

GUSTAV MAHLER Symphony No. 2 in C minor *Resurrection*

BORN: July 7, 1860, in Kalischt, near Iglau, Bohemia [now: Kaliště, Jihlava, Czech Republic]

DIED: May 18, 1911, in Vienna, Austria

WORK COMPOSED: 1888 (first movement); 1893 (second, third and fourth movements); 1894 (finale); in November 2016 the manuscript sold at Sotheby's in London for a record \$5.5 million!

WORLD PREMIERE: 1895; Mahler conducted the Berlin Philharmonic in the premiere of the first three movements on March 4 and the entire symphony on December 13 in Berlin.

I love Mahler's music! There are only a few other works that affect me as much, but none compare with Mahler's Second Symphony. The size of the orchestra the work demands is still one of the largest in the repertoire and being in the middle of all that sound is a fantastic experience. I remember the first time I played it with the Richmond Symphony Orchestra when I was living in Virginia. I didn't think that life could be more wonderful until I played it with the OB Symphony Orchestra (the oldest amateur orchestra in Japan) in Tokyo. I thought I had died and gone to heaven! My wife, Sharon, sang in the 150-plus member chorus. The concert was not long after her father had passed away and during the performance there was an earthquake, which only added to the profound emotions we were both experiencing. Recently a colleague of mine told me that he didn't like Mahler. After I got over the shock and was able to metaphorically pick myself up off the floor I asked him why. Actually what I said was, 'What you talkin' 'bout, Willis?' Well, those were fighting words – right? All kidding aside, his response was that Mahler is too difficult to understand and also very depressing. Lately I've been reading *Absolutely on Music: Conversations with Seiji Ozawa* by Haruki Murakami. Ozawa talks about how Mahler's music can only be understood when the performer, or the listener, allows the music to emotionally invade their soul. Try not to understand Mahler's music – *feel* Mahler's music. Great advice! Not everyone will walk away loving Mahler's music, but the experience may change you.

In 1886 Mahler was at the Leipzig Opera as the assistant conductor to the great Arthur Nikisch (1855-1922). Although Leipzig was one of the premier opera houses of the time with an exceptional orchestra, the inevitable rivalry with Nikisch made it difficult for Mahler. The main source of conflict was over how the two conductors would share the duties for the new production of Wagner's *Ring* cycle. Because of Nikisch's illness in January 1887 it was decided that Mahler would take charge of the entire cycle, which was a resounding success with the public. The orchestra felt otherwise; they resented his dictatorial manner and heavy rehearsal schedules.

While in Leipzig Mahler befriended Carl von Weber, the grandson of Carl Maria von Weber, and agreed to prepare a performing version of the composer's unfinished opera *Die drei Pintos* (*The Three Pintos*). The premiere in January 1888 was an important occasion that was attended by the heads of various opera houses as well as Tchaikovsky. The success of the premiere did much for Mahler. In addition to raising his public profile, it came with financial rewards. Mahler was completing his First Symphony and began work on a large orchestral piece called *Todtenfeier* (Funeral Rites) in February 1888 and in May, enabled by his new financial security, he resigned his Leipzig position. By October Mahler was headed to Budapest after a short and unhappy experience in Prague that ended in his dismissal following an outburst during a rehearsal.

Mahler went through a period of emotional turmoil in 1889 with a series of family deaths. In February his father died; in the autumn his younger sister Leopoldine died and her death was soon followed by the death of his mother, who had been suffering from a long illness. Mahler, at twenty-nine, was now the head of the family that included his two sisters Emma and Justine, and his brothers Alois and Otto. Since Alois was in the military and Otto was a student at the conservatory, Mahler's primary concern was for the welfare of his sisters. He arranged for them to move in with his friend Fritz Löhr and his wife, since Otto was already staying there. Justine, the oldest sister, lived with Mahler for extended periods during which their relationship developed into a deep, mutually supportive friendship.

By 1893 Mahler was the principal conductor of the Hamburg Opera when he came to the realization that *Todtenfeier* was not an independent work, but the first movement of a second symphony. Entering into the world of Mahler's Second Symphony requires a reflection back to his First Symphony. Mahler creates and depicts the story of a great hero who falls in battle during the symphony's final movement. The Second Symphony pays final tribute to the hero and also tells the story of life and the existential quest for understanding, coming to terms with life's challenges and incomprehensibilities. The first movement is in honor of the fallen hero and an anguished cry to the cosmos for understanding. Anyone who has lost a loved one in the prime of their life can understand this anguish and grief. Why did they have to die? What is life all about? Why am I here? At the end of the first movement Mahler instructs that there be a short pause (the marking in the score is for approximately five minutes, however in most contemporary performances the pause is much shorter) before continuing on with the following movements. When Julius Butts was preparing to conduct the work in Düsseldorf in March 1903, Mahler wrote to him that there ought to be "an ample pause for gathering one's thoughts after the first movement... the Andante is composed as a kind of intermezzo (like some lingering resonance of *long* past days from the life of him... something from the days when the sun still smiled upon him)."

The second movement is a nostalgic reflection on happier times with some bittersweet moments. When someone dies we always reflect back on their life, remembering the good times and accepting the difficult moments more easily than when they occurred. Mahler describes the third movement as a "rumination on the meaningless nature of life." In a mechanical way it churns along, at times like a whirlpool that won't let go. In response, the fourth movement, *Urlicht* (*Primal Light*), expresses the hope that the empty, meaningless dimension portrayed earlier is not actually what it seems and that life does have beauty and meaning (this is the first time a song had been used as a movement of a symphony).

Mahler knew that the finale should be with a chorus, but finding the right text was a challenge. The conductor in charge of symphony concerts in Hamburg when Mahler arrived in 1891 was Hans von Bülow. Von Bülow was impressed with Mahler and as von Bülow's health declined Mahler substituted for him and their relationship developed. In early 1894 von Bülow died and at the memorial service the choir sang a setting of the *Resurrection Hymn* by the 18th century poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock. Mahler was deeply moved by von Bülow's death and as he later wrote to Arthur Seidl, "It struck me like lightning and everything was revealed to my soul clear and plain." Mahler used the first two stanzas of Klopstock's text and then added verses of his own. The fifth movement is an expression of optimism and a declaration of hope. Although with

religious overtones, the theme is universal in that all people share a deep level of humanity – regardless of any specific belief.

While the attempt here is to provide a programmatic scenario for the Second Symphony, Mahler resisted numerous requests to explain his music in any specific literary terms. However, on three occasions he did provide some program notes: in January 1896 to his confidante Natalie Bauer-Lechner; in March 1896 to the critic Max Marschalk; and in 1901 to King Albert of Saxony for when the work was to be performed in Dresden. They all differ in their details but follow the same general idea of the soul striving for answers and the inner experience of redemption and resurrection. In fact, the subtitle, *Resurrection*, which has become synonymous with the work, was not bestowed by Mahler.

Numerous books, dissertations and articles that have been written about him provide evidence that Mahler was an intense and complicated person. He wrote to Alma, his wife, that no information he could provide would shed any insight on the Second Symphony. The letter speaks volumes about how he viewed the work and about himself:

It gives only a superficial indication, all that any program can do for a musical work, let alone this one, which is so much all of a piece that it can no more be explained than the world itself. — I'm quite sure that if God were asked to draw up a program of the world he created he could never do it. — At best it would be a "revelation" that would say as little about the nature of God and life as my analysis says about my C-minor Symphony.

It seems that Mahler's life was plagued with a dark cloud looming over him and perhaps that might make one feel that his music is depressing. But within that darkness are also some amazingly beautiful and enlightening moments. His Second Symphony was written before he would suffer some of the most heartbreaking and devastating moments of his life. Mahler's music is a profound exclamation of the soul that can only be experienced by being open to the emotions it brings.

— Vincent Osborn © 2017

There have been only three previous DSSO performances of this symphony with the orchestra and the DSSO Chorus. On May 1, 1970 Joseph Hawthorne conducted with the soloists Maureen Forrester (contralto) and Leah Beth Frey (soprano). Yong-yan Hu led the March 15, 1997 performance with the soloists Susan Sacquitne Druck and Patricia Kent. On April 12, 2008 Markand Thakar conducted with Jan Wilson and Hope Koehler.

Instrumentation: 4 flutes (all doubling piccolo); 4 oboes (3rd and 4th doubling English horn); 3 clarinets in B \flat , A, and C (3rd doubling bass clarinet); 2 clarinets in E \flat (2nd doubling 4th clarinet); 4 bassoons (3rd and 4th doubling contrabassoon); 10 horns (7-10 also offstage); 6 trumpets (2-6 also offstage); 4 trombones; tuba; timpani (2 players; also offstage); several snare drums; 2 bass drums (one offstage); 2 pairs of cymbals (also offstage); 2 triangles (one offstage); glockenspiel; 3 deep, untuned bells; rute; 2 tamtams; 2 harps; organ; soprano solo; alto solo; mixed chorus; "The largest possible contingent of strings" .