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Mahler's Overwhelming Climaxes: The Symphony as Mass Medium

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A number of Mahler's symphonies contain climactic accumulations and releases of musical-expressive energy that overspill conventional boundaries between the aesthetic and the sensational, the spiritual and the physical, high art and the popular. These might be said to define something of the 'problem' that his music represented for many of his contemporaries. They are still infrequently confronted in terms of their elaborately staged excess, as if mocking the metaphorical language of harmonically contrived 'tension and resolution' by revealing, in spite of conventional mockery of 'programmaticism', what such notionally formal or 'theoretical' language always implies. Even Lawrence Dreyfus's recent exploration of the 'erotic impulse' in Wagner's music was to some degree hedged by symptomatic analysis of Wagner's supposed 'decadence', although it valuably opened up the field and offered insight into key features of post-Wagnerian, late-romantic music. Mahler himself, in a famous letter to Gisela Tolnay-Witt, situated these in the specific, socio-cultural characteristics of symphonic music in an era of mass consumption by ever larger numbers of people in ever larger spaces. The history and changing implications of these climactic moments in Mahler's symphonies will be sketched here with reference to their often explicitly transgressive implications.

> From here … to the end it is advisable to augment the horns, so that the hymnic, all-overwhelming chorale reaches the necessary volume. All the horn players stand up in order to achieve the greatest possible power of sound.[1]

> Our horn players loyally submitted to Mahler's bidding and thus the desired *non plus ultra* of sonority was reached – however with very mixed effects on the ears and nerves of the listeners. Only the composer could inform us whether this dynamic-acoustic outdoing of Berlioz which occurs at the end of this most peculiar of symphonies is also parodistic or satirical. … Yet this seemed less than obvious to me: the colossal violence of the climaxes could also be the expression of a tremendous creative urge seeking recognition at all costs.[2]

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The matter I want to address here is one that has often eluded conventional musicological treatment of Mahler's music. It has done so because the

[1] 'Von hier an … bis zum Schluss ist es empfehlenswerth die Hörner so lange zu verstärken, bis der hymnenartige, alles übertönende Choral die nöthige Klangfülle erreicht hat. Alle Hornisten stehen auf, um die möglichst grösste Schallkraft zu erzielen. Mahler's direction in the score of the Finale of the First Symphony, seven bars before cue 56. English translation by the author.

[2] From Theodor Helm's review of the Vienna premiere in November 1900 of the First Symphony, upon whose 'parodistic' elements he had dwelt satirically. Translation by Karen Painter and Bettina Varwig, from Karen Painter, ed., *Mahler and His World* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 293–4 [original German text not included].

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characteristics of what I am calling 'overwhelming climaxes' in Mahler – structurally nodal effects of extreme volume and emotional impact – fall outside standard European aesthetic definitions of music or 'musical material'. More even than referential labels and titles, more than narrative or dramatic programmes, these strategic eruptions and accumulations of sound and volume, usually dominated by brass instruments and batteries of percussion (including bells, gongs and hammers), have often been taken as meretricious 'extra-musical' effects, markers of what Richard Taruskin has called 'maximalism'.[3] Their 'colossal violence', for Theodor Helm, might ironically have been taken to demonstrate a 'tremendous creative urge', but he too was immediately led to characterize it negatively, as suggesting a desire to secure 'recognition at all costs'.

Elements of a kind of mass-culture critique seem already present here – something that would come to dominate earlier twentieth-century debates about artistic modernism and its moral and ethical opposition to cultural modernity (signifying commercialism and the commodification of experience). Without immediately reaching for later Marxist models of the kind of critique to which I refer, we might remind ourselves that it was already developed in Nietzsche's later writing about Wagner – so too in Wagner's own writing about implicitly empty 'Effekt' in Meyerbeer, something valuably explored in Alexander Rehding's chapter on 'Musical Apotheoses' in his book *Music and Monumentality*.[4]

Mahler himself invoked aspects of this critique in a rather objective and matter-of-fact way, almost as if in premature dialogue with Helm, in the striking letter he wrote to Gisela Tolnay-Witt in 1893.[5] Attempting to explain 'why such a large apparatus as an orchestra should be necessary in order to express a great thought', Mahler offered a simplified evolutionary historical narrative of music's development from chamber music on the one hand (designed to amuse the rich), and the Church on the other, where liturgical ritual provided a readily understood, meaningful context for music's reception.[6] Echoing some of Wagner's historical theorizing, Mahler associates Beethoven with the 'new era' of music, in which the modern orchestra developed, along with more sophisticated expressive and notational resources with which to articulate complex, 'modern' subject-matter: 'the fundamentals are no longer mood – that is to say mere sadness, etc. – but also the transition from one to the other – conflicts – physical nature and its effect on us – humour and poetic ideas'.[7] Finally, addressing the material circumstances of 'modern' music's consumption, Mahler strikingly

[3] See Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music,* IV: *Music in the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010 [originally 2005]), 5–6ff.

[4] Alexander Rehding. *Music and Monumentality: Commemoration and Wonderment in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 52ff. See also Richard Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, trans. W. Ashton-Ellis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), *I*, 195–6.

[5] Gisela Tolnay-Witt may have been the nine-year-old subsequent musicologist Gisela Selden-Goth, although Herta Blaukopf questions this assumption on grounds of Selden-Goth's 1884 birth-date; see Herta Blauopf, ed., *Gustav Mahler Briefe,* Neuausgabe (Vienna: Paul Zsolnay, 1982), 434. Mahler does, however, clearly refer to her as his "little tormenting spirit"; see *Selected Letters of Gustav Mahler*, ed. Knud Martner (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 149.

[6] *Selected Letters of Gustav Mahler*, ed. Martner, 147–8.

[7] *Selected Letters of Gustav Mahler*, ed. Martner, 148.

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explained 'the physical necessity to enlarge the musical apparatus' in the following, socially grounded terms:

> music was becoming more and more common property – the listeners and the players becoming ever more numerous – in place of the chamber there came the concert hall, and from the church, with its new instrument, the organ, the opera-house evolved. So you see … : We moderns need such a great apparatus to express *our* ideas, whether they be great or small. First – because we are compelled, in order to protect ourselves from false interpretation, to distribute the various colours of our rainbow over various palettes; secondly, because our eye is learning to distinguish more and more colours in the rainbow, and ever more delicate and subtle modulation; thirdly, because in order to be heard by many in our over-large concert halls and opera-houses we also have to make a loud noise.[8]

It is fascinating to see Mahler carefully positioning himself here as a modern, Wagnerian composer whose democratically inclusive lay audience requires music to explain its complexity in direct terms, articulating its subtlety and new effects of expression with a suitably large and loud instrument that has to provide, or indeed *be*, its own form of mediation (with or without 'programmatic' explanations or clarifying notes and texts). To grasp the nature of that communication process – which precisely bypasses conventional manners to address the listener in urgent Wagnerian *im*mediacy, as if *without* mediation[9] – I return here to an idiosyncratically illuminating contribution by Friedrich Kittler to David J. Levin's 1994 collection *Opera Through Other Eyes*. Kittler's essay, 'World-Breath: On Wagner's Media Technology', can be read, somewhat against the grain, as an enthusiastic gloss on Adorno's *In Search of Wagner* in the spirit and style of Nietzsche's *The Case of Wagner*.[10]

Kittler's special contribution is to credit Wagner with having created, in the music-drama, 'the first mass-medium in the modern sense of the word'.[11] For Kittler, the music-drama moved decisively out of the realm of 'arts' into that of 'media'. Where the former engage in symbolic relation with 'the sensory fields they presuppose', the latter 'correlate in the real itself to the materiality they deal with'.[12] Elaborating on this distinction, Kittler sees media as rendering obsolete the former mediating intelligence (here styled 'psychic faculties') involving 'reflection and imagination, education and literacy'.[13] This intelligence 'the medium of music-drama' dispenses with in favour of a direct 'play with and upon the public's nerves'.[14] Echoing Adorno in characterizing the music-drama as a form of technology, whose ideological affiliation is with power exercised through

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[8] *Selected Letters of Gustav Mahler*, ed. Martner, 148–9.

[9] I am thinking here of Wagner's theorization of the post-Beethovenian orchestra's 'faculty of speech' ('the faculty of uttering the unspeakable') as outlined in Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, III, section V, 316ff.

[10] My engagement with this single essay by Kittler is rather deliberately opportunistic; for more extended consideration of Kittler, relevant to the present article, see Gundula Kreuzer, 'Kittler's Wagner and Beyond' in 'Colloquy. Discrete/Continuous: Music and Media Theory after Kittler' in *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 70 (2017), 228–33.

[11] Friedrich Kittler, 'World-Breath: On Wagner's Media Technology', in *Opera Through Other Eyes*, edited by David J. Levin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 215.

[12] Kittler, 'World-Breath', 215.

[13] Kittler, 'World-Breath', 216.

[14] Kittler, 'World-Breath', 216.

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the conductor's baton 'over Nibelungs, musicians, and audience', Kittler nevertheless levels the playing-field somewhat by characterizing the superseded 'arts' of the German nineteenth century as themselves 'great enterprises', dependent for their survival upon 'subventions and interventions of state power' in the form of 'programs of aesthetic education' and 'redemptions through the eternal feminine'.[15] The music-drama remains contemporary as a precursor of Hollywood cinema, through its technologies of direct, bodily and psychological engagement with the audience, utilizing libretti that create worlds in which we are surrounded with 'breathing, rustling, and storming'.[16] The orchestra of Wagner's 'artistic imperialism' depends upon 'the power of sound'. It becomes quite literally an 'amplifier' for 'pure dynamics and pure acoustics'.[17]

Symphonic Pleasures

Looking back at Mahler's rather systematically worked-out response to the young Gisela Tolnay-Witt through the prism of Kittler's spirited critique of the Wagnerian music-drama, two tendencies of that response become clear. On the one hand, we have the democratically inclined, liberal modernist seeking to convey most efficiently new and complex aesthetic experiences and perceptions to a wide, self-selecting audience. On the other, we have the practitioner of post-Wagnerian affective 'technology', employing the amplifier-orchestra (which Kittler, again echoing Adorno, later styles as functioning like an army: 'as drill, as power, and as instrumental unit'[18]) often to overwhelming effect. Did Mahler, perhaps, thus confirm the Symphony's new role as a mass-medium, advancing the cause of Wagner's 'artistic imperialism' dedicated (in Kittler's words) to Wotan as a 'god of armies and ecstasies'?[19]

As the democratically modern communicator, Mahler certainly seems also to have been in touch with the great outmoded enterprises of 'art' that Kittler had associated not only with 'programs of aesthetic education' but significantly also with 'redemptions through the eternally feminine'. The irreverent jocularity of that comment might prompt thought about the disarming apparent naivety with which Mahler sometimes both charmed and perplexed his contemporaries.[20] Some of that naivety might even have played a role in the grandest and most 'public' of his symphonic works: the Eighth, whose second part is precisely a celebration and setting of the 'Schlussszene' from Goethe's *Faust*, from which that image of the redemptive 'Ewigweibliche' derives. In that very symphony – with its colossal final peroration and 'deus ex machina' of a separate cohort of brass instruments amplified by the organ ('volles Werk') – Mahler provides his audience once again with one of those crushing manifestations of 'pure dynamics and pure acoustics' whose powerfully pleasurable effect is defined by our readiness to be 'overwhelmed' by them. This was something that Theodor Helm and others, drawing back in shock and perplexity, had refused to be.

It is worth pondering the nature and texture of the experience of both responses, not least to that final peroration in the First Symphony in Vienna in 1900.

[15] Kittler, 'World-Breath', 215.
[16] Kittler, 'World-Breath', 221.
[17] Kittler, 'World-Breath', 224.
[18] Kittler, 'World-Breath', 233.
[19] Kittler, 'World-Breath', 233.
[20] See, for example, Max Graf, *Die Wiener Oper* (Vienna: Humbolt-Verlag, 1955), 'Gustav Mahler im Kaffeehaus', 79.

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Part of Max Graf's account of the performance is included in the valuable selection of critical reviews from which I have taken the Helm quotation, and which formed the closing section of Karen Painter's *Mahler and His World*. While Helm and Hirschfeld (for example) simply accuse disapprovingly, Graf observes that the symphony had spoken differently to two different constituent groups within the audience, the confused and exasperated older-generation critics being outnumbered and out-voiced by the cheers of 'our younger generation':

> Only this generation can feel the work's great emotional rapture, pleasure in intensely colored sound, and ecstasy of passion; only they can enjoy its parody and distortion of sacred emotion. I myself am far too close to this generation not to empathize with the work as if it were my own. Yet I can almost understand that an older generation finds it alien.[21]

Here, then, we are introduced to a striking contemporary view of what might be called the politics of pleasure with respect to the symphony as mass-medium. Where a decade or two later the authentic modernist experience would again be associated more with a kind of pleasure-questioning pain, a heightened recourse to 'aesthetic education' and the 'subventions and interventions', the 'imagination, education and literacy' that Kittler had associated with the 'arts' of former times, *here* the youthful proto-modernists are presented as both intelligent and enthusiastic hedonists, able to enjoy and cheer what their elders and betters found disconcerting and incoherent.

Climactic Markers and Meanings

Let us remain with the First Symphony in order to consider more closely the prominent climaxes that Mahler engineers there. We began with the grand finale, its resounding triumphal march and standing horn-players. Arguably, that celebration is won on the back of another, more significant climactic breakthrough that is integral to the progress and nature of the symphony and concerns what, in technical musical terms, we would call the conclusive establishment, later *re*-establishment, of the symphony's primary key of D major.[22] This is the key of the whole of the first movement, after the long, evocative introduction, with its 'Naturlaut' atmosphere, bird-calls and distant horns. In a movement apparently associated with positive, sunny pastoralism, the first iteration of the climactic explosion to which I refer occurs after a long build-up of tension, towards the end of what we might once have been happy to call the 'development' section. That tension is now released in the grand restatement at cue 26 of the new, *Freischütz*-like horn theme that had been introduced just after cue 15; its restatement marks a recapitulation that is defined as an arrival, a movement *onwards*, rather than simply a formal 'return'.

The climactic explosion, six bars after cue 26, represents the noisiest 'effect' deployed by Mahler in the first movement. A gradually accelerating bass ostinato (E♭, D♭, C♮) intensifies the function of the rest of the orchestra's dominant pedal

[21] Painter, ed., *Mahler and His World*, 286.

[22] For an illuminating study of this movement, see James Buhler, '"Breakthrough" as Critique of Form: The Finale of Mahler's First Symphony' *19th-Century Music* **20** (1996): 125–43.

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A until the volcanic eruption of D major trumpet fanfares at the point in question, leading to the conclusive arrival *into* D major at cue 26. With or without programmatic explanations, this whole passage comprises an elaborate gestural and dramatic signalling of a formerly anticipated, so-called 'purely musical' tonal and structural event of the kind that would have been understood and anticipated by eighteenth-century connoisseurs. This climactic signalling and 'heightening' of significant structural moments – a key feature of the symphony as mass-medium – was here practised emphatically with bodily as well as musical-technological means. Mahler's gestures as a conductor were revealingly studied by caricaturists, as were those of Liszt at the keyboard. Where Liszt's climactic moments referenced 'visionary' experiences or moods, we know he would have leaned back from the keyboard, arms at full stretch, his eyes (open or shut) gazing heavenwards at the apparition his music seemed to conjure.[23] Mahler's climaxes, with their startling 'Luftpausen' (pauses as if to catch breath) and directions like 'Vorwärts drängend' ('pushing' or 'thrusting forward'), were of course celebrations of the conductor-composer's power over the militarily drilled orchestra. But so too, as in the First Symphony, are they gesturally constructed *experiences* for the audience: experiences whose direct physicality often simultaneously invited and forbade complete verbal description or characterization.

In a recent article on the Third Symphony, Ryan R. Kangas cautiously characterized the modes of 'programmatic' interpretation in which he was engaging by citing Paul Ricoeur's sophistically intricate concern 'not to discover an intention behind the text but to unfold a world in front of it'.[24] However we cover our interpretative tracks, we are likely to find real-world experiences, images or sounds invoked by Mahler's music. The enthusiastic, real-time audience involvement with the First Symphony's performatively heightened and dramatically delayed structural 'arrival' in D major could have suggested modes of climax that included the intimate, culturally censored experience of sexual tension and release, whose full-frontal character (as we might put it) may well have played a part in inspiring the 'ecstasy of passion' that so impressed the youthful members of the audience with whom Max Graf felt able to sympathize – for all that he understood the shocked disapproval of more sedate senior critics like Hirschfeld or Helm.

To characterize the first movement's celebrated climactic outburst of sunshine and nature in this way is in no sense to downplay its bursting through into a world that seems joyfully hospitable to the subjective protagonist of the symphonic narrative as suggested by Mahler's programmatic titles and occasional comments about the work; these were further glossed by musical and poetic connections to the jilted lover of the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*.[25] It is, however, to question the

[23] I am thinking of the famous series of eight caricatures by János Jánko reproduced by Lawrence Kramer in his *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 88. As originally published in a Hungarian newspaper in 1873, they were accompanied by amusing captions that may be seen in translation in Anthony Wilkinson, *Liszt* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 65. The fourth image is the one referred to here; its caption: 'Pianissimo. Saint Assisi Liszt speaks to the birds. – His face brightens with holy light'.

[24] Ryan R. Kangas, 'Mahler's Early Summer Journeys through Vienna, or What Anthropomorphized Nature Tells Us', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* **68** (2015): 378.

[25] The second song supplied much of the music and implied imagery of the symphony's first movement. See also n.27 below.

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more negative implications of the mass-mediated symphony that such sensational commotions could also seem to resound. Not only is this sort of climax *not* 'overwhelming' in the ideologically troubling sense of capping an edifice that celebrates (as it perhaps inspires) the authoritarian pressing of the audience into awed submission, it also emphasizes what might reasonably be called the 'modernist' aspect of the symphony. Again we note Graf's observation of the significant generational divide in the Viennese response of 1900, seemingly inspired precisely by the immersive, *dynamic* character of such climaxes. Here utopia is no static cloud-cuckoo land; it develops and must be *won*. This task is re-mediated and reconfigured by the two great climaxes of the Finale, the second of which directly references and in a sense repeats that of the first movement.

The twofold return to D major of the Finale that worried Alma Mahler and inspired criticism from Richard Strauss[26] need now confuse no audience alert to the dramatically significant recollection of the 'nature' mood and location of the first movement's introduction. This recollection happens immediately after the first climax and subsequent first presentation of the triumphal march derived from the falling fourths of the introduction. In terms of the technological innovations of the post-Wagnerian symphony (here the musical 'flashback' to a static space outside or 'beyond' the subjective tragedy of the expressive discourse), this moment of enacted recall supplies, in newly expanded (if no longer 'pure') musical terms, its own programmatic explanation when the subjective mode of the elegiac, 'sehr gesangvoll' theme (cue 16) is subsequently re-engaged for the first time in the context of the 'Nature' into which the lovelorn Wayfarer had originally wandered. His subjective experience of that excursion is now at last fully evoked and confronted. It is as if that lyrical voice is rediscovered in the remembered context of a 'Nature' whose utopian construction in the first movement is here revealed as the healing 'otherness' which the originating song ('Ging heut morgen über's Feld') had invoked as the site of an attempted escape from subjectivity that *did not work* for the heart-broken poet.[27] Only now, in a sort of self-psychoanalytic performance, does the poet and composer confront a purely utopian Nature with the modern experience of *dis*-harmony and, as a result, re-possess it and 'win' the triumphant final climax and celebrative march in which he calls upon his orchestral forces to overwhelm the audience. This, we might suggest, they do not with the din of monumental, imperial power, but of a more productively utopian vision of oneness in which the alienated urban subject, freed of illusions, re-joins his contemporaries in a democratically conceived Nature as celebrative site for communal progress and renewal.

Participatory Horrors

Of course, such a reading could itself be interpreted as an ideological imposition. The deafening display of uplifting energy in that climax might even merit the 'parodic' interpretation with which Helm satirically invested it in his review. It is clear,

[26] See Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*, fourth English revised edn (London: Sphere Books, 1990), 106. Concerning Strauss's criticism, see Herta Blaukopf, ed., *Gustav Mahler – Richard Strauss: Correspondence 1888–1911* (London: Faber & Faber, 1884), 37.

[27] In Mahler's text for the second of the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, the description of an idyllic natural world in which flowers and animals speak to the poet concludes with the lines 'Will my happiness begin now?/ No, no, I think it can never bloom for me!'

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however, that he suspected that Mahler really *meant* the direction 'Triumphal' that appears at cue 56; but so too is it clear that for Mahler the dialectical questioning of such triumphalism would recommence at the very start of the Second Symphony, whose arguably even greater acoustic power is wielded with differently 'overwhelming' intentions. Significant here might be the contrasting reactions in 1895 (as reported by Wilhelm Kienzl) of Karl Muck and Richard Strauss to the battering, dissonant climax of the first movement. The passage in question must be that at cue 20, marked 'Molto pesante', which leads to the cliff-edge drop into the recapitulation of the opening theme. Muck's and Strauss's reactions succinctly re-stage the Viennese double-take on the outrages of the First Symphony:

> all kinds of harmonic and instrumental audacities were to be heard, particularly a stubbornly dissonant fortissimo passage for the brass. Richard Strauss … had invited Muck and myself to sit with him in an empty box to enjoy Mahler's work together. At the passage for brass just mentioned Strauss, sitting on my left, turns to me with enthusiasm in his eyes, 'Believe me, there are no limits to musical expression!' At the same time, to my right, Muck's face is distorted with unmistakable revulsion and the single word 'Horrible!' ['Scheusslich!'] comes from between his teeth.[28]

Here, more clearly even than at the end of the First Symphony, we have an effect involving the 'pure power of sound' (in Kittler's phrase). The conventional tendency to regard it as 'extra-musical' is stunningly reinforced by a literally non-musical effect of noise that administers a kind of direct, physical shock to the concert-hall audience. The 'stubborn' chordal dissonance is given to trumpets, trombones and tuba, *fortissimo*. With a pedal G throughout, one block-chord stack of thirds (F♯, A, C, E♭ and G) is succeeded by another (G, B, D, F♮ and A♭) over four bars. Both are hammered out in a fundamental rhythm derived from the first-subject's march, in the last bar with trilling woodwind adding a diabolical dimension to what is harmonically a dominant minor ninth in C minor. The accompanying 'noise' to which I have referred is provided by a two-bar-long crescendo-ing roll with sponge sticks on a suspended cymbal, generating a searing, rushing and hissing sound, like a terrifying kind of 'feedback', as lower strings, tuba and bassoons tumble down a chromatic scale into the C-minor recapitulation – its tremolando (as at the start) now a newly electrified shivering. This climax rushes over and around us like an apocalyptic disaster before apocalypse is even in question: a technological horror-thrill that could seem to take symphonic sensationalism about as far as it could go, yet without any immediate programmatic explanation. That will come later.

Even the well-known Dresden 'programme' only tells us that this movement is a kind of soliloquy – a meditation upon death and the meaning of life inspired by a funeral.[29] It tells us a great deal more about the subsequent, even more significant climaxes to come. First must be that in the Scherzo, where St Anthony's fruitless sermon to the uncomprehending fish in the river leads to an apparently deranged outburst of orchestral violence, 'fff'. This explosion, nine bars after cue 50, seems to conjure forth a vision of some more ideal realm; the first-movement's terror-thrill has now become an exasperated 'outburst of despair' whose origin and character

[28] Blaukopf, ed., *Mahler –Strauss Correspondence*, 119 (for the German text see Herta Blaukopf (ed.), *Gustav Mahler – Richard Strauss, Briefwechsel 1888–1911* (Munich: R. Piper & Co., 1980), 156).

[29] The translated text of this programme is reproduced in A. Mahler, *Gustav Mahler*, 213–14.

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are explained as emanating from the presiding subjectivity of the projected 'hero', whether we characterize him as protagonist, or simply the composer-conductor as performed by Mahler. However, the climactic effects of the Finale will be 'explained' in ever more extraordinary fashion, as if courting and then engaging with Kittler's critical response to all such post-Wagnerian and (in his terms) audience-crushing 'artistic imperialism'.

This fifth movement opens, after the visionary intimacy of the *Urlicht*, with a repetition of the clamorous outburst from the climax of the Scherzo; here the business of the mass-mediated symphonic technology is still, therefore, that of extreme amplified subjective expression (rather as had been the case with the Finale of the First Symphony[30]). A significantly new climactic event takes place in the four bars preceding cue 14, and seems programmatically to usher in the genuinely apocalyptic quaking of the earth, after which 'the graves burst open, the dead arise and stream on in endless procession … – kings and beggars, righteous and godless – all press on – the cry for mercy strikes fearfully on our ears'.[31] The apocalyptic march is ushered in, following the awesome visions of the preceding pages, by another terrifying crescendo that seems to refer back to that in the first movement. But here the effect is precisely construed and constructed as coming from somewhere other than the tormented heart of the symphonic protagonist. 'He' seems to become one with us, the programmatically and literally terrified audience. History does not reveal what Muck made of the Finale of the Second Symphony, but his response to the first movement's dissonant climax suggests that he must have suffered there a new aesthetic insult added to the injury repeated by the technology of ear-splitting terror. A Grand-Guignol *Maestoso* transformation of the three-note incipit of the fugato theme from the first movement of Beethoven's last C-minor piano sonata, Op.111 (bars 19–20) is preceded, after the music has died almost to silence, by another 'pure acoustic' crescendo, this time for percussion alone. Here the feedback effect of the suspended cymbal roll is replaced by two tam-tams (one high, the other low), whose final breaking wave of sound is shatteringly accompanied by rolls on bass drum, side drum and timpani. This time we are all enfolded by the eschatological drama, our inclusion soon emphasized by archangelic fanfares and apocalyptic warnings sounding from off-stage brass and percussion groups. These create an astonishingly immersive effect of participatory verisimilitude before the choral finale celebrates our doctrinally subversive conceptual 'redemption' from the very horrors that Mahler's effects of mass-mediated terror have evoked, in the manner of Hollywood blockbusters to come.[32]

Epilogue: Broadening Mahler's Meaning and Re-defining the Elite

> That tone is everything in Mahler is obvious enough to anyone at a live performance, whether it be through the overwhelming power of the Mahler *tutti*, the

[30] The programme for the second performance in 1893 of the First Symphony in Hamburg had the Finale titled 'V. "Dall' Inferno" (Allegro furioso)/ folgt als der plötzliche Ausbruch der Verzweiflung eines im Tiefsten verwundeten Herzens' ('follows, like the sudden despairing outburst of a heart wounded to its depths'). See Henry-Louis de La Grange, *Mahler*, vol. 1 (London: Victor Gollancz, 1974), 748 (translation amended).

[31] A. Mahler, *Gustav Mahler*, 213.

[32] My reasons for describing the movement as 'doctrinally subversive' are explored further in Peter Franklin, *Reclaiming Late-Romantic Music: Singing Devils and Distant Sounds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 18–22.

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> attenuated lines of bare polyphony, the unsupported high violins, the doubling of the single line, or the analytical deconstruction of a scherzo. That *how* Mahler's music speaks is inseparable from *what* it says is nowhere clearer than in relation to his orchestration.[33]

I began here with a critic-contemporary of Mahler who was inclined to complain about, or mock, the 'colossal violence' of the First Symphony's climaxes. That response, and others like it, registered a negative perception: that Mahler's symphonies were helping to construct the nascent realm of mass culture to come, beyond all the bounds of conventional 'good taste'. This was confirmed in matters of acoustic volume and all that implied in terms of how Mahler seemed to be manipulating his audience, when not crushing it into submission to his 'modernity'. Max Graf attested to the positive reception of all this by the younger members of Mahler's audience (with whom Graf tended to sympathize). The question of Mahler's 'modernity' was thus interpreted in ways that prematurely problematized his later appropriation (and implicit neutralization) as a phenomenon of influential but essentially 'historical' interest to Schoenberg and his pupils: as a forerunner of the subsequently institutionalized category of 'new' or 'modernist' music.

After the First World War, the so-called Second Viennese School wanted the designation 'new music' to be hostile to all debasing sentimentality and meretricious pandering to a musically ill-educated middle-class audience – tendencies which Schoenberg himself (unlike Berg) certainly detected in Mahler. This can help to explain the ambivalent tone that coloured some of Schoenberg's statements about his older contemporary and erstwhile mentor, not least in the strange 1912 essay on Mahler that appeared in the first edition of *Style and Idea* in 1951, where Schoenberg seems effortfully to be seeking a way to overcome his evident underlying distaste.[34] He had been one of the less supportive members of the youthful cohort in the audience for the first complete Vienna performance of the Second Symphony in 1899, which he recalled with revealing ambivalence in the essay, where he nevertheless confesses also to having been 'completely overwhelmed' by it, and seized 'with an excitement which expressed itself even physically, in the violent throbbing of my heart'.[35] Was this perhaps a response to the kind of 'effect without cause' of which Wagner had accused Meyerbeer? Schoenberg indicates that he subsequently questioned his susceptibility and the means which Mahler had used, implicitly comparing them with such violent effects as were employed in Puccini's *Tosca* (premiered the following year, in 1900), which Schoenberg felt 'should not be used by an artist because they are too cheap, too accessible to everyone'[36] (Mahler too had qualms about *Tosca*, but would in turn confess to supporting Schoenberg with little comprehension of the direction *he* was taking[37]).

I cite Schoenberg's implied ambivalence here ('I, too, at first considered Mahler's themes banal'[38]) precisely in order to avoid the cruder and more

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[33] Julian Johnson, *Mahler's Voices: Expression and Irony in the Songs and Symphonies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 40.

[34] Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea* (London: Williams and Norgate Ltd., 1951), 7–36; the essay, 'Gustav Mahler', had been written as a posthumous lecture in 1912.

[35] Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, 8.

[36] Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, 8–9.

[37] On both issues see A. Mahler, *Gustav Mahler*, 225 and 112.

[38] Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, 15.

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obviously biased ways in which anti-Semitic critics would subsequently influence Mahler's over-determined marginalization by a considerable portion of the European musicological establishment until his 'rediscovery' (with the aid of conductors like Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer) by a later youthful audience in the 1960s, a decade and a half after the end of the Second World War. Only since the end of the twentieth century has musicology begun less nervously to accommodate what we might now call the 'multi-', as much as 'mass-mediated' aspects of Mahler's symphonies – all those features that were once considered compromisingly 'extra-musical'.

It has been an era in which the nuanced study of mass-media has slowly gained footing in the territory of the traditional humanities, with their vested interest in the official modernisms and avant-gardes of the twentieth century, without necessarily resolving all of the questions about why such things merit study for more than the obvious sociological or critical-ideological reasons (important as they are). Julian Johnson, himself a professed devotee and advocate of a Second-Viennese-School-orientated notion of Modernism, clearly addressed the kind of parameters that interest me here in his 2009 study *Mahler's Voices: Expression and Irony in the Songs and Symphonies*, as indicated in the passage quoted above. Before that, Raymond Knapp had still more boldly confronted what we might call the Mahlerian challenge to conventional aesthetic proprieties when in 2003 he quizzically addressed 'the possible pornographic value of Mahler's music', noting that the ideological assertion of the purity of 'pure music' has ever sought to veil the 'myriad ways' that composers have found

> to communicate in music what could not have been stated in words or depicted on stage. … And it has been argued that the private musical codes of such straight-laced musical personalities as Schumann and Brahms hid a private, sexually-charged fantasy world from the general public.[39]

My aim here is to suggest, however, that Mahler's mass-mediated symphonies hid their meaning less from the imaginative, programmatically literate general musical public of his day than from the ideologues and conservative critics whose certainty of the high quality of their own 'taste' censored what they undoubtedly heard in Mahler, but could only condemn as 'un-musical', 'un-symphonic' or, like Helm, simply 'ironical' (noting the composer's own investment in 'ironic' and 'parodic' forms of rhetoric). That the cultural power of such censorship is still felt within musicology is evidenced even in the innovative critical work of Seth Monahan, who convincingly proposes the category of 'hypothetical music' when writing about the First Symphony or ventures to change the gender of the subject of the Sixth Symphony's 'tragedy'. Proposing that Alma, rather than Mahler himself, might be its true protagonist, his reasons are carefully set out, but he nevertheless feels compelled to engage in nervously disciplinary-political apologetics:

> Outsize readings like mine require so much hermeneutic bandwidth that they open themselves to the charges of excess and even imprudence, of drowning out a range of alternative hearings. … My hope here … is not to settle the matter of Mahler's meaning once and for all, but rather to open the door to a new round of conversations.[40]

[39] Raymond Knapp, *Symphonic Metamorphoses: Subjectivity and Alienation in Mahler's Re-Cycled Songs* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 257.

[40] Seth Monahan, *Mahler's Symphonic Sonatas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 260.

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Others are certainly talking, and certainly not being 'drowned out' by Monahan's provocatively illuminating analyses. Thomas Peattie's recent book on *Gustav Mahler's Symphonic Landscapes* relevantly includes meticulous analyses of landscape through the deployment not only of 'pastoral' tropes, but of the evocative placing of off-stage instruments, variously near or far, and the use of natural sound, 'what might be termed "environmental sound" that is reflected in the fabric of the Second Symphony, a work in which the border between sonic event and musical utterance is particularly porous'.[41] Of still closer relevance to my concerns here, perhaps, is Ben Winters's treatment of the late Ken Russell's once notorious film *Mahler*, in his 2014 book *Music, Performance, and the Realities of Film*. The 1974 film was formerly regarded by some Mahlerians with similar levels of scorn and opprobrium as were once heaped upon Mahler himself, but various more recent commentators on it are cited by Winters, specifically in relation to the scene of the young Mahler's nocturnal escape from a family row into the forest, movingly aligned with the approach to the visionary climax of the first movement of the Seventh Symphony and dovetailing (with the appearance of the white horse) into the panic conclusion of the Third's Scherzo. His view is that 'Russell appears to be suggesting that the essence of Mahler, as he sees it, may reside more in the symphonies' narrative content than in their individual formal design'.[42] The implications of Russell's apparent proposal are further extended by Jeremy Barham, who offers a specifically 'cinematic' and multi-media reading of Mahler in an essay on Mark Godden's 1998 ballet *Dracula* (with music taken from Mahler) and its 2002 filmed version by Guy Maddin as *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin's Diary*, which takes as its starting-point an observation about the 'challenge' posed by Mahler's music 'to the socio-cultural propriety of "high-art" musical performance and consumption in the concert-halls of bourgeois Europe'.[43] The piecemeal appropriation of Mahler's music by choreographers and film directors proves, perhaps, less to destroy than to reveal aspects of the true nature of his symphonies.

All the above scholars seem to take as an implicit starting-point the deliberate failure of Mahler's music to 'conform' and its need to be understood, as I would put it, as communicating, in a kind of vernacular, complex things to a wide and potentially mass audience. The impact of the affective tensions on Mahler's audience, as much as upon himself, indeed became increasingly complex. The middle-period symphonies appear to attempt a retreat from programmatically advertised narrative dramas whose outcome is in a certain sense pre-determined. That retreat was presaged in the Fourth Symphony's almost arbitrary-seeming rhetorical 'breakthrough' back to the mood of rarefied, affirmative naivety and simplicity in the 'childlike' *Himmlisches Leben* song. For a time this song had been intended to close the Third Symphony (instead, its final version ended with the closing Adagio's climactic celebration of love and universal affirmation). The way was nevertheless opened to the middle-period symphonies (Nos. 5, 6 and 7) to invoke more conventional structural models and kinds of formal closure, as if seeking to accommodate the cultural power of the hermeneutic censorship

[41] Thomas Peattie, *Gustav Mahler's Symphonic Landscapes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 55.

[42] Ben Winters, *Music, Performance and the Realities of Film: Shared Concert Experiences in Screen Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 122.

[43] Jeremy Barham, 'Dismembering the Musical Voice: Mahler, Melodrama and Dracula from Stage to Screen' in *Melodramatic Voices: Understanding Music Drama*, ed. Sarah Hibberd (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 237.

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that would motivate Mahler's repeated denials and retractions with respect to 'programmaticism'. Yet the middle symphonies also gave rise to the affective form of expressive 'Russian Roulette' that we encounter in the earlier movements of the Fifth Symphony and (particularly) in the Finale of the Sixth. In both movements, their dynamic energy seems ever ready to generate almost involuntary climactic events – predominantly of joyous affirmation and 'arrival' in the second movement of the Fifth, predominantly of the frustration and catastrophic blocking of such energies in the Finale of the Sixth. That blocking was symbolized most conclusively, perhaps, by the most dramatically 'extra-musical' of all his percussive devices: the great hammer that reinforces the Finale's catastrophic denials of the utopian joys it otherwise so powerfully models and towards which it aspires. Just after cues 129 and 140, and 11 bars after cue 164 (in the 'three-hammer-blow' version), the score calls simply for 'Hammer': a note specifies a 'short, powerful, but hollow-sounding blow, *not* of metallic character (like an axe-blow)' ('Kurzer, mächtig, aber dumpf hallender Schlag von *nicht* metallischem Charakter [wie ein Axthief]').

In a sense those catastrophic blows are almost redundant, so clear is the musical rhetoric of frustration and reversal at the end of the three failed climaxes. Their presence is nevertheless visually as much as acoustically significant in any live performance, where whatever device is used needs to be large and heavy, the moment of its lifting carefully prepared by the brave percussionist who dares to wield it. If my focus here on Mahler's loudest and most intentionally overwhelming sounds has inevitably side-lined the many quieter and more delicate expressive and evocative effects employed in his vast musical canvases, the Sixth's hammer dramatically clarifies what I mean not only by the mass-mediated aspect of Mahler's symphonies, but also by their related *multi*-media character, which leads me to press further the comparison of the symphonies with mass-entertainment films to come. Had he lived another 20 or 30 years, might he even have welcomed the addition of film-projection, heightening and specifying the often intensely 'visual' dimension of his musical language, as in the evocations of landscape explored by Thomas Peattie?

The nearest approximation to what such performances might have looked and felt like (to recall Kittler's 'media' critique of Wagner) could be those heroic constructions and re-constructions of full orchestral scores for big silent-era movies like those of Carl Davis for D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) or Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (1927). Their live performances derive so much of their impact from the interaction between the filmed narrative and the continuous symphonic scores performed, in Davis's case, by an almost Mahler-sized orchestra that few but the biggest of 1920s movie-houses would have been able to support.[44] If on one level such a proposal seems irrelevant, given the already intensely visualized complexity and dramatic intensity of Mahler's mass-mediated symphonic dramas, the suggestion highlights the perhaps no less preposterous-seeming truth that Mahler's symphonies were themselves anticipating some of the masterpieces of mass-entertainment cinema to come; those films, in turn, derive a large part of their character and many of their effects from integrated orchestral scores whose music owes much to Mahler.

I am led to two final observations. The first, inspired not least by Jeremy Barham, is to note how Mahler's symphonic language further embraced the melodramatic horror genre by adopting a mode of utterance which I would

[44] The present author writes with specific experience of *Intolerance*, screened with Carl Davis's new score at the 1989 Leeds Film Festival and *Napoleon* (restored by Kevin Brownlow and with a new score composed and conducted by Carl Davis with the London Philharmonic Orchestra) as screened at the Royal Festival Hall in December 2004.

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characterize as 'anti-music' (to set alongside Monahan's category of 'hypothetical music'): where large parts of a symphonic movement may be constructed precisely (as in the Scherzo of the Second Symphony) as something to be rejected, or *escaped from*. The Tenth's 'Purgatorio' is another example. Beyond this, a different kind of 'anti-music' is constituted where its source is revealed to be significantly and sometimes ghoulishly 'other' than the expressive consciousness of the artist-subject – perhaps, indeed, his 'unconscious'. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the first movement of *Das Lied von der Erde*, and nowhere better explained than by Stephen Hefling in his splendid characterization of the 'recapitulation':

> Now the basic cell and its aftermath are texted for the first time … and the terror animating the movement's opening is at last explicitly identified: 'In the moonlight, on the graves, crouches a wildly ghostlike form'. The mock-heroic character of the head-motive horn fanfare … is revealed as well: 'Hear you, how his howling shrieks forth in the sweet fragrance of *life*! [*Lebens*!]'[45]

Hefling (whose italicization of 'Lebens' identifies Mahler's significant substitution for Bethge's 'Abends' [evening]) omits here only the clinching identification before that last exhortation, which would have been clear to any reader of his handbook on *Das Lied*: 'Ein Aff ist's!' ('It's an ape!'). This retrospectively renders the powerful music of the song's introduction as a horrifying form of 'Affenmusik': its flutter-tonguing energy and stuttering, tumbling exuberance an uncomprehending mockery of the brave-face stoicism it appears to be accompanying, its waltz-like gait a dance of death.

My final observation is no less inspired by what are in fact often referred to as 'expressionistic' ruptures and cries that rend the fabric of Mahler's late symphonies. That epithet underpins the standard modernist narrative that has Mahler 'anticipating' Schoenberg and the New Music to come; my previous references to film lead me to suggest that those cries might equally make us think of the shower-scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, underpinned by Herrmann's notoriously 'stabbing' dissonant string chords. And where would Max Steiner's 'Tara' theme from *Gone with the Wind* be without the Sixth's 'Alma' theme, or John Williams's musical underpinning of the arrival, opening and subsequent departure of the alien Mother Ship in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* without the great climactic unfoldings of Mahler's symphonic Adagios, or of the last movement of the Eighth Symphony? Mahler's rainbow-coloured scores anticipated and perhaps made possible those great works of twentieth-century mass culture – with all their questioning, their manipulation of and also challenges to the audiences they have blessed with such complex but undoubted pleasures. Those audiences need have no difficulty in understanding Mahler, for all that his musical and acoustic techniques might be no more transparent or comprehensible to them than the subtle arts and technologies of film-making. In his handbook on *Das Lied von der Erde*, Hefling quotes one of Mahler's greatest contemporary critics, William Ritter, as finding evidence in that posthumous work that 'his music addresses itself *to everyone*'; he went on to add '*to the elite of souls*'.[46] We might perhaps imagine that neither Mahler nor Ritter would necessarily have been surprised to find members of that elite in the cinemas as much as in the concert halls of our later world.

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[45] Stephen E. Hefling, *Mahler: 'Das Lied von der Erde'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 91.

[46] Hefling, *Mahler: 'Das Lied von der Erde'*, 72.

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