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### Gustav Mahler and the Wunderhorn Period

The works of Gustav Mahler have become some of the cornerstone pieces that make up the Western musical canon. This is due to his ingenious amount of creativity and ability to lead art, with his peers, from the nineteenth century, into the twentieth. Mahler lived and worked in a socio-political landscape that seemed to never be in favor of him. Along with this, he seemed to only be able to succeed because of his ability to persevere through life. It may be argued that his determination is what truly led to his personal success. The literary and philosophical worlds of Mahler are also closely intertwined with his artistic and music life. Meaning that his music, and the aesthetic that it presents is a culmination of his own work, and the world that influenced him. Through this paper, I hope to explore how Mahler's work, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, was a large influence on the fin-de-siècle, and how the landscape of the fin-de-siècle was forever changed by his influence.

### CULTURAL CONTEXT

During the life of Mahler, the culture of Europe was constantly changing as the politics of the land were coming into chaos. In the early life of Mahler, the defeat of the Austrians at the hands of the Prussians, led to the construction of the first German Empire. This was a huge event in

world history as it saw the German city states of the old Holy Roman Empire finally united under a common ruler, that of Prussia. From this great divergence of the past, the Austrian Empire was also beginning to see its decline. This first came with the stock market crash in 1873. Then, the “Zweibund” established the military alliance between the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires that would carry into the first World War. It is also from this large scale political event that the rising wave of anti semitism would reach its crux, and be pushed into the action of propaganda throughout many German speaking lands. Yet, the musical scene was also in full swing during the life of Mahler as the works of Brahms, Bruckner, Berlioz, Strauss, Verdi, Wolf, Dvořák and Debussy were being performed until their deaths. These composers are just to name a few that played a large roll in the formation of Mahler as a composer in his own right.

*Socio-Political Landscape.* In the time following the death of Mahler, Count Harry Kessler was a lover of the homosexual subculture, a soldier, a diplomat, a promoter of modern artists such as Gauguin and Rodin, and an anti semite. Though he himself was a lover of the works of Mahler, knowing that Mahler was not of the pure German bloodline, he thought that Mahler's works could be used in the propaganda war that he was helping to wage in Switzerland. This he did in the faith that his political party would triumph at the close of the day. This, with many other actions that he took, he quoted as being that, “Nothing escapes from politics.”

These events, however, took place in the years following World War I. Mahler had already died in the year 1911 due to the heart defect that he had inherited from his mother. This in itself was extremely unfortunate as Mahler was a man of extreme vitality, which he inherited

from his father. Yet, his passing occurred at the young age of fifty. Still though, his music was being performed in some leftist German and Austrian propaganda as means to show the greatness of Germany. This in itself being very interesting, as besides this, Mahler's music would remain largely unknown to the world for another fifty years when it would be rediscovered; and, he would be credited with some of the common twentieth century compositional techniques which he inaugurated. These techniques gave light to his musical emotions, and ways in which to express them; yet these had never been heard before in western music.

“To our ears, his symphonies embrace portents and threats, contradictions and consultations, and have an ability to both express and induce experiences of dreamlike escape and alienation.” This statement by Peter Franklin, is a clear and articulate way in which to see the world, perhaps, through Mahler's eyes. Individuals who were looking into Mahler's music during his life, and following it, all came to his music with some sort of bias. Most of these biases that they held were political and maintained to the ideas of communism and fascism. People during the time following Mahler, including philosophers, theoreticians, and historians, were also beginning to pose the question if music is simply in existence to just be music, or if it is to be conveying some type of message that transcends its mere existence. During this time following the death of Mahler, there was also a large movement occurring to filter out the aims and goals of late romanticism from the idealism of German life and culture. This was being done in a manner of which to exclude groups that were to be marginalized by the government parties that all were trying to vie for power.

Hans Pfitzner was a member of one of these groups who was trying to vie for power after the end of World War I. At the top of his libretto for the 1917 opera *Palestrina*, there is a quote by Schopenhauer, "Alongside world history there goes, guiltless and unstained by blood, the history of philosophy, science and the arts." Pfitzner was a personal acquaintance of Mahler during his lifetime and was a fan of his works; however, he himself was also a member of the large group of anti semites in Germany. Pfitzner himself proclaimed that he feared nothing more than futurism, the Jews, and cultural bolsheviks. He being a member of one of the groups trying to control the government, and hence, centralized power, played a role in how Mahler's music would be viewed not just after the first World War, but the second as well.

This issue of power also played a very personal role in the life of Mahler, as his music was a reflection of the personal struggles that he faced throughout his life. Power, in the sense that he wrote many of his works in the light of the idea of the German greatness of music and power. Yet, his ability to do so was through the mode of transcending this old ideal to find new greatness. In his own time, this was not accepted as it seemed to be a sell out of the values that were well rooted and established. These values started from the compositions of Mozart and the imperial glory that he brought, then to follow through a long line leading to individuals such as Wagner. However, it is also very likely that the critics of this transcending style of music were also very put off by the simply fact that Mahler had Jewish heritage, making him impossible of reaching the German greatness that they were comparing him to.

Today, Mahler is recognized for the greatness that he did achieve. This greatness though, came from his ability to transcend this preconceived notion of what a great German should be

through his transcendent music. Though he may not have overcome some of the struggles spoken of in his personal life, his music clearly reflects the fact that he was able to do so. This came in his ability, first and foremost, to wrestle with the fact that he was both a German and a Jew. Especially, in a time when anti semitism ran rampant in Europe. His German identity led him to greatness in a musical respect while his Jewish identity led him to conviction in his music work. One social stigmatic identity that he also helped destroy was the idea of the prodigy composer. This had been ingrained, especially in the Germanic public, starting with Mozart and continuing all the way through Mendelssohn and Brahms. He was not terribly educated in music, though he did have early dabblings in some instruments like accordion. What he lacked in the sense of being a well versed music prodigy, he made up for in his own sense. This being that he became a prodigy for the new age composer, whose music is much more meant to transcend the meaningless managomy of making music for music.

It is to be said though, that all the ideas about Mahler and what he meant or stood for that came from the time period during and following his death, are horrible riddled with opinions and biases that come from the political landscape of the era. This is, in fact, inescapable. Yet, this brings so much joy and wonder to the study of Mahler as there can be no true scholar other than formulating one's own opinion on how the socio-political landscape would have affected Mahler.

## DAS KNABEN WUNDERHORN

Mahler was yet another composer in his time to follow with the long standing tradition of composing lieder. Yet, he also understood that his choice of texts by Achim von Arnim and

Clemens Brentano were huge departures from the tradition of lieder text. He understood this so well that he even sent a letter to Ludwig Karpath to express how he desired to unleash this new style of an art form to the world. He described it himself as bringing the song back to the blocks of marble that started this wonderful musical tradition, before other composers imposed their molds upon it. Still, is lieder is innately linked to his own form of writing, making it a wonderful gateway to see the inner workings of the compositional style of Mahler.

*Wunderhorn As Folk Music.* There also must be a clear distinction that must be made in the fact that the texts for the *Wunderhorn* are all pieces that were collected by the poets from a folk basis. Meaning that during this time period, most of the texts that were given to Mahler by Anna Bahr-Mildenburg during his time in Kassel, though new to him, were very familiar to the people who inhabited the area. There is also a very scattered history of the pieces of the *Wunderhorn* as they were all composed in separate times for separate occasions.

Some of the pieces of the *Wunderhorn* are meant to accompany his first four symphonies others were to be solo voice and piano, still others were meant for orchestra and solo voice. Regardless, since the time of Mahler's death, there has been much debate to the authenticity of what was meant to be performed and how it was to be performed. It is generally agreed upon now, though, that what was originally written for piano and for orchestra with solo voice, were meant as originally intended.

*Themes of Wunderhorn.* There are two main themes which are prevalent in the composition of the *Wunderhorn* series. These two being that of the idea of a childlike state and the idea of the

tragedy of war. Each of these scenarios would evoke for many the ideas that are commonly associated with them. For childhood, one would typically imagine the carefree idea of being totally free, finding first love, losing friends, and eventually becoming separate from those who we once knew. In Mahler's version of the child state there is much more of a sense of disillusionment that ensues. Also, the idea of war would bring the extremely common idea of the great evil and the great good with the good conquering all and the war being terrible and bloody, but with good cause. Mahler, though, still taking the idea of disillusionment and abandonment on the battlefield to put the listener in an eerie mood.

The portions of the Wunderhorn which are aimed at the child state are interesting to focus on the text as they show a type of mystic air that surrounds the child. One of the most interesting pieces from the cycle that was able to be analyzed had to do with a great juxtaposition between the life of a free girl and a trapped man. *Lied des Verfolgten im Turm* or Song of the persecuted man in the tower, seems to be a commentary on the happy go lucky nature of youth against the reality of being an adult. However, there is also a stark reality that is at play in this text as well. The prisoner who starts the song is one who laments his position in life, but is still very grateful that his thoughts can be something of his that is always free. Then, with the introduction of the female, there is a sense that to her understanding, there is only one type of freedom and that is of the worldly sense of being able to roam. Again, the prisoner reminds her that only thoughts are the things that can truly be free. It is then seen that the girl is some type of love interest to this prisoner in the tower, and she wishes that the prisoner could be free because she simply does not know how she will be able to live if he is to be cooped up in the tower. Again, the prisoner reminds her that only thoughts can be truly free. Upon hearing this, she wishes that he would

only be free to be with her, so that they may live together in love. The prisoner then makes the ultimate word choice and says, "...if this is so then I renounce love!" This being a wonderful commentary on the idea that Mahler must have held himself that freedom is not always what people would think it would be. This, especially, would be important in today's society as we value our freedoms, as we should. Yet the ones that are not always so obvious to us are the ones in which we should cherish the most, the most among these being that no person can ever take our free thoughts away. In the time of this composition, Mahler himself may have even been reflecting on the fact that though he was trapped in his own high tower of being a Jew, the girl of Germany called out to him, but since her thoughts were not free, there was no way that she would understand the freedom which Mahler had in his tower.

The other main concentration of the work, regarding that of war, is another topic that Mahler takes into depth, especially through reflecting on those that were not commonly thought of in his time. This would be the case in the work *Nicht wiedersehen* or No reunion! This song stood out especially as it is a reflection on the idea that those who leave home for war may not always come back to those that they left. In this case, some gentleman left his love for the field of battle and expected to come home to his love once more. Yet, by the time of his return she had already died three days before from grieving and weeping. This is something that is interesting as before this time, the idea of war was extremely constricted to the idea that only the stories of those that have been to the field needed to be told. Not only this, but these were the ones that got the most attention as they tended to captivate the audience in a way that other tales could not do.

## CONCLUSION



The *Wunderhorn* and the period in which it was written was one in which Mahler began to develop a style that critically reflected on the climate of his time. This then led to the great controversy that was his work and also led to the eventual refusal of it for many years. Still, the *Wunderhorn* remains to this day a shining light to the idea of text settings and conveying unconventional messages in unconventional fashions.

Works Cited

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