

Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde*
(*The Song of the Earth*)



Stephen E. Hefling



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*Background: Mahler's "symphonic worlds"
before 1908*

Tragedy and the hope of redemption: Schopenhauer,
Wagner, Nietzsche, Lipiner

Fundamental to an understanding of Mahler's work as a whole is the Schopenhauerian worldview, embraced and extended by Wagner and Nietzsche, in which Mahler was steeped from his student days in Vienna (1875–83). And a crucial figure in his intellectual development during the ensuing quarter-century was the brilliant young poet-philosopher Siegfried Lipiner (1856–1911), whose early writings are directly derived from the ideas of the three authors just named. Even in later years Mahler continued to cite Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (1819/1844) and Wagner's "Beethoven" essay (1870, commemorating the composer's centenary) as the most profound writings on music he knew.¹ To these we need to add a third volume based on those two, Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872), plus a related lecture by Lipiner cited below.

Briefly summarized, the overall viewpoint these writers espouse is as follows: The world, which is experienced as representation, is, in itself, *will* – "the innermost essence, the kernel of every particular thing, and also of the whole."² Schopenhauerian will is the blind force of nature, yet also the driving force of human beings (akin in many respects to Freud's notion of the id). Humanity is deceived by the *principium individuationis*, the principle of individuation which is the form of phenomena; as a result, we live out an endlessly egoistic cycle in which desires of the will can be at best only partially fulfilled. Dissatisfaction ensues, and the cycle recurs – it is the punishing, perpetually rolling wheel of Ixion (to which Mahler referred in comments about the Third Symphony).³ "Birth and death belong equally to life, and hold the balance as mutual

conditions of each other – poles of the whole phenomenon of life.” That is the reason, Schopenhauer says, that Indian mythology gives the god Shiva, who represents destruction and death, both a necklace of skulls and the *lingam*, or phallus – the symbol of procreation that appears as the counterpart of death.⁴ For Schopenhauer there were only two sources of relief from the wheel of Ixion: the effect of grace occurring in Christian or Buddhist religion, and the temporary stilling of the will that results from dispassionate aesthetic contemplation of the arts.⁵ But music, he asserts, is the highest of the arts because it is the direct and immediate expression of the will, without intervening conceptualizations; it “never expresses the phenomenon, but only the inner nature . . . We could just as well call the world embodied music as embodied will.”⁶ On such a view, of course, true music could not be program music in the ordinary sense that we think of it, because stories are conceptualizations of phenomena.

In *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, Nietzsche transposes the duality of will and representation into passionate Dionysian abandon versus harmonious Apollonian restraint. Dionysian art gives expression to the will in its omnipotence – the eternal life beyond all phenomena, and despite all annihilation: this was the Dionysian wisdom of Greek tragedy, which Nietzsche claims to be born from the spirit of music, which is the immediate manifestation of the will. The tragic, titanic hero is “negated for our pleasure,” as Nietzsche puts it, “because he is only phenomenon, and because the eternal life of the will is not affected by his annihilation . . . music is the immediate idea of this life.”⁷ Music gives birth to tragic myth, and “tragedy absorbs the highest ecstasies of music, so that it truly brings music . . . to its perfection.”⁸ For Nietzsche, “all that comes into being must be ready for a sorrowful end; we are forced to look into the terrors of the individual existence – yet we are not to become rigid with fear . . .” The “maddening sting of these pains” pierces us just at the moment when, in Dionysian ecstasy, we anticipate the indestructibility and eternity of infinite primordial joy.⁹

Siegfried Lipiner had fully absorbed and expounded upon the Nietzschean concept of tragedy during Mahler’s years at the Vienna Conservatory. In his lecture “On the Elements of a Renewal of Religious Ideas in the Present” published in 1878, Lipiner declares that in tragedy,

Background

we suver to the extreme, then, only bleeding, man wrests himself from his transitory self, and in [tragedy] the joy of all joys rushes through us, for in this bleeding tearing-oneself-away we feel the omnipotence and magnificence of the higher self, our own godliness . . . here the truest son of Prometheus, proud and daring, as never before, may praise the divinity, for he himself is become this divinity. Here and only here are death and time overcome, here and only here are the sting of pain and victory of hell torn away . . . The giant Pain is here – and only here – properly wished; it overcomes the giant I.¹⁰

Not at all coincidentally, these last lines are closely linked to verses Mahler himself penned for the gigantic chorus-and-soloists finale of his Second Symphony:

O believe, my heart, O believe:
Yours is . . . what you longed for!
Yours, what you loved,
what you struggled for:
.....
O Pain! You all-penetrating one!
From you I have broken away!
O Death! You all-conquering one!
Now you are conquered!
With wings which I have won for myself
in fervent striving of Love
I will soar . . .
.....
I will die in order to live!

Moreover, in an essay published just before Mahler wrote his first two symphonies, Lipiner also presents a view of the relation between creativity and personality that, on all available evidence, is congruent with Mahler's own:

For he himself [i. e., the poet] is only an example of his kind; and just as he will never set forth as poetry an isolated or chance event, the amorphous rock of so-called reality merely as he found it, so will his own personal experience become for him at best an opportune cause to create a type, which will explain to thousands what *they* are feeling. Verily, he will never see by means of the zickering wre of personal passion, but rather with the

light of a quiet, warm sun that ranges over everything and everyone; and then he will create what he has seen, in that form which appears to him best to convey what is unexpressed of "life": with the ruling spirit, even if with ever so striving heart, – always conquered by truth, never tyrannized by reality.¹¹

Programmatic metaphors: the tetralogy of the *W*rst four symphonies

In August 1900 Mahler finished the drafts of his Fourth Symphony, which concludes with a poem from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* – "Das himmlische Leben" ("Heavenly Life"), as Mahler had re-titled it – to be sung by a solo soprano "with bright childlike expression, entirely without parody," according to the score. A greater contrast to the eschatological epic of the Second Symphony's finale would be difficult to imagine. Yet Mahler seriously claimed to his longtime confidante and chronicler, Natalie Bauer-Lechner, that "as regards content and form" his *W*rst four symphonies are "a thoroughly self-contained tetralogy."¹² How this could be so emerges only from close reading of both the music and Mahler's various metaphorical remarks about it, which frequently constitute programmatic outlines of the sort he once characterized as "a few milestones and signposts for the journey – or, shall we say, a star map in order to comprehend the night sky with all its luminous worlds."¹³ These commentaries indeed reveal that Mahler based his music in no small part on the type of artistic vision and distillation of personal experience advocated by Lipiner. To be sure, in October 1900 Mahler would make a now-famous toast known as the "Munich Declaration" condemning descriptive programs, and thereafter he usually (although not invariably) forbade public distribution of programmatic commentary about his music.¹⁴ But as noted above, since childhood he had associated music with concrete ideas, and privately, among people he trusted, such as Natalie Bauer-Lechner and Bruno Walter, Mahler continued to speak about his music in metaphors that, if not overtaxed, can provide useful insight into the works that form the background for *Das Lied von der Erde*.¹⁵

Werther becomes Prometheus: the First Symphony and “Todtenfeier”

Indeed, it was Bruno Walter who characterized the First Symphony as “Mahler’s *Werther*.”¹⁶ The Werther theme of unrequited love and suicide had already been the subject of Mahler’s *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (*Songs of a Wayfarer*), based on poetry he had written in the wake of an unhappy affair with the soprano Johanna Richter in 1884–85. In the case of the First, the object of his illicit affection was Marion von Weber (wife of the grandson of Carl Maria von Weber, the famous composer), and Mahler’s substantial borrowings from song cycle to symphony underscore both the nature and the intensity of his feeling. Such a triadic intersection of love, depression, and artistic response would repeatedly spur Mahler’s output from the time of *Das klagende Lied* (1880) through the unwished Tenth Symphony (1910).¹⁷

Mahler’s commentaries on the First Symphony assume the perspective of “the hero,” his artistically projected persona (Lipiner’s “example of his kind”) engaged in a drama of Promethean conflict. The hero’s moods and experiences progress from the shimmering awakening of nature and “Dionysian jubilation” of the first movement, through the lamenting and bitterly ironic funereal vision based on “Frère Jacques” in the minor mode, to searing heartbreak and fearful struggle with all the sorrow of the world in the finale – “Dall’Inferno” (“Out of Hell”) as he at one point entitled it. Later Mahler described the symphony’s finale to Natalie, who recorded the discussion as follows:

“Again and again he [the hero] receives a blow to the head from fate – and with him the victory motive,” just when he seems to have raised himself above fate and become its master, and only in death – since he has conquered himself, and the wonderful concord of his youth suddenly reemerges with the theme of the first movement – does he achieve the victory. (Magnificent victory chorale!)¹⁸

Yet characteristically for Mahler, before the First was complete, he was seized in January 1888 by the inspiration for its polar opposite, the tragic “Todtenfeier” movement (“Funeral Rites,” or literally “Celebration of the Dead”) that would eventually open the Second Symphony. Stricken by one of the visions that occasionally overcame him while

composing, “He saw himself lying dead on a bier under wreaths and flowers (which were in his room from the performance of the *Pintos*), until Frau von Weber quickly took all flowers away from him.”¹⁹ At one level, such anxiety is scarcely surprising: the flowers were in celebration of Mahler’s first major success as a composer-conductor, his completion of Carl Maria von Weber’s unfinished opera *Die drei Pintos* – made from sketches inherited by Marion’s husband and entrusted by him to Mahler. But Mahler’s terrified vision was also intertwined with the harrowing figure of a Werther *sub specie aeternitatis* (under the semblance of eternity), also named Gustav, who appears in Adam Mickiewicz’s dramatic epic *Dziady*, which Siegfried Lipiner had published in German translation – entitled *Todtenfeier* – the previous year.²⁰ In his lengthy introduction, Lipiner asserts that Gustav’s suicide represents nothing less than “the Fall of Man and its punishment”²¹ – and in his (and Mahler’s) view, such Promethean defiance must lead towards transcendence. At the shattering dissonant climax of the “*Todtenfeier*” movement, Mahler draws again upon musical rhetoric from his *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, this time expanding upon gestures of the explicitly suicidal third song, “Ich hab’ ein glühend Messer” (“I Have a Burning Knife”). But it would take him another six years to hit upon the fitting conclusion to this defiant dramatic opening – a finale based, as we have seen, on the notion of redemption through tragic suffering. Nevertheless, Mahler’s characteristic creative pattern of dialectic interaction between syzygial opposites in the search for higher meaning was now well established; as Bruno Walter so rightly observes,

For him there was fundamentally never release from the sorrowful struggle over the meaning of human existence . . . “For what” remained the agonizing question of his soul. From this arose the strongest spiritual impulses for his creativity, each of his works was a new attempt at an answer. And when he had won the answer for himself, the old question soon raised its unassuageable call of longing in him anew. He could not – such was his nature – hold fast to any achieved spiritual position, for he himself was not constant.²²

Nowhere is this more evident than in the contrast between the monumentally triumphant “Symphony of a Thousand” and the work that follows it, *Das Lied von der Erde*.

The "Budapest stagnation"

Mahler composed very little between September 1888 and January 1892, the period he dubbed his "Budapest stagnation." Yet his world changed in many ways. His driving professional ambition won the twenty-eight-year-old conductor both the prestige and the heavy responsibility of directing the Royal Hungarian Opera in Budapest. He proudly shared news of his accomplishments there with the family back in his provincial hometown of Iglau, but even then the health of his parents was declining rapidly. Their marriage, based on convenience rather than love, had been difficult, and was marked by the deaths of eight children in infancy or childhood. In Mahler's words, his mother and father "got along like fire and ice. He was all stubbornness, she gentleness itself."²³ Parental quarrels and dying siblings had overshadowed his childhood, the time in which, as he several times acknowledged, the raw materials for composing were stored up.²⁴ Father Bernhard Mahler, who indeed "domineered over his delicate wife and hogged the children" as Alma Mahler puts it,²⁵ died in February 1889. However ambivalent his feelings toward his father, Mahler's residual conflict in the wake of his death must have been distressing. But his strong emotional attachment to his mother, who followed her husband to the grave in October 1889, is clearly apparent from many sources. As the psychoanalyst Stuart Feder observes, Mahler was doubly loved by Marie Mahler, both as her first surviving child and as the replacement for her firstborn son who had died the year prior to Gustav's birth; it seems clear that Gustav's position of priority among his siblings gave him, in the words of Freud's adage, "the feeling of a conqueror, that confidence of success that often induces real success." Feder continues:

Mahler's music is repeatedly informed by this primary and enduring relationship in mental life, from his musical identification with the grieving parent of the *Kindertotenlieder* (e. g., the third song, "Wenn dein Mütterlein . . . [When your dear mother . . .]") to the ultimate idealization of the eternal feminine in the Eighth Symphony. Through the transformations of her son's art, modest Marie Hermann was destined to endow representations of the quotidian-tragic mother as well as the most noble symbol of motherhood: Marie become Mary, the Mater Gloriosa of *Faust*.²⁶

Yet apparently Mahler missed her funeral, remaining in Budapest to rehearse, of all things, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.²⁷ The irony is thoroughly Mahlerian.

According to family lore, it was Mahler's mother who had first encouraged him to compose at age six, rewarding him with two *Kreuzer* for a polka with a funeral march as an introduction [!] written not long after the deaths of two younger siblings.²⁸ How different was the reception of his First Symphony, also graced with an unusual funeral march, in Budapest just five weeks after Marie Mahler died: both critics and audience were outraged, and Mahler "went about as though diseased, or an outlaw."²⁹ The most objectionable portions were precisely the funeral march and the storm that breaks out after it – the "devilish" music that is most original and characteristically Mahlerian, like portions of the "Todtenfeier" movement. And the condemnation of "Todtenfeier" by Hans von Bülow in 1891 was another painful blow: the famous conductor declared that by comparison to it, *Tristan* was a Haydn symphony.³⁰

"Heavenly Life" and "Joyous Science": Mahler blossoms

The "Budapest stagnation" was indeed a low ebb; we know of at least two factors that brought Mahler out of it. One was the "epoch-making influence" of renewed engagement with the writings of Nietzsche late in 1891;³¹ the other was reacquaintance with the world of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (*From the Boy's Magic Horn*), the Romantic collection of German folk poetry praised as a genuine manifestation of untutored wisdom by writers as diverse as Goethe and Nietzsche. Within just over a year Mahler's *Wunderhorn* "Humoresken," as he called them, would begin to infiltrate the high culture of the symphony through the extraordinary transformation of "Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt" ("St. Anthony's Sermon to the Fishes") into the scherzo of the Second Symphony. But the most influential of the *Humoresken* was the first piece that broke his long creative hiatus: "Das himmlische Leben," whose text and deep-reaching music continued to enchant Mahler during the next eight years, until at length he found its proper setting as the finale of his Fourth Symphony. "What roguishness intertwined with the deepest mysticism is hidden in it!" he told Natalie Bauer-Lechner. "It is everything turned on its head, and causality has absolutely no validity. It is as though you

suddenly saw the far side of the moon!”³² While Mahler undoubtedly assumed the text was folk poetry, we now know it to be the work of a single learned writer who laced it with numerous scriptural allusions in paradoxical contexts. The upshot is an instance of *ingénu* irony, whereby the naively innocent protagonist of the poem – a child, in Mahler’s setting – utters things whose full import he does not understand. One illustrative instance must here stand for many: in the second strophe of the lied we are told that John the Baptist (i. e., the forerunner of the Lamb of God) turns the Lamb over to Herod (the tetrarch of Galilee who had ordered John beheaded at the behest of Salome): how curious to encounter such violence in a song wherein the second line is: “Kein weltlich’ Getümmel hört man nicht in Himmeln [One don’t hear no worldly tumult in heaven]”!³³ This was indeed a new creative avenue for Mahler; to place it in the perspective of his “epoch-making” reading, the lied is a curious sort of “fröhliche Wissenschaft” (“joyous knowledge” or “gay science”), a light, bewinged manifestation of the child, who, for Nietzsche, came to represent “innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred Yes.”³⁴ In 1901, when the Fourth was wished, Mahler would provide a more traditional interpretation of the singer of “Heavenly Life”: “the child, who, although in a chrysalis state [*im Puppenstand*], already belongs to this higher world, clarifies what it all means.”³⁵ To arrive in heaven *im Puppenstand* was the final fate of Goethe’s ever-striving Faust, and Mahler associated the same rubric with the singer of “Urlicht” (“Primal Light”), the *Wunderhorn* song he would shortly adopt as a miniature prelude to the vast Resurrection finale that would conclude the Second Symphony. Although he dared not set the famous conclusion of *Faust* until 1906 (in the finale of his Eighth), it would seem that Mahler anticipated a similar fate for his “symphonic hero” as early as 1892. “Das himmlische Leben,” then, provided an answer to the despair and stagnation surrounding “Totenfeier”; the song could not possibly balance that massive C minor first movement as the finale of the Second, but it did act as a beacon, “the tapering spire of the structure,” during the composition of his Third and Fourth Symphonies, which comprise the second half of the “self-contained tetralogy.”

It is difficult to pinpoint Mahler’s further responses to Nietzsche, both because they were mixed, and because that writer’s spiraling mode

of thought resists facile conceptualization. Quite possibly Nietzsche's stance on traditional religion – that God is dead, and therefore humanity is to anticipate the *Übermensch* – gave Mahler the courage to conclude the Second Symphony with his unorthodox vision of resurrection, which takes place through the rather Romantic agency of “wings which I have won for myself in fervent striving of Love,” according to Mahler's own poetry, rather than through divine grace. But Mahler's universalism – “no divine judgment, no blessed and no damned; no good, no evil ones, no judge!” – is almost certainly derived from Lipiner's teacher, Gustav Theodor Fechner, who taught that

there is no heaven and no hell in the usual sense of the Christian, the Jew, the heathen, into which the soul may enter . . . after it has passed through the great transition, death, it unfolds itself according to the unalterable law of nature upon earth . . . quietly approaching and entering into a higher existence.³⁶

As we shall see, Fechner's views were also influential in Mahler's shaping of *Das Lied von der Erde*.

The famous “lightning bolt” of inspiration for the Second's finale that struck Mahler in March 1894 at the memorial service – publicly announced as a “Todten-Feier” – for Hans von Bülow, who had severely condemned Mahler's “Todtenfeier” movement, is among the best-known events in his career. The psychoanalyst Theodor Reik has insisted upon the Oedipal aspect of this extraordinary breakthrough in Mahler's creative logjam; Reik's view, if overstated, contains a kernel of truth.³⁷ Between 1888 and 1894 Mahler wrestled inwardly or overtly with several oppressive patriarchal authority figures: the Judeo-Christian God, his earthly father Bernhard, his supervisor Bernhard Pollini, director of the Hamburg Opera (the “Pollini jail” as Mahler called it), Hans von Bülow – and not least, Beethoven, whose apotheosis of joy in the Ninth Symphony Mahler both imitated and challenged in his “Resurrection” finale. Nevertheless, it was the success of the Second among audiences (if not, initially, among critics) that first made Mahler a significant European composer of the day.

In the First and Second Symphonies Mahler establishes several broad characteristics of his symphonic oeuvre as a whole. First is the principle of the “frame” (as Donald Mitchell has lately dubbed it), derived from

Beethoven, whereby the first and last movements respectively introduce and resolve (at least temporarily) the main issues of the symphony, and the two or more inner movements are rather like interludes. In the First Mahler had originally grouped the five movements into larger blocks that he labeled “Abtheilung[en]”; a similar arrangement is explicitly indicated in the Third and Fifth Symphonies, and is fundamental to *Das Lied von der Erde* (although not marked as such in the score). As Mahler once told Natalie, “Composing is like playing with bricks, whereby a new building always arises from the same stones. The stones, however, have lain there ready and waiting from one’s youth, the only time for collecting and storing them.”³⁸ And a prime musical topos found in virtually all his symphonies is the march, a predilection doubtless stemming from his childhood experiences in the barracks town of Iglau.³⁹ Marches are humanity on the move – into the heat of combat, home in the glory of victory (or shame of defeat), or solemnly en route to the final resting place; Mahler draws upon all varieties. Another common movement type is the folksy Austrian Ländler, which Mahler came to know from Schubert and Bruckner as well as from popular music. And as noted, he also incorporates into the large, public genre of the symphony that most intimate and private of Romantic musical forms, the lied, drawing upon folk poetry as well. Also from Mahler’s childhood grows his Romantic fascination with the sounds, moods, and atmospheres associated with nature that he molds into music, sometimes specifically calling them *Naturlaute*. Indeed, from the summer of 1893, when he resumed work on the Second, through the end of his career, an isolated summer *Häuschen* (composing hut) in the country, or better yet in the woods, was essential for the inspiration to compose.

His sense of affective association with specific tonalities is both traditional and idiosyncratic: D major for the “magnificent victory” of the First and C minor as the tragic key of “Todtenfeier” are stock in trade, whereas E major is a pastoral, blissful key, as in the contrasting second subject of “Todtenfeier” and the serene close of “Das himmlische Leben.” He deploys the full resources of advanced nineteenth-century tonal practice, including third-relations, “expressive” tonality (whole- or semitone ascents to suggest brightness and intensification, the opposite for depression or darkening affect),⁴⁰ irregular cadential resolutions, chromaticism and surface dissonance, etc. Yet the overall framework of

tonality remains solidly apparent, based on traditional voice-leading techniques. In the early symphonies Mahler's developmental procedures tend to favor drama and gesture more than compact motivic working-out; beginning with the Fourth he would achieve a more impressive balance. And Mahler's sensitive and imaginative treatment of the orchestra, from which he draws sharply characterized colors, is already fully apparent in these two works.

Finally, we should take note of an archetypal musical motive in the finale of the Second that would recur in many of Mahler's subsequent works, including *Das Lied*: the "Ewigkeit" ("eternity") motive (Ex. 1). Borrowed from Wagner's *Siegfried*, where it is associated with the word "Ewig" ("eternal[ly]"), it is deployed by Mahler in a variety of contexts, but always with connotations of temporal transcendence, and frequently suggesting ascent to a realm of peace and nurturance, such as the sphere of "das Ewig-Weibliche" ("the eternal feminine") in the Eighth Symphony, and in numerous other works.⁴¹

A second syzygial pair: the Third and Fourth Symphonies

"Meine fröhliche Wissenschaft" ("My Joyous Science"): the Third Symphony

Mahler's next two symphonies share a common origin: "Das himmlische Leben," which he at first planned to serve as finale of the Third. Only when he realized the vast proportions to which that wide-ranging symphonic world had sprawled did he transfer the child's vision of paradise to an entirely different work, conceived in concise neoclassical style. Mahler's Third is a vast pantheistic meditation on the evolution of the world from primeval nature through man to the realm of divinity. Its six movements last ninety minutes or more, and the music is replete with sonic symbols of nature – "Pan asleep," "The southern gale," "The bird of the night," etc. – specifically labeled in the autograph score. Particularly in the huge first movement, a "Pan-inspired abundance" of irrepressibly billowing Dionysian life force, "Mahler takes greater risks than he ever did again," as Adorno observes: "The literary idea of the great god Pan has invaded the sense of form; form itself becomes something both fearful and monstrous, the objectification of chaos . . ."⁴²

Background

Example 1 The “Ewigkeit” (“Eternity”) motive (a) Wagner, *Siegfried*, act III, scene 3 (Brünnhilde) (b) Mahler, Second Symphony, ♯male (c) Mahler, Second Symphony, ♯male; text: “I shall die in order to live!”

(a) Brünnhilde

E - - wig war ich, E - - wig bin ich.

(b) 696

696

ff Ster - - ben werd' ich, um zu le - - - ben!

Both background and genesis of the Third have been well surveyed by Peter Franklin in a companion volume of the Cambridge Music Handbooks series.⁴³ For present purposes we should note three points: (1) Mahler's vision of evolution in the Third Symphony embodies not only the Schopenhauerian notion of will as blind force of nature, but also Fechner's view of the cosmos as an inwardly alive spiritual hierarchy extending from atoms up to God, who “is at once the base and the summit.”⁴⁴ Both viewpoints inform *Das Lied* as well. (2) As suggested by its provisional title, “Meine fröhliche Wissenschaft,” the Third also manifests Mahler's ongoing engagement with Nietzsche, but more especially with his scriptural parody *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the book of the prophet who announces that “God is dead” and, in his famous midnight song, guardedly reveals and elaborates Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence – that everyone must “come back eternally to this same, self-same life, in what is greatest as in what is smallest.”⁴⁵ It is precisely Zarathustra's midnight song that Mahler sets for alto solo as the fourth movement of the new symphony, “O Man, Take Heed.” Then follow children's and women's voices chiming *Wunderhorn* lyrics on Christian themes, “Three Angels Were Singing.” His explanation of this bold

juxtaposition: “here humor has got to aim for the heights that can no longer be expressed otherwise.”⁴⁶ But the work concludes with a hymn-like orchestral adagio originally entitled “What Love Tells Me” – the “liberating resolution” in which the Schopenhauerian wheel of Ixion is stilled, according to Mahler.⁴⁷ “I could almost also call the movement ‘What God tells me!’” he wrote to Anna von Mildenburg (the soprano who was then his lover). “And this in precisely the sense that God can only be comprehended as ‘Love.’”⁴⁸ According to Alfred Roller (Mahler’s revolutionary set designer at the Vienna Opera, 1903–07), “His faith was that of a child. God is love and love is God. This idea came up a thousand times in his conversation.”⁴⁹ It is not, however, a common notion in late Nietzsche. Finally (3), Mahler’s personal identification with this symphony was yet more intense than with the previous two, and often terrifying, as though he were confronted by

the Universe itself, into whose immeasurable void you plunge, in whose eternal space you whirl, such that earth and human fate fall behind you like a tiny speck and vanish. The highest questions of humanity, which I posed in the Second and tried to answer: Why do we live, and will we survive beyond this life? – here these can no longer concern me. For what can that mean in a Universe where everything *lives* and *must* and *will* live?⁵⁰

In certain passages he feared the work “has almost ceased to be music; it is almost just sounds of nature.”⁵¹ And Mahler was equally aware of its numerous appropriations of plebeian music: “Often one would believe he were in a lowly pub or a stable,” he wrote Bruno Walter.⁵² The boy of four who professed he wanted to become a martyr was now the mature master confident in his powers yet fearful of both “the path that music must follow” in his hands, and the abuse he would consequently suffer. Mahler compared his martyrdom to

Christ on the Mount of Olives, who had to drain the chalice of sorrow to the dregs – and willed it so. He for whom this chalice is destined can and will not refuse it, but death-agony must at times overcome him when he thinks of what still lies before him.⁵³

Yet such a messianic self-identification represents more than humble servitude. It is closely allied both to his “intense narcissistic interest in his post-life,” as Feder puts it,⁵⁴ and to a Nietzschean usurpation of

tradition and authority that is also distinctly Oedipal. As he copied out the full score of the Third's *w*rst movement in 1896, Mahler likened the piece to "Zeus destroying Kronos" as well as to Jacob wrestling with God for divine blessing: "God also wants not to bless me; only in fearful struggle over the coming into being of my works do I wrest it from him."⁵⁵

During the following year Mahler also managed to wrest control of the Vienna Court Opera from its *w*rst conductor, Hans Richter, and its aging director, Wilhelm Jahn, again astonishing the musical world by his meteoric success at a relatively young age (thirty-seven). Vienna had always been his goal, and he was determined to show what he could do. He had long since become a tyrant in the pit of the theatre; during his last year in Hamburg he admitted to Bauer-Lechner that

I can only make it work in the role of an animal trainer, which I assume there, one who constantly lays on the lash of the most taxing demands upon their attentiveness and capacity for work, and who handles them the roughest when the beast of impotence and indolence ventures forth even for a moment.⁵⁶

He drove himself just as relentlessly, sometimes to the point of ill-health; hemorrhoids, migraines, and sore throats were common ailments, and what little free time he had during the summer of 1897 was devoted to convalescence.

Moodiness was by now a *w*xed feature of his personality; during the previous year Natalie had recorded that

I had never seen in anyone else such change of mood in the most dizzying sequence. His relationship with the people closest to him was also subject to this changeability, which jumped from the most passionate "for" to the most vehement "against," and which could overwhelm a person just as one-sidedly with his love as it could unjustly with his hatred . . .

Recently he came to pick me up at a friend's, and rushed into the house like a whirlwind; he was talkative and in a most sparkling mood, and in his boisterousness and scintillating merriness swept everything along with him. But within a very short time – who knows what went through his head – he suddenly became as silent as the grave, sat there immersed in himself, and said not another word until we left.

His changeability and inconstancy was so great that he never remained

the same for an hour at a time, and everything around and beyond him, but particularly those closest to him, always appeared divergent in his altered outlook.⁵⁷

Even his physical appearance could change dramatically within days or hours, from youthfulness to the look of a man much older than he was. Today some psychologists suspect he suffered from cyclothymic disorder, a chronic, fluctuating mood disturbance involving numerous periods of hypomanic and depressive symptoms (which symptoms are, however, less numerous or severe than those of the bipolar disorders).⁵⁸ In any case, Mahler himself recognized that his creativity was “closely linked with irritability [*Irritabilität*],” and such rapid shifts of mood, from “rowery Elysian fields” to “the nocturnal terrors of Tartarus,” are also characteristic of his compositions.⁵⁹

“What the Child Tells Me”: the Fourth Symphony

The Fourth is just such a radical shift, from the cosmic monumentality of his previous two works to a quasi-classical four-movement symphony of about half their length, scored for more modest forces. An Apollonian rather than a Dionysian work, the Fourth was literally “composed into” its preexistent wnale, “Das himmlische Leben.” And the title that song previously bore as part of the Third – “What the Child Tells Me” – might well be extended to the entire Fourth, for the gently ironic perspective of the *ingénu* infuses the whole. Formally, it is a delicate sendup of symphonic grandeur as in the tradition of Beethoven’s Ninth (and Mahler’s “Resurrection”): not a profound chorus, but rather a simple child singing a *Wunderhorn* text concludes the proceedings. The point is also underscored by the preceding slow movement, a double variation set culminating in fanfare summonses to a higher realm, just as in the Adagio of Beethoven’s Ninth. And as in that icon, Mahler’s scherzo with double trio is somewhat terrifying: its tuned-up solo violin is intended to “sound raw and screeching, ‘as though Death were striking up’” – an allusion to the ancient German folk wfigure Freund Hain, the grim reaper, occasionally represented with a wddle.⁶⁰

As Adorno has emphasized, “The entire Fourth Symphony shu z es nonexistent children’s songs together . . . The means are reduced, without heavy brass . . . No father wfigures are admitted to its precincts.”⁶¹

Such an impression is owing in large measure to Mahler's almost cyclical dispersal of "Himmliches Leben" motives throughout the work. Overall, Adorno argues, "the symphony is a solitary attempt at musical communication with the déjà vu, in genuine color . . . a spacious fantasy realm in which everything seems to happen once again."⁶² And further: "everything is composed within quotation marks . . ."⁶³ Such capacity to make music conjure forth the past is among the most important features Mahler develops further in his late style, especially in *Das Lied*.

But the Fourth's childlike dimensions are by no means musically regressive. *Au contraire*, like the text of the wnale, the music's outward simplicity barely masks its extraordinary sophistication: as never before, Mahler is here the master of development and counterpoint, an advance in technique that would prove essential in the works to come. And in the slow movement, which both he and Richard Strauss regarded as the high point of the Fourth, Mahler achieves a new expressive intimacy by appropriating childhood memories of maternal love, death, and peaceful isolation. As Natalie reports his private commentary,

"A divinely serene and deeply sad melody runs throughout, at which you will both smile and weep."

He also said that it bore the countenance of St. Ursula (who is sung about in the "Heavenly Life" of the fourth movement). . . .

At one point he also called the Andante the smile of St. Ursula, and said that in it there had hovered before him the face of his mother from childhood, with deep sadness, and as though smiling through tears; she suvered unendingly, yet always lovingly resolved and forgave everything.⁶⁴

Mahler also likened the smile of the mother-saint to the expression of wfigures found on monuments in ancient churches: "they have the scarcely noticeable, peaceful smile of the slumbering, departed children of mankind . . ."⁶⁵ Just such a moment is the movement's close (w. 13 v.), which leads directly to the child's celestial song. This passage is marked "sehr zart und innig [very sweetly and intimately]," and notably, at the very end, "gänzlich ersterbend [dying away entirely]": the "Ewigkeit" motive is prominent (cf. Ex. 1), as is a gesture of quiet collapse (w. 13 + 13 v.). Variants upon this extraordinary passage soon found their way into two deeply contemplative pieces written the following year (1901): the Rückert lied "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen [I have become lost

to the world]” and the famous Adagietto of the Fifth Symphony, composed as a declaration of love for his future wife Alma (see below). Both are important predecessors of “Der Abschied,” the finale of *Das Lied*.

As a child, Mahler would frequently remain motionless in one spot for hours on end, “lost to the world” in daydreaming, music, and later, literature. Both Natalie and Alma relate the story of young Gustav’s taking a walk in the woods with his father; having forgotten something at home, Bernhard told the boy to sit on a log until he returned. Back home, as usual, was “noise, commotion, distraction,” and Gustav was completely forgotten until twilight. The child, meanwhile, had remained sitting motionless just as his father had left him, “his eyes peacefully lost in thought, without fear or astonishment. And several hours had passed before evening fell.”⁶⁶ While such dreaminess was one way of dodging childhood traumas, it also generated conflict – in reality, and probably in fantasy as well. Mahler told Natalie that although he was tormented for his brooding and felt guilty about it, he later realized it had been essential to his spiritual development.⁶⁷ Psychoanalysts have suggested that such concentrated stillness as a way of avoiding conflict and fear of abandonment may provoke fantasies anticipating the stillness of death, and of return to the womb as the ultimate punishment; the flipside, however, is the craving to overcome fears of abandonment and death through withdrawal and womb-like isolation that approaches claustrophilia, such as Mahler found in his summer *Häuschen*.⁶⁸ In his entire oeuvre, the most extended and extraordinary passage of music “lost to the world” is of course the close of *Das Lied von der Erde*, also marked “gänzlich ersterbend” at the end. Alma Mahler, who learned this music from her husband at the keyboard, suggests that

with wondrous consequence his inner life returns to the visionary childhood scene in the woods. Is not his farewell [*Abschied*], the “Song of the Earth,” the ripe fruit of that far-off melancholy contemplation, whose kernel may have come to life in the waiting boy?⁶⁹

1901: a year of transitions fundamental to *Das Lied von der Erde*

Except for 1907, the first year of the new century brought more fundamental changes to Mahler’s life than any other. From Christmas 1900

through the following February he drove himself ever more relentlessly, despite recurrent headaches, stomachaches, tonsilitis, and hemorrhoid problems. On 24 February he collapsed from a severe hemorrhoidal hemorrhage, having conducted the Vienna Philharmonic at midday and the Opera in the evening. The composer who had so often wrestled with the mysteries of death and eternity believed that “my last hour had come.”⁷⁰ But Mahler survived. While recovering on holiday, he recounted to Natalie two vivid and terrifying dreams he had remembered for years as the two of them walked in the moonlight beside a mountain lake. The first had occurred when he was only eight years old: the stars engulfed each other in a sky filled with yellow smoke as though it were the end of the world, and the uncanny figure of the Wandering Jew tried to force Mahler to take his staff (topped with a golden cross), the symbol of his eternal wandering; the boy woke with a scream. The second, from 1891, went as follows:

He found himself in the midst of a large gathering in a brightly lit room, when the last of the guests entered – a large man of stiff bearing, faultlessly dressed, and with the air of a man of affairs. But he [Mahler] knew: that is Death . . . The stranger seized him by the arm with an iron grip and said, “You must come with me! [*Du mußt mit mir!*]” . . . he could not tear himself loose until, by expending all his forces, he threw the nightmare over.⁷¹

In wake of this illness Mahler’s life and work were completely transformed. Within less than a year the bachelor of long standing had become engaged to Alma Schindler, nearly twenty years his junior, and the couple conceived a child prior to their marriage. This rush into the renewal of life was almost certainly in response to his brush with death, as Feder observes. But months before his crucial encounter with Alma, Mahler memorialized that moment artistically during the summer of 1901, in several musical meditations upon death: the last of the *Wunderhorn* songs, three of the *Kindertotenlieder* (*Songs on the Death of Children*), two of the separate Rückert songs, and the beginnings of the Fifth Symphony.⁷²

Never again would Mahler draw near the naively humorous world of “Das himmlische Leben.” All of his Rückert settings assume an individualized first-person perspective that (with one exception) is intimately introspective: therein lies an essential feature of his new musical

persona.⁷³ “Remarkable how close in feeling Fechner is to Rückert,” Mahler later observed; “they are two nearly related people and one side of my nature is linked with them as a third.”⁷⁴ Like Fechner, the universalist who regards the entire universe as an organic spiritual hierarchy leading up to the deity, Rückert, too, sees all-encompassing unity manifest in both the simplest aspects of existence and in the complex systems of languages and cultures; his projection of feeling into nature is much akin to both Fechner’s and Mahler’s. And for Rückert, dying in love leads to the realm of eternal light, a view much akin to Fechner’s belief that death is but the transition to the third stage of being, that of eternal waking, in which man is merged as one with waves of light and sound.

Rückert was an orientalist whose immersion in Eastern literature strongly influenced his own poetry; meditative, mystical withdrawal from earthly hubbub was a familiar notion for him. It was for Mahler as well, both from childhood experiences and via Schopenhauer’s notion of stilling the driving will, the “wheel of Ixion.” Such is also the central theme of Rückert’s poem “Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen [I have become lost to the world],” which inspired the most extraordinary song Mahler had yet composed: “It is my very self!” he told Natalie just after it was completed.⁷⁵ If less than superlative poetry, Rückert’s lyrics were the perfect catalyst for Mahler, who believed that the text of a song “actually constitutes only a hint of the deeper content that is to be drawn out of it, of the treasure that is to be hauled up.”⁷⁶ To bring forth this treasure, he drew heavily upon the anhemitonic (“without semitones”) pentatonic scale, the most common mode of pitch organization in Eastern music, just as he would later in *Das Lied von der Erde*. Both the mild exoticism of the pentatonic scale and its capacity to diffuse goal-oriented Western tonal processes are extensively exploited in “Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen.” Yet almost paradoxically, it is precisely the hybrid mixture of tonality and pentatonicism that infuses this piece with concentrated organic coherence such as Mahler had previously achieved only in certain passages of the Fourth Symphony. (And as noted above, the close of the Fourth’s slow movement is the prototype for the conclusion of “Ich bin der Welt.”) Following the second performance of the lied in 1905, Mahler emphasized his organic approach to composition in conversation with Schoenberg and young Anton von Webern: