

Thoughts on Mahler's Symphony No. 2 Manfred Honeck

In Mahler's second symphony we discover once more his great yearning for answers regarding the sense of life and death as well as the question of the afterlife. He already gave the last movement of his first symphony the title "Dall'Inferno al Paradiso" and this program also covers – albeit in a differentiated way - the entire second symphony. And, differentiating again, he also applies this scheme to the third symphony.

For me, the massive first movement called "Totenfeier" (Funeral Rites) is a symphonic poem looking back on the life of a man deceased in the prime of his life, of a hero: a Hero's Life. Could Mahler possibly have referred to himself? All his experiences and sufferings hitherto, his many spiritual deaths are processed in this monumental movement. Wild dramatics, battle music, death sighs, dances macabres (I like to dub them skeleton dances because Mahler uses *col legno* (string instruments played with the wooden part of the bow) in order to imitate the rattling sound of a dancing skeleton, same as he does in the song "Revelge", where the word 'bones' is illustrated by *col legno* playing) alternate with pastoral music, sunrise and sounds of nature. The music markedly documents Mahler's relationship with nature.

After this broadly conceived, almost sprawling first movement, Mahler must return to simplicity in the second one, a leisurely ländler. I find it interesting to see that he makes a very precise distinction between the diverse kinds of dance types which in turn have a decisive effect on the tempo. Leisurely ländler, slow ländler, menuet, scherzo, valse etc, they all have their own tempo. In today's time the second movement might be perceived faster, but according to Mahler it really needs to be performed "very leisurely". The accents are not only emanating from the first beat, its calm, mellow, idyllic sound creates a cozy, intimate atmosphere. By using a lot of plucked strings and the harp Mahler creates a musical landscape reminiscent of old Austrian folklore. Zither, dulcimer, harp, guitar: during his stays in the country Mahler certainly listened to innumerable folk music groups. When I make the violin players pluck their instruments held under their arms, it is to transport the intimate, relaxed atmosphere of such kind of parlor music to the big concert hall.

My father insisted I take zither lessons with a teacher in Vienna. At the time I already studied violin at the music academy and only agreed reluctantly, considering myself too "advanced" to learn the repertoire of ländlers, waltzes and other dances. The elderly teacher desperately tried, as I kept insisting on performing the music as written, to make me understand what was between the notes. Only later, when I started to occupy myself with Mahler did I realize how precious these lessons had been. The unwritten and partly lost traditions that were revealed to me back then can all be found in Mahler's music.

There is also a lot of Austrian influence in the third movement, a scherzo, a slow ländler, a rustic ländler riddled with irony, even parody. The usage of a rod, often combined with the *col legno* of the violin bows, is a reminder of Krampus, the mythical horned companion of St. Nicholas, the somewhat off-key sounding clarinet makes us think of pub music. Here Mahler writes "with humor". But how are you supposed to play this humorously? If we look at the practice of folk musicians we realize that the upbeat of certain segues are being played gravely and prolonged. Hearing this tradition captured in a serious, classical symphony certainly caused amusement back then. Everyone knew where it came from and Mahler was probably not exactly taken very seriously by the musicians. The employment of the tam-tam forms an important moment. This

instrument – always mystical – symbolizes dying: when the first major *fortissimo* irruption resounds as a premonition of death, and even more so in the *pianissimo* of the last bar at the end of the movement. By one single tam-tam beat Mahler's genius manages to conclude and dissolve the previous worldly happenings, at the same time opening heaven and hence new dimensions. By the way, Tchaikovsky achieves something similar in the last movement of his sixth symphony, where at the end of the work the sole tam-tam beat symbolizes the end of life, of struggle and consequently followed by the funeral music of the trombones.

After this unspecified tam-tam sound dies down, Mahler wants to enter this new world *attacca*. The plain song "Urlicht" is already ogling the otherworld. Mahler wanted the group performing the chorale situated apart from the orchestra. In practice, this is not viable without a longer break so that the musicians can assume their positions. But as it is supposed to be *attacca*, the most common solution is, for better or for worse, to have the choral performed by the main orchestra. However, the idea conceived by the tam-tam beat gets lost: the glimpse of afterlife. For me, the choral has to come from another world, therefore we place additional musicians off-stage. But Mahler also allows the musicians of the orchestra to immerse into the otherworld, for example when he lets four piccolo flutes accompany the text "there came a little angel", whilst the oboe, with utmost delicacy, expresses the pleading, even puling, in short the yearning for it.

The heart of Mahler's second symphony is the fifth movement which he begins with the eruption we already know from the third movement. Soon everything material dissolves. This is a musical manifestation of what Pope Benedict refers to as "desecularization". Of course this-worldly elements still are mixed in with the ones from the ulterior realms: drums announcing Judgment Day with enormous *crescendo*, a march, trumpet fanfares (according to Mahler these should be hardly audible backstage), bells, sighs (alongside the word "faith"). Here, the pizzicato in the choral is not an element from folk music but a mythical whisper or divine raindrops from a different world, everything serves as preparation for the entrance of the choir with the words "resurrect". The same role is assumed by the "voice in the wilderness", signified by the horns positioned far away and the so-called "Great Call" where this world (flute and piccolo imitating birdsong) enters into a dialogue with the other world (horn and trumpets – as to Mahler trumpets of the apocalypse – and timpani backstage). It is their function to prepare the new hope, the redemption, the redeemed hero of the first movement - the original light of the beginning turns into eternal light at the end. Now, at the climax, Mahler turns everything into certainty. Three times the choir sings "god" as expression of the trinity, only now the organ plays, only now three (!) bells of undetermined pitch exude their fullness of sound. The unreachable has been reached, death has been conquered, hope has become certainty. Mahler expresses this certainty by emphasizing every note the choir sings from "die shall I in order to live" until the very end (!) with a *marcato* accent whereas the preceding words "with wings shall I fly up" are carried by a light voice with a hint of *rubato*. In my point of view everything in this vast and very personal symphony has to orient itself by the end. Every detail – and there are thousands – must be subordinate to the ultimate goal.

By the way, what kind of birdsong might Mahler have heard in the Great Call? The first birdcall comes from the off-stage trumpet and is, based on most recent research, the call of a tawny owl whereas amongst the other birdcalls according to Mahler "right in the midst of the awful silence we think we hear in the farthest distance a nightingale like a last quivering echo of earthly life".