Mahler's Symphonic World Pt. 2

with Russell Steinberg, Ph.D.

Week 6 February 20—Symphony No.7 Pt. 2

German Tenor Horn—like an American Euphonium (or Wagner Tuba)
The tenor horn solo theme opens and haunts Mahler's seventh symphony

Mahler Symphony No. 7 Part 2(Movements 3, 4, 5)

3rd Movement "Shadow Scherzo"

Perhaps this movement inspired Ravel's *La Valse*. The timpani functions as a melodic partner with the orchestra. Like the Ravel, Mahler's use of the lower register with bass clarinet, contrabassoon, tuba, and double bass is striking. And finally, Mahler's shadowy scherzo also has waltz sections that have a *totentanz* quality. There is a grotesque popular tune that eventually surfaces in this scherzo. Does anyone know what Mahler is parodying here? One other remarkable tidbit adding to the spookiness of this movement: near the end Mahler calls for the basses to pluck as loud as they possibly can, creating for the first time what we now call the "Bartok pizzicato" where the string is plucked to forcefully snap back to the fingerboard.

4th Movement Bucolic Serenade

This is the famous movement where Mahler includes guitar and mandolin. While we associate these instruments with serenades, Mahler does not assign them conventional Spanish or Italian musical styles, but instead adds them for subtle, colorful percussive effects. The novelty of their timbre in the orchestra inspired Schoenberg to use them in his own serenade. In several passages, the guitar, mandolin, and harp form a plucked trio that forms its own orchestral section. The entire 4th movement serenade, though, is celebrated for its transparent chamber music quality. Mahler leaves out the trumpets and low brass. The serenade begins with a solo violin solo over strings that has a "once upon a time" quality similar to the way Richard Strauss begins *Till Eulenspiegel.*

This gentle movement is in the pastoral key of F major, which brings up an important observation: the tonality of the seventh symphony is highly ambiguous. The first movement began in b minor but ended in E major. The 2nd movement begins in C major and ends in C minor. The third movement begins in D minor and ends in D major. This movement is in F major. And the finale beings in E minor and ends in C major. The lack of a tonal center is mirrored in the lack of a central narrative, either musical or psychological, in the entire symphony. And that is unique to this Mahler symphony.

5th Movement Rondo Finale

The timpani bursts the serenade's fairy tale bubble, with erupting powerful jungle drums that reintroduce the brass in all their glory. The trumpet plays a jubilant theme that hits high C several times. This is the main tune of the rondo and returns repeatedly in as a conventional rondo form, in fact, though always varied. Mahler particularly explores stretching the meter from 2 to 3 beats in several sections which lend the theme a particular plasticity. Near the end the march theme from the first movement reappears, transforms to C major, complete with orchestral bells, cymbals, triangle, brass… the whole works. And the symphony ends with a big noise.

You'll read that this movement has its share of critics. They complain about its bombastic quality, its unsubtle orchestration (compared with the other movements), and that, unlike other Mahler symphonies, its triumph and jubilation seem unearned. Even the return of the 1st movement's march theme seems a dutiful insertion to lend the movements coherence, rather than appearing as an inevitable revelation.

Whatever your opinion, Mahler's 7th symphony is not easy to summarize. It's hidden program is extremely hidden. Though its compositional structure seems clear, almost simple, the meaning of its musical structure, its emotional tone, and progression of ideas are hard to put your finger on. This sense of the symphony continually eluding generalization and full understanding is perhaps itself attractive. Its many striking and unique moments invite repeated listening and the hope that each time, more will be revealed. This quality sets the 7th apart from all of Mahler's symphonies.

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