

Symphony #9 by Gustav Mahler

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(1968)

The recording of Gustav Mahler's Ninth Symphony you are going to hear today was made during performance in Vienna on January 16, 1938, almost exactly thirty years ago. Bruno Walter conducted the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. The recording was published on 78 rpm disks and thus filled 20 sides. Numerous rather intricate procedures of splicing were used by Carl Volkers in his attempt to provide us with a continuous, nearly unbroken tape copy.

The four movements of Mahler's Ninth Symphony are perfect examples of a particular compositional procedure which tends, maybe intends, to mislead the music-loving listener. Each movement begins with relatively simple gestures, unambiguous patterns. Simple in that recognition of previous musical experiences is invited, even encouraged; unambiguous in that the gestural quality of the initial statement by far overrides the shrewdly disguised germs of future dissent. In other words: the exposed beginning acts like a familiar generator, radiating the commonplace promise of predictable consequences. If, inspired by such plausible communicability, the listeners immediately adjust their own pace, ready to comfortably stroll along with the music down a well-known path, they will find themselves in trouble in no time. The composer, namely, almost immediately begins to have his musical events reflect suspiciously on that which has been exposed so simply and unambiguously, leaves it all abruptly, and is found again restarting the generation of the supposed generator from a distant, usually earlier, scratch. The listeners' problem is not caused by their following a wrong path. It is the right one that turns into a blind alley as soon as the listeners have settled with a knowing nod to a complacent plod in the suggested direction. While they saunter on looking for familiar

landmarks which are not there, the composer has embarked on the game of repeatedly entering the same path, changing the first steps again and again, even changing the location and appearance of the path at will apparently, and according to apparently moody decisions.

If, on the other hand, the listeners' own intellectual restlessnesses emotionally drive them to continuously search for accumulations of alternatives, if they are allergic to all display of triumphantly affirmative accomplishment where everything is shown to fit and to be just right and done with, if they are looking for trouble that is there and not for comfort that is not, then they can enjoy the deterioration of simplicity, the light-breaking clouds of inscrutable ambiguity, which are the main themes, subjects, motives, programs, and images of Mahler's music.

Andante comodo is indicated in the score at the beginning of the first movement. "With a leisurely gait" or "comfortably moving along" might be considered fair English interpretations of the indication. In the light of the preceding remarks however, *Andante comodo* sounds like pure irony if understood as an instruction as to how the movement is to appear. Reading the score, one finds absolutely nothing in it that would correspond to *comodo*, nor to either leisure or comfort. What one does find is a plentitude of remarks, scattered all through the movement, demanding frequent changes, often instantaneous changes, of attitude. "Passionately" with exclamation marks, "Urging on", "With supreme effort", "furiously", are just a few examples to show the range. A little reflection discloses that this language was not addressed to either the music nor to the listener but to the conductor. Out of experienced skepticism mixed with an always delib-

erately stipulated hope for the better, Mahler nursed the assumption that with such challenges and direct appeals to the personal dignity of conductors he might inveigle them to interpret his compositions correctly. As the first movement lasts 25 minutes, and as during this time the tempo and the general temper of the music change 25 times, it is fair to deduce that the words *Andante comodo* should be interpreted as a fair warning to the conductor and that they would best be translated into English by “Take it easy”.

With all these wide fluctuations of intensity, its sharp contrasts between attacks and decays and its range of instrumental coloration, the first movement is but one immense *Lied*. Irrelevant, that there is no text, irrelevant also, that it probably could never be sung by human voices. Relevant is that Mahler, having composed many songs, numerous cycles of musical poems for the voice, now wrote a composition for which the concept of *Lied* would not be the formal category but rather the thematic idea, the musical subject. The same ingredients that hitherto gave to the song its concise lyrical or storytelling form, are here, in this movement, developed into symphonic sections. For once, with reference to the life size of songs, one may speak of the components of song appearing larger than life, no longer serving the *lied*, but enthusiastically singing of it. In this composition about the concept and the image *Lied*, a magnificent lyrical panorama becomes exposed where every fragmentary segment appears as eloquent as the elevating and oppressing totality of the whole movement.

To such a kind of reflective listening, the second movement presents itself as a composition of the three-four meter with the help of *Ländler* and waltz—rather than as a composition of *Ländler* and waltz with the help of the three-four meter. The primary subject is the metrum. The associated recollections of dance attitudes have a secondary, almost instrumental function, but are also the object rather than the subject of the proceedings. Mahler’s indication “In the tempo of an easy-going *Ländler*” demands that the tempo be chosen as if the music were a *Ländler*, not because it is one. This holds equally true for a remark later in the score

where the request for a gradual acceleration is accompanied by the word *Walzer* in parentheses. It means “Get going and think of ‘the *Walzer*’, don’t play one.” In fact there is no waltz. Breathtaking insistence, urging impatience, and veritable explosions of the badly distorted three-four metrum are the characteristics of the music and not the properties of the waltz with its complacently traditional Viennese *Gemütlichkeit* of the turn of the century. However, it should be remembered that once, almost 100 years earlier, the *Walzer* did indeed have a revolutionary function. This “wild and shameless dance” of the rising bourgeoisie shocked and terrorized the fine but decaying aristocrats of 1815. It is pleasant to behold how Mahler’s three-four bar excesses injected a truly aristocratic shivering terror into the tired limbs of a saturated philistine bourgeoisie of 1911. Mahler deliberately ignored the Viennese waltz’s complacency, its *Gemütlichkeit*, considering these to be a matter of social calamity rather than musical interest. He thought so either because or in spite of having lived in Vienna for such a long time.

To the third movement Mahler gave two titles: *Rondo* and *Burleske*. The tempo indication *Allegro assai* is followed by the words *Sehr trotzig*. If one translates this by “very relentless”, the exaggerating redundancy of the word “very” in this context allows one to catch a glimpse of the ironic absurdity hidden in the German original *Sehr trotzig*. Together with the titles *Rondo* and *Burleske* this means: The recurrently alternating musical events populating the Rondo turn this ancient formal scheme into a burlesque misfit, and the performance of this process is to be a very relentless one. Every one of Mahler’s symphonies contains at least sporadic bits, often elaborate sections, hinting at the gesture called marching band music. This movement uses that gesture as its main subject, disassembling its parts down to mere signals which nevertheless play the role of characters, aggressive fragments of military march routines attacked by hectic jumping fits; then, suddenly, everything goes all limp and lyrical, brimming over with tender emotions, only to be caught up short by its very own grotesque parody in the form of, again, a signal, signalling that the in-

evitable marching is about to resume. Everything in this music is, to say the least, ambiguous. But then so did the material appear to Mahler. For 50 years now professional music reviewers take delight in repeating a dramatization of the torn personality, the conflict-prone egocentricity, the heartrending mania of Mahler the man. Simply looking at his scores should help one to see that Mahler was probably saner than anyone in his position or neighborhood, on whose reports one usually relies. It is the things he dearly loved that had become pathologically distorted and he showed them in the state in which he found them. Mahler loved the *Lied*, the dance, the march, and the passionate rubato as elements of music, but he found them at the time, in the society and the music of his day, to have turned into jargon and passwords, spelling conservative solidarity with all that was hostile to anything fresh and new. On *this* ambiguity, on *this* pathology, Mahler reflects in his music, not on his own. Therefore it is not surprising

that his melodies sound sarcastic to those who really desire to march.

The symphony finally disappears into a movement with the title *Adagio*. Once before, in his immense Third Symphony, Mahler had an *Adagio* substituted for the *Finale*. But there the gradual intensification at last reached a festively clamoring fortissimo, ending in an affirmative dream of fulfillment. Here however, in the Ninth Symphony, the climax is achieved when almost nothing can be heard anymore, when all is over and over with. After numerous beginnings and promising attempts, each initiated with fresh and vigorous warmth, each almost an assault on futility in gesture, the end dies in a fourfold pianissimo.

Here, then, is the *Symphony #9* by Gustav Mahler, recorded during performance in Vienna, on January 16, 1938, with Bruno Walter conducting the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra.