

Mitchell

I can not help wondering as I stand here in Toblach, so closely identified with Mahler and his late masterpieces, what influence this unimaginably beautiful landscape had on the man and his music. There can be no doubt of course about Mahler's enthusiasm for Nature. He was no passive observer of landscape but an active explorer of it, especially on foot. We know of his fondness for walking amid the lakes and mountains, and can guess with some certainty of being right that what attracted him to mountains was their silence, that unique silence which in fact constitutes an aural experience in itself, a silence that is itself a sound. It is a silence moreover that magically articulates any natural sound that may impinge upon it - the cry of a bird, cowbells from the valleys below, the murmuring of a mountain stream. All these sounds, the ~~individuality~~^{individuality} of which might be lost when they form part of the larger chorus of noise which surrounds our day to day life on earth, are heard sharp and clear, each with its own sonorous physiognomy, in the context of silence.

Now all this may begin to sound like poetic rhapsody, of which we have had more than enough in the decades since Mahler's death. But in fact my purpose is somewhat different, not to rhapsodize but to remind us of something very essential about Mahler, that he walked not only on his feet but also with his ears: that a walk for this wholly extraordinary man was as much a sonorous experience as a matter of physical locomotion. In short we have to remember that for a walking composer his ears are at least as important as his eyes; and in Mahler's case I shall want to suggest his eyes performed a role much more complex than drinking in, in a general way, the grand beauty of lake and mountain. Mahler's eyes, I think, could be almost as specific as his ears. This is a point to which I shall return. For the moment, let us stick to his ears.

To one form of Nature's music, bird song, Mahler's ears had always been open. We don't have to wait until his late works, for example, to encounter the incorporation into his music of the song or cry of a bird. (I have often thought that in this respect alone Mahler and Messiaen might have had much to say to each other.) I could quote many examples from the earlier works. But perhaps one is of particular interest and importance, the great cadenza in the finale of the Second Symphony, Der grosse Appell, the summons which leads to the final elevation of the dead to paradise. At this critical juncture in the symphony, which is both a coup de theatre and a radical exploration of acoustic space, Mahler, after a great release of orchestral hubbub and activity, creates a moment of silence and then fills it with a huge instrumental cadenza compiled out of horn calls and, and, no least significantly, bird song. It is indeed the liquid aria of the bird, the flute and piccolo combined, that surely represents after the travail and tension of life and earth, the promise of hope, light and eternal life. I wonder if I might remind you of this remarkable passage:

Play: Cadenza from the finale of Symphony No. 2

The innovative techniques employed there continue to surprise one. But what grips my attention especially is the free, quasi-improvisatory character of the cadenza and in particular the free, unmeasured nature of the birdsong, which is as it were not bound by the tyranny of the barline, no more than the birds themselves in the real world are subject to the rules of composition. I have no doubt, moreover, that while that great cadenza in the finale of the Second is pre-eminently symbolic not naturalistic in its intention and effect, it nonetheless had its roots in Mahler's acoustic experience of the universe. The free music

mix

I have written about that passage and suggested that its extraordinary

before Fig. 22

PLAY: Das Lied, 'Abschied' from Fig. 18 to double bar

recognition:

This is a music taken from Nature which has been received by Mahler's ears and then transformed by his imagination, but certainly not out of

Die Welt schläft ein!

'Die Vogel hocken still in ihren Zweigen

sounds of Nature just before the world surrenders to sleep:

word. Mahler does not so much describe as faithfully document the

night and silence descend. 'Description' indeed is entirely the wrong the nocturnal stirrings and twitterings of the birds at the moment when

Das Lied von der Erde - the passage where Mahler graphically describes

There is a remarkable example of this development in the 'Abschied' of

and the sounds and events of Nature were further and radically lowered.

of realism, if you like, in which the barriers between art music (Kunstmusik)

towards what one might think of as (for him) a new kind of naturalism,

or symbolic representation of Nature, and of bird song in particular,

as his work developed, more and more moved away from a figurative, decorative

others are improper and to be excluded. Mahler, as he grew older and

classical proportion, of sounds and events which are proper to art while

think the freedom of Nature, unconstrained by considerations of art, of

The free profile of the flute song in the cadenza reflects one might

into music. *solilo die like*

wherein of course lies his genius - to assimilate them and transform them

response of Mahler's ears to what they heard about them and to his capacity-

of the sounds, the unmeasured birdsong, all these speak for the

motivic organization and audacious instrumentation amount to a kind of Mahlerian impressionism, but an impressionism, we note, that does not aspire to a blend, a blur, but comprises a brilliant and incisive articulation of bird song. Once again Mahler has created a moment of silence, as he did in the finale of the Second Symphony, but this time filled it not with symbolic but as it were with actual bird song and other nocturnal noises. There is a big difference between the two aesthetic approaches.

Mahler of course did not altogether abandon in his last period the figurative, decorative or symbolic use of birdsong. When he needed it as a resource, then of course he made use of it. Indeed, in Das Lied itself, the two modes of incorporating Nature, the two strategies, are juxtaposed in the same work. Take, for example, the fifth movement of Das Lied, 'Der Trunkene im Frühling'. In the third strophe of the song, it is a bird that brings the pessimistic singer a message of hope and reconciliation, the confirmation of the presence of Spring - 'Der Lenz ist da, sei kommen über Nacht!' And Mahler permits us to hear the tenor overhearing the bird singing in the tree. But as my next example shows, this is a very well trained and musically educated bird which inhabits the solo flute, with a highly developed sense of melody, of balanced phrasing and above all with a striking capacity to build its song out of the motives with which the composer has obligingly provided it. In short, this is principally a symbolic bird, whose song has been conditioned by long established tradition, a very different creature and a very different concept of sound from the nocturnal passage that I played a moment or two ago from the 'Abschied':

PLAY: 'Der Trunkene im Frühling'

2 bars before Fig. 6 to Fig. 7

One might argue perfectly properly that there is after all nothing very exceptional about a composer with an emphatic love of Nature building bird song into his music. Birds are Nature's musicians, Nature's own singers, and composers have long been in the habit of conscripting bird song to serve their own purposes. I have shown in that last example how Mahler had one foot in tradition, and in the preceding example, from the 'Abschied', how he was establishing a new tradition, a kind of authenticity of reproduction which formed no part at all of that earlier decorative or symbolic tradition. But Mahler we may be sure was not in the business of achieving a faithful, literal replication of birdsong. What was it, then, that we should try to identify as Mahler's particular interest in birdsong, in the sounds of the natural universe? Or to put it another way: are we able to identify in any meaningful way the influence of Nature on Mahler's musical thinking?

The aspect of the relationship between Mahler's own music and the music of Nature that interests me most is the unmeasured freedom that characterizes the latter and the ever increasing freedom of Mahler's late compositional techniques, especially in the fields of rhythm and melody.

I have talked a lot about birdsong, perhaps to excess. But perhaps you will be patient and let me bring forward one final example from this sphere, though in fact it is not a literal representation of birdsong at all. You will remember my first example from the Second Symphony, the cadenza from the finale, and the marvellously free, quasi-improvised duet for piccolo and flute which unfolds a continuous flow of unmeasured melody. Let us hear now a famous passage from the 'Abschied', the first of the recitatives, and let us concentrate not just on the voice but on the flute obbligato and in particular on its innovative, improvisatory unmeasuredness:

PLAY: Das Lied 'Abschied' 1 bar before Fig. 3 to Fig. 4

Now I am not at all suggesting ~~there~~ that what we hear there is undiluted birdsong - if that were the case, it would be a virtuoso bird indeed! Moreover, it is clear to me that the concept of that recitative has its roots in Bach, in Bach's recitatives from the Passions in particular (Mahler was a great admirer of the St. Matthew Passion) and in the style of Bach's instrumental obbligati in his Passions and Cantatas. One might think that one could not get further from Nature than the music of Bach. But as so often in Mahler's music, one thing does not exclude another; or to put it another way, he integrates in and through his music elements and influences which normally one would have thought irreconcilable. In short, while recognizing the predominant Bach influence, ~~at the same time the free shape of that extraordinary flute obbligato has~~ *Robert Schumann* been conditioned, if only unconsciously, by the asymmetries of the music of Nature. And when one takes into account the poetic context and content of ~~the first~~ ^{that} recitative from the 'Abschied', in which the protagonist responds to a nocturnal mountain landscape, it is not altogether far-fetched to hear in Mahler's flute obbligato an audacious mix of Bach and the last song of the bird before nightfall.

I want to get away from birds for a moment and think about other features of Nature which might have caught not only Mahler's ears but also his eyes.

No doubt you will be asking whether it is really possible for a composer's music to be influenced by what he perceives with and through his eyes. I am reminded of something Mahler himself once said to a friend who was visiting him and admiring the surrounding landscape. 'Don't worry about that', Mahler said, 'I've just composed it all in my music' - in whichever symphony it was he was working on at the time. Mahler of course was expressing the thought of the relationship between landscape and music in the form of a joke. But it is my conviction that there is more than an element of truth in it, a truth that became more pronounced

as Mahler moved into his late phase. Let me illustrate this point with another example from the 'Abschied' of Das Lied, the extraordinary oboe melody that introduces the text describing both the sight and sound of a murmuring stream creating its own melody in the darkness and amid the flowers palely glowing in the twilight. It is technically one of the most radical inspirations and challenging inspirations in Das Lied:

PLAY: Das Lied, 'Abschied', Figs. 7 to 5 bars after Fig. 10

What is striking about that passage is its exceptional rhythmic asymmetry. There is no bar in the melody which repeats a previously established rhythmic pattern: each bar is rhythmically unique. The melody extends itself systematically through bar-by-bar rhythmic

variation. Moreover, this melody which is built out of an additive chain of asymmetries is itself accompanied by figuration with its own built-in rhythmic asymmetry: the clarinets' and harp's alternations of the minor ~~the minor third~~ ⁱⁿ ~~grouped in patterns of 3's and 2's.~~ ^{Wendell} Furthermore, there is scant harmonization of the melody in any conventional sense and as you will surely have noticed, a conspicuous absence of punctuation or traditional cadencing: the melody wanders irregularly

^{n/} until it is abruptly cut off. Finally, Mahler introduces, not an asymmetry, which would not be possible, but an ~~instability~~ ^{instability} into the mode, the key, in which the passage is conceived. F is finally established after the ambiguity of the first two bars of introduction,

but it is an F in which Mahler for 5 bars methodically sharpens the fourth degree ^{sharp} of the scale - B flat becomes ^{natural B} B natural - which lends

the melody an unfamiliar, uncertain colour, thus complementing the irregularities ^{of} of the rhythm and ^{contours} contours of the melody. Perhaps we might hear this passage just once again, at least down to the entry of the voice:

But that passage is not only a remarkable manifestation of Mahler's late style, of the development of new and surprising features, it is also something else: a graphic tonal picture of a mountain stream pursuing its irregular course, and singing its song as it flows. It is not only the sound of it that worked on Mahler's imagination, but also the sight of it. It is a passage in which one might claim sight has been transformed into sound. This takes me back to the point I made earlier: that Mahler was as much a pair of walking eyes as a pair of walking ears.

I have no intention of course of exaggerating the influence of

Nature on Mahler to the degree that it loses all sense: I am far from

suggesting that Mahler in his music was a kind of gazeteer or Baedeker.

I am suggesting, however, that when we analyse some of the characteristics

of the late style of Mahler and his growing preoccupation with the

potentialities of asymmetry and irregularity, we should bear in mind

that what was perhaps a development in his music that would have happened

anyway for purely musical reasons, was backed up, intensified, reinforced,

by his absorption of the irregularities and asymmetries of the sounds

and sights of the world of Nature by which he was so often surrounded.

And where, as in Das Lied, the poetic content of the work is much bound

up with observation of and reflections on Nature, then the influence

surfaces in a highly original and immediately identifiable manner. I

think my examples show that.

I have now, I think, broadened out the topic of this talk which

will allow me to conform perhaps a little more closely to its title. I

have been expounding relatively marginal detail in order to support

my general proposal that we may perceive a genuine connection between

Mahler's response to Nature and the manifestation of asymmetry and

irregularities in his music. But while it is true of course that some

I
I though with this difference: that it is a march that from the very outset

us that the finale of the 'Abschied' is also conceived as a gigantic march. But has it struck marches of all shapes and sizes abound in his symphonies.

We all know how important for Mahler was the concept of the March -

free.

and the asymmetrical, the regular and the irregular, the strict and the opposition - I am now speaking purely musically - between the symmetrical

resolved in and by the 'Abschied' and in terms of the contrast, the conflict and dichotomy. It is a conflict which is played out and finally

oblivion and the transcending of it, an altogether typical Mahlerian Das Lied, I suggest, concerns itself both with the fight against

the disease that was to cut short his life in 1911.

with Mahler's own personal history and in particular the diagnosis of escapable fact of his extinction. All this, we may think, was bound up

the idea of death, the possibility of man's reconciliation to the in-preoccupation is with the idea of man's mortality, his struggle against

we might reach ready agreement: for a start, that Das Lied's principal content of the 'Abschied'. I think there are various points on which

is about, the poetic meaning of Mahler's song-cycle, and in particular the works, then I must say something very brief about what, I suggest, Das Lied

If I am to explain, even in the barest outline, how Mahler's method

Das Lied.

a major musical and poetic resource - in the finale, the 'Abschied' of

of a symbolic/formal use of asymmetry - the employment of asymmetry as

Perhaps not altogether surprisingly we find an elaborate example

or depictive and assume a profound formal and symbolic significance.

his systematic employment of asymmetry which altogether escape the graphic

very clearly have their origins in Nature, there are other aspects of

of the asymmetries I have commented on and illustrated from Das Lied

is the main formal business of the finale of Das Lied to establish it is precisely the reconciliation of those seeming irreconcilables that the fear of annihilation and a positive embracing of it. And indeed the metrical and the predictable. The contrast is as sharp as that between a freely conceived music, the irregularity of which is the very opposite of escape from mortality and its metrical bonds is represented by asymmetry, and death, that area is represented by the constraints of symmetry. The of its transcendence - mitigation, reconciliation, on the other. Mortality encompasses: the fact of mortality on the one hand, and the possibility with the two poles of experience which the songcycle as a whole the free, the symmetrical and asymmetrical, are brilliantly identified itself, we come to realise that the two types of music, the strict and kind of music against the other; furthermore, as the movement extends then proceeds with extraordinary logic and consistency, to play off one finale the symmetrical and the asymmetrical, the regular and the irregular, Mahler, having thus concisely juxtaposed at the beginning of his before.

I need not continue that example because it is one that we have heard

PLAY: Das Lied, 'Abschied', from start to 4 bars after
Heimliche Abschied
 Fig. 3 (slow fade on flute)

asymmetries of the flute obbligato: introduces us for the first time to the remarkable freedom and a fragmenting music that leads us naturally into the first recitative and a few bars, the march breaks up, or rather, breaks down, disintegrating into its symmetrical rhythm, trying to assert itself. But within the space of to the 'Abschied' unfolds the dichotomy: we hear the march, and above all late stage in the movement has been reached. The very opening prelude of the movement never succeeds in establishing itself until a very

But mortality and the metrical are not to triumph in Das Lied and do not, distinctly not, provide the work with its ultimate denouement. Throughout the 'Abschied', as I have already suggested, Mahler, with consummate skill, has played off the free against the strict, the asymmetrical against the symmetrical. Some of those intimations of the escape from mortality through a consciously free, unmeasured music I have already illustrated: not only the nocturnal passage, 'Die Welt schläft ein' - and it must have been just such music that Adorno had in mind when referring in his monograph on Mahler to the 'unregimented voices of living things' - but also that amazing passage, the oboe melody, which I spoke about in connection with Mahler's observation, through his ears and eyes, of a mountain stream. It seems hardly credible that one movement should contain two such radically contrasted musics, one so improvisatory and irregular, and rhythmically amorphous, the other so definedly symmetrical in ~~one long~~ melody and regular in rhythm. But it is precisely the task

PLAY: Das Lied, 'Abschied', Figs. 41 to 5 bars after Fig. 46, slow fade

The March idea, naturally enough, represents the most intensive concentration of symmetry and rhythmic regularity; and when finally the March succeeds in establishing itself unequivocally in that extraordinary interpolation for orchestra alone that precedes the closing stages of the 'Abschied', Mahler leaves us in no possible doubt of the symbolic relationship between the concept of death and its embodiment in music which, of its very nature, is born out of symmetry and metricality. Moreover, it is a grand funeral march, a ritual celebration of death, that Mahler releases - has in truth reserved for, this moment; could he have spelled out for us more clearly in the context of the finale of Das Lied the identification of mortality with metricality?

of these two contrasted compositional techniques to represent the two poles of experience that I have suggested the 'Abschied' is built around. It is revealing, I think, that one could argue that the innovating oboe melody has its roots, its origins, in Nature. But by no means all the music that I should allot to the 'free' category in the 'Abschied' is bound up quite so unequivocally with Nature, with Mahler's depiction of observation of it. Take this long, ^{seamless string melody} for example, which in its own way, is quite as free as the oboe and flute melodies, 'Der Bach singt', which it succeeds and complements:

PLAY: Das Lied, 'Abschied', 5 bars after Fig. 10 to Fig. 13

The freely evolving, spontaneous character of that melody, which uncoils itself unpredictably across the bar lines and is rarely punctuated by them, is typical of the asymmetrical, irregular and often very long string ^{free} melodies which emerge with increasing frequency in Mahler's late works, though perhaps nowhere is there such a concentration of them as in the finale of Das Lied. In the example I have just played, we may note that the melody is not directly linked with observation of Nature. On the other hand, it without doubt articulates the response of the protagonist in the 'Abschied' to the overwhelming beauties of Nature, of the world. I find it altogether fascinating that the protagonist in the finale, who was surely Mahler himself, chose to exploit the resources of asymmetry in expressing his felt response to Nature, just as asymmetry and irregularity were the means by which elsewhere he incorporates into his music the actual sounds (and some of the sights!) of the ^{Nature} universe. Whatever Mahler's predisposition was towards the asymmetrical in shaping his melodies, we may conclude, I believe, that the influence of Nature was a heightening factor, especially in those works in which Nature is a central preoccupation,

of which Das Lied is a prime example. Is there not something very

magical as well as logical, about Mahler unleashing his tumultuous feelings about Nature in a melody whose contours are unregimented as those of Nature herself?

And so amidst the very landscape amidst which Das Lied was conceived and created and which, I suggest, exercised a profound influence on the

profile of the musical materials assumed, we come to the end of my talk, and at the same time to the end of Das Lied itself. As I said earlier, it is not the metrical that finally triumphs in the 'Abschied' but the very opposite pole. In the ecstatic coda that rounds off the finale indeed, Mahler achieves an unprecedented beatlessness, a suspension of pulse and beat which virtually erases rhythmic measurement. This, combined with the proliferation and

heterophonic combinations of long spans of asymmetrical melodies, provides Mahler with that consummation of the free style, that other pole, in the

'Abschied', which at the same time signifies the transcendence of death, the reconciliation and the identification with the perpetual renewal

of earth's beauties which has been the goal of Das Lied from the outset:

PLAY: Das Lied, 'Abschied', from upbeat preceding Fig. 58 to end.

Thus through the manipulation of two contrasted compositional

techniques, the strict and the free, Mahler plays out the poetic drama which is at the heart of Das Lied and brings it to its radiant denouement. I

do not doubt myself that landscape and Nature - not pictorially, but at

far deeper levels of the creative imagination - were profoundly influential in, as it were, drawing the contours of some of the music we find most

remarkable in Das Lied. Landscape into music. A unique act of trans-

formation, and like most things about Mahler, without precedent, and unsurpassed.