

Symphony No. 4

By Gustav Mahler

Born July 7, 1860, in Kalischt, Bohemia (now Czech Republic)

Died May 18, 1911, in Vienna, Austria

Gustav Mahler was pleased with this work when he completed and premiered it in Munich in 1901, and sure that he had composed a symphony that everyone could comprehend and appreciate. But critics' reactions were initially hostile, and the public was slow in warming to it as well. No doubt they were expecting the monumentality of the composer's second and third symphonies, and didn't know what to make of this comparatively gentle work that begins somewhat innocuously with the sounds of sleigh bells and "naïve" flutes and violins.

As it was, Mahler tinkered with the work for the remainder of his life, revising various aspects of instrumentation, phrasing, and even inserting occasional corrections to what he perceived as "wrong" notes. Clearly, this symphony occupied a special place in his heart, prompting him at one point to write to his wife, Alma, "My Fourth...is all humor, naïve, etc...It is that part of me which is still the hardest for you to accept and which in any case only the fewest of the few will comprehend for the rest of time." Interestingly enough, by the 1940s, the dissemination of this particular work was such that the "fewest of the few" had grown to considerable proportions, solidifying once and for all a wide embrace of Mahler in modern times.

Indeed this, the shortest of Mahler's symphonies, is widely regarded as his most accessible, and certainly the most lightly scored with, for example, no heavy brass (tuba or trombones). Its character, as one might expect from a story about a child's vision of heaven, is generally one of innocence and light amid many playful moments, with only some being somber (and never truly sinister) in nature.

Mahler's second, third, and fourth symphonies are often called the "Wunderhorn" symphonies. This is because their themes originated in earlier songs that Mahler had composed based on texts taken from a popular 19th century collection of poetry called "Das Knaben Wunderhorn (The Youth's MagicHorn)." The fourth symphony was structured around Mahler's 1892 song, "Das Himmlische Leben (The Heavenly Life)." That song is alluded to in the symphony's first three movements, then sung in its entirety by solo soprano in the fourth.

What Mahler originally had in mind when he composed the first three movements was not a full-fledged, four movement symphony, but rather a "symphonic humoresque." But his conception evolved, and he incorporated his 1892 song as the finale. Thus the first three movements are themselves an evolving aspiration to the completed subject of the song in the fourth.

The perky first movement conjures the notion of smiles, gentle laughter and lilting dances. In the second, solo violin is tuned a tone higher than normal, accentuating the

music's eerie character, centered on Freund Hein, a skeletal, fiddle-playing figure from German fairy tales. Mahler likened the ghostly aspect of the movement to being panic-stricken in a sunlit forest, the scherzo an exercise in supernatural mystery and momentary confusion. "But in the Adagio (Ruhevoll)," he wrote, "where all this passes off, you will immediately see that it was not meant so seriously." Two serene trios displace the darker musings, anticipating the ecstasies of heavenly life.

The beautiful and solemn processional quality of the extended third movement is a further progression toward the threshold of eternal paradise envisioned in the finale. Mahler's use of the double thematic variation form brings to mind Beethoven's similar treatment in the Adagio from his Ninth symphony. Mahler explained to the conductor, Bruno Walter, that his intention here was to suggest an image of a church sepulchre "showing a recumbent stone image of the deceased with his arms crossed in eternal sleep" Near the end there is a brilliant, full-orchestra declaration of ethereal majesty.

Opening on to a scene of bucolic serenity, the relatively short fourth movement presents a child in the form of the soprano's voice describing a joyous vision of heaven. The music ends with neither bombast nor even a succinct exclamation, but rather simply fades into tranquil eternity.

Tom Wachunas