De Waart Conducts Mahler

Gustav Mahler was one of the leading conductors of his day. His tenures at the Vienna Opera and in New York, at the Philharmonic and Metropolitan Opera, left an enduring mark on their musical and production standards. He was also one of the last great composers in the Austro-German tradition. Tonight we hear his Ninth Symphony, music of extraordinary emotional directness.

GUSTAV MAHLER

Born 7 July 1860; Kalischt, Bohemia (now Kalište, Czech Republic)
Died 18 May 1911; Vienna, Austria

Symphony No. 9 in D major

Composed: 1908-09
First performance: 26 June 1912; Vienna, Austria
Last MSO performance: September 2005; Andreas Delfs, conductor
Instrumentation: 4 flutes, piccolo, 4 oboes (4th doubling English horn), 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, e-flat clarinet, 4 bassoons (4th doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, 2 timpani, percussion (bass drum, chimes, cymbals, glockenspiel, snare drum, tam tam, triangle, large bell), 2 harps, strings
Approximate duration: 81 minutes

Gustav Mahler finished his Ninth Symphony in the leisurely summer of 1909, at his new retreat at Toblach (now Dobbiaco) in the southern Tyrol region. It was the last he completed and was — along with its immediate predecessor, the song-symphony *Das Lied von der Erde* — one he never lived to hear. (His Tenth Symphony was left unfinished.) Like *Das Lied*, there's sorrow and surrender here, but at its conclusion there's no depression, just a quiet ecstasy. As Leonard Bernstein rightly observed, its final moments come as close to depicting a peaceful death as music ever has.

The Ninth's four-movement structure is unusual (slow-fast-fast-slow), creating a sort of mirror image in which a slow-fast first half is offset by a fast-slow second half. Mahler stated that his Fourth Symphony comes nearest to the Ninth because both begin with innocence, then gain experience, then struggle to regain innocence.

Alban Berg (1885-1935) called the gargantuan first movement "the most glorious [Mahler] ever wrote," and went on to say that "the whole movement is based on a premonition of death which constantly recurs... that is why the tenderest passages are followed by tremendous climaxes like new interruptions of a volcano." Mahler biographer Donald Mitchell agrees that this vast Andante comodo is organized around the principle of "a recurring, expanding, and exploding crescendo" — more so than the principle of a traditional sonata or sonata-rondo form. Listen for two themes that saturate the movement: 1) a descending whole step (as in the famous "ewig" of *Das Lied von der Erde*); 2) an ascending three-note motive: a minor third followed by a whole step (e.g., F#-A-B).

The second movement — "in the tempo of a leisurely Ländler (folk dance), somewhat clumsy and very crude" — finds Mahler in a sardonic mood. There are three dances and three main tempos that alternate with one another: 1) a rustic country dance with rising scales on the violas and bassoons, with bagpipe-like drones in the strings; 2) an inebriated waltz that becomes faster every time it appears; 3) a slow Ländler reminiscent of an old-fashioned minuet. (Listen for the first movement's descending two-note phrase.) At the coda, disquieting timpani strokes usher in an eccentric contrabassoon solo. The music starts to fall apart, but regains its initial joviality at the very end.

In Mahler's later years, Bach was an important influence on his music. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the "exercise in musical hostility" (David Hurwitz) he termed Rondo-Burleske. Here, the composer displays all his contrapuntal skills, demanding the utmost in orchestral virtuosity, as motives are flung among strings, woodwinds, and brass. The movement's basic form is A-B-A-B-A-C-A. (A is called the ritornello; B and C are called episodes.) The main theme (A) is angular, stormy, and busily polyphonic. The first episode (B) is at the same fast speed, but in a major key and with new melodies, offering an agreeable contrast — until a rude cymbal crash initiates an even fiercer rendition of the ritornello. When we reach C, Mahler provides something entirely fresh — a peaceful respite of calm tranquility. The solo trumpet plays a little five-note melodic turn (*grupetto*), something we heard in the opening Andante, as the violins play a shimmering tremolo. Now the strings develop this theme — which will become a principal motive in the final Adagio — into an unfeigned expression of tenderness. When the full ritornello (A) eventually returns, it is played again and again, growing faster, louder, and more hostile. "A more graphic illustration of malicious anger it would be difficult to imagine." (Hurwitz)

Mahler sets the intensely lyrical final movement in the richly warm key of D-flat major, a half step lower than the brighter D major of the opening movement. As an introduction, unison violins play the *grupetto*, a motive that will pervade the Finale. Then the strings present the hymn-like principal theme, one that calls to mind "Abide with Me." (Did Mahler hear it through the church door during his tenure in New York City?) The second subject is a rising phrase, first heard on bassoon, then on the basso-profundo contrabassoon. Mahler varies these two principal melodic elements to develop this beautifully expressive movement. (Again, listen for the influence of Bach.) In the coda, the muted strings play as the rest of the orchestra stays silent. By the end, only the disintegrated grupetto remains, becoming fainter and fainter as the music fades into the ether.

"Audiences are not mistaken when they feel an emotional charge as the music fragments and grows ever more rarefied," writes Mahler scholar Henry-Louis La Grange. "This work invariably carries the listener with it. It seems to compel its performers to surpass themselves and its audience to feel at one with each other."

Recommended recording: Herbert von Karajan, Berlin Philharmonic (Deutsche Grammophon)