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Mahlerfest XVII: An Intensely Mahlerian Feast by Igor Grobman

The moment of arrival in Boulder is the moment of the plunge into a sea of conversation, scholarship, and most importantly, the music itself. The experience is intellectually stimulating and intense in a way that only Mahlerites could pull off. Everything is on a grand scale: the symposium, the conversation/parties, the performance, and of course the food. Speaking of food, if there is a short summary of what I felt as I left the festival Sunday night, I sensed fulfillment, the kind one feels after a perfect meal, except this fulfillment encompassed every bit of my body and soul at that moment. It is then that I thought of Mahlerfest as a feast for all senses. Allow me to indulge and carry this analogy throughout this personal account of my experience at the uniquely Mahlerian feast that is Mahlerfest.

The Pre-dinner drink: Chamber Concert.

Every journey must have a beginning, and with this concert we begin with the early influences on Mahler as well as the music of young Mahler himself. First, we heard Schubert's settings of poetry by the Brothers Schlegel. The baritone Patrick Mason explained that these rather ordinary poems sparked Schubert's interest due to their fascination with Nature. As we know, Uncle Gustav (as Stan Ruttenberg fondly refers to our favorite composer) took up this romantic obsession with Nature. Death is yet another recurring theme in Mahler's music. To that end, we heard Schubert's "Death and the Maiden", followed by the *Andante* movement from Schubert's quartet of the same name.

The last non-Mahler work on the program was a string quartet arrangement of the waltz from Franz Lehar's "The Merry Widow". The Seventh Symphony contains an apparent quote of this waltz. However, scholars confirmed that both Mahler and Lehar were composing their respective works simultaneously during the same summer of 1905. Much like many other questions surrounding the symphony, this one does not offer such a definite answer either. During the symposium the next day, Eveline Nikkels mentioned that a new biography of Lehar describes his visit during the winter of 1905. Among other things, he brought along the unfinished score of the "Merry Widow"! In any case, Alma and Gustav were very fond of this waltz, and it was a fitting start to the second half of the concert.

The Piano Quartet is Mahler's earliest surviving work. Kelly Dean Hansen, the pianist and author of the thorough program notes, introduced the work as being something of a curiosity and "Less than good Brahms". I beg to differ. It might just be subjective perception, but I hear the singularly Mahlerian drive clearly present in this work. Donald Mitchell, whose essay on the Seventh was distributed at the symposium, makes a similar claim when he states that Mahler's music often has a "traveling" component. Suffice it to say that Mahler's extensive use of marches is just one kind of driven music that he uses throughout his oeuvre. Mitchell cites more examples including the *ostinato* in *Das Klagende Lied* and the "walking" melody in the second song of *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*. It is this kind of drive that I believe is unmistakably present in this derivative, yet somehow Mahlerian work. In fairness to Kelly, he did agree with me that this is not entirely a trivial work during post-concert discussion. The members of the Razumovsky quartet and Kelly Hansen were at their best here. Despite the introductory words, they played it like a Mahler work.

Clea Nemetz's expressive rendition of the four *Wunderhorn* songs was indisputably the highlight of the evening. She accomplished an amazing feat in fully articulating the tragedy of *Das Irdische Leben* while impeccably portraying two very different voices of the dying child and the desperate mother asking for just a little bit more patience. Her pronouncement of the tragedy of the final notes was, pardon the pun, to die for. She was equally at home portraying the naive sweethearts in *Rheinlegendchen* and *Wo die schonen Trompeten blasen*. Particularly memorable was her humorous portrayal of *Wer hat dies Liedlein erdacht?*. I couldn't help but smile, and saw the same smile on the faces of my neighbors. The humor played an important role that weekend. For many of us, it turned out to be the key to unlocking the Seventh--this most puzzling of Mahler's creations.

The Appetizer: "What the Universe tells me: Unraveling the mysteries of Mahler's Third symphony". Documentary by Jason Starr.

The best appetizers subtly prepare one's palate for a meal without any explicit suggestions. Jason Starr's exploration of the magic behind another Mahler symphony, the Third, provided the perfect prelude to the rest of the symposium. Describing this unique creation in words is as hard as it is to describe the musical experience. Yet, this masterful interpretation of music comes closest to translating the experience into another medium. The film puts the commentary of philosophers, historians, theologians and Mahler scholars together with stunning and wonderfully matched visuals of nature, space and shots of the Manhattan School of Music orchestra performing the symphony. The focus of the commentary is what the symphony means to this varied set of experts. The visuals provided the best commentary of all, at least to this viewer.

The movie's length of one hour is significantly shorter than the symphony, yet, as aptly pointed out by Mitch Friedfield, it manages to hit and discuss every major idea and theme of the work. As soon as the movie ended, the audience erupted into endless applause for the director. This was a much-deserved acknowledgement for what is obviously a labor of love. The movie will be released on DVD in February or March, and will include another hour of footage with Donald Mitchell and Henry-Louis De La Grange. The full performance of the Third Symphony will also be included. This is a DVD no Mahlerite should be without.

"Soup or Salad? Throw the salad into the soup, and add a few entrees and a desert for good measure!"--In a restaurant somewhere in Mahleria.

The Soup: The multitude of ideas on Mahler's Seventh.

It was Marilyn McCoy who first compared the profusion of diverse views that were on display to a soup. A Mahlerian soup it was, with all possible ingredients thrown in. One only had to wonder when the kitchen sink might show up.

Eveline Nikkels, known to participants as "Mahler-Nietzsche babe" focused on the connection between the Seventh Symphony and Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* overture. Naturally, she touched on the Nietzschean connections as well. Dr. Nikkels demonstrated the reference to *Die Meistersinger* in the rondo theme of the last movement. Mahler did not make any secret of it, as he paired the overture with this symphony a number of times. In fact, he placed the overture after the symphony in his last performance in Amsterdam, clearly emphasizing the link. This reference to Wagner's opera may have a fascinating subtext. Perhaps Mahler was suggesting to Alma that their relationship is akin to the relationship between Hans Sachs and Eva Pogner in *Die Meistersinger*. Certainly, there is the difference in age, and a younger lover, Walter Gropius, who ironically shares the name with Eva's lover in the opera, Walther Von Stolzing. Mahler is said to have whispered something to Alma after a rehearsal in Prague. It is assumed to be about the second *Nachtmusik*, the serenade, but perhaps it was the last movement that he wanted her to pay attention to.

The finale is rife with Nietzschean subtexts. The sunny theme and mood may refer to the last words from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: "Thus spake Zarathustra and left his cave, glowing and strong, like a morning sun coming out of gloomy mountains". The seven repeats of the *rondo* theme may be related to the Seven Seals. A member of the audience asked why Mahler forbid Alma from reading Nietzsche, and whether he abandoned Nietzsche's philosophy himself after meeting her. Dr. Nikkels conjectured that Mahler's prohibition had to do with his desire to break off from his former circle of friends. Further, he may have wanted to give himself up to Alma, not Nietzsche. Nietzsche nevertheless remained an influence on Mahler and his work throughout his life.

Stephen Hefling started his talk with the most appropriate and pithy characterization of this work: "Symphony that refuses to act like one". Dr. Hefling then proceeded to give his view and analysis of the symphony. We started with the two *Nachtmusik* movements. They were composed first, and in Donald Mitchell's words were "two *andantes* in

search of a symphony". They do indeed share this refusal to conform to expectations with the rest of the symphony. The use of cowbells in the first *Nachtmusik* is particularly striking: first, they appear in the distance, and later on they are combined with a bizarre kind of carousel music. The implication that the cowbells are sounding at night is in itself a kind of bucking of reality that is present throughout this work. The second *Nachtmusik* has the characteristic cadential refrain. Notice how it always appears whenever the music approaches emotional immediacy. This is not to speak of the affront of starting a movement with an ending--a cadence. Once again, expectations are confounded.

Mahler's creative crisis famously ended during a lake crossing when he was enchanted with the rhythm of the oars moving the boat along. This is the rhythm of the introduction to the first movement. Dr. Hefling demonstrated how Mahler's sketchbooks make it clear that he composed the recapitulation before the exposition's main theme was written, that was he started with the end! Equally interesting is the fact that the celestial music later quoted in the Eighth was a last minute splice. In the first movement, as in any other, Mahler avoids directionality and closure. Witness the second theme, which sounds like a singer indulging in *rubato*. Closure is expertly avoided throughout the development too. Then, there is the fake exposition, which is not itself novel. Beethoven and Brahms used this technique to promote action, not so with Mahler claims Dr. Hefling.

The *Scherzo* is anticipatory of expressionism. It is similar to the *Scherzo* of the Fifth, and the *Purgatorio* of the tenth, although it is certainly more stylized than the former. In agreement with Dr. Nikkels, Dr. Hefling sees the last movement as embodying Nietzschean character. There is the boundless joy of the main theme, and the prominence of drums and brass, which in Nietzsche is associated with the joyful attack on the Spirit of Gravity. Yet, once again, the fragmentary nature of this movement raises a multitude of questions. The ending is particularly puzzling. According to Dr. Hefling there is no apparent need to bring back the first movement's theme. It is perhaps a fitting way to end Mahler's full-scale parody of the symphonic form.

The last speaker was Joe Monzo, a lifelong Mahler fan, and a devotee of the Seventh in particular. Joe presented a fascinating, if controversial conception of the first movement, and its possible program. At the time of the composition of the Seventh, Mahler must have been very familiar with Richard Strauss's *Sinfonia Domestica*. Joe argues that this work was in the back of Mahler's mind while composing the first movement, which might be seen as a kind of a family portrait. The introduction might represent the whole family asleep. The first and second themes are Gustav and Alma respectively. In fact, Joe hears a resemblance of Gustav and Alma in the two themes of the first movement of all symphonies starting with the Sixth. Interestingly, when the first theme morphs into a mixture of both, Joe sees it as referring to Mahler's daughter(s). Perhaps that music denotes Daddy playing with the kids. Joe's informal and unassuming style, combined with his emphasis that the "Family Portrait" was just one of the thoughts occupying Mahler's mind, worked to convince much of the initially skeptical audience.

Joe illustrated his argument with musical examples drawn from his MIDI rendition of the first movement. He is a strong believer in slowing down as much as possible before the climaxes in this movement in order to "milk" them to the fullest. It was an intriguing interpretation to hear.

The main dish: The Seventh Symphony by Gustav Mahler

At the end of the day, we all came for the music, and has the music ever been served with more enthusiasm, thoughtfulness and impulse? I have never heard a Mahler performance that could better the two concerts I heard in the two days when Mahlerfest came to its culmination.

Maestro Robert Olson displayed a clear overall vision in his somewhat unusual interpretation. The overall feeling is of expansiveness: he took most everything at a fairly leisurely tempo. Still, it rarely appeared to be slow. The orchestral playing was simply exceptional. It is to the great credit of the volunteer musicians who only come together to play Mahler once a year that this insanely difficult work was played almost flawlessly.

The first movement's introduction sounded strikingly stately and stable in Olson's hands. From there, we proceeded to the main material. Every detail was carefully taken care of, yet there was lightness to Olson's touch. One could indeed hear the children playing. The relatively stately pace allowed for highly satisfying climaxes, a bit reminiscent of Joe Monzo's somewhat more extreme interpretation. I asked him whether he thought Olson came close to his ideas, and he acknowledged as much, and wondered whether his talk had any influence on Olson's view of the work.

Olson's rendition of the first *Nachtmusik* continued in the bright and relaxed mood of the first movement. Again, a light shone upon every detail. The *scherzo* was positively spooky. At times, I caught myself thinking that the eeriness may not be stylized after all. The clarinet shrieks were most instrumental in this effect.

It is the second *Nachtmusik*, not the last movement, that was most troublesome for me when I came to the Mahlerfest. I could not hear it as engaging music. Certainly, it appeared to be the least Mahlerian of all Mahler movements. Stephen Hefling's and Marilyn McCoy's lectures made me aware of the crucial role the cadential motif plays in the structure of the movement. It was Olson, however, who convinced me. Suddenly, this serenade to end all serenades showed its real face. It is unlike other Mahler's slow movements in that its themes don't really go anywhere, yet there is much humor hidden throughout. What used to be frustrating became fun: the way that any and all hope for resolution gets squashed by the infamous cadential phrase.

It should be no surprise at this point that Olson made the last movement unabashedly joyful and bright. During the symposium, he asked why attention was not paid to the minuet music which comprises almost a third of the finale. The minuet music seems to me to be playing a role similar to cadential phrase in the previous movement. The minuets interrupt the joyful main theme often at most inopportune times. Unlike the cadential refrain, they are not much different in mood from the joyful music, and in the end they must give their place up to the joyful *rondo* theme. And what bliss it is to hear the joyful music come back again and again, and finally come to the final climax and the penultimate chord. Wow! I was completely in awe of this incredible performance for hours after it was over. All I could talk about at the post-concert party is how amazingly Olson and the Mahlerfest orchestra pulled off this incredible feat. The next day came a repeat performance, just as magical. Would you believe it?

The dessert: the company of fellow Mahlerites

This dessert is served not only after the meal but it is enjoyed throughout as well. Stan Ruttenberg and the rest of the Colorado organizers did an amazing job in making sure everything comes off just right. The opportunity to socialize with fellow Mahlerites is perhaps the most important feature of Mahlerfest. The moment one enters the Mahlerian world one immediately feels at home. Henry and Sheila Mahler, and Florence Fox were the first to welcome me and make sure I feel comfortable. Everyone is approachable and will happily talk Mahler all day (and all night!) long.

There are moments that will forever stay in my memory, moments without which this Mahlerfest would not be as magical as it was. The conversation we had with Tim Dickinson and Stan Gayuski that started my rethinking of the second *Nachtmusik*. The moment when during the Sunday brunch, we erupted into the singing of the finale theme. Later that same brunch, conversation veered towards PDQ Bach, and what outrageous ideas we came up with for the PDQ Mahler symphony. We laughed so hard, it hurt. But without the laughter, would I have heard as much of the humor in the symphony? Perhaps not. These are the memories I'll treasure, and there are many more. That's what happens when we are forced to spend 48 hours (in my case) in the company of fellow crazy Mahler fans.

It's notable that for most attendees, Mahlerfest is not an optional activity. Whenever I asked how many times they've been at Mahlerfest, most everyone would name the first festival they attended, and I was to understand that they've attended every one ever since. I have not broken the rule yet myself, having started last year. Attendance is a must for every single Mahler fan. Every music lover owes it to himself or herself to give this crazy festival a try too.