

## MESSAGES BEYOND THE SCORE, OR ENCODED MEANINGS IN MAHLER'S SYMPHONIES<sup>1</sup>

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**Motto:**

Mahler: „*The more music develops, the more complicated the apparatus becomes to express the composer's ideas.*”<sup>3</sup>

**SUMMARY.** Could it be that the deliberately chosen solitude in the three Komponierhäuschen during the creative summers would isolate and, at the same time, free the composer from the music he had conducted during the seasons? Or, maybe just like the haunted castles, his symphonies will hide in their labyrinth forsaken musical personalities, leaving in the themes, sometimes just transfigured fragments, the evidence of the composer's admiration and devotion for the broken destinies. For those who will discover the overwhelming force of his music only decades later, Mahler will be the revelation of perfection in his multiple and varied roles and original masks, as well as through the surprises generated by the meeting of themes he liked – the great and departed. The present study began from the impact of Mahler's music, as he himself would have liked it; it is well known the fact that he refuted more than once the initial program of his symphonies and the deciphering of his anthropomorphic enigmas creates just as many connections between the *pre-sign* – research of triggering biographical or socio-political events, *act-sign* – the specific of communication and *post-sign* – their hermeneutic and historical interpretation.

**Keywords:** Mahler, symphonies, symbol quotations.

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<sup>3</sup> Constantin Floros, *Gustav Mahler, The Symphonies*, Amadeus Press, 1993, p.15.

Mahler is considered to be one of the greatest symphonic composers prior to the First World War, followed by Sibelius, Elgar and many others. Nowadays, Mahler's symphonies, together with those of Shostakovich, are analyzed most often, after Beethoven's. Mahler was criticized for his "frequent quotations", his "triviality" (Henry-Louis de la Grange) but also for the "decomposing" (Adorno); some assertions of that time were caused by insufficient understanding of the symphonies, as well as by prejudice.

Let us remember that nobody accused Mozart of vulgarity when he mocked composition blunders in *Dorfmusikanten (A Musical Joke)*, K.522, or when he overlapped the aristocratic minuet with the bourgeois contradanza and the rustic *Teitsch* in *Don Giovanni*. Contemporary composers as well as those following him will often use quotations in his manner: Enescu includes a quotation from the second Mahler symphony in the end of *Symphony no. 1*, Shostakovich quotes the theme in Tchaikovsky's *Manfred* in *Symphony no. 8* (part III and IV), as well as the theme in Rossini's *Wilhelm Tell* overture in his last symphony. Bartók uses, in *Concerto*, themes from J. Strauss, while Toduță quotes Schubert with the main theme of the *Unfinished*. As for the self quoting, the line "*Così fan tutte [le belle]*" can be found in all three of Mozart's operas inspired by Lorenzo Da Ponte's librettos, while in *Don Giovanni* he self quotes with the aria "*Non più andrai*" alongside with quotations from his contemporaries. Also, Bartók, in the same *Concerto*, quotes from his own opera, *Bluebeard's Castle* ("The lake of tears").

Mahler surprises us in the most unexpected moments with thematic flashes from famous musical works, but a closer look at the composer's biography, as well as at the political and social situation of the time, can unravel the true messages of these "allusions" and "references", initially treated by critics in a derogatory manner, as an incapacity of Mahler the composer to break away from Mahler the conductor.

The present voyage in the world of Mahler's symphonies is looking for answers for some of the most surprising musical references, some of them evident, others hidden in the symphonic endeavour.

### 1. Quotes and motivations

The interference and the fusion of the art song with the symphony, achieved in *Das Lied von der Erde*, considered as a true Ninth *Symphony*, was preceded by self quotation of the themes in the art songs in the symphonies (as in the case of the second and fourth of the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, quoted in part I and III of the *Symphony no. 1*). Beyond

the self quoting as a stylistic element, it is surprising that he quotes from other composers' operas and operettas. A common and superficial explanation for these inspiration sources was connected to Mahler's conducting activity.

We will therefore try to find more profound explanations for the composer's options and especially to identify the hidden meanings of the quotes.

First of all, we looked for the cause, the motivation of these quotes:

(i). The disappearing of the idols (Wagner – 1883, Liszt – 1886, Bruckner – 1896, Brahms – 1897, Hans von Bülow – 1894<sup>4</sup>, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche – 1900<sup>5</sup>, Verdi – 1901), sometimes in a tempestuous manner (Tchaikovsky – 1893 and Hugo Wolf – 1903), will make a strong impression on Mahler, especially that some of them supported him in the beginning of his career (Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Bülow) while others were his colleagues (Wolf). Mahler was in the beginning of his career when he conducted *Don Giovanni* at the Opera in Budapest and Brahms congratulated him backstage impressed with the quality of the interpretation. Tchaikovsky, after the first rehearsal, waived in his favour the first performance of *Yevgeny Onegin* in Hamburg.

(ii). The sometimes tragic events in Mahler's life will determine the autobiographical character of many of his works. Mahler's sentimental life was often marked by unfulfilled romances, often reflected in works such as *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*. After Johanna Richter, the muse from Kassel, Mahler (just like Wagner in his relationship with Mathilde Wesendonck) has to leave Leipzig due to his affair with baron Carl von Weber's wife, Marion. In Hamburg, soprano Anna von Mildenburg becomes his inspiration, followed by the promising friendship with Natalie Bauer-Lechner, whom he would leave upon meeting Alma.

The death of his siblings when he was a child (seven out of 14) make him appreciate Rücker's poetry and write *Kindertotenlieder* (1905).

The first premise can thus be established: Mahler's symphonies contain melodic pieces commemorating departed symphonic idols (Beethoven, Schubert, Berlioz), devotion (Bruckner, Brahms, Wagner, Verdi), as well as affinities and similar destinies confessed thematically (Bizet, Johann Strauss).

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<sup>4</sup> His death and Klopstock's obituary will inspire *Symphony no. 2*.

<sup>5</sup> With text in *Symphony no. 3*.

## 2. Examples and interpretations

Leaving aside the most famous quotes (present in most bibliographic references), we will mention only a few well hidden in the symphonic weaving.

Therefore, in his first symphony, in part IV (m. 106-110), Mahler quotes a fragment from Verdi's *Rigoletto* (act. 3, no. 13 – *Terzetto*, m. 222, Sparafucile, Gilda), from the scene where Maddalena asks her brother, Sparafucile, to kill Rigoletto instead of the Duke; Gilda, hearing the dialogue, decides to sacrifice herself instead of her father:

E.g. 1

s. Se pria ch'abbia il mez-zo la not-te toc-ca - to al-cu - no qui giunga, per es - so mor - rà.

1. 2. Trp. in F  
3. 4. Pos.  
2. Pos.  
3. Pos. und Tuba  
1. Puker  
Becken  
Gr. Tr.

98 unis  
1. *ff*  
2. *ff*

zu 2  
*f*

*pp* mit Schwammschlägel *poco cresc.*

Could that be a premonition, even premature, of his own daughter's death? Nevertheless, each one of his symphonies is connected, one way or another, to death.

In the fifth and final part of the second symphony we find a short quote from Tchaikovsky – the choral theme from *The sleeping beauty* (*Apothéose*):

E.g. 2



Tchaikovsky's recent unexpected death could explain the presence of the quote.

In *Symphony no.3*, part I, beginning with a theme that evokes Brahms' first symphony, part IV, we find a short fragment of Verdi's *Trovatore* – the soldiers' choir in act III:

E.g. 3



The first opera conducted by Mahler was Verdi's *Il Trovatore* (in Laibach/Ljubiana, on October 4, 1881) and this justifies the quote.

In the first part of the fourth symphony we find a prosodic quotation from the first part of the *Sonata op. 27 no. 1* ("Quasi una fantasia") by Beethoven:

E.g. 4



The presence of Beethoven (several times) is perfectly explainable due to the impact of the composer's music on all the works that followed him. Mahler's admiration for Beethoven is evident: he begins his first symphony with a theme resembling the opening of the *Nineth Symphony*, in *Symphony no. 4* he quotes, in the first part, from the *Sonata op. 27 no. 1* ("Quasi una fantasia"), the motive from the *Fifth Symphony* can also be found in Mahler's *Symphony no. 5* (p. 1) and the *Sonata op. 81a* "Les Adieux" is present, with its message, in the first part of *Symphony no. 9*.

We should also mention the parody quotations in *Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (*The Master-Singers of Nuremberg*) by Wagner and in *The Merry Widow* by Lehar in part V of *Symphony no. 7*, the quotation from the waltz *Freut euch des Lebens* (*Enjoy Life*) by Johann Strauss-son, as well as the self-quotation in *Kindertotenlieder* (*Songs on the Death of Children*), art song IV, parts I and IV in *Symphony no. 9*. Leonard Bernstein, speaking about the fourth part, "speculated [...] that the entire movement is symbolically prophesying three kinds of death: Mahler's own impending death, the death of tonality, and the death of "Faustian" culture in all the arts".<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gustav-mahler.eu/index.php/werken/95-symphony-no-9/859-movement-4-adagio-sehr-langsam-und-noch-zurueckhaltend>.

### 3. Hidden messages in *Symphony no. 6*

*This symphony*,<sup>7</sup> considered “prophetic”, bearing a name (“The Tragic”) which cannot be attributed with certainty to its author, begins with a funeral march, just like *Symphony no.2* and *no.5*. the second theme of the sonata form was called the “Alma theme”, due to the affirmations made by Mahler’s wife after his death:

E.g. 5



A restatement of that theme at the movement's end marks the happiest point of the symphony.<sup>8</sup>

These contradictory connotations (death vs. happiness) are highlighted by the self-quoting of the art song *Revelge (The dead drummer)* in *Wunderhorn Lieder*, the somberest art song of the collection, as well as the happy *Tik-tak polka* by Johann Strauss (arranged by the composer on themes from the operetta *Die Fledermaus - The Flittermouse* or *The Bat*):

E.g. 6



<sup>7</sup> Finished in 1904 and revised two years later.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gustav-mahler.eu/index.php/werken/92-symphony-no-6/839-movement-1-allegro-energico-ma-non-troppo>

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1.  
2.  
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Posaunen

m. 382

This quotation could be in recognition of Strauss' talent as well as due to their Jewish ancestry, a conflict with a fatherly figure and difficulties in becoming well known.

The first part ends with the obsessive repetition of Alma's theme, with imitations and augmentations, whether nostalgic or in a slightly mocking manner.

The second part is lyrical<sup>9</sup>, nostalgic or even secluded, an image of loneliness, with dramatic amplification in the medial area, rising like a less than fortunate replica of the *Adagietto* in the preceding symphony.

The *Scherzo* reprises the menacing rhythmical motive in part I, in contrast with a graceful trio. We find frequent changes in tonality or meter, together with alternations of the sarcastic, macabre or cabaret tones.

In part IV, in a strange atmosphere marked by the frequent interruptions of discourse we are surprised by a motive which is repeated obsessively and which seems to be a metamorphosis of the theme in *L'Arlésienne* by Bizet, with an index function which appears more evident in sound than in the written score:

E.g. 7

ff.

Erste Viol.

m. 682

The suite *L'Arlésienne*, initially composed as background music for Alphonse Daudet's play, considered by Nietzsche as "lovely in its

<sup>9</sup> It is worth mentioning that the order of parts II and III was later changed by Mahler; Ivan Fischer chose the original version, andante-scherzo (!).



simplicity”, presents the story of love and suffering ending in the suicide of the main character Frédéri, who was in love with a young lady who never appears. Why does Mahler quote Bizet? Probably because of their common Jewish ancestry, unrecognized talent and oblivion. Could it be that his premonition also foretold of their common illness and disappearance at approximately the same age? Or maybe Bizet’s character reminded him of his own brother’s suicide?

In the end of Mahler’s symphony Alma’s theme returns in transfiguration, as *pars-pro-toto*, just like the *idée fixe* in the *Fantastic symphony* by Berlioz:

E.g. 8



m. 552



m. 573



m. 581

The entire final part is articulated by the three hammer blows, in *fff*, marked as such in the score (Hammer), with the indication “brief and mighty, but dull in resonance and with a non-metallic character (like the fall of an axe).”<sup>10</sup>

It is worth mentioning that, subsequently, Mahler removed (a superstition?) the third hammer blow from the score<sup>11</sup>, and later on they were interpreted by Alma as the three blows received by Mahler from faith: the resignation from the Vienna Opera House, his daughter Maria’s death and his heart condition that proved fatal to him.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.gustav-mahler.eu/index.php/werken/92-symphony-no-6/842-movement-4-finale-allegro-moderato>

<sup>11</sup> The ones remaining are those from m. 336 and 479.

Before the final fortissimo, we find the debut motive from the *Symphony no. 8 “the Unfinished”* by Schubert, already anticipated:

E.g. 9



Whether it was real or a simple trick played by the impulse to compare and recognize, the connotation cannot be ignored: just like Aristotle invokes the plausible reasoning in order to reveal the universal, the little quotation can acquire meaning in the context of the connotations already displayed.

*Symphony no. 6* seems to be a metaphor of Mahler's marriage to Alma, where musical signs seem to indicate a not so happy relationship, with good things and bad things, with nostalgia and hopelessness, with fatidic elements, remained unfinished (for the time being), just like the symphony it so discretely invokes.

Alma had complained after Maria was born that she had no feelings left for her husband, but, long after Mahler's death and her marriage to Gropius, she admitted that the only man she had ever loved was Mahler.<sup>12</sup> These emotional fluctuations are definitely mirrored in his music.

During Mahler's creative period the verist themes were in fashion, with the fatidic triangle *love – jealousy – death*; Verdi had finished *Othello* in 1887 and Tolstoi had concluded the sombre *Kreutzer Sonata* in 1889. They were followed by Mascagni, with *Cavalleria rusticana*, in 1890 and Leoncavallo with *Pagliacci* in 1892. The modern woman was dreaming to escape the monotony of conjugal life and live the passionate story of Emma Bovary or Anna Karenina, as well as the dangerous adventures of Carmen or Tosca, often with tragic consequences. Eaten by jealousy, partners would transform into Othello, Alfio or Canio killing both their unfaithful lover and their rival, or, following Werther's example (by Goethe) and choosing suicide: this is the case of the young painter Richard Gerstl, Mathilde Schönberg's forlorn lover (1908). Mahler, a friend and supporter of Schönberg, as well as a connoisseur of Tolstoi's novels, will also face a similar situation and he will ask for Freud's help. The

<sup>12</sup> Carr, Jonathan, *Az igazi Mahler* [The real Mahler], Európa Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2005] Constable and Company Limited, London, 1997, p. 267.

femme fatale, Carmen's modern replica, had appeared in two plays by Frank Wedekind (*Erdgeist* 1895 and *Die Büchse der Pandora* 1904) and was Alban Berg's inspiration for the opera *Lulu* (1929-1935). Alban Berg was Schönberg's disciple and family friend for Alma Gropius, ex Mahler. Could it be that Berg chose the subject thinking of Mathilde and Alma?

### Conclusions

Mahler's symphonies represent the diary of his artistic and social feelings: his heroes preserve the tragic greatness of Beethoven's main characters, the double image taken from Schumann (Florestan's passionate enthusiasm and Eusebio's dreamy idealism), the demonical and the mystical from Liszt and the caricatured passion from Berlioz. Therefore, aesthetical categories can be found in Mahler's symphonies in their complexity and diversity as follows: the grotesque real vs. the sublime ideal, the ironic comics, as well as the great tragic, the picturesque and the sombre.

Although he did not compose operas, his themes appear in the symphonic discourse just like Wagner's leitmotifs. Mahler's symphonies project his religious and philosophic thinking, as well as his social life and community; hence, the Christian chant (the hymn, the Catholic missa, the choral) alternates with pantheist elements, texts from Nietzsche, occasional marches (funerary, military fanfares), dances (the graceful and aristocratic Minuet from *Symphony no. 3*, p. II and the waltz in the third part of *Symphony no. 7*), as well as the permanence of Jewish themes (*Symphony no. 1*, part III, *Symphony no. 2*, part IV).

Without the knowledge of the social, historical and cultural context, of his family ties, his studies, his career and the nature of his sentimental relations we would not be able to profoundly understand Mahler's music, it would be like a foreign language that sounds nice but lacks in meaning. Here is why Paul Ricoeur's recommendation to "not treat the diachronic element as a secondary product of structural analysis" is to be followed when you plan, as a musicologist, to take part in the transformation of a simple work in a work of art<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> *Apud* Grabócz Márta, *Zene és narrativitás*, Jelenkor Kiadó, Pécs 2003, p. 19.

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