

# MAHLER

## A MUSICAL PHYSIOGNOMY



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## THEODOR W. ADORNO

# MAHLER

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## A Musical Physiognomy

Translated by Edmund Jephcott

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THEODOR W. ADORNO, 1903–69, taught at Frankfurt, Oxford, and Princeton. Many of his works in music and philosophy have been published in English.

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The text of the second edition is unchanged from the first, except for the correction of misprints.

It may be noticed that "*Quasi una fantasia*," the second volume of the author's musical writings, also contains two texts on Mahler.

One is a memorial address given at the invitation of the Gustav Mahler-Gesellschaft in June 1960 in Vienna. It was formulated after the completion of the book. This may have given it a certain quality of overview, of detachment from its subject, that justifies its retention alongside the book, which itself aspires to be as close as possible to its subject in the constellation of its individual analyses. It is the book alone that expresses the insight at which the author was aiming.

The "*Epilegomena*" should be read as additional and complementary material to the book. Many are concerned with the central complex of the Sixth Symphony. The reader may be reminded again that between this work and "*Rewelge*" the most profound connections exist, going far beyond scattered thematic echoes.

The fragment of the Tenth is deliberately not discussed in the book. The philological questions it poses are far too unresolved for the author to permit himself a judgment; without a decision on textual problems and an assessment of attempted reconstructions the subject itself could not be validly discussed. All that seems certain to

the author is that even if the whole formal progression of the movements were established and all the sketches saved, they remain *vertically* fragmentary. Even in the opening Adagio, which is clearly the furthest advanced, sometimes only the harmonic "chorale" and one or two main parts are written down, the contrapuntal fabric being merely indicated. However, the layout of the work and the whole approach of Mahler's late style leave no doubt that it is only the harmonic polyphony, the tissue of voices within the framework of the chorale, that would have brought into being the concrete form of the music itself. If one strictly respects what originates from Mahler, one arrives at something incomplete and contradictory to his intention; but if one completes it contrapuntally, the adaptation usurps the true theater of Mahler's own productivity. Accordingly, the author inclines to the view that precisely someone who senses the extraordinary scope of the conception of the Tenth ought to do without adaptations and performances. The case is similar with sketches of unfinished pictures by masters: anyone who understands them and can visualize how they might have been completed would prefer to file them away and contemplate them privately, rather than hang them on the wall.

That the second edition was needed so quickly indicates that a full awareness of Mahler's importance is beginning to come about.

October 1963

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Preface to the Second German Edition   viii

- 1   Curtain and Fanfare   2
- 2   Tone   18
- 3   Characters   40
- 4   Novel   60
- 5   Variant—Form   82
- 6   Dimensions of Technique   106
- 7   Decay and Affirmation   122
- 8   The Long Gaze   144
- Notes   168

MAHLER



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The difficulty of revising the judgment on Gustav Mahler passed not only by the Hitler regime but by the history of music in the fifty years since the composer's death exceeds that which music generally presents to thought, and even to philosophical thought. Inadequate as is thematic analysis to the content of Mahler's symphonies—an analysis which misses the music's substance in its preoccupation with procedure—no more sufficient would be the attempt to pin down, in the jargon of authenticity, the statement put forward by the music. To try to grasp such a statement directly as something represented by the music would be to assign Mahler to the sphere of overt or tacit program music, which he early resisted and which has subsequently become plainly invalid. Ideas that are treated, depicted, or deliberately advanced by a work of art are not its ideas but materials—even the "poetic ideas" whose hazy designations were intended to divest the program of its coarse materiality. The fatuous sublimity of "What death told me," a title foisted on Mahler's Ninth, is even more distasteful in its distortion of a moment of truth than the flowers and beasts of the Third, which may well have been in the composer's mind. Mahler is particularly resistant to theorizing because he entirely fails to acknowledge the choice between technique and imaginative content. In his work a purely musical residue stubbornly persists that can be interpreted in terms neither of processes nor of moods. It informs the gestures of his music. To understand him would be to endow with speech the music's struc-

tural elements while technically locating the glowing expressive intentions. Mahler can only be seen in perspective by moving still closer to him, by entering into the music and confronting the incommensurable presence that defies the stylistic categories of program and absolute music no less than the bald historical derivation from Bruckner. His symphonies assist such closeness by the compelling spirituality of their sensuous musical configurations. Instead of illustrating ideas, they are destined concretely to become the idea. As each of their moments, tolerating no evasion into the approximate, fulfills its musical function, it becomes more than its mere existence: a script prescribing its own interpretation. The curves so enjoined are to be traced by contemplation, rather than by ratiocination on the music from an ostensibly fixed standpoint external to it, in the pharisaic manner of the "New Objectivity," tirelessly toying with clichés such as that of the titanic late Romantic.

The First Symphony opens with a long pedal point in the strings, all playing harmonics except for the lowest of the three groups of double basses. Reaching to the highest A of the violins, it is an unpleasant whistling sound like that emitted by old-fashioned steam engines. A thin curtain, threadbare but densely woven, it hangs from the sky like a pale gray cloud layer, similarly painful to sensitive eyes. In the third measure the motive of a fourth detaches itself, tinged by the piccolo. The ascetic asperity of the pianissimo is as precisely calculated as similar timbres to be heard seventy years later in Stravinsky's last scores, when the master of instrumentation tired of masterful instrumentation. After a second woodwind entry, the motive of the fourth descends sequentially until it comes to rest on a B-flat that clashes with the A of the strings. The tempo suddenly quickens with a pianissimo fanfare for two clarinets in their pale, lower register, with the weak bass clarinet as the third voice, sounding faintly as if from behind the curtain that it vainly seeks to penetrate, its strength failing. Even when the fanfare is taken up by the trumpets it still remains, as the score directs, *in sehr weiter Entfernung* (in the far distance).<sup>1</sup> Then, at the height of the movement, six measures before the return of the tonic D, the fanfare explodes in the trumpets, horns, and high woodwinds,<sup>2</sup> quite out of scale with

the orchestra's previous sound or even the preceding crescendo. It is not so much that this crescendo has reached a climax as that the music has expanded with a physical jolt. The rupture originates from beyond the music's intrinsic movement, intervening from outside. For a few moments the symphony imagines that something has become reality that for a lifetime the gaze from the earth has fearfully yearned for in the sky. With it Mahler's music has kept faith; the transformation of that experience is its history. If all music, with its first note, promises that which is different, the rending of the veil, his symphonies attempt to withhold it no longer, to place it literally before our eyes; they seek to rejoin musically and surpass the theatrical fanfare in the dungeon scene in *Fidelio*, to go beyond that A which, four measures before the trio, marks the caesura in the Scherzo of Beethoven's Seventh. So an adolescent woken at five in the morning by the perception of a sound that descends overpoweringly upon him may never cease to await the return of what was heard for a second between sleeping and waking. Its physical presence makes metaphysical thought appear as pale and feeble as an aesthetic that asks whether, in a formal sense, the moment of rupture has been successfully achieved or merely intended—a moment that rebels against the illusion of the successful work.

This causes Mahler to be hated today. It masquerades as an honest aversion to ostentation: to the art-work's claim to embody something merely added in thought, without being realized. Behind such scruples lies rancor against the very thing to be realized. The lament "It shall not be," over which Mahler's music despairs, is maliciously sanctioned as a precept. The insistence that there should be nothing in music other than what is present here and now cloaks both an embittered resignation and the complaisance of a listener who spares himself the exertion of comprehending the musical concept as something evolving, pointing beyond itself. Even at the time of "Les Six," an astute intellectual anti-Romanticism had formed a disreputable alliance with the entertainment sphere. Mahler enrages those who have made their peace with the world by reminding them of what they must exorcise. Animated by dissatisfaction with the world, his art omits to satisfy its norms, and in this the world rejoices. The breakthrough (*Durchbruch*) in the First Symphony af-

fects the entire form. The recapitulation to which it leads cannot restore the balance demanded by sonata form. It shrinks to a hasty epilogue. The young composer's sense of form treats it as a coda, without thematic development of its own; the memory of the main idea drives the music swiftly to its end. But the abbreviation of the recapitulation is prepared by the exposition, which dispenses with multiplicity of forms and the traditional thematic dualism and so needs no complex restitution. The idea of breakthrough, which dictates the entire structure of the movement, transcends the traditional form while fleetingly sketching its outline.

But Mahler's primary experience, inimical to art, needs art in order to manifest itself, and indeed must heighten art from its own inner necessity. For the image corresponding to breakthrough is damaged because the breakthrough has failed, like the Messiah, to come into the world. To realize it musically would be at the same time to attest to its failure in reality. It is in music's nature to overreach itself. Utopia finds refuge in its no man's land. What the immanence of society blocks cannot be achieved by an immanence of form derived from it. The breakthrough sought to penetrate both. In the entrapment that music would breach, it is itself entangled as art, augmenting it through involvement in appearances. Music as art transgresses against its truth; but it offends no less if, violating art, it negates its own idea. Mahler's symphonies progressively seek to elude this fate. Yet they are rooted in what music seeks to transcend, the opposite of music which is also its concomitant. The Fourth Symphony calls it *weltlich* 'Getümmel' (worldly tumult),<sup>3</sup> Hegel the perverse "course of the world" (*Weltlauf*)<sup>4</sup> which confronts consciousness in advance as something "hostile and empty." Mahler is a late link in the tradition of European Weltschmerz. The aimlessly circling, irresistible movements, the perpetual motion of his music, are always images of the world's course. Empty activity devoid of autonomy is the never-changing. In this musically still rather tepid hell, a taboo is placed on novelty; it is a hell of absolute space. The Scherzo of the Second Symphony conveyed this feeling, and to a much greater degree that of the Sixth. Hope in Mahler always resides in change. Formerly the activity of the vigorous subject, re-

flecting socially useful work, inspired the classical symphony, though even in Haydn, and far more in Beethoven, it was rendered ambiguous by humor. Activity is not, as ideology teaches, merely the purposive life of autonomous people, but also the vain commotion of their unfreedom. In the late bourgeois phase this becomes the specter of blind functioning. The subject is yoked into the world's course without finding himself reflected in it or being able to change it; the hope that for Beethoven still throbbed in active life and allowed the Hegel of the *Phenomenology* finally to give the world's course precedence before the individual who only attained reality in it has deserted a subject thrown back powerlessly on his own resources. Against this background, Mahler's symphonies plead anew against the world's course. They imitate it in order to accuse; the moments when they breach it are also moments of protest. Nowhere do they patch over the rift between subject and object; they would rather be shattered themselves than counterfeit an achieved reconciliation. To begin with, Mahler conveys the externality of the world's course in terms of program music. The prototypical Scherzo of the Second Symphony, based on the *Wunderhorn* song of St. Anthony's sermon to the fishes, culminates in the instrumental outcry of one in despair.<sup>5</sup> The musical self, the "we" that sounds from the symphony, breaks down. Breath is drawn between this movement and the following one with the yearning human voice. All the same, Mahler was not content even then with the overconfident poetic contrast between transcendence and worldliness. In the course of its restless movement, with harsh wind choruses, the music makes itself vulgar.<sup>6</sup> Yet simply through the internal logic of the composition, Hegelian justice so far guides the composer's pen that the world's course takes on something of the self-propagating, enduring, death-resisting force of life itself, as a corrective to the endlessly protesting subject; as soon as the theme passes to the first violins, sound and melodic character extinguish all traces of vulgarity.<sup>7</sup> A passage in Natalie Bauer-Lechner's *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, which is so pertinent in its details and reveals such insight into the problems of composition from the composer's standpoint that its authenticity ought to be accepted, al-

lows us to surmise that Mahler was aware of the ambivalence of the relation between the subject and the world's course. With regard to an anecdote about Frederick the Great, he observed:

It's all well and good that the peasant's rights are protected in spite of the King, but there's another side to the story. Let the miller and his mill be protected on their own ground—if only the millwheels didn't clatter so, thereby overstepping their boundaries most shamelessly and creating immeasurable havoc in the territory of someone else's mind!<sup>8</sup>

The justice done to the subject can become objective injustice, and subjectivity itself, in empirical terms the nervous composer's sensitivity to noise, instructs him that the world's course—in the terms of the anecdote, absolute power—as against the abstract protection of personal rights, is not simply reprehensible, that, as Hegel perceived, it is not so bad as virtue imagines it. Aware at the musical level of the crude abstractness of the antithesis between the world's course and the breakthrough, Mahler gradually concretizes it, and so mediates it, through the internal structure of his compositions.

The Scherzo of the Third Symphony, like that of the Second, is prompted by animal symbolism. Its thematic core is taken from the early song "Ablösung im Sommer"; its music has the same quality of confused bustle as the fish sermon. This, however, is not answered by despair but by sympathy. The music comports itself like animals: as if its empathy with their closed world were meant to mitigate something of the curse of closedness. It confers utterance on the speechless by imitating their ways in sound, takes fright itself then ventures forward again with harelike caution,<sup>9</sup> as a fearful child identifies with the tiniest goat in the clock case that escapes the big bad wolf. When the postilion's horn is heard, the hush of the seething hubbub is composed as its background. It has a human timbre against the attenuated muted strings, the residue of creaturely bondage to which the alien voice would do no harm. When two French horns melodiously annotate the phrase,<sup>10</sup> the precarious artistic moment reconciles the irreconcilable. But the menacing rhythm of the tramping animals, oxen with linked hoofs dancing triumphal rounds, prophetically mocks the thin fragility of culture,

as long as it nurtures catastrophes that could swiftly invite the forest to devour the devastated cities. At the end the animal piece puffs itself up once more in literary style by a kind of panic epiphany<sup>11</sup> of the basic motive in augmentation. Overall, it oscillates between pan-humanism and parody. Its light-beam falls on that perverted human condition that, under the spell of the self-preservation of the species, erodes its essential self and makes ready to annihilate the species by fatefully substituting the means for the end it has conjured away. Through animals humanity becomes aware of itself as impeded nature and of its activity as deluded natural history; for this reason Mahler meditates on them. For him, as in Kafka's fables, the animal realm is the human world as it would appear from the standpoint of redemption, which natural history itself precludes. The fairy-tale tone in Mahler is awakened by the resemblance of animal and man. Desolate and comforting at once, nature grown aware of itself casts off the superstition of the absolute difference between them. However, until Mahler art-music went in the opposite direction. The better it learned to master nature through the necessary mastery of its material, the more masterful its gestures became. Its integral oneness abolished multiplicity; its suggestive power severed all distractions. It preserved the image of happiness only by proscribing it. In Mahler it begins to rebel, seeks to make peace with nature, and yet must forever enforce the old interdiction.

The Scherzo of the Fourth Symphony, in line with the two preceding it, stylizes the sturdy allegory of worldly bustle into a dance of death. The shrill fiddle, tuned a tone higher than the violins, opens sinisterly with a bizarrely unfamiliar sound that irritates doubly, since the ear cannot account for its strangeness. Chromatic inflections sour the harmony and melody; the color is soloistic, as if something were missing: as if chamber music had parasitically invaded the orchestra. From images of baseness the music advances into unreality, phantasmagoric bustle ambiguously suspended between enticement and tears, mingling the sob of grief with its fleeting train of images. Similarly ambivalent is a melody of the woodwinds and later of the strings, a kind of *cantus firmus* to the hurrying main theme<sup>12</sup> of the Scherzo of the Seventh Symphony, which no longer has any pretense of innocence. Marked *klagend* (la-



menting) by Mahler, it combines, as only music can, the barrel-organ grinding of the world's course with that which expressively mourns it. Mahler's sense of form compels him to place the breakthrough, traces of which have not been absent, in the Scherzo of the Fourth, as a contrast to its ghostliness, as an influx of reality, of blood, that has already been sought in passages of the trio that spontaneously assume the *Ländler* quality of the first theme. For a few seconds, *sich noch mehr ausbreitend*<sup>13</sup> (broadening still further), there is a sensuousness seldom found in Mahler; Tchaikovsky is skirted, then immediately left behind as the movement recoils further and further into the realm of the spectral and somber, with a conclusion from the imaginative horizon of the late Beethoven. Yet the serenity of the Fourth as a whole is always preserved. It mutes the macabre tone with an almost genial temperance.

Pressing to its conclusion the logic of the antithesis between the world's course and the breakthrough, at the height of the Fifth Symphony, in the second movement, Mahler raises it to a principle of composition. Paul Bekker recognized this as a kind of second first movement and as one of Mahler's most magnificent conceptions.<sup>14</sup> It is not a scherzo but a full sonata movement, of *größte Vehemenz*<sup>15</sup> (utmost vehemence). The humor that presumed, from a distance accorded to no one, to smile at the world's course has been swept away; the movement is driven along irresistibly, with all the accents of suffering unappeased. Its proportions, the relation of the tempestuous allegro passages to the proliferating slow intrusions from the Funeral March, make it uncommonly difficult to perform. These proportions cannot be left to chance simply as what the composer ordained; from the outset the whole piece must be so clearly organized around the contrast that it does not lose momentum in the andante sections; the changes constitute its form. It is of especial importance that even the presto passages should be played distinctly, their whirling themes intact, without compromising the tempo; they balance the melodies of the Funeral March. Yet it is the formal principle of the headlong presto that it should lead nowhere. For all its dynamism and vivid detail, the movement has no history, no direction, and really no emphatic dimension of time. Its lack of historical progress inclines it toward reminiscence; its energy,