

To Climb the Magic Mountain

Martin L. Shough

Sept. 2010 marks the centenary of the first performance of Mahler's Symphony No.8, the 'Symphony of a Thousand'

Stepping from the car onto the grassy lake shore of Seewalchen in the Austrian Salzkammergut on that balmy June morning was for me a symbolic moment. The last stage of my pilgrimage lay before me, the shining spires in sight. But the spires that beckoned me southwards across the misty blue reaches of the Attersee were not those of any man-made cathedral, they were the rocky towers and buttresses of the Salzkammergut mountains, and the music echoing among them expressed a worship of a very different kind.

The mountains here in the northern foothills of the Austrian Alps are modest compared with the 12,000-foot giants of the Hohe Tauern between Leinz and Zell am See. The crags around the forested shores of the Attersee rarely exceed 5000 feet, and the highest peak falls short of 6000 feet. Nevertheless with its jostling proximity of mountain and lake, reminiscent of parts of the West Highlands of Scotland, or even the English Lake District, the Salzkammergut is dramatic and beautiful.

My particular destination was the village of Steinbach, some 15 km down the eastern shore of the Attersee on Federal Route 152, for it was here that the composer Gustav Mahler had turned these mountains into music.

Upon entering Steinbach one's view is dominated by the mighty wall of the Höllengebirge frowning down over the pine-clad eastern slopes. This was the view which had impressed the young Bruno Walter (later to become a world-renowned conductor and interpreter of Mahler's work) when he stepped off the lake steamer at Steinbach on a visit to Mahler in July 1896. 'It's no good looking at that,' said Mahler, hauling the younger man's luggage down the gangway, 'I've already composed it all!'

It was during that summer that Mahler completed the score of his Third Symphony, a work of extraordinary originality in which elemental forces seem to contend in a process of evolution from brute matter to spiritual serenity. 'It has almost ceased to be music,' he told his close friend Natalie

Bauer-Lechner. 'It is hardly anything but sounds of nature.' Walter heard Mahler's completed draft piano score of the symphony that summer at Steinbach and was overwhelmed by 'the force and novelty of the musical language.' Only now, he wrote, had he 'fully recognised' Mahler, whose 'entire being seemed to breathe a mysterious affinity with nature.'

Yet it was not the Nature of the aesthete which animated the composer: his was a sound-world of rock and wind, primeval geology, bringing forth life in a riotous celebration that merely confused most of his contemporaries. In a letter to the journalist Richard Batka later that year Mahler complained that 'nature' to most people meant flowers and little birds. 'No one knows Dionysus,' he said, 'or the great god Pan.' It galled him that the delicate intermezzo movement of the Third Symphony ('What the flowers of the meadow tell me') had been plucked from its context to become a popular concert piece. Bruno Walter was one of the few who understood what he called Mahler's 'symphonic world dream'; on many long mountain hikes in the Höllengebirge the composer had instilled in his friend the 'spiritual atmosphere' of his work, and appropriately it was Walter who was later to conduct the first complete performance in Vienna of this revolutionary symphony.

Mahler's working practice was the very epitome of Wordsworth's definition of the craft of poetry: 'emotion recollected in tranquillity.' Wordsworth's long walks among the Cumbrian lakes and peaks charged him with the poetic energy which would later flow to earth along his pen and recreate itself through the medium of wordcraft. Similarly, Mahler's walks in the Salzkammergut, or among the soaring peaks of Berchtesgarden, or, later in life, among the Dolomites at Toblach, were a lifelong source both of solace and of creative drive. At Steinbach the fruits of his religious morning peregrinations were harvested and stored until he returned to the inn *Zum Höllengebirge* where he had constructed a tiny summerhouse or 'Music pavilion' in the meadow by the lake. Here, in the utter silence and solitude essential to the exercise of his uniquely intricate craftsmanship, those fruits were ripened into maturity.

Stepping into the main street of the village I looked around me, wondering where I should begin to search for the little 'composing cottage' which I had scant hope might still be standing. Probably it would be useless; not a stick or stone would remain. But it was thrilling even to stand amid the scenery of Mahler's sound world, and I could be satisfied with that.

Just then I turned, and my eyes fell on the entrance to a building not five metres from where I stood; and there, let into the wall by the door, was a plaque commemorating the residence here of

the man whose memory I sought. It was the *Zum Höllengebirge*, its facade still much as it must have been in Mahler's prime.

Venturing within I located a pleasant Fraulein and began brokenly to convey the reason for my visit, half expecting to elicit bewilderment or an impatient dismissal. But scarcely had I begun when the receptionist's eyes lit up: 'Ah, you wish to see Gustav Mahler's sommerhaus? I will find the keys for you!' The keys? So not only had I found the little music pavilion, I was even to be allowed inside! I waited in anticipation for the Fraulein's return, which was not long delayed. She happily pointed me in the direction of the lake shore behind the inn and left to continue her duties.

Well, there it was, a little hut, scarcely large enough, it seemed, for the composer's piano. I turned the key in the lock, entered with something approaching reverence, and was immediately transported back nearly a century into the magic landscape of Gustav Mahler's 'symphonic world dream'

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It had been a disturbed dream, sometimes a nightmare. By the time Mahler first came to Steinbach in 1893 at 33 years of age he was already a renowned and controversial musical figure: tyrant; demoniac precisionist; and principle conductor of the Hamburg Opera. The following year he became Director, and the transformation he had wrought at Hamburg in his unflagging pursuit of perfection led to an offer of a post at Vienna. By the age of 37 Mahler, incorrigible climber, had attained to topmost summit of his profession as Director of the Vienna Opera, whilst in the summer holidays he pursued his real goal among the peaks of the Höllengebirge, writing the story of his heart in music for the coming generations - a story of savage misfortune, transcendent beauty and yearning for a god he was never to find. For, beneath the ascending scale of Mahler's worldly success, there sounded an ominous, descending counterpoint of private tragedy - a pursuing sorrow above which, either on the mountain or on the podium, he was never able to climb.

In 1874 when the young Gustav was barely 14 years old his 13-year-old brother Ernst, to whom he was very close, died from hydrocardia after months of protracted illness during which Gustav rarely left his side. This early encounter with mortality was perhaps the worst of many for the sensitive composer. Altogether, six of Mahler's siblings died in childhood. Of his immediate surviving family he was to witness deaths of another four, whilst sister Justine suffered hallucinations of death and brother Alois fled to America, a criminal fugitive.

Friends, too, seemed to be sucked down in this maelstrom of calamity. In 1880, when Mahler was taking up his first lowly conducting post in the little spa town of Bad Hall, Upper Austria, his close friend from the Vienna Conservatory, Hans Rott, became insane and was confined in an institution; a young girl relative of his friend Emil Freund, with whom Mahler had had a close relationship, committed suicide; and depressed fellow-composer Anron Krisper started on the downward spiral that led him to mental illness and eventual death in 1914.

Throughout his life Mahler sought solace in walking and the presence of nature. In 1884, after an unhappy love affair with singer Johanna Richter, he composed the poignant song-cycle 'Leider eines Fahrenden Gessellen' (Songs of a Wayfarer), depicting the wanderer's escape from the adversities of life and love into the tranquility of rural solitude. It was very much a self-portrait.

The year 1889 was a milestone, both in musical history and in Mahler's personal life. 'My symphony will be something of which the world has never heard the like before,' he promised. 'People are going to be surprised by many things! It overwhelmed me - flooded out like a mountain torrent!' Today that First Symphony is one of the most popular pieces in the concert repertoire; but at its first performance in Budapest that November its eery sounds of nature, dramatic effects, sensuous lyricism and touches of *bizzarerie* provoked a storm of derisive jeers and cat-calls. In the press, critics coldly tore it to shreds. Thus was the first symphonic child of his heart smothered at birth, in the same year which saw the deaths of his father, his mother and his unhappy 26-year-old sister Leopoldine.

It was a terrible year. But for solace there were always the mountains; and in the mountains there was always more music.

By the end of 1894 Mahler had secured conductorship of the prestigious Hamburg Symphony concerts and completed his Second Symphony. He was looking forward to working on sketches of the Third the following summer at Steinbach. But then in February came another blow: His talented brother Otto shot himself in despair - life, his note said, no longer pleased him and he was 'handing back his ticket'. Gustav was devastated.

In 1897 the meteoric rise of Mahler's worldly fortunes approached culmination with the Directorship of the Vienna Opera, followed in 1898 with conductorship of the Vienna Philharmonic. Three years later as the new century dawned Mahler's personal family tragedies must have been very much in mind when he began work on the song-cycle *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs on the Death

Of Children) from poems by Rückert - a piece which was also prophetic of tragedy to come. But this foreshadowing of future grief was only a momentary cloud across the sun. For in November of 1901 Mahler met the beautiful Alma Schindler and fell in love.

It was perhaps the nearest thing to a time of simple happiness that Mahler was ever to know. First performances of his Third and Fourth Symphonies were followed in March 1902 by the birth of a daughter, Maria. His fame spread, and Vienna, the cultural capital of the world, was at his feet. By June 1904 Mahler and Alma had a second daughter, Anna; life was full and promised more. Yet by 1906 the clouds were gathering again, this time in earnest. At the rehearsal of his Sixth Symphony, known today as the Tragic from the 'three hammerblows of fate' by which its hero is 'felled like a tree', Mahler broke down in tears. It was an echo of the day two years before when Mahler played sketches of the Sixth to Alma together with the *Kindertotenlieder* cycle. 'For heaven's sake,' she cried, 'don't tempt fate!'

The following year opened a climactic, not to say apocalyptic, period for Mahler. He was diagnosed as suffering from a heart lesion caused by recurrent streptococcal infections which had troubled him for some time. He had not slowed down. That summer at Maernigg he had completed the colossal, celestial Eighth Symphony in an astonishing six weeks of fevered inspiration. He was advised to rest but dismissed the doctors. He simply could not slow down, and hurried back to Vienna only to meet financial crisis in the Opera and savage critical derision of performances of his Third Symphony. The papers were full of rumours of his resignation. 'I am a hunted stag, hounds in full cry,' he complained to Alma.

On July 5, 1907, the first hammer blow fell. Their daughter Maria, Mahler's adored 'Putzi', died of scarlet fever and diphtheria. Alma collapsed from shock and exhaustion, and Mahler learned that his heart condition was likely to prove rapidly fatal. Now doubly stricken, Mahler saw Vienna slipping away from him: On August, under the combined assaults of his influential critics and an anti-semitic campaign to oust him from his Directorship, he resigned. This third blow of fate had, as he foresaw, 'felled him like a tree'.

Mahler's bacterial endocarditis was now slowly killing him, but in 1908 he took up an offer from the Metropolitan Opera of New York, where his uncompromising perfectionism was to make him new friends and, as usual, bitter enemies. That summer he and Alma returned to Toblach where he tried hopelessly to work at his desk, depressed and desolate. But he did not give in; his yearning for the mountains and forests was too strong. Still he walked, against medical urging, as far as he was

able under the blue skies of this, their 'saddest summer'. But now, said Alma, the exhilaration of long cycle rides and climbing was replaced by the morbidity of measured walks with a pedometer. 'His steps and pulse-beats were numbered and his life a torment. Every excursion, every attempt at distraction was a failure.'

Yet it was here at Toblach that Mahler's chance introduction to the enchanting Chinese verses in Hans Bethge's *The Chinese Flute* slowly lifted him out of despondency and drew from him some of the most haunting compositions in all of music: *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth), music filled with life and beauty written out of despair. There is no paradox here: Mahler's love of the world is a love, as critic and biographer Michael Kennedy put it, 'sharpened to the limits of poignancy by awareness of . . . the transitory nature of existence . . . [Das Lied] is the best of Mahler, his speaking likeness.'

Sadly, Mahler never heard his supreme masterpiece performed. The Song of the Earth, together with the Ninth Symphony and fragments of a Tenth, was his bequest to the humanity he so loved and so despised. In May 1911, his remaining equanimity shattered by Alma's affair with architect Walter Gropius during his last months, Mahler sank into a fevered delirium in a Vienna sanatorium.

On the night of May 18, surrounded by friends and flowers, Mahler slipped from consciousness murmuring the names of Alma and of Mozart. A thunderstorm broke out over Vienna. The long climb was over.

The following day violent rain persisted as his coffin was laid beside that of his beloved Putzi under a simple headstone that, by his request, said only

GUSTAV MAHLER

Any who come to find me will know who I was.

The rest do not need to know.

At the moment the coffin was lowered the sun broke through the clouds.

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The June sun shone full on the Attersee. I stared for a long time at the landscape around that little hut, lately restored by the Gustav Mahler Society and now housing memorabilia of the composer,

and decided that he had been right: he needed no memorial. His real 'music pavilion' was all around me, indestructible, filling the horizons. The caravan site that now filled Mahler's meadow could not diminish him. My mind was brimming with the heart-breaking loveliness of The Song of the Earth, the closing text of *Der Abschied* (The Farewell) written by Mahler himself, and one man's refusal in the face of death to give up the hope that lives on in the beauty of nature.

'I shall never again go seeking the far distance.
My heart is still and awaits its hour.
The dear earth everywhere
Blossoms in spring and grows green again.
Everywhere the distance shines bright and blue!
Eternally eternally !

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