Mahler’s Fifth Symphony

Michael McManus meets Osmo Vänskä to decipher Mahler’s meticulous markings in the score for his Fifth Symphony

The symphonies of Gustav Mahler rarely, if ever, make for easy listening, but one exception, for long stretches at least, is his Symphony No 5 in C sharp minor, composed between 1901 and 1902 during a period of intense personal fulfilment and happiness. By his own admission, Mahler did struggle with happiness – ‘Ich bin ein schlechter Ja-sager’ (‘I am bad at saying yes’) and hints of sunlight or positivity in his works are generally leavened by melancholy, sarcasm or sudden lapses into remote, dark, minor-key tonalities. This is certainly true of the Fifth Symphony.

The work was originally conceived in four movements, but during the early stages of composition, Mahler met and fell in love with Alma Schindler, who became his wife within just four months, already pregnant with their first daughter. Mahler then added an extra movement to the otherwise turbulent work – the famous Adagietto, conceived as a love poem to Alma. ‘Love is a tool for creation,’ he wrote to a friend. As the piece developed, Mahler would describe it as the product of an ‘entirely different direction’ in both his life and his art.

When I meet Osmo Vänskä to discuss the work, which he has just recorded for BIS with the Minnesota Orchestra, he seems remarkably fresh and relaxed for someone in the middle of a Europe-wide tour (with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra). He’s reluctant to ‘get technical’ though, despite the LPO having provided him with a score exhibiting many of Mahler’s own markings. ‘He’s telling the story of his life at this particular time,’ says Vänskä, ‘but it leaves a lot of things for us to understand....It’s great to know everything that’s been said about [the symphony], especially by him, but at the same time, the music is written so that it tells a similar story even if you don’t know all of that.’

The principal theme of much of our contemplation is not ‘the black dots’ but Mahler’s markings. For Vänskä, this piece offers a priceless opportunity to commune not only with one of our greatest composers, but also with a conducting colleague of rare gifts: ‘When he wrote, he saw no reason to put away his conductor’s hat. I like the dialogue between composer and conductor in the score. He has given special instructions to the conductor – he reminds us to take care, to beat 163 and not triples.’

The opening rhythm echoes that of Beethoven’s towering Fifth Symphony: ‘He wants the ripple at the opening as a quasi-accelerando,’ says Vänskä. ‘Not exactly mathematical – make it interesting, make it exciting, make it sound natural.’ Comparisons with Beethoven soon end, for this music is distinctively sui generis: ‘It’s good to remember the military-band influence from his childhood. How many times did he

The historical view

**Mahler**

*Letter to his wife Alma on October 12, 1902, four days before the Cologne premiere*

What sort of face should the public make at this chaos, where an eternal new world is born in one moment only to be destroyed in the next? Oh, I wish I could premiere my symphony 50 years after my death!

**Bruno Walter**

*Writing in his book, Gustav Mahler (Dover: 2014, originally published 1936)*

He has had enough now of struggling with weapons of music for a philosophy of life. Thus the Fifth Symphony is born, its face turned squarely towards life, and its basic mood one of optimism.

**Sir Simon Rattle**

*Gramophone (March 2010)*

This is a piece desperately longing for a conclusion and one attempt after another fails. The finale has its shadows but it’s really the last symphonic movement Mahler wrote where there is complete joy – unalloyed exaltation.
hear this kind of fanfare?' The exhortations in the score are quick in coming and the conductor must note their emotional, as well as musical, import. ‘When you come to the allegro the first time, it says Pianisch schneller...Leidenschaftlich, Wild. It’s not a fanfare. It’s like the clown in the circus tent whose face is painted to be happy, but who is actually very sad.’ Vänskä feels the Jewish aspect is important too, comparing the heart of this movement to a sound picture of a column of desperate refugees reluctantly leaving their homes.

Mahler said the first two movements belong together like the two sides of a coin and Vänskä agrees. In the second movement, the conductor singles out a moment where the cellos take charge, in a sudden, intense and slow, F minor episode running into rehearsal mark 12 (bars 189-214). He paid particular attention to this section in his recording: ‘Our cellists make this so, so soft, which makes it really touching. You are expressing your hopes and dreams.’ This movement too is littered with instructions, including a Mahler leitmotif – nicht scheppen (‘don’t drag’). Vänskä likens this to the gentle admonition of a father to an errant son: ‘I know what you are doing – do this, don’t do that.’ Terms such as ziehend (‘heavy’ or ‘massive’) are, points out Vänskä, ‘nothing to do with tempo’ – and everything to do with colour. We both laugh as we note the cascade of instructions towards the end of the movement, typified by nicht ilden (‘don’t rush’) at bar 401 coming so hot on the heels of nicht scheppen at bar 392. It suggests a degree of micro-management – almost hectoring – that would have been incomprehensible to an earlier generation.

‘The Adagietto is one of the best love songs ever. Keep it slow, but still move. The sound colour is like a translucent curtain’

Mahler struggled with the orchestration of this symphony for the remainder of his life, and the stand-alone middle movement, the Scherzo, troubled him most of all. ‘It will have a long history of suffering,’ he warned. ‘Conductors will take it too fast and make a nonsense of it.’ Vänskä emphasises the concertante nature of the movement, which has been more prominently observed in recent years, and finds its musical roots in Austrian folk music, including yodeling. ‘Technically, keeping all those long accelerandos and the slowing down – it’s a huge challenge for the conductor and orchestra to keep all that with a living pulse.’

Vänskä describes the Adagietto as ‘one of the best love songs ever. Keep it slow, but still move. I think it’s very much a question of sound colour – the softest dynamics and a lot of air, like a translucent curtain. Mahler is saying, “If you are really happy, you must try to hide it.”’

The finale, which follows the Adagietto without a break, is a Rondo including fugatos, fugues and canons, a constant swirl of key and mood changes. The horn calls in the D major opening are ‘like a new start, refreshing the whole thing’, akin to someone outside calling “Hey, hey, we are here!”’ Mahler’s recent fascination with Bach is much in evidence as the movement progresses: ‘Here is a master composer, using all these formats and still keeping the music alive,’ says Vänskä. ‘It is written with great self-confidence, like a magician showing off his tricks.’

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