

# Mahler's Eighth Symphony

Gustav Mahler conducted the premiere of his Eighth Symphony on 12 September 1910 in Munich. As the performance came to its ecstatic close, the audience surged forward to hail the composer. In their elation, Mahler and his wife Alma stayed awake talking the whole night. Yet in the four years since Mahler had composed the symphony in eight weeks at their summer retreat on the Wörthersee, they had been tested to endurance and beyond.

Mahler's resignation in 1907 after twelve years as Director of the Royal Opera in Vienna, followed soon after by the diagnosis of chronic heart disease, had left his future very uncertain. Around the same time, his elder daughter Maria died of diphtheria. Then in 1910, just before rehearsals of the Eighth got underway, Alma's romantic involvement with the architect Walter Gropius at a health spa where she was recovering from nervous exhaustion threatened to end their marriage. In the anguished denouement, Alma accused Mahler, who had earlier forbidden her to compose her own music, of neglecting her. Mahler, fearful of losing his beloved but much younger wife, sought help from Sigmund Freud.

The premiere of the Eighth Symphony was thus a moment of reconciliation and triumph. Mahler described this symphony as his greatest work. It is an inspired outworking of both his musical and his philosophical ideas. Musically, it develops ideas from previous symphonies. Whereas his Second symphony used voices in a way that was modelled directly on Beethoven's Ninth, Mahler's Eighth was the first such work to use voices throughout. As far as the ideas are concerned, Mahler was both a devout Catholic and an admirer of Goethe. In a letter to Alma he explains: 'The essence of it is really Goethe's idea that all love is generative, creative ...' and in a formulation that points to the intermingling of Mahler's ideas: 'Eros as the Creator of the world!'

The Eighth Symphony is a musical statement of the unity between Christian ideas about creation and redemption, and Goethe's humanistic ones. The former are expressed in Part One: Hymnus, based on the mediaeval hymn 'Veni Creator Spiritus', the latter in Part Two: The Final Scene of Goethe's *Faust*. The musical unity of the piece is achieved by the reappearance of all of the themes from Part One in Part Two, by the recurrence and interweaving of certain motifs, and above all, by the closing of the circle at the end of Part Two with the restatement of the opening hymn by the off-stage brass.

While the content of 'Veni Creator Spiritus' is accessible enough, the same cannot be said for the final scene of Goethe's *Faust*. In Goethe's version, Faust dies without losing his soul. The scene, which echoes Dante, as well as the wider Catholic and Neo-Platonist traditions, begins with a chorus of religious hermits in their respective cells

dotted through a wildly beautiful landscape. The hermit with the highest cell and therefore the most unimpeded view of the unfolding events is Dr Marianus, whose chief role in the scene is to announce and to adore the blessed Virgin (Mater Gloriosa). A series of angels raise Faust's soul up ever further. Mater Gloriosa comes into view, and is approached by Gretchen, Faust's former lover, and a group of other penitent women, who implore her to redeem his soul. The scene ends with a mystic chorus singing, 'Everything transitory is just a parable...The indescribable happens here; the Eternal Feminine draws us upward'.

Goethe's polarity between the striving male and the redeeming but more passive female is an image to which Mahler also subscribed. To us it has become an anachronism. So why is Mahler's 'old-fashioned' music (his word) and setting of Goethe's obscure and problematic text as popular today as when it was premiered? Clearly there is a transcendent appeal in both the music and the text and their evocation of divine love and eternity.

Most of the five months which remained to Gustav Mahler after the premiere of his Eighth Symphony were spent on a concert tour in the New World with his wife and daughter Anna. Before they departed, Mahler discovered and played through some of Alma's songs, which he encouraged her to have published. Alma ultimately outlived him by longer than he himself had lived, dying in Los Angeles in 1964.

It is astonishing to think that Mahler effectively composed his Eighth Symphony in his summer holidays, interrupted only by the small matter of conducting the *Marriage of Figaro* in Salzburg. It is a measure of his self-confidence as a composer that he felt able to tackle the most venerated work in German literature, which its author had worked on periodically for over forty years. Even by the standards of a genius who 'did everything quickly', Mahler's was a masterly achievement. The Eighth Symphony was a distillation of his most important ideas, and so its creation was a longer process than the act of writing alone suggests - the product of a lifetime of musical and literary influences and creative activity. Given Mahler's theory that each of us is the result of many generations of development, his choice of a mediaeval hymn tune to open and close the symphony suggests, intriguingly, that the period of gestation may have been longer still.

Notes by Alastair Ker, Orpheus Choir

## Sources:

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