

Mahler's Music of the Mountains

Martin L. Shough

The composer Gustav Mahler was a lifelong hillwalker and found the inspiration for much of his music whilst trekking in the mountains of the Austrian Salzkammergut, the Alps and the Dolomites. 12 September 2010 sees the centenary of the première of the immense Eighth Symphony, arguably the crowning achievement of his public life as a composer.

It was a beautiful June morning, warm and blue, as I drove down Federal Route 152 into the little Austrian village of Steinbach am Attersee. The flight from Coventry, at 8000ft on an antique DC-3 Dakota bound for an airshow at Wels, had been an adventure in itself, reminiscent of tobogganing down a sun-baked cart-track. Now the Austrian road slid beneath me, smooth as black glass, contrasting with the ruggedness of the scenery all around. From here southwards to the high Alps every view is dominated by mountains - and more mountains, an indestructible memorial to the man whose world I had come to find.

The name of Gustav Mahler may not be instantly familiar to everyone, yet he is the most controversial, and some would say the greatest, composer of the last century and a half. This landscape filled his life, and his music, for like Beethoven and many another great artist before and since, he was an inveterate walker.

At the performance of his First Symphony in 1889 few - except perhaps Mahler - realised that they were erecting a milestone in the history of music. Today that work is one of the most popular pieces in the concert repertoire; but then, its eerie nature sounds and dramatic originality merely baffled his musicians and bewildered his listeners, provoking jeers and cat-calls. In the music press, critics coldly tore it to shreds.

Mahler's life, like his music and the scenery he loved, was full of contrasts. By the age of 37 he had achieved the highest summit of his profession as Director of the Vienna Opera - virtual ruler of the cultural capital of the world - but his private life followed a downward spiral of tragedy. Altogether six of Mahler's siblings died in childhood, and he witnessed the deaths of all but one. When he was only 29 both his father and his mother died, together with his unhappy younger sister Leopoldine. Surviving sister Justine became mentally ill, as did several of his close friends. Brother Otto shot himself in 1895, and Gustav's own daughter Maria died of scarlet fever at the age of 4.

Nor was he himself to escape the early attentions of the Reaper: He was only 47 years of age when, Vienna slipping from his grasp due to an anti-Semitic campaign against his Directorship, he was diagnosed as suffering from a fatal heart infection.

From his earliest years Mahler had felt something of an exile, a stranger in a strange land. In 1884 the unknown 24-year-old had finished his first mature masterpiece: *Lieder Eines Fahrenden Gessellen*. These 'Songs of a Wayfarer' depicted a wanderer's escape from the cares of life into the solitudes of nature. Spilling over into the First Symphony with its jaunty 'walking tune', this theme set the pattern for much of Mahler's music - poignant with longing, full of sweeping vistas of some unreachable horizon. It was very much a self-portrait.

His early letters are full of this same aspiration. In 1880 he sent a poem to his friend Anton Krisper, beginning: 'How desolate my heart! How lonely the world! How great my longing! O how there stretch from valley to valley such endless distances!' He was in melancholy mood. The cure? A three-week footslog through southwest Germany.

The route he chose struck north from Vienna through the forested uplands of the Czech-German border where Bohemia becomes Bavaria, as far as the River Eger at Cheb, then west through the wooded peaks of the Fichtelgebirge (or 'spruce mountains') dominated by the 3448-ft Schneeberg, to Bayreuth (home of Wagner and birthplace of the *Ring* cycle), then down through 'Franconian Switzerland' (also known to climbers as Frankenjura) *via* the mediaeval city of Nuremberg (home of the Renaissance 'Meistersinger' contests), there to begin the long haul south to the little town of Oberammergau in the Bavarian Alps, where the religious Passion Play has been performed every 10 years since 1634 in fulfilment of a vow made by the villagers after a plague epidemic. A total distance on foot of some 400 miles!

Throughout the rest of his tumultuous life, Mahler's solace was to be walking. He was an immensely energetic man, whose long summers away from the worldly pressures of Vienna were spent hiking, climbing and cycling in the Salzkammergut mountains around Steinbach, among the soaring peaks of Berchtesgarden or, later in life, at Toblach in the Dolomites of northern Italy. Without this strenuous physical activity and the solitude of the mountains, he said, he could not write a note. When told that his bacterial endocarditis could soon prove fatal, it was not the thought of death that distressed him but the doctors' injunction against walking! 'For many years,' he wrote to close friend Bruno Walter from Toblach, 'I have been used to ceaseless and vigorous exercise - walking in the mountains and forests, and then, like some carefree brigand, bearing home my drafts. I used to go to my desk only as a peasant goes to his barn, to work on my sketches.' His confinement, he said, was 'the worst calamity that has ever befallen me.'

Walking from the shore of the Attersee at Steinbach towards the sheer massif of the Höllengebirge frowning down over the forested slopes, I felt that I had glimpsed the meaning of Mahler's life and music - those ascending, yearning, struggling cadences, punctuated by heart-stopping tumbles and plateaux of rest, rising towards final redemption. His whole life was a climb, a longing after some peak of perfection, whether in his consummate professionalism as conductor and administrator, in his huge yet intricate symphonies, or on foot in the mountains. He was a man born for the heights. When he took a walk, he said, it was usually uphill. Even in his orchestration he strove for an austere clarity like mountain air. His every symphony is a journey; his themes converge like mountain trackways on a map.

Mahler's working practice was the very epitome of Wordsworth's 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. At Steinbach he would spend every morning hiking among the crags of the Höllengebirge then return, often late in the day, to the little 'music pavilion' he had constructed by the lake in Steinbach, there to give shape to his ideas. Here the Second Symphony was completed, and the colossal Third with its eerie depiction of life evolving out of the sounds of some primeval geological epoch. (Play this music on your iPod next time you clamber to your favourite high place - you won't forget it.)

In 1908, living now in the long shadow of his own mortality, Mahler stayed at Toblach among the 10,000ft peaks of the Dolomites. By now his canon included eight symphonies, the last being the immense 'Symphony of a Thousand', as it was memorably to be dubbed, against Mahler's will, by an agent for its first performance. That performance was to be one of the rare artistic triumphs of Mahler lifetime; but its ephemeral glory still lay two years in the future. Now, staring from his desk by the window at the Dolomites, he could see no future and fell into a deep depression: he could neither walk nor work; Vienna was lost to him and his music derided.

Yet he did not give in. Spurning advice he began to walk again - measured walks, now, with a pedometer in his pocket. 'His steps and pulse-beats were numbered.' recalled his wife Alma, 'and his life a torment.' Yet it was here at Toblach, inspired by poet Hans Bethge's verses in 'The Chinese Flute', that he began to compose again for the first time in two years, bringing forth out of sadness one of the most haunting compositions in all music - 'Das Lied Von Der Erde', The Song of the Earth. Although he was to live to complete a Ninth Symphony, 'Das Lied' is in many ways Mahler's poignant farewell to the beauties of his 'dear earth'.

Sadly Mahler never heard this masterpiece played. In May 1911, in the fading afterglow of the successful première of the Eighth, his ailing heart broken by Alma's affair with the architect Walter Gropius in his last months, he died - like Beethoven before him - during a thunderstorm. He was 51 and at the very height of his creative powers.

His simple headstone reads only 'Gustav Mahler'. This was at his own request. 'Those who come to find me will know who I was,' he said. 'The rest do not need to know'.

I had not gone to that Vienna grave, but to the mountains of the Salzkammergut. Standing in the little 'music pavilion', which still sits there on the meadow by the lake surrounded now by a caravan site, I remembered the conductor Bruno Walter's visit to Mahler here in 1896. Walter had been awed by the landscape. 'It's no good looking at that,' said Mahler briskly, hauling the younger man's cases off the boat. 'I've already composed it all!'

He was right. He needed no memorial. Who could have a grander headstone than these mountains?

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