arrived in my end after many years of living with his music.

Mahler pondered on the function of death in our destinies and its role in his life from a very early age. In part he was forced to do so by reality, having lost so many of his siblings and having constantly faced people perishing in his near surroundings; in part he was inclined to question things as a result of his own skeptical personality, his eternal doubts and his curious but not entirely surprising need to doubt everything until proven otherwise – a tendency very strongly rooted in the Jewish spirit.

Mahler tried to approach, research and comprehend all human perceptions of death - physical, spiritual and cosmic (apocalypse). In my eyes, the first work which brings the occupation with death to the fore is the Second Symphony. It is the culmination of years of touching on the subject, writing about it, wondering about it – but for the first time, it is as apparent. The beginning of the symphony is Mahler's first direct occupation with Death - described directly and figuratively, it is seizable, concrete and material.

In this Symphony we also face Mahler's first pronounced occupation with the concept of resurrection. One cannot but suspect that he tried to offer certain answers - probably to himself in the first place – in a similar fashion as religion or the church attempts to do - answers to existential and abstract questions as well as resolution to fears (primarily the occupation with mortality) which have bothered human-beings ever since the beginning of time. By touching on subjects such as life-after-death, the resurrection and the concept of immortality, one is offered an alternative to the unknown – which is ultimately our darkest fear.

Through this Symphony arises a fundamental question for the first time - does the process of dying define the meaning of life? The strikingly "story-telling-esque" narrative of the Second Symphony, the very concrete but at the same time somewhat impersonal depiction of death and mortality, the role of the prophet but the one who is observing us all from above – follows Mahler throughout most of his works. The music is on one hand extremely personal, but the general spirit is cosmic – it is not dependant on any context to bring its message across – it is therefore universal.

All throughout Mahler's oeuvre, until his 8th Symphony, one faces different universes which can send a different message to every single person, depending on the personal baggage they bring with them into the experience. The narrative of those works is so universal that it can mean completely different things to different people. In his last three works however, although the themes at hand are utterly universal and can be related to by anybody – there are extremely personal voices that glitter through the different dimensions of those pieces. So personal that one cannot listen to them in that same way one does to the proclamation of Death of the 2nd Symphony. Here we no longer hear stories about existential doubts – it is existence itself which presents itself for judgment and evaluation.

2. THE FAREWELL TRILOGY – MAHLER'S LAST THREE WORKS

Three Final Movements – Three Farewells

After a lifelong occupation and very close connection with Mahler's late works, I happened to notice a most special and unique phenomenon within his last three works which has touched me a great deal and which, I believe, sheds a most unusual light on those incredibly enigmatic and matchlessly strong pieces.

I have come to see the last three works of Gustav Mahler – "Das Lied von der Erde", the Ninth Symphony and the Tenth Symphony as a trilogy – a trilogy of three universes which are interconnected, directly relevant and strongly dependant on each other. Those works form a trilogy of farewells. In particular their respective last movements have a unique and very specific meaning which all together accumulates into an unparalleled, universal process and finally a cosmic statement.

This trilogy goes from the personal to the universal, from the detail to the whole, from the individual to the collective. It is a via dolorosa of Farewells from all aspects of existence – from one's simple, physical death to the annihilation of it all.

Mahler did not live to hear any of his farewells – those were the only pieces he had not lived to perform. A requiem to himself, to his world and to all he believed in – this requiem was carried out after his death. And so did his prophecy.

2.1. DAS LIED VON DER ERDE – FIRST FAREWELL

Farewell to the body, to nature, to all things material and the acceptance of mortality.

Das Lied von der Erde – the Song of the Earth – and its most unique 6th Movement, "Der Abschied" (quite literally "The Farewell") in particular, is a piece which fits no category – it is not quite a Symphony but is also hardly a song-cycle. Many say Mahler avoided calling it a Symphony out of fear of the infamous "Curse of the Ninth" – as it would have become his Ninth Symphony, the same infamous "Ninth Symphony" that killed several of his predecessors. Legends aside, the piece is based on Chinese poetry (substantially modified and elaborated by Mahler) and is tightly wrapped around the piercing thread of death.

The piece was written in a uniquely difficult time in Mahler's life. A very painful departure from Vienna, Mahler's adopted home-town, as well as from his position as Generalmusikdirektor of the Opera house – a position whose venerated eminence in Viennese society we can nowadays only imagine. Even more notable was the very fresh loss of his daughter who died the year before, a daughter who symbolized for him an already complex marriage to a woman who was so much more than just a partner for him. But above all the piece came after a bitter diagnosis of a heart-condition which terrified Mahler beyond anything else and accelerated the already very present inner occupation with his own mortality.

The “Abschied”, an endless funeral procession, occasionally bordering an endless cabalistic cycle of madness, is Mahler’s Farewell from life. After a decade-long occupation with death, in this first Farewell we are exposed to Mahler’s first acknowledgement of mortality - a very painful step every human being experiences on the journey towards awareness. It is a farewell to the physical existence, the realisation that the body is just as much a servant of nature as the spirit, and the realization of how powerless one is in front of one’s destiny. The voice, the narrative, sings a lament, to the cease of its own existence. The Abschied is the last occupation with death as a concrete phenomenon of mortality – it is a farewell from the material world. It is Mahler's farewell from nature, from mother earth whom he loved so dearly and who meant everything to him - and ultimately from his own material existence. It is worth noting that the Coda of the Abschied is a remarkably serene transcendence into a new dimension – it seems as if mother earth carries the narrator on a journey to a world we can only remember but not see, it is flying over all those landscapes which have already been composed. Every mountain and every river awaits his turn to bid farewell, every bird and every leaf – is unique – and will be no more. In the text one can find the words “liebe erde” – “beloved earth” – and so goes life away, but nature stays. For we are all mortal – but nature will be forever. The extremely serene coda come to a close with the word EWIG – ETERNAL - which is repeated nine times.

But is meaning revealed by death?

2.2. THE NINTH SYMPHONY – SECOND FAREWELL

Farewell to the soul, to the spirit and to music.

The beginning of the Ninth Symphony unfolds itself as the phoenix who rises from the ashes. For after death, there is nothing. Or is it so?

The introduction of the first movement is the search of a blind phoenix, crawling on a surface of nothingness to redefine his own meaning and the texture of existence. For he himself does not know – does he exist, or is it an illusion, a memory? For he is afraid to awake from his illusion and realize – that it is all over. It is all past. The heart stopped beating – but the soul continues its journey.

The last movement of the Ninth is unique in the literature and comprises the most complete spectrum of elements in one piece that Mahler ever conceived– it is the summary of the cycle of life; the soul is recounting the story of its visit to the earthly existence. Representing the eternity of the soul, it is Mahler’s Song of Life, he sings from his innermost being – this time farewell – to his own soul, to his spirit, to music. This movement declares the belief of life after death – as the soul goes on, although the body vanished in the end of Das Lied von der Erde. The movement starts with conception of material life - the “DNA” and its evolution, a spiritual representation of a metaphoric pregnancy, into birth and the creation of life. It continues through a constant contrast, a dual coexistence between the earthly and the spiritual – here we hear the very solemn voice of the soul, but soon it is taken over by the sensual, the material, the carnal.

Three times ersterbend, 8 times morendo. The end of the movement – the 2nd farewell – is an epic description of a last breath, a slow, painful disintegration of the spirit – with almost no pulse, we are carried on an endless surface of silence – into nothingness. The spirit gives out and takes with it the old European civilization and above all tonality in the form we'd known it.

2.3. THE TENTH SYMPHONY – THIRD FAREWELL

Farewell to the world and to the universe;
Limbo, Apocalypse, Post-Apocalypse, Acceptance and Resurrection.

After the perish of the soul, the cease of the spiritual existence, and the disappearance of tonality, we've arrived in a limbo - the Tenth Symphony is starting in a universe of no tonality, no centre, no direction – no tension, no resistance, no meaning - the moment after the death of the soul – the moment before the creation – a static, depiction of nothingness – vacuum.

But is this a point of no return? The limbo is soon followed by the most chromatic example of extremely intense tonality that Mahler had ever composed - a unique texture of such incredible sensuality, of such emotional charge, of such rhetoric – with no comparable equivalent. But – it is only a memory, a memory of all things past, a silhouette of many earlier cycles of turmoil. We are soon again in the limbo, which brings us back to the harsh reality - the soul, as well as tonality, are gone.

The first movement of the Tenth Symphony continues exploring the contrast between sections of extreme intensity and those utterly static – finally leading to its climactic episode where the occupation with death rises to new dimensions – not the death of the individual, but the perish of everything. The end of it all. This notion is introduced to us by a uniquely innovative chord – a chord comprising 9 of the 12 notes of the scale – unprecedented in its modernism and unique in its dissonance and charge of tension. This is the first announcement of the apocalypse.

By the time we get to the Finale, the fifth movement of the Tenth Symphony, we have been through many stages. After the apocalypse comes the Purgatorio, which is the turning point of the piece – it is immediately followed by the Inferno – a depiction of hell through the form of the devil – Mahler himself wrote over the manuscript of the fourth movement – “The Devil is dancing with me”. After this epic sequence of planets, after this entire saga of saying farewell to all different aspects of the universe, Mahler comes back to his most intimate and personal way to say goodbye – the song. The flute introduces a song very different in its meaning to all songs previously laid on paper by Mahler – it signalizes the return of the dove to the ark with a very clear message – it is a message of acceptance, acceptance of fate.

The last movement has the most vital importance to this piece and to the entire statement of the last trilogy. After this whole journey, Mahler brings back the apocalyptic chord, brings back the tonality-lacking limbo of the introduction, this time in the horns. But this time they all come with the same clear message. Only through acceptance of death, acceptance of fate – of the individual, of the soul, of the universe – is resurrection possible.

PART III

Epilogue

Gustav Mahler's Tenth Symphony was written from beyond the horizon – it is his only work to be written from "the other world", from beyond the dead. It is fundamentally transcendental, it observes and conveys a horrifying acceptance past the mortality of the body as well as of the spirit, a reconciliation with fate as well as with one's powerlessness in front of destiny, and leaves us with a message far more meaningful than any ever said before - the future, of music, of Europe, of man - is to be based on the past - on tonality, on tradition, on humanness. It is through these values that our future will emerge as a phoenix from the ashes – for we will only be able to live it once we have accepted the importance of those values we have neglected and frowned upon for so long.

Mahler offers us a new door – a new way we have not known previously. A similar door was opened to us by Beethoven with his late string-quartets – similarly, he died with them, and mankind never explored that route and what could have become of music. Mahler embarked on a new path with his Tenth Symphony – a path only he could have elaborated and explored. And through his death, this path was closed forever.

Mahler created a new future with the Tenth Symphony – a future we have not been able to see and experience for the past hundred years, a future he did not live to show us, to guide us through. But he left us a mission. A duty to fulfil – this future is still ahead of us.

I would like to quote what Arnold Schönberg, a close friend and admirer of Mahler, said about this very matter:

"It seems as if the Ninth is the limit. Whoever wants to explore beyond it, must be gone. It looks like we were about to be told something in the Tenth, which we should not yet know, for which we are not yet ready. Those who have written a Ninth came too close to the after-life, to the other world. Perhaps all riddles of the earth would be solved, if one of those, who know the answer, would write a Tenth. And that seems not meant to be.

<u>We must remain further in the dark, the dark which is only occasionally illuminated by the Light</u>

of Genius. We should continue fighting and struggling, yearn and wish. This should remain unreachable to us, as long as we are unable to see it. We must remain blind, until we have acquired eyes. Eyes, that see the future. Eyes that see not only through the sensual and the concrete, which is no more than a metaphor, but also penetrate through the transcendental. Our soul should be this eye.”

The Tenth Symphony is Mahler's Eulogy to tonality, to old Europe, and to the creation of art as a form of expression of human emotions. This notion died with Mahler and with his Tenth Symphony. A century of invention and innovation followed, a century of exploration and genius – but a century which had a very different aim; not only the aesthetic changed, the raison-d’être behind music and art changed forever. It seems that people have lost their ability to listen – we have landed in a society that is full of output but is incapable of input - Mahler’s music forces a mirror onto this society and confronts us with things we have been desperately trying to repress. For we have lost the ability to listen, to music and to silence – and without silence, there is no music.

The Tenth Symphony is Mahler’s legacy - a mission given to us by him, to resurrect those values, as he showed us with the final movement of his Tenth. It is in a way a letter in a bottle – sent to us over a hundred years – it awaited to be found and to be taken over – the journey must continue. Music must go on. But – just as Mahler showed us in the Finale of his Tenth, it is only through the acceptance of death, through the acceptance of loss, that resurrection is possible. And it is indeed our first task to acknowledge and reconcile with the loss of tonality, of culture, of emotions and of humanness, in order to be able to create a future for music, a future for culture, a future for mankind – a future where experiencing emotions becomes possible.

So does one define life through death? Does the process of dying define the meaning of life? – life which Mahler loved so deeply – for he, just as well, was on an eternal search for love and acceptance. Mahler’s music is, in fact, not about death, but rather about life – the eternal love for life, the love for nature (which expresses eternity), the love for mankind, the love for music.