

SoNA

Symphony of Northwest Arkansas

Majestic Mahler

April 30, 2022

Walton Arts Center

Paul Haas, *conductor*

Symphony No. 6 in A Minor (“Tragic”)

Gustav Mahler

b 7 July, 1860 in Kalischt, Bohemia

d 18 May, 1911 in Vienna, Austria

The Mahler Sixth is the only one of his ten symphonies whose conclusion is in minor mode. In all the others, some elements of hope, of optimism, of positive thinking allowed him to see a silver lining in the thunderclouds so often implied by his music. Not so in this work. Mahler acknowledged that his Sixth was a very difficult symphony to conduct. The A minor symphony remained a tough sell to conductors in the 20th century, and was consequently less frequently performed. Incredibly, it was never heard in the United States until 1947, more than four decades after its premiere. Now, in the third decade of the 21st century, the Sixth is reappearing on symphonic programs with more frequency.

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Life vs. art: any connection?

Why is this symphony so tragic? The circumstances surrounding its composition seemed to encourage a work entirely opposite in character. During the summers of 1903 and 1904, when he was composing it, Mahler was in an expansive and romantic mood.

He was on holiday in the Austrian mountain village of Maiernigg with his beautiful young bride, Alma, and their daughter Maria (“Putzi”) who had been born in 1902. A second daughter, Anna, was on the way. Mahler had every reason to be pouring forth joyous music. But logic is not always a prevailing factor in the artistic process, and for whatever reason, the symphony that Mahler composed during those two fateful summers was a brooding work, filled with grim resolution entirely inconsistent with his life at the time. (One is struck by the inverse parallel with Beethoven, who penned the exuberant Second Symphony, Op. 36, shortly before writing the tortured and impassioned Heiligenstadt Testament, in which he contemplated suicide.)

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A prickly symphony, slow to make friends

The Sixth Symphony was misunderstood during Mahler’s lifetime, enjoying fewer performances than any other work he completed. Even in Amsterdam, where his music was admired by the public and championed by the great conductor Willem Mengelberg, the Sixth remained unperformed during Mahler’s lifetime.

Mahler himself was always deeply moved by the tragic power of his own music in this

symphony. But there is also a significant element of mystery and enigma associated with the Sixth. To his biographer Richard Specht he wrote:

My Sixth will propound riddles the solution of which may be attempted only by a generation which has absorbed and truly digested my first five symphonies.

Even with these prophetic words — for his prediction proved accurate, and several generations of Mahler lovers have devoured the Sixth along with its siblings — Mahler wrought extensive and frequent revisions on the Sixth, as with all his middle symphonies.

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Listening landmarks

Two musical memories of this symphony remain with the listener long after departure from the concert hall. One is a single chord, brilliantly declaimed by the trumpets, *fortissimo*, in A major; then abruptly fading to somber oboes, *pianissimo*, in A minor with the inexorable pounding of funeral percussion in the bass beneath it. This is the “fate” or “tragedy” motif of the symphony, a constant and menacing reminder of imminent doom. The percussive pattern associated with it recurs in two of the three succeeding movements. The other vivid aural memory in the Sixth Symphony is the hammer blows in the finale. Both instances intensify the sense of tragedy and defeat that permeates this music. Each wields its peculiar power in a different way.

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Signature march and an ‘Alma’ theme

Mahler favored march movements to open his symphonies, frequently returning to the march rhythm in a later movement. The Sixth provides a characteristic and fine example, with a strong emphasis on brass and

percussion highlighting the military character of the march. At more than twenty minutes, the opening *Heftig, aber markig* [vehement, but with plenty of vigor] is an imposing start, grand enough to encompass a wealth of melodic ideas.

Of particular note is the whimsical and elusive second theme, in F major, which Mahler told Alma was his attempt to characterize her in music. “Whether I’ve succeeded or not I don’t know, but you shall have to put up with it!” he said to her. The ‘Alma’ theme is followed by an unusual section featuring xylophone, the sole use of that instrument in all of Mahler’s music. Another evocative episode in this first movement is the introduction of cowbells, which Mahler described as “the last earthly sounds heard from the valley far below by the departing spirit on the mountaintop.”

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Scherzo and slow movement: which comes first?

Both in the concert hall and on recordings, the *Scherzo* [*Wuchtig* – vigorous; powerful] sometimes precedes the *Andante* of the Sixth, because Mahler changed his mind more than once concerning the order of the inner movements. Maestro Haas has chosen to place the *Scherzo* second. With its strong brass and pounding percussion, it echoes the foreboding spirit that dominates the symphony.

The slow movement, by contrast, is remote in mood and temperament from the inexorable march of fate introduced in the first movement. By writing it in E-flat major — a distant tonality from the home key of A minor — Mahler subtly emphasizes that spiritual difference. Cowbells, horn calls, a splendid English horn solo, and a woodwind chorale all help to release the near-unbearable tension generated by the rest of the symphony. This is the only movement

that successfully sidesteps an otherwise overpowering sense of doom. Like an island, it remains impervious to the themes and motifs so dominant in the other movements.

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Titanic finale

For his finale, Mahler returns to the enormous proportions of his opening movement. This massive movement takes more than half an hour. It overflows with big themes: one each for violins, tuba, lower woodwind, and horns. The hammer blows – delivered as low thuds by the unpitched bass drum – occur at the end of Mahler’s two development sections. Originally there were three hammer blows, but Mahler was superstitious, and feared that three was an unlucky number for blows of fate. He excised the third hammer blow following the premiere in Essen, Germany on May 27, 1906. Many conductors, including Maestro Haas, chose to restore the third hammer blow in performance. It occurs at a climactic point in the finale, where the second return of the introduction music is cut short by the tragedy motif.

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Life follows art: the cruel hand of destiny

Mahler’s premonition regarding blows of fate was eerily prescient. In 1907, the year after the Sixth Symphony was premiered, three cataclysmic events struck the composer. The first was his forced resignation from the music directorship of Vienna Opera, prompted by anti-Semitism and the political machinations of his enemies. The second was the death of his older daughter Maria from scarlet fever. The final blow that fateful year was the diagnosis of an incurable heart ailment that obliged him to curtail the active life he so loved.

The composer’s valiant and noble spirit comes through in this music more powerfully than any other of the purely instrumental symphonies, giving us what Michael Kennedy has called “Mahler’s most perfect reconciliation of form and matter.”

The score calls for an enormous orchestra comprising piccolo, four flutes (third and fourth also doubling piccolo), four oboes (third and fourth doubling English horn), English horn, clarinets in D and E-flat, three clarinets in A and B-flat, bass clarinet, four bassoons, contrabassoon, eight horns, six trumpets, three trombones, bass trombone, bass tuba, two harps, celesta, strings, and a battery of percussion including: two sets of timpani, glockenspiel, cowbells, low-pitched bells, wire brush, hammer, xylophone, cymbals, triangle, bass drum, and snare drum.

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Mahler’s Contemporaries on the Sixth Symphony

Mahler was both famous and controversial during his lifetime. In addition to critics, friends, colleagues, and family all wrote about him, recording their impressions of his personality along with their assessment of his originality and genius.

His wife, Alma Maria Schindler (*aka* Alma Mahler Werfel), left a memoir that is notoriously inaccurate and skewed to her own agenda. Regrettably, she retold events in a light more favorable to her. Yet her recollection of the Sixth Symphony’s first rehearsals has the ring of truth.

None of his works moved him so deeply at its first hearing as this. We came to the last rehearsals, to the dress rehearsal, to the last movement with its three great blows of fate. When it was over, Mahler walked up and down in the artists’ room, sobbing, wringing

his hands, unable to control himself. Fried, Gabrilovitch, Butts and I stood transfixed, not daring to look at one another.

The tears persisted, but for different reasons. The conductor Bruno Walter was present for the premiere, and wrote:

It was all the more affecting . . . to see him depressed almost to tears after the world première of his Sixth, the *Tragic Symphony*, as he called it, by the disparaging remarks of a very important musician [*Walter was presumably referring to Richard Strauss, who audited the final rehearsal of the Sixth and deemed it "over-scored."* – L.S.] I do not recall any other similar experience in connection with him and I am sure that this extraordinary sensitiveness was considerably influenced by the violent emotion his own gloomy work had called forth."

Nevertheless, Mahler was a methodical and stern taskmaster, always listening and tweaking details in the score. Klaus Pringsheim, a volunteer chorus-master at the Vienna Court Opera Theatre in 1906, accompanied Mahler on some of his trips to conduct in other cities. His recollections are quoted in *Mahler: His Life, Work and World*, by Kurt and Herta Blaukopf:

If the word "self-dissatisfaction" does not exist it ought to be invented to describe Mahler's special manner of working when conducting an orchestra in rehearsal. It was often more a question of trying the music out, rather than rehearsing it in the normal sense of the word; right up to the last rehearsal before a premiere he used to make alterations and improvements and keep trying new solutions... I still remember sitting with other

musicians — among others the pianist Ossip Gabrilovitch... — listening to the rehearsals of the Sixth, and I could still point to this or that spot in the score which was altered on the advice of that 22-year-old [assistant conductor] who came from Vienna... (He had another function at that time; he was allowed to 'conduct' the off-stage cow-bells.) Mahler was always concerned above all with the attainment of the maximum clarity. This was more important to him than coloring and charm of sound.

Critical reception to the new symphony was, predictably, mixed. Many eyebrows were raised regarding the unusual and expanded percussion. *The Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* quoted Richard Strauss as proposing, sardonically, that the conservatories establish percussion professorships. (Little did he guess!) *The Signale für die musikalische Welt* reported:

Cow-bells and celesta! Paradise on earth and Elysian Fields up there! It would be quite simple if Mahler's symphony ran its course only between these two beautiful things. But between them a deep gulf yawns, an unsatisfied longing, a sense of despair, a total striving of the whole orchestra, especially in the last movement, where the very large brass section scarcely rests for a moment, a groaning and moaning and a shouting and roaring, and that is what gives the symphony its tragic quality, which... if you listen carefully, it does possess, and possesses more than Mahler's earlier creations.

That tragic quality has retained the capacity to move us: if not to tears, then still touching a place deep within our souls.

**Program Notes by Laurie Shulman © 2022
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