

SYMPHONY NO. 5 IN C-SHARP MINOR

By GUSTAV MAHLER

Born July 7, 1860, in Kalischt, Bohemia;

died May 18, 1911, in Vienna

"Symphony must be like the world; it must embrace everything," said Gustav Mahler to Jean Sibelius during a visit to Finland in the fall of 1907. It would be difficult to accuse Mahler of not living up to this credo. His nine symphonies (a tenth was left unfinished at his death) are colossal musical experiences that storm the heavens and probe the depths of the soul. Brevity not being one of his virtues, Mahler did not hesitate to accommodate his concepts by expanding the traditional parameters of symphonic structure, increasing the dimensions of individual movements, or adding additional ones. Equally original and distinctive are the thematic materials that he employed. Moments of ethereal beauty and sublime majesty stand side by side with episodes of childlike naiveté and macabre humor. Soaring, sweeping melodies and solemn chorales are incongruously juxtaposed with children's songs, birdcalls, ominous bugle calls, grotesque military marches, robust peasant dances, grim funeral marches, and banal Viennese café ditties. What makes Mahler's music unique is his ability to tie together these sharply contrasting elements and they, not unlike the ambiguities and inconsistencies of human life, combine to form a plausible entity.

The late Bruno Walter, Mahler's disciple and a conductor who is generally regarded as one of the greatest interpreters of that composer's music, described Mahler's Fifth Symphony as "a masterpiece that shows its composer at the zenith of his life, his powers and his craft." Mahler's demanding schedule as a conductor allowed him time to compose only during the off-season months, so he worked on the Fifth Symphony during the summers of 1901 and 1902 at his villa near Maiernigg in the Carinthian Alps. He conducted the first performance of the work on October 18, 1904, at a Gürzenich concert in Cologne. Not satisfied with the original orchestration of the symphony, he made several revisions to it, the last of which dated from the year of his death. Unlike the Second, Third, and Fourth Symphonies, the Fifth is a purely orchestral work. Moreover, it contains no programmatic connections with *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Boy's Magic Horn), the collection of German folk poetry that had served as the inspiration for parts of his first four symphonies. Thus, the Fifth became Mahler's first "absolute" symphony.

The score for Mahler's Fifth Symphony is divided into three parts. Part One consists of the first two movements; Part Two, the central scherzo; and Part Three, the *Adagietto* and Rondo-Finale. The overall structure suggests a progression from darkness to light. The symphony begins with a lamentation of death, moves through periods of angry revolt, renewal, resignation, and acceptance, and ultimately concludes with a joyous mastery over destiny.

The first movement is a lugubrious and disconsolate funeral march. The solo trumpet intones a grim fanfare in shuddering triplet rhythm that is repeated by the full orchestra. The second subject is a dirge-like theme heard initially in the violins and cellos. After a sudden, agitated middle section, the funeral march returns. The movement ends in an atmosphere of gloom, with a final, chilling *pizzicato* thump from the low strings.

Cast in free sonata form, the stormy and violent second movement uses thematic materials from the preceding funeral march. It is music of turbulence and conflicting emotions. Wildly leaping string passages, anguished shrieks from the brasses, and crushing avalanches of sound alternate with brief periods of respite. As the agonized vehemence of the music subsides, the movement fades away in a series of dying echoes. The pivotal third movement is a gigantic scherzo rich in thematic materials and in the rhythm of the *Ländler*, an old Austrian country dance that was the predecessor of the waltz. The tensions of the first part of the symphony are relaxed somewhat by the hearty dance rhythms and Viennese *gemütlichkeit* that pervade this movement.

The relatively brief fourth movement is a delicate and serenely beautiful *Adagietto* scored for harp and strings. The finale, which follows without pause, is an exuberant rondo. A bridge passage played by the solo horn, bassoon, oboe, and clarinet provide a brief transition from the *Adagietto* to the initial statement of the rondo theme. The rondo rises to several climaxes, including an impressive triple fugue, and ends in an exultant *coda* of blazing triumph and affirmation.

-Kenneth C. Viant