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Detail of Rudolfinum interior

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Semyon Bychkov

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Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Symphony No. 2 in C Minor, "Auferstehung (Resurrection)" (1888-1894)

1	I. Allegro maestoso. Mit durchaus ernstem und feierlichem Ausdruck	23. 15
2	II. Andante moderato. Sehr gemächlich	10. 55
3	III. In ruhig fließender Bewegung	11. 10
4	IV. "Urlicht". Sehr feierlich aber schlicht	5. 29
5	Va. Im Tempo des Scherzos. Wild herausfahrend - Maestoso. Sehr zuruckhaltend	20. 47
6	Vb. "Aufersteh'n, ja aufersteh'n wirst du". Langsam, misterioso - "O glaube, mein Herz, o glaube". Etwas bewegter	15. 11
Total playing time:		86. 52

Christiane Karg, soprano (track 6)

Elisabeth Kulman, alto (track 4 + 6)

Prague Philharmonic Choir (track 6)

Lukáš Vasilek, choirmaster

Czech Philharmonic

conducted by **Semyon Bychkov**



Semyon Bychkov
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Renewed Faith

'It is no judgement', Mahler wrote of the end of his Second Symphony; 'there are no sinners, no just. None is great, none small. An overwhelming love illuminates our being. We know and are.' As the organ of the Rudolfinum blazes out, sustaining the full force of the Czech Philharmonic and the Prague Philharmonic Choir, we are confronted afresh by the composer's complex statement of faith. Drawing together various philosophies and soundworlds, Mahler's Second Symphony goes right back to the beginning of his life, just as it points to what might follow for us all.

Born into a Jewish family, Mahler dutifully attended synagogue in his Moravian hometown of Iglau (now Jihlava), even criticising the quality of its congregational singing. He would certainly have celebrated his *bar mitzvah* at the age of 13 — though records were sadly destroyed when the

building was burned to the ground by the Nazis in 1939. And Mahler would have continued his religious education until 1877, enough to pass the *matura*, though his attendance at temple may well have waned. Nonetheless, the memories were profound, as when the baritone, and son of a synagogue cantor, Magnus Davidsohn sang to the composer in Hebrew at the Blue Star Hotel in Prague in 1899. Ending with a prayer for Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, Davidsohn saw that Mahler was visibly moved as he walked over to the piano in the hotel, now the site of the Czech National Bank, and continued the improvisation.

Mahler also maintained other associations with his Jewish roots, not least the klezmer bands he had heard during his early years. Prague, as well as neighbouring Bavaria, was particularly renowned for its guilds of *klezmerim*. And as the Jewish population

of Habsburg-controlled Europe was emancipated by Franz Josef I, movement increased, allowing Mahler to experience the ensembles' uniquely beguiling sounds.

But as much as the composer can be considered Jewish, his knowledge of Christian traditions was just as keen. After all, Mahler received his first harmony lessons from the father of one of his closest childhood friends, the music director at the Jakobskirche in Jihlava. Thanks to concerts of sacred works and oratorios, the young composer came to know a repertoire including Haydn's *Die sieben letzten Worte unseres Erlösers am Kreuze*, the Mozart Requiem, Beethoven's *Christus am Ölberge* and Rossini's *Stabat Mater*, as well as masses and motets sung within the liturgy.

In 1897, it was to the Catholic Church that Mahler reluctantly turned, when he was baptised in Hamburg — the city in which he had first heard Friedrich Klopstock's ode 'Die Auferstehung' at Hans von Bülow's

1894 memorial service. The decision to convert was made in order to secure the post of music director at the Court Opera in Vienna — a Catholic city dogged by anti-Semitism. But while Mahler loved the smell of incense and the sounds of plainchant, including the ominous *Dies irae*, he was anything but avid in his adoption of Catholicism. And yet all of these elements, including the marching band of the 69th Infantry in Jihlava and the town's *Männergesangverein*, even the call of a shofar, fuse in his Second Symphony.

By the time Mahler completed the score, in 1894, it had dominated his thoughts for six years, the longest gestation of any of his works. Composition had begun in 1888, when, facing the conundrum of how to return to writing a symphony — a genre freighted with so much expectation — Mahler decided to continue directly with the quest he had set out in his First. Composition of the two works may even have overlapped, and certainly did in terms

Czech Philharmonic

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Elisabeth Kulman
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of a (hidden) programme, as Mahler explained to his friend Max Marschalk.

“I have named the first movement ‘Totenfeier’, and if you want to know, it is the hero of my [First] Symphony whom I bear to the grave there, and whose life I catch, from a higher standpoint, in a pure mirror. At the same time there is the great question: ‘Why did you live? Why did you suffer? Is it all nothing but a huge frightful joke?’ We must answer these questions in some way, if we want to go on living – indeed, if we are to go on dying! He into whose life this call has once sounded must give an answer; and this answer I give in the final movement.”

For Semyon Bychkov, the Czech Philharmonic’s chief conductor and music director, the search for the answers to these crucial questions ‘shows the life cycle in all its struggles: suffering, joy, irony, humour, love and doubt’, which play out in both personal and communal terms.

‘Totenfeier’, the title Mahler gave to his first movement, recalls the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz’s *Dziady*, which had been translated into German by the composer’s student friend Siegfried Lipiner. Its calls of ‘Darkness around. Dullness around. What will be now? What will be now?’ may dominate the opening, but there is something fonder too. As the hero is taken to his resting place, there are as many shudders of personal grief as there are suggestions of Mickiewicz’s mysterious obsequies, even a procession to rival the Habsburgs’ grandest state funerals. And while the spirit of the *Marcia funebre* in Beethoven’s ‘Eroica’ Symphony can, likewise, not be far from our thoughts, with Mahler’s 25-minute form couched in the same C minor, the music also introduces an idealised vision of the landscape of Central Europe. Sounding in a luscious E Major, a *cor anglais* promises life after death, before militaristic threats and a final assault remind us that the grieving is far from done.



Christiane Karg
© Gisela Schenker

A bucolic mood nonetheless returns with the lilt of an Austrian Ländler at the start of the second movement, the first of two 'episodes from the life of the fallen hero', according to Mahler's close friend Nathalie Bauer-Lechner, as if he were continuing the scheme of a symphony by Berlioz, rather than one by Beethoven. The chosen key of A-flat Major is, however, a frequent partner to C minor in the latter's output, here providing a veil for the strings. The music then turns spectral as it slips into G-sharp minor, with the chromatic spasm from the end of 'Todtenfeier' taking on another guise. Even within this movement's otherwise fond remembrances of things past, grief maintains a stranglehold.

Little comfort is offered by the subsequent episode from the hero's life. Recalling 'Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt', Mahler's setting of words from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* — his first recourse to Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim's early 19th-century folkloristic volume within

the context of a symphony — the third movement's danse macabre also alludes to the Swiss symbolist Arnold Böcklin's 1892 painting of the same Franciscan preaching, somewhat pointlessly, to a shoal of fish. As Mahler calls on the spiralling virtuosity of the *klezmerim* of his youth, a composite picture emerges of a world indifferent to spirituality. Consequently, there has to be rupture, described in his and his family's memoirs as 'a horrible cry of disgust' or 'the appalling shriek of [a] tortured soul'. And it is one that will be repeated at the beginning of the Finale, reminding us how pain, as C.S. Lewis later wrote, is the deity's 'megaphone to rouse a deaf world'.

No less personal — and, within the sequence, even more bruised — is the contralto's confession in the fourth movement, giving voice to what was left unsaid in Mahler's previous allusion to *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. Here, a pregnant chorale throws light on what has gone before, as well as pointing to what will

follow: the red rose of earthly affection translated into heaven's eternal life. And yet, despite the confidence with which the text is delivered, yearning suspensions cast a sense of doubt.

It is therefore left to the enormous Finale, calling additionally on a soprano soloist and a chorus, to rebuild and make the solitary, personal hopes of 'Urlicht' a reality for us all:

"O believe, my heart, oh believe:
Nothing will be lost to you!
Everything is yours that you have desired!
Yours, what you have loved,
what you have struggled for!"

For Semyon Bychkov, this stanza — Mahler's own contribution to Klopstock's text, which he divested of any mention of Jesus Christ — provides the turning point. 'I see these words representing deep meaning to all of us individually', he explains, 'as well as reflecting our mission to enrich and

ennoble the society we serve.' Together, they confirm Mahler's fundamental belief in renewal, stemming from that yearning *cor anglais* in the first movement and the acknowledgment in 'Urlicht' of where we have come from and where we are going. 'We shall all return', Mahler wrote to his friend Richard Specht, the year after completing the Second Symphony; 'our whole lives acquire meaning only through this certainty.' As we return to the composer's symphonies once more, performed by an orchestra from the region in which he was born and where he first heard the dazzling, heterogenous sounds of our world, we are likewise confronted by that need to renew, restore and, hopefully, find redemption.

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Prague Philharmonic Choir

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Urlicht

(Text: Des Knaben Wunderhorn, Band 2, 1808)

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O Röschen rot!
Der Mensch liegt in größter Not!
Der Mensch ligt in größter Pein!
Je lieber möchte 'ich im Himmel sein!
Da kam ich auf einen breiten Weg,
Da kam ein Engelein und wollt 'mich
abweisen.
Ach nein! Ich ließ mich nicht abweisen:
Ich bin von Gott und will wieder zu Gott!
Der liebe Gott wird mir ein Lichtchen
geben,
wird leuchten mir bis in das ewig selig Leben!

O little red rose,
Man lies in greatest need,
Man lies in greatest pain.
All the more I prefer to be in heaven.
Once I came upon a wide road,
there stood an Angel who wanted to turn
me away.
But no, I will not be turned away!
I came from God, and will return to God,
the loving God will give me a little light,
to lighten my way up to eternal, blessed life!

Aufersteh'n

Text: Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1758)/Gustav Mahler

5

Aufersteh'n, ja aufersteh'n wirst du,
Mein Staub, nach kurzer Ruh!
Unsterblich Leben
Wird, der dich rief, dir geben.

Arise, yes, you shall rise again,
my dust, after a short rest!
He who called you
will give you eternal life.

Wieder aufzublüh'n, wirst du gesät!
Der Herr der Ernte geht
Und sammelt Garben
Uns ein, die starben!

You are sown to blossom anew.
The lord of the harvest strides
and gathers sheaves
to us who have passed away.

O glaube, mein Herz, o glaube:
Es geht dir nichts verloren!
Dein ist, ja dein, was du gesehnt,
Dein, was du geliebt, was du gestritten!

Oh believe, my heart, believe:
nothing will get lost!
What you have longed for is yours!
Yours, what you have loved, what you have
strived for!

O glaube: Du wardst nicht umsonst geboren!
Hast nicht umsonst gelebt, gelitten!

Oh believe: you were not born in vain!
Have not lived, suffered to no avail!

Was entstanden ist, das muß vergehen!
Was vergangen, auferstehen!
Hör auf zu beben!
Bereite dich zu leben!

What has come into being must go!
What passed away must rise again!
Tremble and quake no longer!
Prepare yourself to live!

O Schmerz! Du Alldurchdringer!
Dir bin ich entrunnen.
O Tod! Du Allbezwinger!
Nun bist du bezwungen!
Mit Flügeln, die ich mir errungen,
In heißem Liebesstreben

Oh pain! You all-penetrating power!
I am wrested from you!
Oh death! You all-conquering power!
You are vanquished at last!
With wings that I have gained,
in a fervent striving for love

Werd ich entschweben
Zum Licht, zu dem kein Aug' gedrungen!
Sterben werd' ich, um zu leben!

I shall rise to the light,
which no eye has ever seen!
I shall die, in order to live!

Aufersteh'n, ja aufersteh'n wirst du,
Mein Herz, in einem Nu!
Was du geschlagen,
Zu Gott wird es dich tragen!

Arise, yes, you shall rise again,
my heart, in no time!
What you have beaten for and suffered
to God it will bear you!



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