

## INTRODUCTION

When I first started listening to Mahler, I used to wonder if he wasn't just fundamentally mistaken about how to go about creating music. I sometimes feel that way even now. Why is he doing *this* in *this* part of the composition?

—Haruki Murakami (*Absolutely on Music*, 2011)

Must I have a correct understanding of what I have lived and felt? And I believe I have felt your symphony. I shared in the battling for illusion; I suffered the pangs of disillusionment; I saw the forces of evil and good wrestling with each other; I saw a man in torment struggling towards inward harmony; I divined a personality, a drama, and *truthfulness*, the most uncompromising truthfulness.

—Arnold Schoenberg (in a letter to Mahler after hearing the Third Symphony, 1904)

**T**he “experiencing” title fits my subject, since Mahler’s music speaks to the highs and lows of life more than it deals in learned abstractions or reassuring conventions. As critic and musicologist Paul Bekker put it in his 1921 book *Gustav Mahlers Sinfonien* (*Gustav Mahler’s Symphonies*), this composer “was filled with a burning desire to break through the layers of distorting educated intellect that lay above the pure humanity of the natural being.” In turning away from abstractions, like foreseeable structures or consistency of style, his music often seems to give up musicality for harsh reality: it speaks explicitly, in terms so strong and raw they can alarm us even in the twenty-first century, as if the ink were still wet on the page.

Mahler's pieces seem to ask, as a basic rationale, "Since when has music been something one is supposed to *understand*?" As Arnold Schoenberg suggests in the letter quoted above, experience is different from understanding, let alone "correct" understanding. Schoenberg opened his letter on Mahler's Third by saying music terminology could hardly account for the piece as he experienced it: the composition left him able "[to] speak only as one human being to another." It says something about the Third Symphony's power that it discouraged even a composer, teacher, theorist, and outspoken polemicist like Schoenberg from using the rationalist's usual terms of understanding, leading him instead to try and explain "the feelings an experience arouses in me."

We could talk about listeners becoming immersed in Mahler—plunged into a music that is too irrefusable to be understood. Immersion suggests an all-enveloping experience where the intellect plays no role. Mahler's listeners can have the strangely pleasant feeling of fighting for survival against overwhelming, sublime forces. Richard Wagner, probably Mahler's key musical influence, talked about music in such terms: he spoke of melody being set into motion by rhythm, becoming a musical equivalent to wind-swept waves, and "in such a sea a person immerses himself" (*in dieses Meer taucht sich der Mensch*). Water goes where it wants to, and it's this kind of tidal dynamic that Haruki Murakami points out when he refers to Mahler's "fundamentally mistaken" structures. We could even say that Mahler's expressive power comes from his refusal to do things "properly." The tried-and-trusted conventions of sonata form were synonymous with musical rule-following, and symphonists as diverse as Charles Gounod, Vasily Kalinnikov, and the younger Antonin Dvorak showed how "proper" formal scaffoldings could serve the moment-to-moment dynamics of well-mannered expression in the late nineteenth century.

Sitting down to hear the first movement of a symphony, listeners of the time would have expected a sonata form—a musical structure involving three contrasting thematic areas that play out across the three traditional functional sections of (1) *exposition* of themes, (2) intricate and often ingenious *development* of said themes, and then (3) recognizable *recapitulation* of those themes. Traditionally speaking, the symphonic composer underlined such structural junctures as points of emotional tension, drama, or completion: the point of recapitulation, for

instance, often becomes a moment of triumph or satisfied re-arrival. In overall terms, the emotional-dramatic progression of a movement tended to be plausibly mapped upon the formal structure. Mahler did things differently. The philosopher and social critic Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, working from ideas set forth by Paul Bekker, even came up with experiential terms for Mahler's "mistaken" formal practices. He talked about some of Mahler's forms in terms of structural breakthrough (*Durchbruch*), suspension (*Suspension*), and fulfillment (*Erfüllung*). These are nonanalytical terms, suggesting psychology or philosophy rather than music. In using them, Adorno focused not on standard patterns of repetition, but on willful musical events that take on far-reaching implications.

Mahler himself famously said that "the symphony must be like the world; it must contain everything." His statement is revealing in so many ways. Worlds are usually created by gods rather than musicians, and Mahler is an example of high-handed creation doing exactly what it wants and succeeding or failing on that account. As the philosopher-essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, "To believe your own thought, that is genius." Such self-importance is part of Richard Wagner's and Friedrich Nietzsche's influences on Mahler, resulting in a culture of mad indulgence that carries on to composer-crank as musically different as Harry Partch, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Michael Tippett. And yet Mahler didn't cloak his self-importance and impropriety in ill-defined and doctrinaire notions of "modern music." Maybe his most audacious musical act of all was to tempt comparison with classical forbears by writing minuets (as in his Second and Third Symphonies) and, as a way of rebelling sometimes against his own loyalty to "the natural being," writing some sonata-form movements that are almost cheeky in their straightforwardness (as in the Fourth and Sixth Symphonies).

It should be clear from these observations that Mahler is a daunting topic, all the more so because piles of books have been devoted to him. Nonacademics will find certain volumes from these bulging library shelves more helpful than others. The definitive life account is Henry-Louis de la Grange's multivolume biography, but Peter Franklin's much more concise and still beautifully written *Life of Mahler* will be more useful for nonspecialists. For a straightforward life-and-works, I suggest Michael Kennedy's *Mahler* or Kurt Blaukopf's volume *Gustav Mahler*, published in English translation in 1973. For a synoptic account of the

music, Constantin Floros's *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies* is a go-to volume, though the English translation is at times questionable. Paul Bekker's richly insightful and engaging book *Gustav Mahler's Symphonies*, published in 1921 and recently translated from the German, offers the perceptions of a musician and critic of Mahler's own time.

My own book is no biography, nor is it a life-and-works study. I intend it as a broad introduction to Mahler's music and ideas, with an emphasis on "bring[ing] readers closer to the musical work as a living listening experience"—as blurbs for the Listener's Companion series would have it. My aim has been to bring readers closer to Mahler's compositions by simplifying discussion of his structures and his compositional aims, and by usefully uncovering avenues of experience. I have tried to open his daunting world of musical abandon for the reader by giving some points of access, some "ways in." There's nothing systematic or especially original about my similes, insights, historical comparisons, and semantical discussions. Apart maybe from the references to musical events and ordering, I'm not sure if any of these approaches can be replicated in someone else's experience. But then Mahler forces us to realize one of the basic truisms about music more broadly: that musical meaning can't be nailed down by any one interpreter.

To connect with this music is an ongoing, conversational effort, a fulfilling task for a lifetime. Even in those cases where Mahler himself gave detailed subtitles, storylines, and programs to his symphonies, the musical significances begin rather than end there. And so I hope my readings won't be taken literally, but will instead provoke similar or dissimilar reactions of your own. When I say, for instance, that a panic attack is suggested in the first of the *Kindertotenlieder*, that the climax of the first movement of the Fourth Symphony explodes like a child's tantrum, and that the repeated stopped-horn rasps in the first movement of the Ninth Symphony sound like pleas for mercy, I don't mean to be taken literally. These are suggestions rather than conclusions: they are potential footholds, similes for passages that could just as easily lend themselves to other interpretations.

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### **SYMPHONY NO. 7**

A Mahler Serenade

**T**he Seventh is the odd man out among Mahler's symphonies, the opus that presents no particular gimmick, rationale, or worldview. At one point, the symphony had the nickname "The Song of the Night" (*Das Lied der Nacht*), a subtitle that didn't originate with Mahler, and one that has fallen out of use. We know from the composer's letters and from secondhand accounts that he did hear the first four movements as vaguely relating to topics of night and darkness—a premise that becomes concrete in the two *Nachtmusik* ("night music") movements, and in his score indication "shadowy" (*schattenhaft*) for the third movement. But then night and dark are mutable or even indefinable things, just as this is an elusive and dark-hued piece of music—hanging together more as a set of shadowy dreams than as cumulative storytelling.

Along these lines, writers—including myself—usually end up framing the Seventh Symphony in negative terms, defining it by what it isn't. And then there's the matter of the Seventh's neglect among conductors and orchestras. Though it had some success at its premiere in 1908, this remains one of Mahler's least played scores. Deryck Cooke called it the "Cinderella" among the symphonies. If the Seventh is the least cohesive of his scores, we should remember that it came right after the tight and highly symphonic Sixth, and could not have walked the same paths. By this reckoning, the Seventh is both an answer to the Sixth and an attempt to leave it behind: where the Sixth is tense and tersely argued,

the Seventh is sprawling and digressive; while the Sixth glowers and deliberates, the Seventh diverts. (If there is any consistency in Mahler, it's through such paired contrasts: we've seen it before with the Third and Fourth Symphonies.) Be that as it may, this substantial piece—just as long in timespan as the Second, Sixth, and Eighth Symphonies, if not the Third or Ninth—is certainly about something more far-reaching than nocturnal darkness.

With its circuitous five movements and its guitars and gentle horn summonings, the Seventh is less a symphony than it is a serenade. It shows Mahler connecting with traditions of occasional music—and with the old leisure spaces of nocturnal pleasure gardens, spacious dining rooms, and upper-class entertainment quarters. In terms of structure, a rule of thumb was that the symphony as a generic tradition comprised four movements, while the serenade had five or more. (Mahler's lengthy sonata-form first movement and sizable rondo finale don't rule out serenade comparisons for the Seventh, since Mozart's larger Salzburg serenades had comparably weighty beginnings and endings and could be almost as long.) Mozart's famous *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* originally had five movements, and most of the serenades of the later eighteenth century had five, six, seven, or even eight. It's against this occasional-music backdrop that the nocturnal colorings and five-movement layout of Mahler's Seventh make the most historical sense.

- (1) *Langsam – Allegro risoluto, ma non troppo* (Slowly—Quickly and decisively, but not too much) (21 minutes)
- (2) *Nachtmusik I. Allegro moderato* (Night Music I. Moderately quickly) (17 minutes)
- (3) *Scherzo. Schattenhaft* (Scherzo. Shadowy) (10 minutes)
- (4) *Nachtmusik II. Andante amoroso* (Night Music II. Amorously and at a walking tempo) (15 minutes)
- (5) *Rondo – finale* (Rondo—finale) (18 minutes)

Heard as a serenade, Mahler's Seventh Symphony reflects a neoclassical approach—but one very different from the formal nostalgia we heard in the Sixth Symphony. The Sixth follows the standard four-movement format of the classical Austro-German symphony in its tried-and-true pattern of forging ahead through the different symphonic facets of sonata first movement, slow movement, scherzo, and then finale. But a five-movement work like Mahler's Seventh is more digressive—

and in that way, more suggestive of night's pleasures and irrationalities than the rational sensibilities of day. Night is a time for leisure, wandering, and lovemaking, and is therefore a time for guitars, serenading under balconies, and a certain impulsiveness, oblivion, and tranquility overall.

Night, cloaking humanity under intimacy and darkness, is also a time for focused listening. As part of its nocturnal theme, the Seventh Symphony sports many ear-catching novelties in instrumentation. These become particularly audible, and beautiful, in the chamber-music scoring of the two *Nachtmusik* movements. Among the instruments here are the mandolin and guitar, used to evocative serenade-like effect in the fourth movement. Carried over from the Sixth Symphony to the second and fifth movements of the Seventh are the cowbells and *Rute*. The two stringed instruments suggest privilege and leisure, and the two percussion carryovers delight the ears with their washes of gentle and perplexing noise. The two *Nachtmusik* movements are colored by the unique combination of mandolin and cowbells, along with prominent passages for the horn and solo violin. The first two tend to create quite a bit of picturesque noise—their pluckings and clankings throw tone colors in all directions. This overall sonic landscape makes for an evocative aural picture of the flotsam and jetsam of nighttime, and the white noise of dreams. Adding to the effect is the unusual amount of repetition in the *Nachtmusik* movements, which gives them a strophic or songlike quality.

A serenade involves less of a musical-structural argument than a symphony does, for the simple reason that serenades weren't written for focused, concert hall listening. So it comes as no surprise that symphonically minded critics have found fault with Mahler's second and fourth movements, the two "night musics." In an interview with Wolfgang Schauffler, conductor and composer Esa-Pekka Salonen complained of "unbelievably banal, painfully banal moments" in "Nachtmusik I." Actually, it would be easier to accuse Mahler of a threadbare musical argument here. But his loosely assembled last movement has come in for heavier criticism for that very reason, particularly given the general supposition that finales become the key movements in symphonies starting with middle-period Beethoven. Beethoven's Ninth, Brahms's First, and Bruckner's Fifth developed a culture where the symphony finale became both culminative and cumulative—a custom

that Mahler continued in his own First, Second, Fifth, and Sixth. And yet Deryck Cooke spoke of the last movement of Mahler's Seventh as a "patchwork" finale, while Henry-Louis de la Grange described it as "perhaps the most bizarre and disconcerting piece Mahler ever wrote." Regarding the interpretive and structural difficulties that attend the piece as a whole, veteran conductor Valery Gergiev has confessed—in an interview with Michael McManus—to sleepless nights trying to devise a viable overall interpretative strategy. These various negative verdicts suggest the Seventh isn't so much unusual by choice as it is an example of compositional indecision, awkwardness, or even failure.

The old popular "Song of the Night" subtitle is accurate in one sense, in that Mahler began the Seventh Symphony with the two shorter *Nachtmusik* movements (movements that became the second and fourth of the completed work). Mahler's "Nachtmusik" title is actually a pun, since it can indicate a "night piece" in the sense of rustling nocturnal ephemera, and can also signify a serenade—in the sense of occasional, light music for nightly entertainments, as epitomized by Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*. Mahler's two movements embody both these night-music types, encompassing the nocturnal buzzes and rustlings one hears in nature as well as the lighthearted serenading that represents a fair evening's outdoor entertainment. There is a luxurious and unhurried character to these movements, contrasting utterly with anything in the Sixth Symphony—making it all the more remarkable that Mahler wrote them while working on the finale of the Sixth. The *Nachtmusik* movements amble along as if they had all the time in the world. According to Alma, her husband was occupied with "Eichendorff-ish visions" while composing the second *Nachtmusik*, and entertained images of "murmuring springs and German romanticism." She goes on to say that Mahler was specifically occupied with parts of Joseph von Eichendorff's story in verse *Das Marmorbild* (*The Marble Statue*, 1819). To judge from the water reference, Alma could have been thinking of these specific lines from *Marmorbild*, given here in translation:

Over the glistening peaks,  
It comes from afar like a greeting,  
The treetops are whispering,  
As if they wished to kiss.



How gentle he is, how fair!  
Voices sound across the night,  
Sing secretly of the image  
Ah, how glad the wake I keep!

Do not murmur so loudly, you springs!  
You know it is not yet morning,  
Into the moonlight's balmy waves,  
I sink my silent joy and sufferings.

It is fitting for us to begin discussing the Seventh Symphony here, where Mahler might have begun writing: with “voices sound[ing] across the night” in the two *Nachtmusik* movements. The Seventh differs from the Fifth and Sixth in having no true Adagio movement, no “still center” since there is no tightly wound existential crisis that would demand it—no consistently forceful Allegro movements to be offset. The *Nachtmusik* movements have aspects of both intermezzo and slow movement, and yet sound like rondos in the way they return insistently to familiar material. They also gain meaning from the way they flank the third-movement scherzo—a peculiar and macabre essay in triple meter that by virtue of its central position tethers the symphony to an irresolvable enigma. The primary intrigue of the Seventh Symphony lies with the strange relationship between the two *Nachtmusik* movements and the scherzo they enclose. The occasional-music pair combine acerbic humor with descriptive music, continual shifts in tone color and major/minor modality, and an overall marchlike character. These shifts in character and timbre range from obtuse to subtle. In “*Nachtmusik I*,” the symmetrical structure matters less than the constant juxtaposition and rejuxtaposition of different kinds of music that the form allows. The shimmering, whimsical instrumental hues become a cloak for what is at its essence a “walking piece” set to a steady, sauntering tempo.

In the *Nachtmusik* movements, we hear nocturnal trickles and jangles within changing soundscapes. These are aural diaries of nocturnal strolls, with the ears open to all manner of novel sounds that daylight would have banished or obscured. Mahler was finishing the Sixth Symphony when he started these two scenic interludes, so there are carryovers from that work—including the cowbells and the major-minor seal (now heard within the descending gestures that start, end, and mark the center of the second movement, with the minor turns appear-

ing at 1:28, 9:06, and 16:13). The writing for solo instruments makes this pair of movements immediately appealing: this is chamber music that demands a beautiful sound and interpretive poise. True to the history of the serenade, Mahler places special emphasis on wind solos. In the serenades and cassations and nocturnes of the eighteenth century, wind instruments were at the forefront in creating sounds that could carry outdoors. And so we begin the second movement with horn players evoking a sense of space, possibly in illustration of Eichendorff's "voices sound[ing] across the night." In this beginning, two horns converse at a distance, the first marked "calling" (*rufend*) and the second instrument—muted and therefore sounding more distant—marked "answering" (*antwortend*). The space the horns open up is then consecrated by trickling water: Eichendorff's murmuring springs are simulated by the oboe, clarinet, English horn, and bassoon. The introduction concludes at 1:30, and then the main section begins. Here we immediately hear another point of contrast with the tragic Sixth Symphony, namely a sense of playfulness. The major-minor seal is used as a simple punctuation, divorced from its earlier fateful symbolism. Offbeat accents and misplaced trills appear as splotches of mordant humor. We hear the clatter of *col legno* strings, and (starting at 2:21) an overlong passage where the basses and contrabassoon have their self-importance punctured by the high-handed timpanist.

All this suggests a composer enjoying himself after oppressive labors on the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies. The leisurely diversions continue in the second movement's two trio sections, which introduce A-flat major and C minor into a movement based in C major. The first (starting at 3:56) is a striding passage that focuses on the strings. It gives way (at 5:37) to a more cadaverous style initiated by the opening horn duet and tinged with the secretive timbres of cowbells, tam-tam, stopped horns, and low woodwinds. An abridged reprise of the main section follows (starting at 6:45), before the mournful second trio begins with quivering oboes (at 7:44). This trio is interrupted by an abbreviated return of the "murmuring springs" introduction (starting at 8:42), after which (at 9:13) the trio music combines two solo cellos in a plaintive duet—introducing a kind of heartsick tango into Eichendorff's landscape. Humor quickly returns as we approach the expected retransition back to the main material. Here Mahler sets up a gradual decrescendo (beginning at 10:14) through disparate registers of lower strings, flute, and

harp. What should be a direct springboard back to the tonic key and the original material becomes instead a teasing disengagement: the closer we get to the reprise, the more unlikely it becomes. Indeed, the gradual decrescendo seems to flaunt its own control over our expectations. Finally, the trumpet and the (extremely frustrated) clarinet take matters into their own hands and heave us into the long-expected return of the main section (starting at 10:51).

The second *Nachtmusik* (the symphony's fourth movement, marked "amorously and at a walking tempo") shows the more romantic side of night. The movement begins with a sumptuous yawn on the first violin, a gesture that suggests a languorous form of oblivion. Eichendorff makes no mention of luxury divans fitted out in silk damask, but Mahler's opening phrase puts us in mind of one—with our serenaded paramour lounging on top. The violin line stretches up an octave, F to F, and then descends the scale before horn and oboe dovetail with the melody and the guitar and mandolin enter with their accompanimental twinklings. They twang their way through the movement as part of a reduced orchestra, suggesting a serenade under the lover's balcony. More generally, the remaining melodic gestures are just as luxuriant and solicitous, even tender, as the opening solo. This presents night as an escape into amorous oblivion, perhaps in reference to the lovers' nocturnal tryst in act 2 of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Wagner, working under the influence of the poet Novalis and the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, portrayed evening as a deep escape from the spitefulness, envy, vanity, and deviousness of day. In the most celebrated line from Wagner's act 2, the two lovers entreat the evening: "Descend, / O Night of Love, / Grant oblivion / that I may live" ("O sink hernieder, / Nacht der Liebe, / gib Vergessen, / dass ich lebe"). Here the night becomes a haven not only from daylight, but also from consciousness and from time itself.

Romantic though it may be, this second *Nachtmusik* manages a robust sense of humor. There are moments of buffoonery where Mahler seems to poke fun at his own dark moods. A mock transition section sequences upward with dogged insistence (beginning at 2:11, marked "very graciously") and distances us worryingly from the tonic F major. At 2:53 we arrive at A minor for what promises to be a lengthy stay—and an anguished one, to judge from the stabbing As marking the beat. But before we know it, a quick crescendo and a trill on flutes and violins

pull us out of the darkness and back toward some amiable mandolining in F major. By now, misfortune intruding on romance has become an ongoing joke, played repeatedly at our expense, and the movement continues to take time from its nocturnal lovemaking to toy with our anxieties. Nervous upward sequencing keeps leading in various and sundry harmonic directions. An anxious violin solo provides some new melodic interest starting at 3:27. We're back in minor-key note-stabbing mode at 3:53 and again at 5:34, but are soon liberated from it. At 6:03, and again at 6:25, the worries are centered on G-flat minor, but a B-flat major trio section enters to save the day. Anxiety manages to rear its head yet again at 7:40, to the tune of E-flat minor and now with a sobbing idea on the G string of the solo violin paired with mandolin plunks.

The air is cleared of jesting by a luxurious passage that suggests the orchestration of Richard Strauss, and at 9:29 we're safely back in the opening material. But Mahler saves his biggest prank till last. The anxious rising sequence starts up one last time with the guitar entrance at 11:34 and works its way into the mother of all dead-end climaxes—though major chords never disappear from view. All this much-ado-about-nothing is over by 12:10, at which point we're back yet again in the comforts of the ambling first theme. All is forgotten when the end of the movement brings an intoxicating spray of quiet and sublime colors: a clarinet trills over three muted solo violas; the horns, cellos, and double basses calmly locate the tonic F major; the clarinet brightens the picture by calmly raising its trilled note to the major third, at which point low flutes chime in with their silvery, feathery balm for the ears; and the guitar strums two last chords just as the clarinet quietly and slowly unwinds its blissful trill. These last moments must be, whether literally or figuratively, a musical rendering of “the moonlight’s balmy waves” described by Eichendorff.

## **RECONCILING THE SYMPHONY WITH THINGS NOCTURNAL**

Having produced these two lovely spin-offs from the gloomy Sixth Symphony, Mahler put pen to paper again the following summer to write the more obviously symphonic first, third, and fifth movements of the

Seventh. The opening movement that resulted, the longest and the most weighty of the five, is an odd amalgam of the serious and the grotesque. At the same time, it has sensuous byways that hint at the earlier *Nachtmusik* movements, and at the Sixth Symphony itself. The first movement is primarily a stern march, centered in B minor with an introduction in E minor, and sounds like a fusion of the march styles that begin the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies. But we don't hear a steady march until three minutes into the movement, when the introduction gives way to the Allegro section. In this Adagio introduction, the shuddering rhythm is in fact hard to parse in the ear and the memory, and it's even difficult to make out the 4/4 meter until the melody enters.

Instrumentation counts among the most original aspects of this music. Most remarkably, Mahler used a rare instrument for the introductory melody: the tenor horn. This is an outlier from wind bands, confusingly called an alto horn in the United States, and is less like a French horn than a smaller euphonium. Its sound is just as tough to place as the accompanimental rhythm Mahler has put beneath it. The ear wants to ask: is it a trombone? a Wagner tuba? The tone could be described as darkly mysterious, if also rather clearer than a trombone in the same register—it is a bellowing sound that harks back to the imposing “voice of Pan” on solo trombone in the first movement of the Third Symphony. (That solo represented the pagan god of the wilderness in the Third, and Mahler similarly heard the tenor horn as a voice of nature in his Seventh: he likened it to the roar of a stag that's gotten itself mired out in the forest.) The sound is fascinatingly diversified when this theme comes back along with the rest of the opening. At that point, it is divided among a trio of low instruments, their dusky timbres typifying the nocturnal tone of the Seventh Symphony: we hear the melody shared between double bass (starting at 13:06), trombones, and lastly the original tenor horn (starting at 13:26). There follows a captivating face-off of not-quite-the-same low brass sounds when the tenor horn and trombone have a duet, punctuated by the tuba as yet another bass voice (offering two notes starting at 14:07). After such a pageant of timbral gloom, the high doubled violins come in as a *fortissimo* corrective (at 14:20)—though any promise of a brightening is negated right away by an iteration of the major-minor seal.

But the most important aspect of the first movement of the Seventh, something that joins with the formal unorthodoxies to make listening a

challenge, is its lack of definite themes. Mahler has replaced distinct melodies that arrive and depart with sets of intervals that, when reshuffled and put in a different key, become sort-of new sets of intervals. This intervallic (as opposed to thematic) thinking allows a linear and cumulative, twenty-minute symphonic structure with no verbatim repetition of any material until near the end. It's difficult to think of a Mahler first movement that develops a more powerful sense of unimpeded momentum from first bar to last, despite the prevalence of measured tempos. In the first movement of the Fifth Symphony, he had juxtaposed fast and slow tempos without reconciling them. That provocative approach required the follow-up of additional music in similar style, and so the second movement—also in duple meter, and at about the same tempo—was a necessary supplement. In the first movement of the Sixth Symphony, march time was brought to bear on a sonata structure of Mozartian clarity and simplicity, ending in an exciting coda section. In the first movement of the Seventh, Mahler devises a structure of increasing weight and impact, and manages a linear effect by integrating tempo changes, inventing thematic transformations, and reorganizing listener expectations in a sonata form. So the end becomes both exciting and highly symphonic when, after dominant preparation, we arrive at the coda section (at 20:15) and with it a slowed-down and aggrandized version of the first march theme in the tonic E minor.

Even by Mahler's standards, this first movement challenges symphonic expectations. It starts and ends as a march, but fails to divulge whether it is processional music for the military, for the church, or for some other ritual. The movement begins with an *Adagio* introduction that sounds both too tentative and too thematic to be introductory. And then we have a clear thematic return even before the introduction can finish and before the main section of the movement can start with its faster tempo. Here the opening melody comes back in three trombones (starting at 2:02), followed by a repeat of the introductory rhythm, and (at 2:21) a return of the tenor horn with its mysterious bellow. Finally, a decisive arrival on B in the bass line (at 3:00) allows a launch into the *Allegro con fuoco* tempo and the actual main section of the movement, now with an up-tempo march theme given to the horns. In symphonic first movements more generally, it's the slow introduction's job to ask questions and the job of the ensuing faster music to answer them. In this case, however, the questions actually start with the quicker tempo.

Among these questions is the relationship between this new Allegro theme and the introductory theme (as heard at the start in the tenor horn). Does their close intervallic relationship make them the same theme, just played at different tempos and with slightly different rhythm, or is the transformation enough to make them two themes?

The second theme of the Seventh's first movement (the music starting at 7:39), with the main melodic interest in the doubled first and second violins, doesn't contrast by being ideally lyrical, but by being impulsive—in effect, march-resistant—much as “Alma's theme” was in the Sixth. Mahler's marking here in the Seventh is “with great impetus” (*mit großem Schwung*), while the corresponding Sixth Symphony theme was marked “with impetus” (*schwungvoll*). As we already heard in that “Alma” theme of the Sixth Symphony, Mahler's second subjects—harmonically unstable, and reaching and striving across wide intervals—are sounding more and more like transitions rather than themes. (This will become even more marked in Pater Profundus's music in part 2 of the Eighth Symphony and especially in the convoluted, even tortured, second theme in the first movement of the Ninth.) Mahler effects even more continuity by fragmenting these new theme areas with newly intricate textures and other rhythmic instabilities. Expressive impulsiveness is suggested in the Seventh's second theme not through a tempo slowdown, but through a series of fermatas (hold signs, which Mahler says specify in this instance “a trifling extension of the note values”).

Mahler's skill in moving this long movement forward becomes even clearer in the development section. Traditionally, the development in a sonata symphony movement would be preceded by a closing theme that is harmonically stable and ends with a firm cadence. And then the development itself, after it starts with some version of the first or second theme, would steadily increase in cumulative tension right up until the recapitulation. Mahler overturns all these expectations, leaving the listener constantly guessing where we are and in what kind of structure. What he does is lead directly and without pause into the development (starting at 6:22), where we have a restatement of the march theme variant. The repetition is literal enough to suggest we might already have started the recap. But then, conversely, Mahler begins to loosen the tension of the argument considerably, and makes new changes in material. Just where the symphonic vehicle should be moving forward

with greater intensity, the air is being let out of the tires. The second theme reappears (starting at 6:59) in B minor, but with the texture more varied and complex. With some tension returning, we reach (starting at 8:09) a restatement of the march theme variant.

But then there's a cymbal crash and at 8:30 it sounds like we've segued into a different movement altogether in lieu of a real second theme, much like Russian composer Alexander Scriabin was doing at about this same time in his Second and Third Symphonies. Mahler slows the tempo and the harmony in this new passage, slows down for the first time since the opening bars, with our point of rest now being E-flat major. Duetting trumpets, joined by the solo flute, suggest some of the same nocturnal spaces that will be invoked in the next movement. And the trumpets are supported underneath by "solemn" (*feierlich*) chords in winds and strings, a transformation of transitional material from earlier in the movement. The beat is still regular, but more fluid phrases now carry the music across the bar lines. Staying in line with the nocturnal theme of the symphony, writers have related the passage to something dark or mystical: Constantin Floros likens this music to a "religious vision."

The march tries to reassert itself, but at 10:00 the dueting trumpets and mystical tremolos return—now with added clarinet and other woodwinds. A figure in rising fourth intervals leads into a beautifully voiced chorale-like progression in the brass ("blown very softly," *sehr weich geblasen*), and then (at 11:26) an even greater change, like a curtain being drawn aside. The colors suddenly brighten for a radiant opening to B major ("very broad," *sehr breit*), complete with harp cascades, trilling winds, and rocking string figures. Floros says this "might be considered the center of the movement." Such an impression is underlined by the typically "aspiring" Mahler string line that unfolds in first and second violins, reaching rhapsodically for higher heights while doubling each other in octaves and unisons. Henry-Louis de la Grange points to "the ecstatic melody and sumptuous orchestral texture of its accompaniment" and calls the passage "one of the rare episodes in Mahler's music to radiate the sensuality of Strauss." At the peak of their implorings, the violins repeat a fifth leap up followed by a step down—a high-register figure that Mahler would reuse at a similarly ecstatic moment in part 2 of the Eighth Symphony, at the point where Margarete



says her beloved Faust “is still dazzled by the new daylight!” as his remains are borne heavenward.

Structurally speaking, this passage is a big, decked-out dominant preparation—a grand springboard for our return to the original material in the tonic E minor. After such a long and showy windup, when the recap finally materializes (starting at 12:59) it’s disturbing in its underhandedness. We hear the introductory theme reorchestrated, as mentioned above—meekly distributed between basses and trombone. The recap of earlier material extends to the march theme (starting at 15:28), and a pause reengages the movement’s duality between darkness and light by suddenly plunging us back into E major. This surprise recapitulation, reminding us that we are in fact still in a lengthy E minor march movement, takes off pretty much as expected. The march variant reappears (starting at 16:23) with cymbal replacing the earlier tambourine rolls, but still acting like a second theme. Mahler works up considerable excitement through imaginative variation of the march material. The second theme sounds quite different when it reenters at 17:25, now emphasizing downward motion and now pared back to minimal instrumentation with a focus on the violins and horns, with the trumpet recalling the tag that opened the introductory theme. To give the last segment of the recapitulation a suitably conclusive send-off, over a gradual slowdown the march theme returns in its most recognizable form yet (starting at 18:35), before the trombones and tuba work more and more clearly into the material from the movement’s introductory tenor horn solo. The summational coda is introduced by a cadence to the tonic E minor (at 20:15) and a return to the original tempo.

Arnold Schoenberg was thrilled when he heard the new Seventh Symphony—as well he should have been, since the first movement is so similar in its cliff-edged, all-inclusive formal strategy to Schoenberg’s own just-completed Chamber Symphony no. 1, op. 9. But Mahler went one better than Schoenberg: not only did he write follow-ups for this ostensibly self-sufficient first movement, he made those follow-ups somehow indispensable. At the same time, the opening movement has a dramatic, heavy-weather style that neither seems necessary to the overall ruse of this symphony nor implicated in the style of the remaining movements. (Unless we allow that the movement’s dramatic weight could be involved in the “cry of affronted nature” aspect that Mahler himself heard in the tenor horn solo.) Whatever the first movement of

the Seventh might have needed by way of a musical answer, the following four movements don't provide it. The first *Nachtmusik* is just a scenic interlude within the overall plan. The second *Nachtmusik* has the same function, though it does predict some of the rhetoric we'll hear in the finale. Mahler's third movement, the *schattenhaft* scherzo in D minor, poses a more substantial riddle.

### WALTZING IN A MADHOUSE AND GREETING THE DAY

Mahler's scherzo calls for a wild simile. The movement holds some of his most inscrutable writing, but also the most consistently danceable dance music that he penned. I would compare this scherzo to waltzing in a madhouse, while clarifying that the comparison comes from a film and not from firsthand experience. The filmmaker in question is, of course, Ken Russell. Yet again, Russell manages to "explain" a quizzical aspect of Mahler's work through a cinematic vision presented as pseudobiography. Russell used the scherzo of the Seventh Symphony to underscore the scene in his film *Mahler* (starting at 1:04:30) where Mahler and his sister Justine visit the composer Hugo Wolf, an old university friend who is now confined to an asylum. Wolf is suffering the delusion that he is Emperor Franz Joseph, and Mahler and Justine play along while the "emperor" determines whether the young conductor is right for the Vienna Court Opera directorship. In the middle of the conversation, as a test of their facility with things Viennese, Wolf suddenly orders his two visitors to waltz. And waltz they do, accompanied by the strains of the Seventh Symphony scherzo as they spin through the asylum's elegant grounds—past Baroque fountains, topiaries, and manicured French gardens.

Mahler's scherzo is nocturnal in its colorings and mad in its syntax. We need to ask just what he could have meant with the score indication "shadowy" (*schattenhaft*). How can an orchestra play a piece of music in a shadowlike or mysterious manner? Perhaps by emphasizing darkness and changeability of expression, two aspects that overlap with constructions of insanity. At the start of the movement, he assembles the waltz in the reverse direction than a Johann Strauss would have taken: from the bottom up, starting deceptively on beat three rather than one, methodically assembling the oom-pah-pah accompaniment before any

melody has a chance to appear. And while Strauss usually begins a waltz from the top down, by emphasizing luminous and beautiful tones, Mahler begins at the bottom by sketching in this oom-pah-pah with the darkest, lowest colors: the timpani, cellos, and basses. Falling next into place in Mahler's waltz is the middle of the texture: the violins and lower woodwinds. A semblance of melody finally appears (at 0:42) in the uneasy mixture of flutes and high oboes—the tune, marked “lamenting” (*klagend*), sounding quite unwaltz-like in the event. These dancers are weeping as they move. The violins finally do their duty and make the waltz melody more respectable (at 0:59), but then (at 1:14) they disrupt the ballroom elegance with ill-mannered slides. Texture and sense then collapse, and the waltz is forced to start its reassembly a second time.

We could also say Mahler is engaging in defamiliarization, a process the dictionary defines as “taking something familiar and rendering it unfamiliar by drawing attention to the language or formal devices used.” The movement's sheer insistence on 3/4 time makes one think of the children's defamiliarization game of taking an everyday word and reiterating it over and over until it loses all meaning. Some of Mahler's lower winds and brass protest the coercion and loss of sense (for instance, the flatulent tuba at 1:26), while the oboes scream out like pained animals at one spot in the first windup of the waltz (at 0:29). Cadences become forced, even violent, as if the music desperately wants to stop: hear the *fortississimo* timpani hit and tuba slide at 5:32, and the extreme *ffff* snap of the cellos and basses at 7:27. The fluctuation between major and minor keys makes coherence seem more and more improbable: in the fairly innocent trio section (which starts in D major at 3:12), the quick and inexplicable turn to minor (D minor at 3:25) sours the cheer of the dance as if it were milk suddenly gone rancid. In Mahler's grandest statement of the waltz tune (starting at 7:47, marked “wild”), the paired trombones and tuba are along for the ride at the bottom of the texture, giving the music a circuslike sound. But even this big-top rendering can't resist the earthward pull, and the music falls into minor at 7:55. Finally, at the very end, the waltz extinguishes itself through the odd combination of a timpani stroke with a pizzicato chord on violas—the music commits a D major waltz suicide.

The last movement of Mahler's Seventh Symphony practices defamiliarization of a different kind. Having brushed aside all matters noc-

tural, this rondo finale bursts in in uninhibited celebration of the day. It's a comic rondo with a vengeance: it makes no pretense of developing anything, and instead states the opening music a total of eight times in a movement that comprises only eighteen minutes (the ritornello clearly occurring, whole or in part, at 0:11, 2:38, 3:45, 5:38, 8:17, 8:51, 11:00, and 15:59). Mahler isn't emphasizing this thematic material because he thinks it original. It is a barely concealed paraphrase of the music representing the Mastersingers' arrival in Wagner's opera *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*—and the music Wagner uses to open the prelude to act 1. A number of scholars have pointed out a relation to Mahler's nocturnal scenario for the Seventh, in that Wagner ends his act 2 with expectant evening and starts act 3 with the breaking of St. John's Day. Coincident with Midsummer's Day and Hans Sachs's name day, *Johannistag* is the date of the Mastersingers' arrival for the long-anticipated Nuremberg singing competition, to be followed by the wedding of the heroine, Eva, with the competition winner, Walther. To end a long evening in the theater, the opera's final act arrives as a festive morning, and the final scene arrives full of good-natured punchlines and happy endings. In his score, Wagner specifies a setting "in an open meadow" that exhibits "gay decorations" and hosts "much merry-making."

Mahler was deeply in thrall to *Die Meistersinger*, conducting it a total of forty-six times over his career and extolling it to Natalie Bauer-Lechner in 1899 as the perfect comic piece and even a peak of German art more broadly, a work that "almost makes everything else seem worthless and superfluous." But again, even as Mahler dutifully imitates the Nuremberg singers' arrival, we hear him defamiliarizing a beloved musical institution. His ritornello theme is a near-imitation of the singers' arrival for the contest in the scene described above. Among the separable musical parts of this theme, units that are to be stated, shuffled, and reused, are the fanfare-like cry in horns and trumpets (first heard starting at 0:11), the scalewise ascent in the melody set against the scalewise descent in the bass (starting at 0:28), and then the closing section with its cadential timpani (starting at 0:44). These will all recur again and again in a mélange of high spirits. At the start of his final scene, Wagner has the Mastersingers arrive for the *Johannistag* celebrations in the stage setting described above, amidst great pomp and hoopla. In his repurposing of this music for his ritornello, Mahler makes the

Mastersingers seem more and more off-kilter by having them make their grand entrance no fewer than eight times.

A formal analysis seems beside the point with such a movement, a movement that asks the listener to stop listening and just join the revelries. Simply keeping the party moving betrays a certain compositional prowess: only at one point (starting at 12:05) are Hans Sachs and company encouraged to sound calm and lyrical. It would be more in the spirit of the proceedings to talk about Mahler's orchestrational means for keeping the flood of sound fresh and vibrant: for instance, the pairing of bass drum and cymbal with a minor key at 4:34, or the slightly bizarre appearance of flutter-tonguing in the flutes at 10:18. The importance of the timpani to this movement, even as a solo presence, raises questions of playing and orchestral balances. In her book on the Seventh Symphony, musicologist Anna Stoll Knecht has suggested that Mahler actually merged his love of Wagner's opera with an interest in the circus, which as a touring act was becoming widely popular in Mahler's time in Vienna and in the American east. Mahler's finale certainly coarsens the broad humor of the Wagner comedy, taking it more in the direction of humans doing pratfalls and tumbles and elephants doing hoof-handstands. As Stoll Knecht indicates, the sheer proliferation and collision of sounds in Mahler's music could suggest a three-ring extravaganza—multiple spectacles that compete for our attention. Brass and percussion come to the fore, as do carousel sounds. At one point (11:15), the music actually cadences and stops in its tracks with a circusy “ta-dah!” flourish.

But this finale still must function somehow in performance as the capstone of Mahler's eighty-minute symphony. Veteran conductor Valery Gergiev has found the Seventh Symphony a special interpretive task: how to bring its loose ends together despite a dominating first movement and a last movement that offers more sonic spectacle than symphonic argument? As quoted by Michael McManus, Gergiev outlines the challenges thus:

[The Seventh] has a strange, unusual shape, which is the key to it. You have to work very hard at shaping it. This is not really about tempi—it's more about working with light and shadow and different levels of power. It is essential not to tire your public too early. You start to feel exhausted yourself and worry about the orchestra too.

The first movement is so immense you really need to know what to do with the second movement.

Gergiev touches on the Seventh's problems of proportion and formal strategy, much as I discuss them above: namely, the symphony's unusual overall setup of five movements that fail to "speak" to each other, not so much in terms of a lack of shared thematic material but in terms of uncoordinated weights, moods, and messages. By Gergiev's understanding, the Seventh ends up becoming a kind of interpretive black box: the piece either works as a musical entity in performance or it doesn't, and by the time the conductor knows how those efforts are panning out, the hand has been played and it's too late to do anything about the outcome. For Gergiev, that crux—that point of reckoning—occurs early in the finale, and once that movement has begun the performance has already succeeded or failed. The challenge that comes to bear at that place is "to feel [the symphony] is moving, becoming more and more focused on one goal, namely the end of the piece." Mahler constructs such a sense of focus by self-consciously bringing back material from the first movement (starting at 13:31), in a grand attempt to round off the symphony as a whole. When the first movement's march idea returns with a sense of triumph in D-flat major (starting at 14:47, then shifting back to the tonic C major at 15:11), we appreciate just how closely related the various themes of the first movement are. For Gergiev, though, that would seem secondary to the conductor's ability to mold and pace the work as a whole. "For me the terrible thought was that we might play, say, the first five or eight minutes of the final movement and I would find myself thinking, 'it's over, it didn't work again.'"