

Thoughts on Mahler's Symphony No. 5

Manfred Honeck

As a young man, experiencing Mahler's music for the first time was a truly captivating experience for me. This fascination has not abated but with experience has gained intensity continuously. Together with the Pittsburgh Symphony I therefore decided to present – after Mahler's First, Third and Fourth Symphony – the Fifth Symphony as another masterpiece by this composer, at the same time continuing our CD recording of all of Mahler's symphonies.

Mahler positively struggled for this symphonic work, he continually made revisions, especially in the course of the orchestral rehearsals. He reportedly complained to the legendary Bruno Walter about his ineptness when it came to the instrumentation. His first version seemed totally over-orchestrated, something that his contemporary Richard Strauss also found fault with.

For me, this symphony signifies a turning point in Mahler's oeuvre, leaving the world of the Wunderhorn songs behind. We still experience marches, waltzes, ländlers or fanfares, which hail from the old Austrian tradition he grew up with, there still are those long drawn-out melodies, but all this is presented in a new guise. The scherzo, being the symphony's centerpiece, is of an unprecedented polyphony. My challenge is to not only to display this polyphony transparently, but also to mark off the diverse contrasting themes clearly. By the way, Mahler used to let the first hornist step forward to the concertmaster in order to distinguish him as soloist. I follow his example, letting our solo hornist, William Caballero, play standing up.

Conductors may be grateful for Mahler's extremely precise notation. However, some of his comments might still lead to misunderstandings. For example the first triplet upbeat of the trumpet is to be played "hastily, in the manner of a military fanfare". This fanfare is often performed too fast nowadays which seems to indicate that traditions run the risk of sinking into oblivion.

In order to get a full grasp of Mahler's music it is therefore of advantage to look into the customs of traditional Austrian folk music: the Scherzo being performed as a fast waltz does not comply with the idiosyncrasy of traditional music making. Mahler wrote after his first rehearsal in Cologne: "... conductors will take it too fast for 50 years and make a codswallop out of it." Moreover I am of the opinion that the waltz accompaniment needs to have a distinct Viennese flavor.

During the work on this piece Gustav Mahler experienced a period of happiness, professionally as well as privately, newlywed to Alma. To her Mahler dedicated the Adagietto and, according to the conductor Mengelberg, taking a love poem as a basis – a far cry from the theme of Visconti's movie "Death in Venice" which bestowed upon the Adagietto world-wide fame. Like the Rückert lied "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen" (I have become lost to the world) the Adagietto does not express gloomy sadness but deeply felt bliss. It may be surprising that I choose a quiet and leisurely tempo which is yet faster than the common practice. After all, this is no Adagio, but an Adagietto, a declaration of love, not a requiem.

In the main theme, Mahler notes a comma after each part of a phrase which leads to slight bewilderment nowadays. For me, a comma here does not mean that it is necessary

to stop or interrupt the phrase, but rather a way of losing oneself, which is still leading on to the next phrase. In opposition to the "legato madness" coming into fashion at the time, Mahler simply wanted to demand greater clarity of the musicians.

With regard to the difficult rehearsals, Mahler uttered the wish of conducting this opus 50 years later. Well, now, more than 100 years later, we can happily state that the orchestras' performance culture has developed enormously. Still, the challenge to live up to the spirit and content of this work has not lessened in the least. It needs to be met by a reflection of the traditional playing style, in this case the old Austrian tradition.