



MAHLER Symphonie No.3

Anne Sofie von Otter
WIENER PHILHARMONIKER | PIERRE BOULEZ



SUPER AUDIO CD

SURROUND



Gustav Mahler: Symphonie No. 3

SACD 1

[59'40]

ERSTE ABTEILUNG

PART I / PREMIÈRE PARTIE

1. Kräftig. Entschieden

[33'34]

ZWEITE ABTEILUNG

PART II / SECONDE PARTIE

2. Tempo di Menuetto.

[9'28]

Sehr mäßig

3. Comodo. Scherzando.

[16'36]

Ohne Hast

SACD 2

[35'48]

4. Sehr langsam. Misterioso.

[9'19]

Durchaus *ppp*

"O Mensch! Gib acht!" (alto solo)

Text: Friedrich Nietzsche, "Also sprach Zarathustra"

5. Lustig im Tempo

[4'06]

und keck im Ausdruck

"Bimm bamm! Es sangen drei Engel"

(chorus, alto solo)

Text: "Des Knaben Wunderhorn"

6. Langsam. Ruhevoll. Empfunden

[22'21]

ANNE SOFIE VON OTTER, mezzo-soprano

Frauenchor des Wiener Singvereins

Women's Chorus of the Vienna Singverein · Chœur de femmes du Singverein de Vienne

Chorus Master / Einstudierung / direction: Johannes Prinz

Wiener Sängerknaben

Vienna Boys' Choir · Petits Chanteurs de Vienne · Chorus Master: Gerald Wirth

WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

WERNER HINK, violin solo · HANS PETER SCHUH, posthorn solo (cor de postillon)

IAN BOUSFIELD, trombone solo (Posaune)

Pierre Boulez

MAHLER: SYMPHONY NO. 3

Henry-Louis de La Grange

The composer who writes “a major work, literally reflecting the whole world, is himself only an instrument being played by the whole universe”. This oft-quoted phrase could have been uttered only by Mahler, and then only in a rare moment of exaltation such as that which inspired one of his most imposing, ambitious and vast creations, the Third Symphony.

During the early summer of 1895 he returned to Steinbach on the Attersee, where he had composed the Second Symphony and there wrote the minuet to which he later gave the name *Blumenstück*, inspired by the flower-strewn meadow surrounding the hut. Even at this early stage he already had a plan of the whole work, one of the

most ambitious designs ever conceived for a symphony. Starting out from inert matter – rocks and inanimate Nature – he could already glimpse how the vast epic would proceed, one by one, through the stages of evolution: to flowers, animals and mankind itself, before ascending to universal love, which he imagined as a supremely transcendental force.

This programme passed through several different versions, but it must be stressed that Mahler finalized it before he embarked on the score. At no point did he ever disown it, even though he later forbade the publication of any explanatory text when his works were performed. The opening movement was initially called

"The Arrival of Summer" or "Pan's Awakening" and, later, "Procession of Bacchus". It appears that the initial Allegro (actually composed the following year, 1896), was not yet preceded in his scheme by the long introduction in D minor, music that Mahler was later to say could have been subheaded "What the Mountains Tell Me." The other movements already bore their definitive titles:

2. "What the Flowers of the Meadow Tell Me"
3. "What the Animals of the Forest Tell Me"
4. "What the Night Tells Me" (later changed to "What Mankind Tells Me")
5. "What the Cuckoo Tells Me" (replaced by "Morgenglocken" [Morning Bells] and, later, by "What the Angels Tell Me")
6. "What Love Tells Me"

In Mahler's original plan, there was a seventh, movement, "What the Child Tells Me": the song *Das himmlische Leben*, written three years earlier and subsequently taken over into the Fourth Symphony.

After the minuet, the next four movements were written during this first summer of 1895. For the opening movement, which was to be the longest of the six, Mahler merely noted down a few musical sketches, deferring composition itself until the following summer. When he returned to Steinbach on 11 June 1896 with the intention of resuming work, it proved, as always, far more difficult to reimmerse himself in the score than he had envisaged, the transition from his life as a performing artist to that of a creative musician invariably causing him considerable anguish. Yet in less than a month, by 11 July 1896, the first movement was completed in short score.

For the present, the introduction was still conceived as a separate movement, but it was gradually assuming a new significance: no longer would it depict soulless, lifeless Nature imprisoned beneath the winter ice, but instead the stifling heat of summer, when "not a breath stirs, all life is suspended, and the sun-drenched air

trembles and vibrates. At intervals there come the moans [...] of captive life struggling for release from the clutches of lifeless, rigid Nature". Alive to the "mystery of Nature", Mahler believed that music alone could "capture its essence". A letter written at the time finds him both lucid and elated: "My symphony will be something the world has never heard before. In it Nature herself acquires a voice and tells secrets so profound that they are perhaps glimpsed only in dreams!"

In an attempt to justify the extraordinary length of its opening movement, Mahler divided the symphony into two *Abteilungen*, or sections: the first comprises the initial Allegro, while the second includes the remaining five movements. Originally he had intended to impose a sense of thematic unity on all six, and though this plan was not finally adopted, he did use several motifs from the opening Allegro in the fourth and sixth movements.

The first performance of the Third Symphony, in Berlin on 9 March 1897, was incomplete, comprising only the second, third and sixth movements. The booing nearly drowned the applause; and the critics of the German capital surpassed themselves, writing of the "tragicomedy" of a composer lacking both imagination and talent, and of a work made up of "banalities" and "a thousand reminiscences". But they were particularly exasperated by the final movement, with its "religious and mystic airs", and dismissed its main theme as "a formless tapeworm".

Five years later, however, in June 1902, the symphony was performed complete for the first time at Krefeld in the Rhineland, and on this occasion it was the contemplative power of the final Adagio that conquered even the most wilfully hostile listeners. In the view of one critic, it was "the most beautiful slow movement since Beethoven". The evening's triumph opened the doors to a new era in Mahler's life and career.

1. *Kräftig. Entschieden* (Powerfully. Decisively). The first movement of the Third Symphony is still cast in the sonata form that had obsessed Romantic composers anxious to maintain the Beethovenian ideal – with the difference that there are two expositions instead of one. Stated *fortissimo* on eight horns in unison, the initial march-theme serves as a gateway to the rest of the work and plays an essential role throughout the whole of this opening movement. It, too, refers to the past, in this case to the final movement of Brahms's First Symphony.

As we have already seen, the most striking feature of this opening movement is the stylistic contrast, not to say disparity, between the two main subject groups. The first subject is music of darkness and chaos: noble, powerful and grandiose in the most Romantic and traditional sense of the term. Embodying motionless, imprisoned Nature, it takes its place in the grand symphonic tradition established by

Beethoven and continued by Bruckner. The second subject, evoking the Bacchic procession, is distinguished by its blatantly populist character; it belongs to the “lower” world of brass bands and military music whose cheerful simplicity, candour and even naivety for Mahler invariably concealed a musical and intellectual mechanism which shaped and structured the musical discourse with conscious, unrelenting rigour.

2. *Tempo di Menuetto. Sehr mässig* (Very moderate). The flowers of the meadow at Steinbach inspired Mahler to write a minuet whose tribute to the past has nothing ironic about it but which dances with an exquisite grace. Two episodes alternate in symmetrical fashion. Although they are identical in tempo, the second seems faster by virtue of its shorter note-values.

3. *Comodo. Scherzando. Ohne Hast* (Unhurriedly). Although binary rather than ternary, this movement is the symphony's scherzo. With the exception of the Trio, all

the thematic material is borrowed from the song *Ablösung im Sommer* (Relief of the Summer Guard), in which the spring cuckoo is replaced by the summer nightingale. The song's melodic material is repeatedly transformed and developed, with contrast being provided by one of the most magical moments in any of Mahler's works, namely, the passage for solo post-horn, which is played "in the distance", i.e., off-stage. Mahler's contemporaries were scandalized by the alleged "banality" of this long solo, but it delights us today as a moment of unalloyed poetry. No less notable are the great wave of impassioned anguish and "cry of terror" that ring out towards the end of the movement in a powerful brass fanfare. It is in this way, Mahler suggests, that the animals react to mankind's intrusion upon their world.

4. *Sehr langsam* (Very slow). *Misterioso*. The role of Nietzsche's "Drunken Song" or "Midnight Song" differs little from that of *Urlicht* in the Second Symphony. In the

middle of the night, at the darkest and deepest hour, Life makes Zarathustra feel ashamed of his anguish and doubts and bids him meditate between the twelve strokes of midnight on the secret of the worlds, their profound pain and even more mysterious joy, and on the ardour of that joy which, far from bewailing its ephemeral fragility, yearns for eternity. In the course of this meditation, man discovers the way of truth and accedes to a higher form of existence in the childlike purity of the fifth movement and the mystic contemplation of the sixth. The form here is very free, with deliberately indistinct rhythms and "weak" harmonic progressions suggesting night's immobility. Everything revolves around contrasts of timbre and register.

5. *Lustig im Tempo und keck im Ausdruck* (Cheerful in tempo and cheeky in expression). The text of "Es sungen drei Engel" is taken from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. For this briefest of the work's six movements,

Mahler paradoxically calls on its most elaborate forces, with double chorus of women and children in addition to the female soloist of the previous movement, and entrusts a children's choir with the task of imitating morning bells. Yet the radiant luminosity of these fresh-sounding voices gives the scene the bright-toned colours that Mahler desired.

6. *Langsam. Ruhevoll. Empfunden* (Slow. Calm. Deeply felt). A glance at the opening pages of the score of this vast slow movement might suggest a simple exercise in polyphonic writing, but no listener can remain insensible to its serenity and grandeur, to its powerful assertion of faith, to its hypnotic motionlessness that is mystical and contemplative rather than meditative. Here we find Mahler donning the mantle of the legitimate heir of the

great Baroque and Classical traditions, a heritage recognizable by its subtle art of variation that untiringly transforms thematic elements which, always familiar, are always different. As usual, there are two alternating subject groups, one in the major, the other in the minor. But the rare moments when anxiety makes itself felt merely serve to underline the tranquil certainty of the movement as a whole.

This apotheosis is undoubtedly the most authentically optimistic of any by a composer so often described as "morbid" and obsessed with anguish and death. All questions find an answer here, all anguish is assuaged. With this hymn of praise to the Creator of the World, conceived as the supreme force of Love, Mahler took the final step on the road to Eternal Light.

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