



MAHLER'S SIXTH SYMPHONY Triumph in Tragedy

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It is often said that in his Sixth Symphony, composed in 1903–05, Mahler most nearly approached the classical, four-movement format; and there is undeniably an element of truth in the observation. But what is perhaps more important in the work are those features that could have been imagined only by Mahler himself. He was always deeply conscious of the past, and perhaps nowhere more so than in this first movement, which can certainly be interpreted as reaffirming the long-established tradition of first-movement, sonata form in "Classical" symphonies. We have an exposition – of which Mahler even calls for the traditional recap – with clearly defined first and second subjects, a development and a recapitulation.

But as soon as we embark on our journey through the symphony itself, how different everything looks and sounds. The musical materials out of which Mahler builds his forms are often of a character that, at the time he conceived them, were novel – even, some have thought, alien – to the world of the symphony as it had come to be known and understood. Hence the particular importance of those conscious formal recognitions of the past with which Mahler assured his orchestras and his audiences, and himself too perhaps, that however radical and subversive his invention might be, there was in the Sixth Symphony no conscious abandonment of the past, but rather constant reminders of what the present and future owed to it.

In one dimension the work powerfully adheres to a fundamental formal principle of Mahler's symphonic thinking: what I call the "frames", by means of which the first movement and finale enclose a sequence of varied or contrasted middle movements. The principal feature of Mahler's framing method – its objective, indeed – was the resolution in and by the finale of the "drama" that has been outlined but left unresolved by the first movement. Mahler's first movements almost invariably leave us with suspended expectations, and leave the drama's denouement as the main business of the finale.

The conflict fundamental to the symphony's overall drama – is it life (or love) that is to triumph, or will it be death? – is spelled out by the duality of the movement's first and second subjects. On the one hand, the relentless, pounding rhythm of the march (in the manner of one of the late *Wunderhorn* songs), death on the move, as it were; on the other, Mahler's portrait of Alma, one of the most intense and surging string melodies he was ever to write – the very embodiment of human passion. And then there is the symphony's famous motto, which combines the basic march rhythm (drums) with a triad (three trumpets, *fortissimo*) that has hardly affirmed the tonic major (A major) before it fades into the minor (*pianissimo*). Which mode will have the upper hand we can't predict at this point. That revelation must await the completion of the drama at the end of the last movement.

The Sixth concludes with one of the most imposing finales Mahler ever wrote, or most a one-movement symphony in its own right. Its half-hour duration is in itself remarkable, and the movement incorporates a huge variety of different musics (my plural is deliberate), including, naturally, all the necessary and explicit references to the materials out of which the first movement was built and which must now be reconciled – or not, as the case may be. But first, there is a slow introduction to be encountered and

absorbed, another unique stretch of orchestral music made up of a mosaic of widely contrasting themes and textures, precious slides and extravagant leaps, shimmering tremolos and fiercely exploited extremes of dynamics, all freely treated in the manner of a fantasia, sometimes closely approaching the quasi-Expressionist language of Schoenberg and Berg. One might think of it almost as an unnumbered *Orchesterstück* by Mahler, interpolated into his symphony in the shape of this introduction. In terms of character it is both nocturnal and agitated, but more nightmarish than dreamlike. And then comes the resumption of the great march which got the whole work underway in the first place.

How can one hope to describe a movement of this size and scope in a few words? Best perhaps to reduce it to one or two simple but basic observations. First, that time and time again the music rises to huge climaxes (shades of the Ninth's first movement to come) in pursuit of triumph, only to encounter defeat in the famous hammer-blows, three as first envisaged by Mahler, but the third later abandoned by him, perhaps out of superstition, perhaps because the absence of the third blow might itself represent death's proximity, not its distance. (It is difficult to my mind, however, to hear the absence of a musical image; difficult, that is, to make absence *audible*.) When at long last we reach the final return of the motto and the final proclamation that it is A minor – death – that has triumphed, not life and love, we think back inevitably to the ecstatic A major of the "Alma theme" that closed the first movement and seemed to promise victory. It was not to be.

So much for the all-important "frame". What about the middle movements?

I hope I may be forgiven if I refrain from dealing in detail with the disputatious subject of the "correct" order of movements 2 and 3, one which continues to excite so

much attention. Here are the known facts. When Mahler composed the symphony – first imagined and created it – the Scherzo succeeded the first movement and was followed by the Andante. This was how the work was originally printed and published. However, there is also significant evidence of Mahler's uncertainty with regard to the order, which led him finally to reverse the original sequence, with the Andante now preceding the Scherzo. There is no doubt that it was in this order that the symphony was performed under Mahler at its premiere on 27 May 1906 in Essen and repeated at its Vienna premiere on 4 January 1907, Mahler again conducting; and it is in this order that we hear the work on this recording. I myself believe that any serious musical discussion of the symphony must take into account both Mahler's first and second thoughts about the placing of the Scherzo, but here any such further speculation must give way to a few comments on the middle movements themselves, always bearing in mind the evolution of the "drama" contained within them.

The first movement over, the Andante unfolds one of Mahler's most inspired melodies for strings, to which Schoenberg would pay special attention. It provides a stretch of repose after the tensions and conflicts of the preceding march, which has ended positively in A major with the "Alma theme". The Andante continues to affirm the possibility that life and love may still prevail. Furthermore, this remarkable slow movement, in its contrasting episodes, reminds us of another world altogether, that of nature, its sounds, its distances, its peace and serenity. There has already been a glimpse of this in the first movement, and the sound of cowbells plus our reacquaintance with E major, Mahler's "heavenly" key (cf. Symphony 4), in this haunting Andante serve as indication that we have still to await the resolution of the drama. The cowbells, in fact, are to be heard again, even amid the storms of the finale, by

which time, however, it is quite clear to which abyss the momentum of the music is leading us.

All doubt about that is swept away by the opening of the Scherzo, when, to one's utter astonishment, it seems for a moment as if one has returned to the march of the first movement and to A minor. But there is something distinctly odd about it: the great death march has been redone in dance form, in triple time – in short, it has become a dance of death. This is one of the most daring of Mahler's many feats of imagination, and clearly he himself was disconcerted, perhaps even shocked by it. Hence at least part of the reason, I believe, for his doubts and nervousness about the movement's final location. As for the rest, the Scherzo's trio sections, more relaxed in character, pursue their own irregularities of rhythm; and while the movement concludes *pianissimo*, the last sounds we hear are from the timpani (solo) and double basses, outlining once again the A minor that we now know is to be the finale's ultimate destination.

What more is there to be said? Death proves to be the victor; but such is the nature of great art, and the act of living creativity it embodies, that the destined end of Mahler's "tragic" Sixth Symphony also represents an unqualified compositional triumph.