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Gustav Mahler's second symphony : a choral conductor's investigation of "Aufersteh'n"

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GUSTAV MAHLER'S *SECOND SYMPHONY* :
A CHORAL CONDUCTOR'S INVESTIGATION OF "AUFERSTEH'N"

A Project Report

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Music and Dance
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Natasia Sexton

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ABSTRACT

GUSTAV MAHLER'S *SECOND SYMPHONY*: A CHORAL CONDUCTOR'S INVESTIGATION OF "AUFERSTEH'N"

by Natasia Sexton

This document addresses the "Aufersteh'n" in the final movement of Mahler's *Second Symphony* and was written to assist choral conductors who must prepare this work in the future. The historical background of the symphony is examined in this document with special attention given to the choral writing, the significance of the chorus in relation to the entire composition, and Mahler's work with choruses.

The results of the research explain the importance of the role of the chorus in this symphony and how Mahler was able to work out philosophical and metaphysical questions which had plagued him most of his lifetime by using a chorus and a text. In addition, information about Mahler as a conductor and interpreter is presented to assist conductors preparing the *Second Symphony*.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept for writing this document came to me after preparing the San Jose State University Chorale for a weekend of performances with the San Jose Symphony of the *Second Symphony* by Mahler. Although the chorus only participates in the final portion of the symphony, its role is a vital one. To prepare a chorus for this work is extremely difficult because it is a challenge to motivate a chorus to work on a piece that is seemingly such a small part of a larger work. For the chorus to understand its significance in this work it is necessary to introduce some history of the symphony to the singers. There exists a significant amount of information about the *Second Symphony*, but very little about the chorus or Mahler's work with choruses. I wanted to prepare a resource—something that would provide the information I myself sought while teaching this work—for other choral conductors who would also have to prepare a chorus for this work.

Over the past ten years Gilbert Kaplan, founder of the Kaplan Foundation which supports Mahler research, has provided a great deal of important information about the *Second Symphony* which has been used in this document. Other significant references have been written by Deryck Cooke and Kurt and Herta Blaukopf, all of whom have researched and written about Mahler and this symphony.

This document will provide important information about the history of the composition as it applies in particular to the chorus, the significance of the chorus in this work, and Mahler's work as a conductor and interpreter and how it applies to a chorus preparing the *Second Symphony*.

CHAPTER 1

Historical Background

In 1888, when Gustav Mahler began work on the first movement of his *Second Symphony*, questions concerning the meaning of life and death were not new to him. Mahler's search for the meaning of life did not begin without good reason. At the age of twenty-eight Mahler had already witnessed and experienced enough suffering to mandate his life-long obsession with these matters. Mahler was so compelled by these issues that he was driven to compose his first major work in the form of a symphony about mankind's struggle to find meaning for personal existence (at the time, the *First Symphony* was still considered a symphonic poem). Mahler explained these struggles to his friend, Max Marschalk, in a letter written a few months after the premiere of the *Second Symphony* in December 1895. In the first movement of the *Second Symphony* Mahler places the listener at the grave of the hero of the *First Symphony* and asks: "Why have you lived? Why have you suffered? Is it all just a huge, frightful joke?"¹

Mahler's obsession with matters concerning life and death may have developed while still a child. It is well documented that daily survival was indeed a struggle for members of the Mahler family. In *Gustav Mahler: The Early Years*, Donald Mitchell discusses the circumstances in which Mahler lived as a child and adolescent. Mahler's father Bernard was raised in poverty, but by studying and working hard he was able to improve his lot in life. When Bernard married Gustav's mother Marie, she was in love with another man, but as Gustav himself admitted, "her parents and my father knew how to bend her

¹ Kurt Blaukopf, ed., *Mahler: A Documentary Study*, trans. Paul Baker, Susanne Flatauer, P.R.J. Ford, Daisy Loman, and Geoffrey Watkins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 182.

will."² Her will may have been bent to this marriage, but the relationship between father and mother grew no closer over time. The composer's wife, Alma Mahler, had on several occasions spoken of Bernard's brutality to his wife and children, and years later, when Gustav was being psychoanalyzed by Freud, he often recounted vivid stories of violent arguments between his parents. In addition to this dismal relationship between mother and father, Mahler's birth followed five children all of whom died at early ages from diphtheria. No doubt these losses colored his parents' interactions with the remaining children in various ways. As if these deaths were not enough, when Gustav was an adolescent he watched his beloved younger brother Ernst die.

The traumas of these childhood events manifested themselves differently in each surviving child. For Justine, one of Mahler's younger sisters, the manifestation took on a physical form. Alma recounted that while still a child, Justine "stuck candles all round the edge of her cot. Then she lay down and lit the candles and firmly believed that she was dead."³ There are scattered references to the fact that Mahler's brothers Otto and Alois were both insane, and as far as Mahler was concerned, their lives never amounted to anything. As for Gustav Mahler, he grew to nurture a desire for absolute control of all within his reach; the matters which he could not control, he would then question obsessively. He became driven by the desire to understand his significance as a human being in this world and what, if anything, was waiting for him beyond death.

On such a canvas Mahler's *Second Symphony* was created. After he finished his *First Symphony* in 1888, he began sketching ideas for the first two

² Donald Mitchell, *Gustav Mahler: The Early Years* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

movements of the *Second Symphony*. A draft of the first movement was finished by the end of the summer of 1888. Most scholars agree that, given the idea behind the first movement (the burial of the hero of the *First Symphony*), Mahler had composed his way into a dead end. This was the first of many problems and setbacks that the composer would experience over the next six years while he continued to work on the *Second Symphony*. Between 1888 and 1894, when he finished the symphony, Mahler was also working to establish himself as a conductor, which left little time for him to compose. While conducting at the Royal Opera in Budapest, Mahler had little time to compose and did not finish scoring the first movement of the *Second Symphony* until just before he left for Hamburg and the Stadttheater in 1891. His close friend, the archaeologist Fritz Löhr, tells of a visit he made in the spring of 1889 to see Mahler in Budapest. During that visit Mahler sat at the piano and played "fragments of the *Second Symphony* growing within him."⁴ Shortly before this visit Mahler's father had died in February, leaving the composer responsible for his three remaining siblings. Löhr explains that, in light of Mahler's father's death and the added responsibilities caused by the death, "real musical creation was out of the question for Mahler."⁵ Months later, in October of the same year, Mahler's mother, who had been quite ill, also passed away. In spite of these challenges and setbacks, Mahler continued to work on the symphony as time allowed.

While in Budapest, Mahler developed a warm friendship with the composer Richard Strauss. The friendship is documented in the many letters Mahler wrote to Strauss. One particular letter illuminates perhaps the greatest

⁴ Kurt Blaukopf, *Gustav Mahler*, trans. Inge Goodwin (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), 87.

⁵ Ibid.

impediment to Mahler's progress while writing the *Second Symphony*. For a long time Mahler had respected the work of Hans von Bülow, the famous conductor and director of the subscription concerts in Hamburg. While Mahler was working on the *Second Symphony*, he invited Bülow to his home where he hoped to play portions of the first movement for him. The elder man, aware of Mahler's abilities, agreed to hear the work in progress. What occurred apparently impaired Mahler for the next three years. Bülow was undone by what he had heard. At one point Mahler noticed that Bülow was even covering his ears in dismay! In the letter Mahler proclaimed, "My 'scores,' dear friend, I am now consigning to my desk. . . . A week ago Bülow almost gave up the ghost while I was playing from them to him . . . Good heavens, world history will go on without my compositions."⁶ Many Mahler scholars conclude that, after this incident, Mahler changed the title of the work from *Symphony in C Minor* to *Totenfeier*, hence indicating that he intended the work to be a symphonic poem and no longer a symphony. What scholars have not reached an agreement on is whether the work that Mahler offered to Schott Verlag in 1891 as a symphonic poem was the *First Symphony* or the first movement of the *Second Symphony*.⁷ By the summer of 1893 Mahler had finished the second and third movements of the *Second Symphony* and, according to his lifelong friend Natalie Bauer-Lechner, had decided to retain the traditional designation "symphony." In her journal she recorded that Mahler had explained to her that, "Terms like 'tone poem' and 'symphonic poem' are worn out without having really said anything."⁸

If, as scholars assert, Mahler's experience with Bülow truly impaired his

⁶ Herta Blaukopf, ed., *Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss: Correspondence 1888-1911*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 21.

⁷ Paul Banks, "Mahler's 'Totenfeier': A Symphonic Poem?" *Musical Times* 129 (Dec. 1988): 662-663.

⁸ Herta Blaukopf, 112.

progress on the symphony, it is also generally agreed that the death of Bülow in 1894 cleared away one of the barriers Mahler had faced since their encounter over the first movement. Bülow's death, however, was only one factor in Mahler's willingness to renew work. While he was attending Bülow's memorial service at the Michaeliskirche in Hamburg, Mahler discovered the final element for finishing his symphony. J.B. Foerster, a close friend of Mahler's and a member of the artistic circle with which Bülow was associated, was also present at the memorial service. Foerster recounted the events related to Mahler and the *Second Symphony*, explaining that among the music performed at the service was a setting of Klopstock's "Auferstehung" ("Arise, arise, my dust, after your brief repose") sung by the St. Michael's Church Boy Choir:

The children's voices! They rang out like the voices of angels, like a prayer holding within it a sweet sense of hope; and on their wings they bore wondrous power, solace, enchantment, and unspoken grief. . . . Even at the Municipal Theatre [the sight of the processional following the service] I did not see Mahler. However, by midday I could delay no longer; as if under the influence of a magic power, full of my own emotions and in a state of inexplicable excitement, I hastened to him. I open the door of the study and see him at the writing-desk, pen in hand, a little bent over the score. I remain standing in the doorway, Mahler suddenly turns round, sees me, and cried, "Foerster, I've got it!" And I, as if inspired, understand what he means, and reply: "Rise up again, yea rise up again!" . . . This, then, was the origin of the last movement of the *Second*.⁹

Given this information, one understands why Mahler was able to complete the finale in a relatively short span of time: the funeral took place on March 29, 1894, and Mahler completed the work in the summer of the same year. Some scholars assert that Mahler could not have begun and completed the finale in

⁹ Kurt Blaukopf, ed., *Mahler: A Documentary Study*, 198-199.

this amount of time considering its grand scale; they suggest that he must have begun work on the finale before the memorial service. Other scholars propose that work on the finale did not begin until immediately after the service. The thematic unity and the transformation of thematic material in this movement make the latter scenario more likely. Donald Mitchell allies himself with this second camp and explains that the concept of resurrection finally presented an idea which would balance the opening theme of death in length and concept. In addition, the concept of resurrection inspired Mahler's tonal move from C Minor to E-flat Major, which now added reason to the "hitherto ad hoc assembly-line of movements."¹⁰

Although Mahler had not settled on a resolution to his symphony, he had already considered the use of a chorus before the memorial service. He had been reluctant because of the inevitable comparisons that would be made between his symphony and Beethoven's *Ninth*, and because his search for suitable texts left him uninspired. The events which transpired during the memorial service found fertile ground in Mahler's mind. Kurt Blaukopf, a Mahler biographer, reveals the composer's state of mind at the memorial service by excerpting the following from one of Mahler's letters:

My mood as I sat there thinking of the man who had died, was wholly in tune with the work that was growing in my mind. Suddenly the choir chanted from the organ-loft the Klopstock chorale "Aufersteh'n!" It was like a flash of lightning—the whole work now stood clearly before me.¹¹

As was typical for Mahler, who often revised works of other composers to fit his

¹⁰ Donald Mitchell, *Gustav Mahler, The Wunderhorn Years: Chronicles and Commentaries* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 178.

¹¹ Kurt Blaukopf, *Gustav Mahler*, 96-97.

own interpretation when conducting them, he used the Klopstock text as a point of departure for his work. Ideas and questions which had long been simmering within the composer's mind were here finally released and resolved in a comprehensive text conveying the message of hope for all humanity. To allow the reader to fully understand how Mahler transformed Klopstock's text into a universal, not parochial, message of hope, the two texts are compared below:

KLOPSTOCK'S AUFERSTEH'N

(Text according to the program book of February 1894)

Aufersteh'n, ja aufersteh'n wirst du
mein Staub, nach kurzer Ruh',
unsterblich's Leben
wird, der dich schuf, dir geben. Halleluja!

Wieder Aufzublüh'n, werd' ich gesä't;
der Herr der Ernte geht
und sammelt Garben
uns ein, die starben. Halleluja!

Tag des Dank's, der Freudenthränen Tag!
Du meines Gottes Tag!
Wenn ich im Grabe genug geschlummert habe,
erweckst du mich.

[Thou shalt arise, yea, rise,
dust of my body, after a brief rest;
immortal life shall He
who made thee, give thee, Alleluia!

Again to blossom am I sown;
the Lord of Harvest goes forth
collecting sheaves:
we who have died. Alleluia!

Day of thanksgiving, day of joyous tears!
Day of my God!
When I have slumbered in the grave awhile
Thou shalt awaken me.]¹²

MAHLER'S VERSION

Aufersteh'n, ja aufersteh'n wirst du
Mein Staub, nach kurzer Ruh!
Unsterblich Leben
Wird, der dich rief, dir geben.

Wieder aufzublüh'n, wirst du gesät!
Der Herr der Ernte geht
Und sammelt Garben
Uns ein, die starben.

O glaube, mein Herz, es geht dir nichts verloren!
Dein ist, ja dein, was du gesehnt,
Was vergangen, aufersteht!
O glaube: du wardst nicht umsonst geboren,
Hast nicht umsonst gelebt, gelitten.

Was entstanden ist, das muss vergehen,
Was vergangen, auferstehen!
Hör auf, zu beben!
Bereite dich, zu leben!

O Schmerz, du Alldurchdringender,
Dir bin ich entrungen!
O Tod, du Allbezwinger,
Nun bist du bezwungen!

Mit Flügeln, die ich mir errungen
Werde ich entschweben!
Sterben werd' ich, um zu leben!

Aufersteh'n, ja aufersteh'n wirst du,
Mein Herz, in einem Nu!
Was du geschlagen,
Zu Gott wird es dich tragen.

¹² Kurt Blaukopf, *Gustav Mahler*, 98-99. Translated by Blaukopf.

[Thou shalt arise, yea, rise,
dust of my body, after a brief rest.
Immortal life shall He
who called thee, give thee.

Again to blossom thou art sown.
The Lord of Harvest goes forth
collecting sheaves:
we who have died.

Have faith, my heart, for nought is lost to thee.
All that thou longed for shall be thine,
what is gone shall rise again.
Have faith: thou wast not born in vain,
Thy life, thy suffering were not in vain.

All that has grown must perish,
what perishes will rise again.
Be not afraid!
Prepare thyself to live!

All-pervading Pain,
I have escaped thee!
All conquering Death,
Now thou art conquered.

On wings that I have won
in ardent toil and love
I shall soar to the light
that never eye has seen.

On wings that I have won
I shall rise up again.
I die, to live again.

Thou shalt arise, yea, rise,
My heart, instantly.
Whatever strength was thine
shall carry thee to God.]¹³

Mahler's four additional verses demonstrate the depth of his commitment to the concept of resurrection. His obligation to make the text appeal to human nature

¹³ Kurt Blaukopf, *Gustav Mahler*, 98-101. Translated by Blaukopf.

is evident in the way that he assured that life beyond death is available for all of humanity.

Because of the philosophical nature of Mahler's compositions, he became "obsessed by the idea that his compositions were in the truest sense indestructible; nor was he afraid to assert that art and humanity would be the poorer without his *C Minor Symphony*."¹⁴ Given Mahler's preoccupation with the meaning of life, death and the existence of a hereafter, one begins to understand the importance of the *Second Symphony* to Mahler the man—here he had uncovered a message which offered affirming answers to questions echoed in the minds of all humanity.

Once Mahler had settled on the idea of resurrection, only nine months passed between the memorial service of Bülow and the completion of the autograph full score (which is dated December 18, 1894). As mentioned above, Mahler had on several occasions performed excerpts from the work at the piano for various guests while he was still composing. Wanting to promote Mahler as a composer, his friend Richard Strauss—who was conducting the 1894-95 season of Philharmonic Concerts in Berlin—invited Mahler to present the first three movements of the *Second Symphony* in March 1895. Mahler, fully aware of the artistic risk involved with performing only a portion of the work, felt that the exposure of his works to the public was more important at this point than the danger of being misunderstood.¹⁵ Mahler gladly accepted the offer and conducted the premiere of the first three movements with the Berlin Philharmonic on March 4, 1895. Unfortunately for Mahler, the premiere was unsuccessful with audience and critics alike. Today one cannot help but

¹⁴ Ibid., 101.

¹⁵ Ibid., 112.

imagine that, when performed without the final two movements, the *Second Symphony* would leave listeners feeling confused. Even though evidence suggests that Mahler almost certainly conducted this concert with movements two and three in the reverse order (therefore not ending with the Scherzo's shriek of terror at the end, but rather the Austrian Ländler),¹⁶ reactions that evening fell short of his hopes. Years after this performance Strauss recalled that the publisher of the *Allgemeine Musikzeitung*, Otto Lessman, scolded Strauss with the words, "the altar that Bülow consecrated has now been fouled by pygmies."¹⁷

Upset by the unsuccessful premiere of the first three movements, but not completely hindered from moving forward, Mahler, with the help of others, managed to launch a premiere of the entire *Second Symphony* on December 13, 1895. Undeterred by the previous performance, Strauss again offered Mahler the opportunity to conduct the Berlin Philharmonic. Hermann Behn, a lawyer in Hamburg and a very knowledgeable musician, shouldered the considerable cost of the premiere (5000 marks) with a Hamburg businessman named Wilhelm Berkhan.¹⁸ In addition to the costs incurred by hiring soloists, the oversized orchestra, and The Stern Choral Society in Berlin, Mahler added a special rehearsal to those already scheduled for which he himself paid the expenses.¹⁹

Though the premiere of the complete *Second Symphony* was praised by members of the audience, critical response was mixed. Justine recalled the circumstances under which Mahler conducted this performance:

¹⁶ Paul Banks, 662.

¹⁷ Herta Blaukopf, ed., *Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss*, 119.

¹⁸ Herta Blaukopf, ed., *Mahler's Unknown Letters*, trans. Richard Stokes (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), 20.

¹⁹ Herta Blaukopf, ed., *Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss*, 42.

He conducted his *Second Symphony* while suffering from one of his worst migraines. It had reached the stage at which he cannot remain lying down, but has to get up. . . . The maddening headache never left him. He conducted with such unparalleled outward calm that those who did not know the reason were mystified, and all those who did were filled with admiration. He could scarcely bow in response to the endless acclaim of audience, orchestra, and choir.²⁰

In the account of the premiere recorded by Bauer-Lechner, the success of the last movement in particular is emphasized with special mention of "the sublime, transcendental chorus of 'Auferstehen.'"²¹ Bruno Walter, a lifelong advocate of Mahler's music, remembered the premiere as a transforming experience in Mahler's career:

To be sure, there was hostility, misunderstanding, belittlement, scorn. Yet the work left such a deep impression of greatness and originality, of the force of Mahler's personality, that one may date his rise to fame as a composer from that day.²²

The premiere of the *Second Symphony* inspired Annie Mincieux, a German artist unknown to Mahler at the time, to write a letter which was apparently full of deep appreciation. (The letter from Mincieux has been lost, but the contents may be ascertained from Mahler's response to Mincieux.) Mahler, who was quite moved by Mincieux's understanding of the *Second Symphony*, answered, "This is the first indication that someone remote from me on my journey through life has given a joyful and positive answer to my so serious question."²³ Mahler must have been pleased with the reception of his *Second Symphony*, and

²⁰ Natalie Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, trans. Dika Newlin, ed. Peter Franklin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 70-71.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

²² Kurt Blaukopf, *Gustav Mahler*, 119.

²³ Herta Blaukopf, ed., *Mahler's Unknown Letters*, 119.

surely he understood that in some part the success of this performance was due to the inclusion of the final two movements.

Surprisingly, despite the unsuccessful premiere of only the first three movements, Mahler continued to allow partial performances of the work. Kurt Blaukopf defends Mahler's decision:

Mahler, who always wanted to "build whole worlds" in his symphonies, might have been expected to demur. The dismemberment of what he had painstakingly welded into a whole was an abomination to him. But he agreed to such disfigurements as readily as "Marsyas about to be flayed." Though he did not abandon his principles, he was prepared to make compromises when it was a question of being performed and heard.²⁴

The first three movements of the *Second Symphony* are less expensive for orchestras to perform because soloists and chorus need not be hired. In light of this information Mahler allowed the symphony to be performed without the last two movements.

Given Mahler's fondness for reorchestrating other composers' music, it comes as no surprise that he made many such alterations in his own *Second Symphony*. These revisions were almost always determined by the acoustics of the performance hall and consisted primarily of changes in the doubling of parts. In addition, and again depending on acoustics, Mahler's interpretations of tempos in the *Second Symphony* fluctuated from performance to performance. Other larger issues included the location of the off-stage bands, the reversal of the second and third movements, and ideas regarding the five-minute pause between the first two movements. Paul Banks, author of several articles about Mahler and the *Second Symphony*, defends Mahler's need to

²⁴ Kurt Blaukopf. *Gustav Mahler*, 119.

constantly revise and argues that "such precision is particularly necessary in the case of a composer-conductor who constantly reassessed the way in which his music should be realized in performance."²⁵ The critical factor in regard to these revisions is that Mahler based all changes on the demands of each performance.

In 1897 Mahler's first three symphonies were published. Mahler's friend, the renowned musicologist Guido Adler, arranged for a grant to cover the costs of publishing the *First* and *Third Symphonies* as well as the orchestral parts for the *Second Symphony*.²⁶ Hermann Behn may once again have provided funds for the full score of the *Second Symphony* to be published by Friedrich Hofmeister of Leipzig.²⁷

Because of the work of supporters like Adler and Behn who realized the historical importance and artistic significance of the *Second Symphony*, this work will continue to reaffirm humankind and its struggles. Mahler's obsession with issues concerning life and death are echoed in human nature. His transformation of Klopstock's "Aufersteh'n" endows a humanity facing similar concerns with the hope that not only is there a purpose for humankind's endeavors, but that beyond death there is a new life.

²⁵ Paul Banks, 663.

²⁶ Paul Banks and Donald Mitchell. "Gustav Mahler." *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 11 ed. Stanley Sadie. (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980), 813.

²⁷ Herta Blaukopf, ed., *Mahler's Unknown Letters*, 20.

CHAPTER 2

The Significance of the Chorus

Like Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, Mahler's *Second Symphony* is expressly philosophical in content. Mahler was driven by a creative principle in which he attempted to "build a world" in every symphony; in the *Second Symphony* the chorus has the final word in expressing Mahler's philosophical thought. In the last movement the chorus resolves the philosophical question of the first movement. Referring to the existence of humanity, Mahler asks, "Is it all nothing but a huge, frightful joke?" Sixty minutes later, at the end of the final movement, the chorus finally replies, "O believe, thou wert not born in vain, hast not lived in vain, suffered in vain." Mahler reserved the chorus and organ for the final portion of the symphony so that the impact of the philosophical message they carry would not be missed.

Deryck Cooke, a renowned interpreter of meaning in Classical and Romantic music, points out in his book *Gustav Mahler: An Introduction to His Music* that the chorus answers a question which is only asked in the programs written by Mahler to accompany and explain his *Second Symphony*. Cooke asserts that music alone is incapable of asking and answering questions. Because the chorus resolves the conflict which has come before it, the previous movements must be discussed in relation to their programs and as absolute music. In her journal Natalie Bauer-Lechner recorded Mahler's own interpretation of the *Second Symphony* as he explained to her one morning in January 1896 after he and Bruno Walter had played through the symphony at the piano the night before. Given the importance of Mahler's own articulation of his program, his words are printed here in their entirety:

The first movement depicts the titanic struggles of a mighty being still caught in the toils of this world; grappling with life and with the fate to which he must succumb—his death. The second and third movements, Andante and Scherzo, are episodes from the life of the fallen hero. The Andante tells of love. The experience behind the Scherzo I can describe only in terms of the following image: if, at a distance, you watch a dance through a window, without being able to hear the music, then the turning and twisting movement of the couples seems senseless, because you are not catching the rhythm that is the key to it all. You must imagine that to one who has lost his identity and his happiness, the world looks like this—distorted and crazy. . . . The Scherzo ends with the appalling shriek of this tortured soul.

The “Urlicht” represents the soul’s striving and questioning attitude towards God and its own immortality.

In the last movement everything is an inward experience. It begins with the death-shriek of the Scherzo. And now the resolution of the terrible problem of life—redemption. At first, we see it in the form created by faith and the Church—in their struggle to transcend this present life. The earth trembles . . . The Last Trump[et] sounds; the graves spring open, and all creation comes writhing out of the bowels of the earth, with wailing and gnashing of teeth. Now they all come marching along in a mighty procession: beggars and rich men, common folk and kings, the Church Militant, the Popes. All give vent to the same terror, the same lamentations and paroxysms; for none is just in the sight of God. Breaking in again and again—as if from another world—the Last Trump[et] sounds from the Beyond. At last, after everyone has shouted and screamed in indescribable confusion, nothing is heard but the long drawn-out call of the Bird of Death above the last grave—finally that, too, fades away. There now follows nothing of what had been expected: no Last Judgment, no souls saved and none damned; no just man, no evil-doer, no

judge! Everything has ceased to be. And softly and simply there begins: "Auferstehn'n, ja aufersteh'n . . ."
["Rise again, yea, rise again"] —the words themselves are sufficient commentary. And I absolutely refuse to give another syllable of explanation!¹

While Mahler was rather unwilling, he eventually published this explanation as a program for the symphony at the request of the King of Saxony in 1901.

Although Mahler's program is detailed and specific, scholar Deryck Cooke believes that it should be set aside. He presents an interpretation based on purely musical content. His interpretation also underlines the significance of the chorus in the symphony as a whole:

The first movement has the rhythm and character of a funeral march, but a quicker tempo; and whereas the normal funeral march is a dignified expression of grief, Mahler's movement is full of anger, revolt, and wild despair. It clearly expresses the state of mind of one who feels a sense of outrage at the apparent omnipotence of death, and can find no ultimate significance in human life in the face of it. . . .

The second movement is a short slow Ländler, basically wistful in mood and eventually overshadowed by an intrusion of the first movement's angry atmosphere . . .; this reduces the final statement of the wistful Ländler section to a disembodied ghost of itself. . . .

In the third movement, the scherzo, Mahler uses the quicker type of Ländler for his vision of Life's bitterness . . . The relentless twisting and twining of the main material certainly has something sinister about it, but something comical as well. . . . Yet the general effect of the movement, in the context of the whole symphony, is without doubt that of a complacently persistent busy-ness, on a plane of easy pleasure, which does at times take on a macabre shadowiness: the "dance of life" appears here as a purely mechanical and sometimes insubstantial activity.²

Cooke does not summarize the final two movements of the symphony because

¹ Natalie Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, 43-44.

² *Ibid.*, 55-56.

the meaning is articulated in the text, but does offer the following as a concluding summary of the entire composition:

The "programme" of the symphony resolves itself into a symbolic description of a psychological mood-sequence: a sense of outrage at the omnipotence of death, a haunting awareness of the fragility of life's happiness, and a feeling of disgust at the mechanical and aimless triviality of everyday life, followed by a turning away to faith in God and belief in resurrection and eternal life.³

Cooke recognizes the emotional and psychological impact of the *Second Symphony* without the accompanying program. He forms his conclusions about the symphony based on its relationship to other similar musical forms and provides an explanation for the work which is similar in content to Mahler's program.

Mahler was ambivalent toward the use of programs because he struggled with the idea of not presenting any guidelines to audiences, hence leaving them confused and wondering about the content of the music that precedes the text and how it related to the text. He was equally frustrated with the idea of presenting a program which would be taken literally rather than as a point of departure. When once questioned by a journalist about the meaning of the *Second Symphony*, Mahler explained that instead of being concerned with a detailed program of events, what concerned him most was an emotion.⁴ Cooke proposes that Mahler "wanted to leave the interpretation to the individual insight of the listener, finding little insight, he tried to explain in words; finding the words taken literally instead of symbolically, he withdrew them."⁵ The ideal

³ Ibid., 57.

⁴ Deryck Cooke, *Gustav Mahler: An Introduction to his Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 12.

⁵ Ibid.

situation for Mahler would have been one in which his *Second Symphony* could have been understood in its context alongside similar musical forms, as Cooke has explained. Such a comparison would provide the listener with the individual insight that Mahler desired.

Mahler was equally as ambivalent regarding the introduction of a text into his symphony as he was regarding the use of programs. He once told his friend Marschalk, "As long as my experience can be summed up in words, I write no music about it; my need to express myself musically—symphonically—begins at the point where the dark feelings hold sway."⁶ If what Mahler explained is true, why then after three movements does he introduce a text into the music? Could it be that Mahler entrusted the orchestra to express his emotions, but not his philosophical beliefs? Only words, when amplified by the emotion of the orchestra, could give explicit voice to Mahler's dark feelings.

Mahler had great faith in the power of a text combined with the emotion of music. He felt that music alone was able to transmit the feelings of a composer to his listeners. Mahler believed that when music achieves this purpose, "the language of music has approached that of the word, but has communicated immeasurably more than the word is able to express."⁷ Considering Mahler's belief in absolute music and his addition of a chorus after four movements, what role does the chorus now assume in the *Second Symphony*? The answer may be found in a letter of 1896 which Mahler wrote to Richard Batka. In the letter he discussed the importance of emotion transforming itself into imagination at certain times. Mahler explained, "If words are necessary for this purpose, then we have the articulate human voice, which

⁶ Ibid., 54.

⁷ Kurt Blaukopf, ed., *Mahler: A Documentary Study*, 225.

can enable the boldest intentions to be realized."⁸

Given Mahler's views regarding the use of the voice, one can only deduce that what Mahler left in the care of the chorus was of supreme importance to him. Knowing Mahler's feelings on the matter, it is difficult to agree with Cooke's assertion that the "message" of the work is open to interpretation. Cooke argues:

Music cannot express intellectual concepts, but only feelings; and what we all respond to is the feeling of faith and inspiration in the music, [so far, this idea is in keeping with Mahler's as expressed above] whether or not we are convinced by the concepts in the text which were the object of these feelings."⁹

One may certainly choose to disagree with Mahler's thoughts and feelings, but Mahler included the text in the final movement so that his philosophical message would not be misinterpreted. Whether or not Cooke agrees with Mahler does not change the message Mahler articulates.

The questions which are answered by the chorus in the *Second Symphony* are ones which Mahler lived with from day to day. Mahler biographer Floros Constantin asserts that "Mahler's thinking often centered on metaphysical and eschatological questions" and that, because of his thinking, the composer was in a state of "metaphysical agony."¹⁰ In the final movement of the symphony Mahler found relief from his agony in the words of the chorus. Mahler explained his inclusion of soloists and chorus in a letter to Arthur Seidl: "Whenever I conceive a large musical form, I always arrive at the point where I have to turn to the word as a bearer of my musical ideas."¹¹ To Bauer-Lechner

⁸ Ibid., 204.

⁹ Deryck Cooke, *Gustav Mahler*, 57.

¹⁰ Constantin Floros, *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies*, trans. Vernon Wicker, gen. ed. Reinhard G. Pauly (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1993), 54.

¹¹ Ibid., 67.

Mahler also wrote, "That was how I cut the Gordian knot, by the idea of introducing language and human voice into my *Second Symphony*, where I needed them to make myself understood."¹² Mahler's use of the human voice in the form of the chorus represents his belief in the idea of resurrection and his desire not to be misunderstood on this concept.

Mahler's faith in the concept of resurrection can be seen in his use of progressive tonality. This technique is an old expressive element in which the conflict of the symphony is resolved by moving from one tonality and mode at the beginning of the symphony and progressing to a new tonality and mode by the end. Mahler moves from C minor to E-flat major. What is the significance of the role of E-flat in the *Second Symphony* within the context of death and resurrection? In *The Language of Music* Deryck Cooke suggests that composers associate certain keys in music with certain moods and feelings. Cooke has coupled the key of C minor with tragedy and has cited its use by Mozart, Beethoven, and Wagner for funeral marches.¹³ Mahler's decision to finish his symphony in a key other than the one he began it in was a bold move in symphonic writing at that time.¹⁴ There must have been a significant reason behind his move. Cooke has referred to E-flat major as a key of consolation and tenderness,¹⁵ and these feelings do not necessarily run contrary to what Mahler has expressed in the close of the *Second Symphony*. Rita Steblin, the author of *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, cites Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in her assertion that E-flat major is a key which expresses

¹² Kurt Blaukopf, ed., *Mahler*, 202.

¹³ Deryck Cooke, *The Language of Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

devotion as well as serious and religious matters.¹⁶ However, in keeping with the concept of death and resurrection and how Mahler seeks to present the latter as an inevitable transformation of the former, it is also useful to recognize the relationship between C minor and E-flat major as major/minor relatives (both key signatures share three flats). Mahler could have moved from C minor to C major much like Beethoven moved from D minor to D major in the *Ninth Symphony*. Instead Mahler represents the natural rise from tragedy to transcendence in the natural harmonic rise from C minor to E-flat major.

The movement toward resurrection, Mahler's musico-philosophical idea, not only presented the composer with the liberating word which enabled him to finish the symphony, but was also a product of having found the liberating word in Klopstock's "Aufersteh'n."¹⁷ Klopstock's text was published in a collection of the poet's works known as the "Geistliche Lieder." The text had already been set to music no less than twenty-five times, and it has not been determined which setting Mahler heard during Bülow's memorial service.¹⁸ However, scholars agree that the melody which Mahler used for the text in the final movement of the symphony is most certainly his own creation. Mahler, remaining true to his instincts as a composer, did not limit himself to the three stanzas which he heard in the church. Instead he wrote four additional stanzas of his own that "contain a personal, eschatological confession."¹⁹ Kurt Blaukopf summarizes the affect caused by Mahler's additional stanzas:

Mahler has transformed the pious resignation of the original text into an incantation against the power of death: "Be not afraid! Prepare thyself to live!" The earthly grave has vanished from Mahler's poem. Death does not extinguish life,

¹⁶ Rita Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1996), 162.

¹⁷ Kurt Blaukopf, *Gustav Mahler*, 98.

¹⁸ Mitchell, *Gustav Mahler, The Wunderhorn Years*, 418.

¹⁹ Floros, 54.

for resurrection is certain. All the toil of earthly life is meaningful. The creed is: You were not born in vain, nor have you suffered in vain.²⁰

In the final movement the language of Klopstock and Mahler combine with the human voice to impart the message of the "indestructibility of human effort" and the message that "nothing is ever lost."²¹ Mahler has assured audiences that the struggles of mankind are not in vain and that unconditional love awaits each human. This faith which Mahler has transmitted to audiences via the chorus is the crux of the work and therefore what has made the *Second Symphony* universal in its appeal.

²⁰ Kurt Blaukopf, *Gustav Mahler*, 101.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

CHAPTER 3

Mahler and the Chorus

As discussed in Chapter Two, the role of the chorus in the *Second Symphony* is absolutely vital in communicating Mahler's message. Mahler left his message of hope—one which he crafted in order to subdue universal fears about the end of time—in the care of the chorus. The responsibility of the messenger to deliver the good news is vastly important. The chorus must not misunderstand its role, despite the fact that it only participates in the very final portion of the work. An uninformed chorus might dismiss the significance of its work and thus produce an uninspired performance. A chorus preparing this work must be aware of Mahler's intent. The singers' challenge is to deliver Mahler's message with intensity and spirit. In short, because of Mahler's assignment of roles, the success of the *Second Symphony's* impact rests in the performance of the chorus.

What kind of performance would Mahler demand of today's choruses? Unfortunately, in many performances of the *Second Symphony* the work is performed with great vitality and fervor up to the point of the choral entrance. Here, at the crux of the composition, performances become marred by intonation problems, poor diction, lusterless delivery, or insubstantial dynamic contrasts. For example, in a letter written in 1907 Mahler shares a story with Alma regarding a performance of the *Second Symphony*. The letter told of a lunch Mahler shared with an elderly woman who was curious about the meaning of the symphony which she had heard performed in Russia. Mahler explained to Alma that when he referred the woman to the words of the chorus for the meaning, she had replied, "Yes, but the chorus sang it in such a way that

it was not comprehensible."¹ Today one only has to read reviews of recordings and performances in magazines and journals to find similar complaints. David Hurwitz, writer of "Classical Reviews" for *High Fidelity*, reviewed a recording of the *Second Symphony* by Simon Rattle and the City of Birmingham Orchestra and Chorus and concluded that, "the Birmingham singers are an amorphous sonic blob" and then later refers to an audible edit at the first choral entrance which was likely the result of an intonation problem.² *Ovation* published a review of the *Second Symphony* performed under the baton of Eliahu Inbal, who is considered by many to be a new master of Mahler interpretation. Lawrence B. Johnson, the reviewer, raved about the recording until he addressed the chorus's role: "There upon the troubles begin. The massive choir is hard to hear, impossible to understand."³ Earlier in the review Johnson referred to an outstanding sound crew, which leads one to believe that the aforementioned problems of the chorus had nothing to do with the equipment. Finally, even Zubin Mehta with Joseph Flummerfelt's Westminster Choir has not escaped criticism. Leighton Kerner of *The Village Voice* recorded that in March of 1982 "Mehta didn't quite manage to get the word 'Aufersteh'n' out of the chorus in its vast whisper of an entrance."⁴

A possible cause for many problematic performances is that the choral writing is deceptive; the homophonic settings of the opening stanzas, the unison passages, and the syllabic setting of the text all appear to be simple.

Performers do not immediately recognize the difficulties of the *a capella*

¹ Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters* ed. Donald Mitchell, trans. Basil Creighton (London: John Murray Ltd., 1973), 296.

² David Hurwitz, "Mahler: Symphony No. 2, in C Minor," *High Fidelity* (July 1988): 63.

³ Lawrence B. Johnson, "A Masterly New Mahler Conductor Emerges," *Ovation* (Nov. 1986): 40.

⁴ Leighton Kerner, "10,000 and Onward," *The Village Voice* (March 1982): 78.

passages, the extreme dynamic contrasts, the slow tempi markings, the use of longer note values requiring breath management, and the vocal writing which often requires sections to sing at the extremes of their vocal ranges. Most importantly, the chorus must deliver the text—the message of the symphony—with clarity.

Mahler's conducting style is well documented and may help lead one to solutions for these problems. Although Mahler may be remembered today more for his work with orchestras, he was also very versed when it came to working with the human voice. Throughout his lifetime he was internationally known as a great conductor of opera and early in his career had even been the choral director at the Cassel Theatre from 1883-1885.⁵ There is evidence that Mahler was equally good working with choruses as he was with orchestras. In 1889 he received an anonymous letter after a performance of *Lohengrin* at the Vienna Opera House. The letter was full of praise for Mahler's work with the chorus saying, "[the] chorus after Lohengrin's farewell to the swan was tender . . . the climax of the prayer was magnificent, [and] the unaccompanied portion was sung with pure intonation." The author of the letter also noted that in performances led by other conductors the unaccompanied portion "nearly always drags."⁶ In direct relation to the *Second Symphony* there is a review in the Basle *National-Zeitung* of a performance conducted by Mahler in 1903. The reviewer marveled that Mahler "performed with the chorus the same miracle as with the orchestra. Who has ever heard a *pianissimo* like that from our choral society?"⁷ Even Mahler, himself a perfectionist and almost never satisfied, wrote

⁵ Bauer-Lechner, 35.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁷ Kurt Blaukopf, ed., *Mahler*, 235.

to Alma in 1904 from Amsterdam and said, "Last night, [there was a] rehearsal with the chorus of the *Second*. They sang magnificently, almost as well as the Basle chorus."⁸

On the podium Mahler was a demanding musician, but what was the special ingredient which he possessed as a conductor and interpreter? In particular he invested much energy and faith in the power of diction. While still working at the Royal Opera in Budapest, Mahler explained to Marie Gutheil-Schoder, a soprano employed at the opera:

In singing, everything depends on diction. Interpretation, even from the musical point of view, ought always to be built on words. No matter how beautifully a phrase is sung, if a singer fails to bring out the full meaning of its words, it will not produce the desired effect, even though the audience might not always recognize the cause of its disappointment. If, for instance, instead of singing "mutter," a singer follows the music and breaks up the word into "mu-tter", its dramatic effect will be lost; instead of "Trutz" (short and sharp), he sings "Tru-tz", the sense and expression are gone, even though his voice might be divine. Short vowels should always remain as short as the corresponding notes; otherwise the word and its sound, which should be as inseparable as the body and soul, become disunited. The ideal song must be based on the words; the sound virtually makes itself, if you speak the words with their full meaning.⁹

This description is characteristic of Mahler's attention to detail while on the podium and also provides insight into interpreting his own compositions with texts.

It is likely that Mahler transferred concepts that were important to him when conducting orchestras to choruses. Of dire importance to Mahler was the concept of rhythmic vitality. He explained to Bauer-Lechner that, when

⁸ Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler*, 251.

⁹ Henry-Louis de La Grange, *Vienna, The Years of Challenge (1897-1904)*, vol. 2 of *Gustav Mahler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 297-298.

employed, the concept of rhythmic vitality "will allow not even the tiniest detail to get lost."¹⁰ It is the "inner rhythm that lies at the heart of any work. As soon as they see [crescendo] they play faster; as soon as they see [decrescendo] they play slower." From Bauer-Lechner's journals scholars also know that Mahler experienced frustrations concerning dynamics and articulation markings: "In vain you seek finer nuances of *mezzo-forte*, *forte*, *fortissimo*, of *piano*, *pianissimo*, *pianississimo*. Much less do *sforzando*, *fortepiano*, or any shortening or lengthening of notes ever register."¹¹ Gilbert Kaplan sheds more light on Mahler's interpretations of dynamics: "Mahler's style is that if there's a *crescendo* that starts out with a *p* [*iano*] and doesn't have the dynamics at the end of it, then you have to know that Mahler tends to exaggerate these things and you want to have a good crescendo."¹² One final point comes from Bauer-Lechner and refers to metrical accents: "Conducting, according to Mahler, should be a continual elimination of the bar, so that it retreats behind the melodic and rhythmic content."¹³ This information serves as a starting point for a conductor preparing Mahler's music.

Specific recommendations concerning the *Second Symphony* and chorus are made by Kaplan. Kaplan owns the autograph manuscript and explains that at the first choral entrance Mahler marked it *ppp* (*pianississimo*). Kaplan points out that in the manuscript the letters are very large, "so you know he really meant it."¹⁴ Because this entrance is so soft and unaccompanied, often choruses cannot sing it in tune and perform it *a capella*; conductors usually have a portion of the strings playing softly to support the chorus. In

¹⁰ Bauer-Lechner, 49.

¹¹ Ibid., 78.

¹² Peter J. Rabinowitz, "We Only Know What He Wrote": A Conversation with Gilbert Kaplan," *Fanfare* 12, no. 3 (1989): 64.

¹³ Bauer-Lechner, 109.

¹⁴ Rabinowitz, 65.

addition, Mahler felt strongly that the chorus should sing its first entrance while seated "to avoid an unbearable disturbance [by standing]. The mysterious sound of human voices . . . should come as a surprise."¹⁵ For the chorus this increases the support needed to sing the passage in tune. Kaplan points out that Mahler once had clarinets double the tenors in order to strengthen their sound at this spot and help maintain pitch.¹⁶ A final point made by Kaplan addresses the final choral entrance. He explains:

At the end of the choral passages, the three "zu Gott's": the first one has a *forte*, but that's really a *subito* softer, because until then they've been singing at *fff* (*fortississimo*). *F* in the context of *fff* means you have to get softer. And as you get softer, you all of a sudden get something that really goes for a final build. But I've never rehearsed a chorus that ever sang that softer.¹⁷

Kaplan's points are valid, and in making them he has exposed some of the challenges for the chorus and conductor.

The principle challenge for the chorus and conductor is to bring spirit and intensity to this work. The tendency is to misinterpret the broad tempi markings and the primarily homophonic setting; the usual result is an uninspired performance lacking vitality and inner life. In comparison to the chorus of Beethoven's *Ninth*, which is faster, more contrapuntal, and melismatic, Mahler's *Second* seems at first glance to require less intensity and spirit. It must be understood that for the "Aufersteh'n" Mahler still requires rhythmic vitality, crisp and articulated diction, and adherence to dynamic nuances. These elements are not optional—they are imperative for a vital performance. Interpretative matters are ultimately left to the orchestral conductor. The conductor's ability to

¹⁵ Gilbert E. Kaplan, "How Mahler Performed His Second Symphony," *Musical Times* 127 (May 1986): 267.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Rabinowitz, 64.

shape and mold the chorus will be directly related to the chorus' ability to bring its own inner life to the *Second Symphony*. The symphony's message was inspired by human nature, and its appeal does not rest in any creed. What Mahler promulgates is "faith in the omnipotence of love";¹⁸ the chorus, representing humanity, must articulate this vision with intensity and spirit.

During his lifetime Mahler conducted his *Second Symphony* thirteen times. It was the first symphonic work he conducted in the United States and the last he conducted in Vienna. Clearly Mahler cherished the symphony; he invested so much time and effort into its creation. Mahler often explained that he was incapable of writing about that which he had not experienced; the *Second Symphony* provides those who are intimate with the work a glimpse into the composer's psyche, a glimpse which textbooks are unable to provide. His fondness for this work is surely based in part on the legacy he knew he would be leaving with it—a legacy which so poignantly confronts and dismantles universal fears about life and death and replaces those fears with a faith in unconditional love available to all of humanity.

¹⁸ Edward R. Reilly, *Gustav Mahler and Guido Adler* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 69.

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