

# MUSIC OF THE MONTH

## CONCERNING MAHLER

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

GUSTAV MAHLER and his symphonies continue to be a storm-centre of impassioned discussion wherever music is a factor in public taste.

In Europe they persist in the amiable habit of giving Mahler Festivals—week-long affairs devoted to serial performances of the Austrian's brooding scores; and in our own relatively benighted land we are not allowed to starve for lack of Mahlerian sustenance. Mr. Stransky with the Philharmonic Orchestra and Mr. Mengelberg with the National Symphony have served us in New York, this season, the First and Fourth Symphonies; Mr. Stock in Chicago has given the Seventh (for the first time in America), and in Philadelphia Mr. Stokowski, with his orchestra and Mr. Townsend's chorus, brought the season to a resounding close with a memorable performance of the huge Second Symphony.

But the "Mahler Question" is no nearer settlement than it ever was. Discussion concerning his qualities as a music-maker persists with unabated fury, dividing those who (like Mr. Mengelberg, Mr. Stokowski, and innumerable European musicians of eminence and experience) regard him as one of the great men of music, from those who (like most of our American critics) regard him as the abomination of desolation. Mr. Mengelberg, for instance, ranks him with the major symphonists—with Beethoven and Berlioz.<sup>1</sup> Mr. W. J. Henderson, for another instance, sees in him only the inspiration for a delectable pun, and deplores our affliction by "Mahleria." For ourselves, we choose to remain on the fence, for the simple reason that we know only four of Mahler's nine symphonies. Mr. William Winter, to be sure, once asserted that you do not have to eat the whole of an egg to tell whether it is bad or not. But the creative work of a

<sup>1</sup> The conception of Berlioz as a major symphonist is Mr. Mengelberg's, not ours.

man's lifetime is hardly so simple a proposition as an egg; and, moreover, Mr. Winter was probably the most intolerant, bigoted, and intellectually unscrupulous critic who ever achieved distinction in this or any other civilized country, despite his scholarship and his mastery of English prose. So we can safely ignore his breakfast-born parable. When we have heard Mahler's *Lied von der Erde*, and his third, fifth, sixth, seventh, and ninth symphonies, we shall endeavor to decide for ourselves whether he is an authentic genius or an inflated mediocrity.

Meanwhile, there is no reason why we should not consider calmly, and without prejudice, certain phases of his output as a composer.

A dozen years ago, upon the occasion of the first performance in New York of one of these celebrated symphonies, Mr. Richard Aldrich summed up with precision and justice Mahler's special relation to the tendencies of his time: "He occupies," said Mr. Aldrich, "a curious and rather anomalous position in the field of modern orchestral music. He is no follower of the modern idea of the 'programme' in music, as it is most characteristically embodied in the work of Richard Strauss. What he writes he calls 'symphonies,' though they are symphonies often in only a rather loose acceptance of the term. They do not follow closely, sometimes they do not follow at all, the outlines of symphonic form. Yet he does not intend them to be listened to as the interpretation of any prearranged programme; he objects to having any programmes laid down for his music, or even to permitting any thematic analyses to appear in the concert-room where it is played, though detailed analyses of his symphonies have appeared elsewhere, apparently with his sanction. The story is told that at a supper after a concert where his C minor symphony was played, he broke out into a denunciation of 'programme-books.' Springing up from the table, he cried: 'Away with programme-books, which beget false ideas! Let the public have its own thoughts about the work performed. . . . Let no preconceived ideas be instilled into it!' . . . Yet Mahler himself has given in many of his works hints, and more than hints, of underlying poetic ideas outside and beyond the music itself—wherein is to be found much of the essence of the programme-music idea.

“ . . . Mr. Mahler, who wrote explanatory titles and mottoes to the movements of his first symphonies, ended by publishing them without any, to be listened to as purely absolute music.”

With Mr. Mahler's views concerning the worthlessness of that pestiferous fly upon the tonal wheel, the programme-annotator, there will probably be few to quarrel. But when Mr. Mahler, gazing with indignant compassion upon an afflicted public as he wiped his streaming eyes, begged that “no preconceived ideas be instilled into it,” he forgot, as Mr. Aldrich indicates, that he himself had not been guiltless of interfering with the public's “own thoughts about the work performed.” Dr. Rudolf Mengelberg, in his programme-notes for the Mahler Festival held at Amsterdam in May, 1920, quoted what he described as “a short synopsis” prepared by Mahler for the performances of his *First Symphony* at Budapest in 1889, at Hamburg in 1892, and at Weimar in 1894. In this “synopsis,” says Dr. Mengelberg, Mahler “wrote somewhat extensively” concerning the programmatic significance of his symphony, which both Mr. Stransky and Mr. Mengelberg played a few months ago in New York. Apparently Mahler was not then so passionately eager to leave the public to “its own thoughts” in the presence of his music.

In Mahler's “synopsis,” the *First Symphony* was divided and characterized as follows:

- I. Spring and no end. The Introduction portrays the awakening of Nature on the first morning.
- II. Mosaic.
- III. Under full sail.
- IV. The Hunter's Funeral Procession: a Dead March in the manner of Callot.

As an elucidation, the following, *when necessary*, may serve: The composer found the stimulus for this music in a grotesquely humorous picture, “The Hunter's Funeral Procession,” contained in an old nursery-book well known to all children in South Germany: The animals of the forest escort the coffin of the dead forester to his grave; hares carry the bannaret, and a band of Bohemian musicians, accompanied by music-making cats, toads, crows, etc., together with deer, foxes, and other four-legged and feathered woodland animals, in comical attitudes, escort the procession. This movement is intended as the expression of a mood now ironically merry, now gloomily contemplative, and is followed at once by the last movement, “From Hell to Par-

adise" (*Allegro furioso*), as the impetuous outburst of a sorely stricken heart.

#### V. From Hell to Paradise.

When this symphony was given at Pesh in 1889, the programme described it as "a Symphonic Poem in Two Parts." At Weimar, in 1894, it was entitled "Titan" (after Jean Paul Richter), and the motto: "From the Days of Youth," was given to the first part, while the second part bore the tag: "*Commedia umana.*"

What it all means (or seems to have been intended to mean), Heaven only knows. The connection with Richter's romance is not easy to trace. Some have thought that Mahler was poking fun at the programmatic music-makers of his day—though it is difficult to think of Mahler as satirical to that extent. Dr. Rudolf Mengelberg, in his Amsterdam notes, dared to speculate as follows:

Though Mahler in this synopsis uses the word "ironical," the term bears no relation to the dominant spirit of the whole composition, but has to do only with the middle portion of the work, which expresses the forced gaiety of a deeply wounded heart. There is so much sadness in this music, so deep and tragical a grief, that the thought of irony would hardly occur to an unprejudiced listener; and as the song of sorrow dies out, the deep consolation that is inspired by the wonderful song of the 'cellos would entirely obliterate all ideas of irony.

As for Mahler's accredited apostle, Paul Stefan, he has observed naïvely that "a programme is unnecessary." Possibly. But the composer, at one time, seems to have thought differently.

A few weeks after the performances of the First Symphony in New York, Mr. Mengelberg played the Fourth, which was by no means unknown in the metropolis. This symphony, like most of Mahler's other works, is steeped in mystery. Mr. Stefan, undaunted apostle that he is, confers upon it the soothing epithets, "shorter and more peaceful." But those are, of course, relative terms: Mr. Stefan means shorter and more peaceful than the huge Third Symphony, which is in six movements (the first alone filling three quarters of an hour), and requires a female chorus, a boy choir, bells in the distance, an alto solo, and a huge orchestra; offering us in its programmatic contents the awakening of Pan, a Procession of Bacchus, an angels' chorus, and an eventual

transit "from the land of Zarathustra into the Christian heaven." No wonder Mr. Stefan found it needful to requisition the adjective "cyclopean." No wonder, also, that after this formidable symphonic dinosaur, the Fourth Symphony seems to Mr. Stefan "shorter and more peaceful." Almost any symphony would seem so—even the turbulent *Domestica* of Strauss.

Mahler's Fourth is really, however, a quite simple and digestible affair. In it Mahler basks and revels in that atmosphere of elaborately contrived ingenuousness and naïveté that he loved so dearly. For Mahler was only a little less happy when he was approximating the style of a folk-song than when he was trying to duplicate one of the gigantic musical "jubilees" of the late Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore, with their choruses of 20,000 and their 2,000 instrumentalists reinforced by cannon-shots and anvils. His imagination aspired to the grandiose and the apocalyptic with as unterrified an audacity as if his ancestral memories were rooted in the dreamer of Patmos. He believed that he could speak at will with the artlessness of the Bohemian countryside or in accents weighty with mystical revelation. One can imagine him fancying himself at his ease among those illuminated beings described by Plato in the *Phaedo*: "They hear the voices and oracles of the gods, and see them in visions, and have intercourse with them face to face; and they see the moon and stars as they really are." You perceive him in one of his comfortable strolls across the evening landscape, noting the familiar processes of the sky and the moon and the "wind on the heath," and telling himself, with Jasper Petulengro, that "life is very sweet, brother; who would wish to die?"—and then, suddenly remembering that he is a Symphonist with a Revelation, calling out, as one divinely chosen:

Bring me my bow of burning gold,  
Bring me my arrows of desire—

like an inconceivably solemn Blake.

"The solemn is safe," said Browning; but he was not thinking of the solemn in art. It is unnecessary to attempt an appraisal of the aesthetic worth of Mahler's dallings with the apocryphal, or to guess at the real value of his immense portentousness. It is enough to note here that it constitutes one extreme of his

astonishing imaginative gamut—this quality which his spokesmen call his “heroic sublimity, the pure exaltation of the gods themselves.” The other extreme is seen in his passion for the naïve, the intimately candid and heart-easing—a conveyance (whether spontaneous or skillfully simulated) of peasant humor and simplicity, the homely ingenuousness of the folk-spirit, “rich and human, smelling of sun-baked fields and smoky kitchens, yet tender and many-colored.” Mahler in this vein is undeniably engaging and persuasive, even touching, when he does not sustain it too inexorably; and it is the vein of the G major Symphony.

The words sung by the soprano voice in the last movement are those of an old Bavarian folk-song, *Der Himmel hängt voll Geigen* (“The heavens hang full of fiddles”) drawn from the famous anthology called *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. The poem, which is too long to quote, describes with inimitable gusto and naïveté a perfect peasant-paradise of the Middle-Ages: a delectably literal and materialistic heaven where the suppressed desires of the mediæval folk achieve a glorious consummation—a paradisaical home-life filled with merriment and ease and gastronomic satisfactions, where game, fish, vegetables, wine, and fruit may be had for the asking, where hares and deer run invitingly about the streets, and bread is baked by angels. St. John brings forth his lamb, St. Luke his ox. Herod is the butcher, St. Martha the cook. Cologne’s eleven thousand virgins dance without teasing, while Cecilia and her relations make an excellent court orchestra, and St. Ursula smiles benignly upon the revels.

When Walter Damrosch performed this work of Mahler’s at a concert of the New York Symphony Orchestra in Carnegie Hall Nov. 6, 1904, for the first time in America, he observed in his introductory remarks that it was not possible to say whether the poem influenced the character of the whole work, or whether the first three movements impelled the composer to resort to the poem as the final accentuation of his imaginative plan. But Mr. Krehbiel in his *Tribune* review declared that the soprano solo “comes at the end to present an index of the contents of the preceding movements, somewhat as the tenor solo prologue does in Berlioz’s *Romeo et Juliette* symphony. The vital difference

between the procedures of the two composers (the advantage manifestly resting with Berlioz) is that one prepares the hearer for what is to come, while the other tells him the significance of what he has heard."

We come now to the last of the Mahler symphonies heard in these parts during the season just ended—the Second, impressively performed by Mr. Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra on May 6th and 7th, at the Academy of Music in that admirable city toward which you can proceed hence "every hour on the hour."

The work is vast in conception and projection. It is a tonal allegory of the life of man—a deeply-felt and passionately earnest portrayal of his sufferings, despairs, felicities, aspirations, his death, resurrection and spiritual triumph. To express these emotional and imaginative immensities, Mahler calls for an instrumental apparatus that must ever be the despair of those directors and guarantors of orchestras who have to dig into their bank accounts and pay the inevitable deficits incurred by that most expensive of luxuries, a modern symphonic organization. Mahler requires here, in addition to the ordinary orchestral forces (with "as many strings as possible"), a brass band with kettledrums behind the scenes, an organ, soprano and alto soloists, and a mixed chorus.

When we heard this work in Philadelphia, it was magnificently sung and played by Mr. Stokowski's forces and the admirable chorus of Mr. Stephen Townsend, and there was then no denying the extraordinarily affecting quality of many pages in the score (it occupies an hour and forty minutes in performance). It is in some respects the most musically memorable of the four Mahler Symphonies that we know. There are dull spots in the first and second movements; but the Scherzo and the contralto solo contain writing of singular beauty, and the Finale—the music of resurrection and spiritual fulfillment—is superb and overwhelming. Mahler need not have written another page than this to have deserved, in Mr. Swinburne's phrase, to be "remembered with distinction and mentioned with honor."

LAWRENCE GILMAN.

# PROGRESS OF THE WORLD

BY WILLIS FLETCHER JOHNSON

PERFECTION is not so often attained that we could afford to overlook the example of it which has been presented in the reception and entertainment of Professor Marie Sklodowska Curie in this country. We might adapt to the occasion the tribute which *Punch* many years ago paid to Joseph Chamberlain on what was probably the most trying episode of his career, that he had "said just what he ought to have said, and done what he ought to have done." There was no affected lion-worship, nor was there the slightest failure to recognize the surpassing greatness of the guest. All that was said and done was, we are sure, just what she would have liked, had it been given her to prescribe it in advance; which was of course, as we have suggested, the perfection of hospitality. Most felicitous was the presentation to her of a quantity of radium, of which, although she was its discoverer, she had not formerly possessed an atom; and equally felicitous—if there were a super-superlative we should use it—was her announcement that she should use the rich gift in study and experimentation for ridding the world of what has to-day become its most formidable and terror-bearing scourge, the protean-formed lesion of cancer. Memory fails to recall another visit of a distinguished guest to this country which was entitled to be regarded with more complete satisfaction than this.

Germany at the eleventh hour agreed to the demands of the Allies, and thus condemned herself beyond salvation. She had been protesting, down to the last moment, that the thing was impossible. But just as Ferdinand Foch was about to order a forward movement of the French army, she suddenly discovered that the impossible was entirely possible and indeed easy. So she began paying the indemnity. It is interesting to recall that July 14 next will be the fiftieth anniversary of France's payment