

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
May 3-4-5, 2019
Subscription Concert No.8
Michael Allsen

Our final program this season is devoted to a single work, Mahler's titanic eighth symphony. Popularly known as the "Symphony of a Thousand," this is a work that explores the themes of love, joy, and redemption on the grandest scale. At these concerts we will feature over 500 musicians, both on stage and off stage: an expanded Madison Symphony Orchestra is joined by the Madison Symphony Chorus, the UW Choral Union, and Madison Youth Choirs. We also welcome eight fine vocal soloists: sopranos Alexandra LoBianco, Emily Birsan, and Emily Pogorelc, mezzo-sopranos Milena Kitic and Julie Miller, tenor Clay Hilley, baritone Michael Redding, and bass-baritone Morris Robinson.

Gustav Mahler, (1860-1911)
Symphony No.8

Mahler composed his eighth symphony in 1906-1907. He conducted the first performance in Munich, on September 12, 1910. We have performed the work once previously in 2005. Duration 79:00.

"Gustav is always on the telephone to God."
-Alma Mahler

The premiere of Mahler's eighth symphony was one of the great triumphs of his life. On September 12, 1910 he conducted a huge orchestra and chorus in the newly-built International Exhibition Hall in Munich, to an enthusiastic audience of over 3000. The response to this, the most joyous of his symphonies—and the last of his symphonies to be premiered during his lifetime—should have been enormously gratifying, but Mahler apparently looked merely drawn and worn out during the long applause. According to one of the critics present, one young man said after the performance: "Look at those eyes! That's not the expression of a triumphant general marching towards new victories. It's the expression of a man who already feels the weight of death on his shoulders!" And indeed, Mahler died just eight months later. This last, sad phase in his career began with a trio of disasters in 1907: losing his post as conductor of the Vienna State Opera, diagnosis of a severe heart condition, and the death of his daughter Maria. During years that followed, he had satisfying but exhausting conducting appointments in New York and elsewhere, but his last few years were marked by marital problems, and a

generally lukewarm reception to his music. None of these troubles are apparent in the eighth, however.

The eighth begins the last phase in Mahler's symphonies, which includes *Das Lied von der Erde* (a "song-symphony") of 1908, the ninth symphony of 1909, and the unfinished tenth. His first four symphonies are all linked by a common reliance on vocal music, particularly on Mahler's own settings of folk-poetry from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* ("The Boy's Magic Horn")—and singers play an important role in Nos. 2-4. These early works are all, to varying degrees programmatic, and derive at least part of their form from extra-musical ideas. The fifth through seventh were purely instrumental in conception, rejecting, at least on the surface, the programmatic ideal. With the eighth, he returns confidently to vocal and dramatic inspiration—in fact, it holds the distinction of being the first thoroughly choral symphony. In earlier symphonies with chorus or solo voices, from Beethoven's ninth through Mahler's own early works, singing was reserved for the finale, but here the form and style are dictated by text throughout. The *Symphony No. 8* has been described variously as an oratorio, as a "cantata, and even as "Mahler's only opera," but at heart, the conception of this work remains symphonic, with an organic development of musical themes throughout.

The inspiration for the eighth came as a flash: while on his annual summer retreat in 1906, he came across the text for the Latin Pentecost hymn *Veni, creator spiritus*, and composed the first movement fairly quickly afterwards. He later told Arnold Schoenberg: "It was as if it had been dictated to me." In fact, he seems to have composed this enormous work with uncharacteristic speed: the score was completed between June 21 and August 18, with orchestration completed the following year. *Veni, creator spiritus* took hold of him—so much so that he completed most of the score for the first movement without having the whole text in front of him. He asked his friend Fritz Löhr to send the text by express mail, and when it arrived, he was delighted to see that what he had written fit the meter and meaning of the text perfectly.

The original plan, sketched out in the first flush of inspiration, was for a four-movement work with the following outline: "1. Hymn: *Veni creator spiritus* 2. Scherzo 3. Adagio 4. Hymn: the birth of Eros." However, he quickly decided that the proper counterweight to the opening choral movement would be a dramatic setting of the closing scene of Goethe's *Faust*. *Faust* was familiar ground: it among was Mahler's favorite literary works, and it was also one of the most important inspirations for Romantic musicians. It was the source of countless art-songs from Beethoven and Schubert onwards, the inspiration for programmatic

pieces by Berlioz, Liszt, and many others, and received several full-scale operatic treatments, most famously in Gounod's *Faust*, and Boito's *Mefistofele*. Faust is the story of a scholar who sells his soul to the devil (Mefistopheles) in exchange for ultimate knowledge. In Part I (published in its final version in 1829) Faust makes his fateful deal—its primary story is Faust's love and abandonment of Gretchen. Part II is a series of fantastic episodes that culminates in the rescue of Faust's soul by the angels and the frustration of Mefistopheles. The closing episode set by Mahler is a lengthy scene in which the souls of both Faust and Gretchen are ushered into heaven

The contrasts between the two movements are numerous, above and beyond the difference in language, and on the surface, they seem to be almost two completely independent pieces. Part I reaches back to J.S. Bach and even further to for its thoroughly contrapuntal texture. Donald Mitchell suggests that Mahler was inspired by Bach's motets, particularly *Singet den Herrn*, and parts of the movement look back a century or more earlier yet, to the great polychoral composers of the late Renaissance. Part I as a whole is one of the most disciplined and tightly-organized movements in Mahler's symphonies, with his masterful contrapuntal writing worked into an overall sonata form. Part II, not only more modern in its harmony and melodic writing, is episodic, with musical form determined largely by Mahler's slightly edited and rearranged version of Goethe. There is also a contrast in mood: Part I is 25 minutes of almost unremitting jubilation, while the joy in Part II appears much more gradually and comes in a much more ethereal form. Several writers have even pointed to a difference in gender, with the text and mood of Part I being in a "masculine" voice. Part II, with its focus on the Virgin Mary and the central solos by the four penitent women, ends by invoking the "eternal feminine" (*das Ewig-Weibliche*).

The ties that bind these two halves together are love and redemption. In Part I, Mahler invites the *creator spiritus* to abide within. One of the most personal sides of this setting is the third stanza, where: the lines "Endow our weak bodies with eternal strength." are sung with great passion. The answer, "Inflame our senses with light, pour love into our hearts," is the climax of the movement. In Part II, the soul of Faust is saved by a much more human, even motherly sort of love. In the long culmination of the movement, faithful Gretchen, now transformed into "Una Poenitentium," is redeemed by three holy women, before she is reunited with Faust. In the end it is the Mater Gloriosa herself who ushers Faust into heaven with a sublime passage that makes the connection between the movements obvious—the Latin *Veni* ("come") and the German *Komm* are associated with the same musical theme.

It is of course the scoring of the *Symphony No.8* that gets the most attention. In addition to parts for eight vocal soloists, and large chorus and children's chorus, he calls for a large contingent of offstage brass, organ, and a vastly expanded orchestra: quadrupled woodwinds, expanded brass sections, and a huge percussion battery, with an enlarged string section to balance. The Munich premiere of the eighth featured the largest ensemble Mahler had ever conducted— vocal soloists and a chorus of 850, with orchestra and offstage musicians bringing the total to slightly over 1,000—but he detested the title “Symphony of a Thousand.” The impresario Emil Gutmann had dreamed up the name as part of his publicity campaign for the premiere, and Mahler thought it worthy of only a Barnum & Bailey circus. This was the heyday of enormous orchestras. Both Mahler and Bruckner used enlarged orchestras in their symphonies and some of Strauss's tone poems (notably *Also sprach Zarathustra*, *Ein Heldenleben* and *Eine Alpensinfonie*) use vastly expanded scoring. Strauss used an even larger orchestra in his *Festive Prelude* of 1913, and both this piece and the eighth are dwarfed by Schoenberg's *Gurre-Lieder*, completed in 1911. In the eighth symphony, however, Mahler uses these huge forces for sheer overwhelming effect only a few times in the course of nearly 80 minutes of music, instead using them as a richly diverse palette, with which he paints the words that are the symphony's inspiration.

Though it is choral throughout, Part I has the outlines, in vastly expanded dimensions, of a traditional symphonic first movement. It begins with the great invocation *Veni, creator spiritus* (“Come, creator spirit”) in an almost sacred style—an exclamation that is used to impose order on the entire symphony. A long passage carried by soloists, beginning with the line *imple superna gratia* (“fill with grace from above those whom you have created”). An orchestral interlude leads to the plea *Infirma nostri corporis* (“Endow our weak bodies with eternal strength”). The development section, on the same lines, is carried at first by the orchestra and chorus and then by gradual entrance of the soloists. The climax of the movement comes with the choral *Accende lumen* (“inflare our senses with light”)—a recapitulation of the opening theme—and the densely scored music that follows. There is brief moment of reverent holding back at *Qui Paraclitus* (“You are known as the Comforter”) before a glorious fugal coda on *Gloria Patri* (“Glory be to God the Father”).

Part II is a series of episodes that follow Goethe's drama. Mahler sets the stage, “mountain gorges, forest, cliff, solitude,” with the longest purely orchestral section in the symphony, alternating pensive music above a long string tremolo with religious chorales from the brass. A more agitated passage introduces the Holy

Anchorites. The next three panels create the wilderness scene for Faust's redemption, the Anchorites building upon the theme of the introduction, and the Pater Ecstaticus (Ecstatic Father) and Pater Profundis (Deep Father) singing from above and below. (Goethe's original also had a Pater Seraphicus, singing from the "middle region.") The second main section begins with choirs of angels who carry Faust's soul upwards, where he finally meets with the last of the anchorites, Dr. Marianus (The Marian Doctor), and his joyful statement that "Here, the view is unobstructed." Dr. Marianus and the chorus of angels invoke the Virgin, Mater Gloriosa, who appears in a serene passage for strings and harp. The next passage concerns the redemption of Gretchen, who died at the end of Part I of *Faust*, insane and hopeless after killing her own child. Here she is transformed into the character "Una Poententium" (a penitent), and three holy women intercede on her behalf: Magna Peccatrix (a great sinner) and Mulier Samaritana (a Samaritan woman) from episodes in the New Testament, and Maria Aegyptica from the *Acts of the Saints*. The final act in this drama is the redemption of Faust himself, heralded by a chorus of blessed boys and Una Poententium. The dramatic peak—ironically, one of the most moving moments in the "Symphony of a Thousand" is also one of the most intimate—is the blessing sung by the Mater Gloriosa (the Virgin Mary) herself: "Come! Raise yourself to the highest spheres!" Her sentiment is echoed by Dr. Marianus and the angels, before a quiet orchestral passage ushers in the final Chorus Mysticus, a moment that clearly echoes the great choral entrance in Mahler's "Resurrection" symphony. The eighth ends with a grand brass transformation of the opening theme.

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