Gustav Mahler the Protomodernist

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Steeped in a cultivated European tradition and burdened by several personal tragedies, Gustav Mahler undeniably shaped the course of classical music leading into the twentieth century. Stylistic and musical conventions of the late Romantic era, including complex rhythmic concepts, emotional and expansive melodies, and strict adherence to form, were still prevalent in the Austro-German musical style governing the late nineteenth century. While these traditional characteristics can certainly be found within Mahler's compositional output, one must not neglect the forward-thinking ideas that the composer incorporated as he and his contemporaries ushered in a new, experimental era of classical music. Mahler's nine complete symphonies incorporated elements of both past Germanic traditions and modern ideas. Despite their significance in the course of music history, these works fell largely unperformed during a period of neglect before their eventual uncovering and promotion by Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic. Though historically viewed as a composer rooted in the Austro-German tradition, Mahler faced relentless cultural division and emerged as a pivotal protomodernist. His utilization of musical quotation and defamiliarization yet adherence to tonal conservatism ultimately bridged the musical gap between late Romanticism and early twentieth-century Modernism, allowing him to serve as an intermediary between the two eras. Some have even contended that Mahler's compositional style foreshadowed the Postmodern era.

Apart from his acceptance as a conductor and director, Mahler struggled to garner compositional success during his lifetime. While his rival, Richard Strauss, gained popularity from his compositions, Mahler persisted in writing music despite his lack of recognition. Constantin Floros notes that in 1910, "the Leipzig conductor Georg Göhler stated that Mahler was not a 'true' contemporary, not a man of his time, because

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his music made no concessions to the taste, the fashions of the day."[1] Not concerned with immediate recognition, Mahler pressed on as he propelled the symphonic medium forward.

Evidence of Quotations in Slow Symphonic Movements

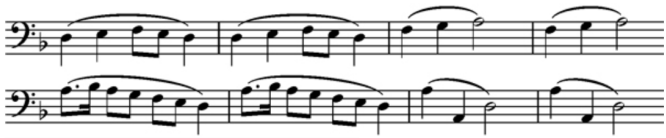
Gustav Mahler's symphonic output and, in particular, his use of slow movements to incorporate borrowed and transformed material is clear evidence of both his compositional genius and his innovative influence over the genre. Mahler began his symphonic career in 1887 when he started work on his Symphony No. 1 in D Major, often referred to today as the *Titan*. Mahler's *Titan* stands as a multifaceted programmatic masterpiece named after Jean Paul's influential novel by the same name. This seamless "symphonic poem," later divided into movements and referred to as a symphony, was poorly received during the composer's tenure with the Leipzig Opera in 1889. Premiered with mixed reviews, the genius of Mahler's first symphony would not be appreciated until long after the composer's death. Within this work, Mahler featured many key "quotations," a technique wherein thematic material is repurposed or gives homage to another composer. Quotation was especially popular with Mahler's American contemporary, Charles Ives. In his comparison of the two artists, Robert Morgan states:

> In Mahler the matter is more complex, for his "quotations" are normally not so much literal borrowings as synthetic recreations of certain standard musical types. Literal quotations occasionally do occur. Yet, in effect…all of these passages are as clearly representative of the real thing as are Ives's literal borrowings.[2]

In his artful quotations, Mahler maintained the recognizable nature of the original musical idea while seamlessly inserting the material into a new context. His ability to draw upon multiple outside sources, bring them together in a new context, and repurpose them in a natural and effective way vastly elevated his works. While musical paraphrases were frequently used in Romantic compositions by composers including

[1] Constantin Floros, *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies*, ed. Reinhard G. Pauly, trans. Vernon Wicker (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1993), 10.
[2] Robert P. Morgan, "Ives and Mahler: Mutual Responses at the End of an Era," *19th-Century Music* 2, no. 1 (1978): 74–75. doi:10.1525/ncm.1978.2.1.02a00050.

Brahms, Schumann, and Liszt, Mahler enhanced the compositional device of quotation, bringing elements of German culture, nationalism, and personal struggle into his pieces through borrowed material. In the third movement (*Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen*) of his *Titan* Symphony, the composer famously utilizes quotation of the popular children's song *Frère Jacques*, a nursery tune that had taken on a colloquial role as a lighthearted pub song. In a twist of genius, however, Mahler transforms the borrowed material into a minor mode, distorting the otherwise unassuming melody into a sorrowful, haunting tune reflective of a funeral (Example 1). This line first appears in a treacherous solo by the contrabass before making its way to the bassoon, flute, and tuba in a canon. An accompanying kettle drum eerily accents an ostinato pattern, creating a distanced effect.

Example 1: Symphony No. 1, mvt. 3, mm. 3–10. These eight measures feature the bass showcasing the *Frère Jacques* tune in a minor mode.[3]

Not only does Mahler's unique treatment of this melody stand as his first main use of quotation in a work, it also demonstrates the composer's innate ability to draw from his surroundings to cultivate deep emotional responses. In a 1901 letter to Bernhard Schuster, the composer reflects that "the third movement…is a heart-rending, tragic irony and is to be understood as exposition and preparation for the sudden outburst in the final movement of despair of a deeply wounded and broken heart."[4] This quoted folk passage then sharply contrasts with a rich, Jewish *klezmer* passage pointing to the composer's cultural roots and creating a striking contrast from the previous children's tune turned funeral march. In this unassuming movement, Mahler manages to achieve seamless transformation of a popular tune, a somber funeral setting, and bombastic *klezmer* music all while maintaining a rich, enjoyable, symphonic texture. The third movement itself fits comfortably within the overall form of the symphony as a slow movement, and Mahler makes use of its

[3] Gustav Mahler, *Symphony No. 1*, London: Universal Edition, 1952.
[4] Henry-Louis de La Grange, *Vienna: Triumph and Disillusion, 1904–1907*, vol. 3, *Gustav Mahler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 18.

placement to portray a solemn scene inspired by *The Hunter's Funeral*, a woodcut work by Moritz von Schwind which satirically portrays a procession of animals preparing to bury a hunter.[5] Schwind's woodcut applies a direct programmatic backdrop for Mahler's funeral scene. Yet, the composer wrestled with the creative restrictions that program music placed on the listener, including programmatic titles only after being prodded by his friends to do so. These titles were later crossed out (likely by Mahler himself) in an early autograph score of Symphony No. 1.[6] The following quote is from a letter Mahler wrote to a music critic, and it demonstrates the composer's concern for his audience, yet his unwillingness to compromise fully to the expectations of the day:

> Originally, my friends persuaded me to supply a kind of program, in order to facilitate the understanding of the D major [Symphony]. Thus, I had subsequently invented this title and explanations. That I omitted them this time was caused not only by the fact that I consider them inadequate, but also because I found out how the public has been misled by them.[7]

The multifaceted integration evident in Mahler's Symphony No. 1 would permeate the early twentieth century as composers dabbled with incorporating borrowed material, often in a satirical manner, while remaining attuned to the freedom of the listener. Composers in the American landscape, including Ives and Dvořák, would regularly compose in this manner as they drew from slave songs, spirituals, and Jewish tunes for their symphonic writings and sought to balance the pros and cons of programmatic writing.

Driven by an affection for Carl Maria von Weber and the motivation of a freshly completed, largescale symphonic work, Mahler began composing *Todtenfeier* (Funeral Rites) in 1888 in a deeply veiled spirit of love and affection, later reflecting on the work as autobiographical in nature. After the work's completion in 1891, the composer would eventually integrate the composition into his 1894 Symphony No. 2 as the first movement. Mahler described *Todtenfeier* in the following way: "At the grave of a beloved person. His struggle, his suffering and desire

[5] Floros, *Gustav Mahler*, 39.
[6] Zoltan Roman, "Connotative Irony in Mahler's Todtenmarsch in 'Callots Manier,'" *The Musical Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (April 1973): 208. doi:10.1093/mq/lix.2.207.
[7] Ibid.

pass before the mind's eye. Questions obtrude: what does Death mean? —is there a continuation?"[8] Here, the composer decided to provide a specified, handcrafted program theme to guide the listener. Despite his deeply personal connection with this work and his wariness regarding programmatic music, the young composer understood the power that can accompany a program and used this to his advantage in his second symphony and his emotional *Todtenfeier*.

Mahler's seamless integration of musical and cultural ideas through quotation can be seen again in the third movement of his third symphony. Composed in 1896, eight years after his first symphony, the composer's Symphony No. 3 was premiered by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in 1897 with a marginally better reception than his first. This monumental work was composed in six movements divided into two halves. Movement 3, Comodo (Scherzando), draws heavily upon the composer's earlier sketches and compositions while quoting Alpine folk tunes. Again, one can see the composer's keen ability to nestle outside material comfortably into a symphonic fabric. Mahler was able to masterfully extract ideas and tunes, fit them into a framework, and create an impactful and emotional experience therein. As Robert P. Morgan notes, this skillful use of melodic quotation is no small task:

> The twofold nature of the process (quoting) required that the music be distinctly recognizable as a representative of its original source, and yet appear to be reactivated in a new context. The ways in which Ives and Mahler achieved this are essentially the same. Borrowed material is fragmented and juxtaposed against other kinds of music, combined simultaneously with different music, distorted through the appearance of unexpected intervals and through complex and ambiguous phrase relationships, or distanced by means of elaborate orchestrations that contradict the material's true heritage. But in each case the materials are transformed in such a way as to acquire new expressive life.[9]

[8] "Todtenfeier," Mahler Foundation, last modified November 21, 2019, https://mahlerfoundation.org/mahler/werken/symphony-no-2/totenfeier.
[9] Morgan, "Ives and Mahler," 75–76.

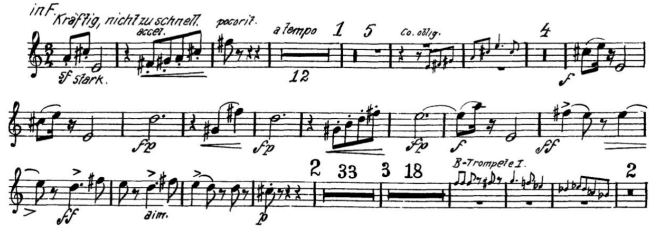
Establishing these borrowed tunes as both recognizable and cohesive within the larger context of the work, as seen in the *Titan*, was a compositional technique at which Mahler excelled as he ushered in the next era.

Nature and Emotion: Creating a Narrative

Mahler's use of quotation served a larger purpose than merely drawing from his heritage, influences, and cultural interests. The composer effectively portrayed narratives like few composers before had ever achieved. All of this was accomplished, however, while maintaining a natural and pure sound. Stating this in no uncertain terms, Mahler said, "My music is always the voice of nature sounding in tone…"[10] Nature served as a continual reprieve and source of inspiration for the troubled artist who frequently fled to the countryside for self-reflection and compositional inventiveness. To Mahler, nature served a threefold purpose as a source of nostalgia, rest, and human emotion.

The artist combined personal tragedy with his recurring natural influences to create a powerful narrative in his *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs on the Death of Children). A collection derived from poetic works of Friedrich Rückert, Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* beautifully pairs harsh weather conditions in the musical backdrop with lyrics of worry and lament. Nature consistently serves as a powerful metaphoric device in the hands of the innovative composer. Again, in his larger works, a similar compositional treatment can be found. Mahler's Symphony No. 5 in C-sharp Minor utilizes an echoing effect to bring the listener into a mountainous landscape. Horns are utilized to usher in a new, broad melodic idea in the Scherzo movement as they evoke visions of mountains rising in the distance (Example 2).

[10] Gabriel Engel, *Gustav Mahler, Song-Symphonist* (New York: The Bruckner Society of America, 1932), 69.

Example 2: Opening horn excerpt from Mahler's Symphony No. 5, mvt. 3, mm. 1–95.[11]

Mahler continues his narrative writing by harkening back to the military band influences of his youth, featuring brass, march-like rhythms, and military signals. Military music allowed the composer to tackle narratives of death and redemption within a memorable and familiar framework. Again, one can look to Mahler's Symphony No. 5 for proof of this thematic writing as the composer opens this work with a fanfare before eventually merging into a military funeral march. By utilizing war-like elements of military music, the composer effectively transports the listener to a solemn and grave disposition. Mahler consistently infused elements of naturalism and past heritage into his symphonic compositions as he heightened the symphonic genre.

Postmodern Thought and a Nod to Tonal Decentralization

Mahler's multifaceted integration clearly surpassed the conventions of the Romantic era, but some scholars have noted that Mahler's use of quotation could even be classified as postmodern. Jonathan Kramer describes the contrast between modern and postmodern quotation as follows:

> There is a difference in perspective between modernist and postmodernist quotation. Modernist composers often want to take over, to own, to demonstrate their mastery of that which they are quoting, either by placing it in modernist contexts or by distorting it. Postmodernists are more content to let the music they

[11] Gustav Mahler, *Symphony No. 5* (New York: E.F. Kalmus, 1900).

> refer to or quote simply be what it is, offered with neither distortion nor musical commentary.[12]

Mahler had a masterful ability to let the quoted music speak for itself within his symphonic fabric. No stranger to suffering and hardship, the composer eloquently and artfully utilized "trivial melodies" to symbolize "experiences of despair or of heart-lacerating self-irony."[13] Ultimately, Mahler's delicate treatment of these melodies creates a cohesive work that is accessible and enjoyable to his modern audience.

Despite his postmodern treatment of quotation, Mahler was conservative in his tonal exploration, holding to the Romantic era's use of traditional tonality. Whereas in paraphrasing and quoting, Mahler pushed compositional norms, the composer anchored himself in his current era with tonality in an attempt to make his music enjoyable across audiences and achieve a cohesive narrative. Kramer explains the works of Mahler, Ives, and Carl Nielsen as follows:

> They are not so much proto-postmodern as they are actually postmodern—by which I mean not only that they exhibit postmodern compositional practices but also that they are conducive to being understood in accordance with today's postmodernist musical values and listening strategies.[14]

Postmodernism, in music, typically has strong associations with serialism, atonality, extended technique, improvisation, and technology. Although Mahler does not embody postmodernism in all areas, his use of multiple meanings, occasional collage-like passages, and regular quotation all point toward postmodern thought. In essence, Mahler prioritized clarity over complexity in his symphonic works, without forfeiting compositional substance and interest. Not only is this clarity seen in Mahler's treatment of melodic material, but also in the composer's principles of tonality.

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[12] Jonathan D. Kramer, "The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism," in *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, ed. Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner, vol. 4, *Studies in Contemporary Music and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 15.
[13] Hans F. Redlich. "The Creative Achievement of Gustav Mahler," *The Musical Times* 101, no. 1409 (July 1960): 421. doi:10.2307/951005.
[14] Kramer, "Nature and Origins," 16.

Ushering in an era with a stark emphasis on complexity, contradiction, and combination, Mahler steadily incorporated progressive elements of tonal variety while clinging fast to his compositional heritage. Again, one can clearly see the composer's reverence for comprehension and musicality over a needlessly complex fabric. While this idea would reach a climax in modern and postmodern thought, art, and culture, the composer slowly introduced organic ideas in his symphonic compositions. While experimenting with tonal duality was not necessarily Mahler's main priority, his early postmodern thought shines through in his compositional fragmentations and discontinuities which paved the way for later uses of polytonality and serialism. Floros, discussing Mahler's utilization of forward-thinking compositional qualities, quotes Göhler, saying, "Mahler offered nothing to his world but would offer that much more to the future—his time was yet to come."[15]

Even though Mahler's writing led to a disconnect with his present world, modern composer Arnold Schoenberg certainly resonated with Mahler as he drew from the composer's inspiration and compositional prowess. Second only to Arnold Schoenberg, the *Zweite Wiener Schule* (Second Viennese School), who prided themselves in techniques such as complete tonal chromaticism and twelve-tone serialism, revered Mahler to the highest degree. Alban Berg and Anton Webern, along with a host of less well-known pupils of Schoenberg, made Mahler's compositional output central to their studies because of his creative compositional treatment of musical quotation. Eric Werner writes, "Both Mahler and Schoenberg were thinkers and creative artists of high ideals; both were romanticists in their conception of the 'courageous' composer's mission and martyrdom."[16] Despite their differing musical aesthetics, Mahler and Schoenberg had parallel conceptions of the plight of a composer in society.

Rethinking Mahler's Legacy

On the macroscale, Mahler's life certainly embodied a rich, tragic narrative which appealed to a mid-twentieth century audience. Mahler had faced significant grief as his mother, father, and sister all died in 1889, and the composer continually suffered under the weight of his

[15] Floros, *Gustav Mahler*, 10.
[16] Eric Werner, "Prolegomenon," in *Contributions to a Historical Study of Jewish Music* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1976), 17.

troubled brother Otto, who later committed suicide. Seemingly bound to a negative narrative, Mahler pressed on in his work, conducting for small theaters and orchestras. Though these tragic experiences heavily influenced the musician's compositions and creative process throughout his life, Mahler also carried a rich arsenal of folk and tavern influences which he used regularly in his symphonic compositions.

Mahler's brief time in America had a significant impact on his foreign contemporaries. His time with the Metropolitan Opera in New York was, in part, spent absorbing and enjoying the emerging jazz landscape as he reflected upon his Eastern European folk and tavern influences. Within Mahler's scope of influence, Aaron Copland stood among the earliest to value Mahler's contributions to the symphonic medium as he also utilized *klezmer*, African American, and folk influences in his own right. Copland, the "Dean of American Composers" and a legendary American modernist, regularly merged outside traditions into his works, tracing back to both Arnold Schoenberg's academic twelve-tone serial techniques and Mahler's lyrical quotation. Mahler's impact on Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School in Germany stands as important evidence for the composer's legacy as an era-bridging, forward-thinking artist. Schoenberg certainly related to Mahler's cultural condition, integration of narrative, and progression within symphonic writing as he pioneered new, experimental perspectives on tonality.

In addition to Arnold Schoenberg, Mahler had a profound influence on American modernist Charles Ives during his time in New York. In his *Essays before a Sonata*, Ives asserts that Mahler rivals Beethoven's symphonic mastery, explaining that "Mahler could have made [symphonies]—possibly did make them, we will say—'more perfect.'"[17] Ives believed that Mahler brought symphonic writing to the highest possible level, furthering the genre beyond any other Austro-German composer to date. Certainly, Mahler owed his symphonic prowess, in large part, to his musical heritage and the German tradition, but nonetheless, the composer effectively used his nine completed symphonies to usher in the era of Modernism.

Despite relentless personal tragedy and a lack of compositional acceptance, Gustav Mahler achieved success as a conductor, composer, and progressive. While holding fast to his past heritage in the Austro-

[17] Charles Ives, *Essays before a Sonata, The Majority, and Other Writings*, ed. Howard Boatwright (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1962), 85.

German tradition, Mahler pressed compositional boundaries by quoting outside works and infusing personal narratives into his compositions. His incorporation of Jewish and folk elements into his slow symphonic movements stands as a pivotal compositional development in the symphonic genre. In Modernism, collage techniques became an essential compositional device as composers combined small, outside motivic elements into larger works. Mahler's unassuming incorporation of melodies from his homeland certainly led to forward development in the twentieth century. Finally, the composer's influence upon progressive, modern composers and schools of thought solidified his legacy as a Romantic progressive. Copland, Schoenberg, and Ives were all impacted by the Mahler's life and works. Each of these key twentieth-century artists drew upon Mahler's modern compositional ideas and worked to balance simplicity and tradition. Mahler's contribution to modern musical ideas stemmed primarily from his symphonic literature as the musician effectively elevated the genre and paved the way for great symphonic writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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