

## MAHLER/SIMON IV PROGRAM NOTES

Once upon a time, in an imagined country, two young poets collected the old folk poems of their nation. Very soon, Des Knaben Wunderhorn (The Lad's Miraculous Horn) took its place on the shelves of every German household, next to the contemporaneous fairy tale books of the brothers Grimm. Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano 'polished' (von Arnim's term) and anthologized verses dating back as far as the Middle Ages, and published their two volumes in 1806 and 1808. They were a critical component of the Romantic search for a unifying German heritage, at a time when "German" referred to a language community, not a political entity, and when that community was threatened with subjugation by Napoleon. These poems, about boys going off to be killed in battle, about a child starved to death by an improvident mother, and also about the cuckoo besting the nightingale in a singing contest judged by the donkey—unsentimental, with the scent of soil—founded a tradition they claimed to be resurrecting. It was nourished by rich ancestral blood.

At the other end of the century, Gustav Mahler, cosmopolitan urbanite, saw Des Knaben Wunderhorn retrospectively, as the relic of a lost Golden Age. He wrote music to a dozen of these poems, embedding their naive vitality in artful casings. Several of the songs in turn germinated, and found homes in, his first four symphonies—quoted in the First, sung in the Second, the Third, and in tonight's Fourth. One can speculate as to his affinity with the poems. They may have resonated with memories of his childhood in a small garrison town in Bohemia, where, in addition to constant bugle calls and marches, he heard local folk music. Another possible attraction of the folk poems may have been as a foil to, and as a vessel for, his philosophical rumination on the purpose of life, based on his readings in German philosophy (above all, the school of Arthur Schopenhauer).

That implies an extramusical component to these symphonies, which leaves any commentator with a quandary, inasmuch as Mahler variously explicated them, but later forbade the publication of his exegeses, relying on his music alone to convey his vision—an absurdly grandiose ambition as it relates to specific narrative, but legitimate when it comes to atmosphere. The inclusion of texted song, moreover, opens the door to literalism. In the case of the Fourth Symphony, the last movement reveals that the preceding journey has been to the pearly gates.

First Movement—"Contemplative—Easy-going": Sleigh bells precede a melodic idea in the first violin that could almost be by Mozart, though also with a narrative, 'once upon a time' quality. Either way, it is nostalgic. It is succeeded by two other groups of themes, one saucy, the other lyrical. Both sound as though they could be folk song-derived. In place of the literal repeat of this exposition demanded in a classical symphony, Mahler presents it again in varied

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and shortened fashion (starting with the sleigh bells). So far all has been tinged with a veneer of idyllic simplicity. —As required by the traditional sonata-form first movement, there follows a development (starting with, yes, sleigh bells), the “mixmaster” of the form, in which previously introduced materials are altered and combined. Mahler also adds new ideas to the mix. What begins as dissection devolves into unruliness, and turbulence increases to the verge of wildness. —The sudden recapitulation, joined ‘in progress,’ (omitting the sleigh bells and the first three measures of the Mozartian tune), is, again, double, and though it follows the prescribed pattern in terms of the sequence of main melodic material and of keys, the complexity of the development is prolonged, with ever new superimpositions of melodic fragments; not just chromosomes, but individual genes are recombined; this would be more difficult were it not for the elemental, folkish nature of the melodies. —The constant infusion of new energy comes to rest in a reflective coda, before all is swept away in a tossed off kick of the heels.

Second Movement — “Leisurely, without haste”: Whereas the first movement took as its point of departure ‘simple’ consonant harmony, and consistently returned there, the second movement grimaces in dissonance as “Freund [Friend] Hein,” folk incarnation of the grim reaper, plays the Dance of Death on his fiddle—in this case, a violin tuned a whole step up, making for a more astringent sound. In rondo form, the movement alternates his sulphur with the country air of two Ländler, the Austrian predecessor to the waltz.

The Third Movement — “Tranquil” — eschewing all caricature or allusion, is a meditation, and as such cleanses to a beginning of serene simplicity: a basic, plucked, bass pattern underlays a major scale in the cellos. This scale is the theme that will be varied throughout the long movement. Its counterweight is a plangent fragment from a minor scale, introduced by the oboe. The two complexes alternate—A, b, A, b; whereas the ‘A’ is varied at each occurrence, ‘b’ is developed. ‘A’ undergoes transformations of speed, meter, and melodic elaboration while maintaining a recognizable identity and an underlying syntax of phrase, whereas ‘b,’ particularly in its second incarnation, is internally fragmented, the fragments superimposed on each other. —A coda is abruptly, triumphantly, proclaimed by the entire ensemble in the distantly related key of E major, and announces the theme that will be central to the celestial last movement, before subsiding in G. The uneasy meditation has culminated in spiritual elevation.

Fourth Movement — “Very comfortably” — is a note-for-note orchestration of a song for voice and piano — “Das himmlische Leben” (“The Heavenly Life”) — that Mahler had composed to a “Knaben Wunderhorn” text in 1892, eight years before completion of the Fourth. As evidenced most clearly by the sleigh bell

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music, the song is the starting point and core of the symphony. Its purported childlike naiveté has raised eyebrows since the early performances of the Fourth. Whereas the little angel claims that it lives a life of “the most gentle calm,” she also narrates Herod’s slaughter of the innocent lamb (the Agnus Dei), and of the ox at the hand of St. Lucas. The sleigh bells turn out to have nothing to do with sleighs. Do they portray the earthly turbulence the angel claims to have escaped from in heaven? Or are they perhaps in ‘fact’ gate bells, asking for admittance? The twentieth-century philosopher and music critic Theodor Adorno heard them as the jangles on a fool’s cap, laughing at us for taking any of this seriously. — Music, whether made by angels or mortals, is something else again. It exists in its own realm, and that realm requires its own key, E-major, this time transcending the G-major of the symphony for good to fade away in a vision of universal joy.

The Fourth, the shortest of Mahler’s symphonies, is also the most lightly scored —no trombones or tuba. As such, it is the most amenable to a chamber version such as tonight’s. An earlier one, by Erwin Stein, was written to be played at Arnold Schoenberg’s Society for Private Musical Performances. (Rather amazingly, it omits French horn!) It is increasingly being replaced by the version we play tonight, prepared for a performance by the Freiburg Chamber Orchestra by its founder, Klaus Simon, in 2008.