

Program Notes for Mahler's Symphony No. 9 (1909)  
By Keenan Reesor

Mahler thought big. His symphonies are among the longest in the repertoire, their required performing forces among the largest. Moreover, in them Mahler faces humanity's deepest philosophical questions: creation, life, struggle, death, judgment, salvation, renewal. The symphonies attest well their composer's famous dictum that "the symphony must be like the world; it must embrace everything." Like most of Mahler's symphonies, the Ninth is well over an hour in length, challenges the formal conventions of the genre, and requires a large orchestra with extended winds and percussion—though it lacks such novelties as the steel rods, cowbells, and hammer (not to mention voices) encountered in others. And it, too, has invited philosophical exegesis.

The Ninth Symphony had little chance of a "normal" reception, owing to its number and place within Mahler's oeuvre. According to the composer's wife, Alma, Mahler feared that composing a ninth symphony might precipitate his death, as it seemed to have done with Beethoven, Schubert, and Bruckner. To evade this so-called "curse of the ninth," Mahler did not assign a number to *Das Lied von der Erde*, the hour-long work for voices and orchestra that he composed directly after his Eighth and even described as a symphony in its subtitle. Only after completing this work did Mahler compose what he entitled his Ninth Symphony. But the joke was on the composer: he died before he could bring his sketches of the Tenth to completion.

More significant for the work's reception has been the mystique of the "last" work (think Mozart's Requiem). As early as 1921, commentators began interpreting the symphony as a prescient expression of the composer's own impending death. Mahler, however, did not compose the Ninth on his deathbed. He completed the work in the summer of 1909, nearly two years before his death, but various personal and professional demands left him no more time to compose than the few weeks in mid 1910 he spent sketching his unfinished Tenth Symphony. He was, it is true, shocked to learn of his incurable heart defect in 1907, but the condition never directly impacted his quality of life until the very end. In February 1911, just days before the onset of his final illness, he wrote a letter in which he stated his intention to return to New York the following season. Like other composers who died unexpectedly, Mahler had no premonitions of his death—his "last" work was really only his last work.

Perhaps Mahler would have elaborated on the meaning of his Ninth if he had lived longer. As it stands, his own documented commentary on the work is tantalizingly little. Strangely, not a single word about the symphony survives in any of the twenty-five letters he wrote to his wife during its composition. His only surviving description of the symphony appears in a letter he wrote to the conductor Bruno Walter:

I have been working very hard and am just putting the finishing touches to a new symphony. . . . The work itself (insofar as I know it, for I have been writing away at it blindly, and now that I have begun to orchestrate the last movement I have forgotten the first) is a very satisfactory addition to my little family. In it something is said that I have had on the tip of my tongue for some time—perhaps (as a whole) to be ranked beside the Fourth, if anything. (But quite different.)

If the Ninth is not the work of a dying man, it certainly can be said to be the work of a man who spent much of his life contemplating matters of life and death. The lasting impact of the crises of 1907—not just his heart diagnosis but also his young daughter’s death—served to stimulate further introspection in an existing personal spiritual quest, as he suggested to Walter in the aftermath of those events in early 1908:

You do not know what has been and still is going on within me; but it is certainly not that hypochondriac fear of death, as you suppose. I had already realized that I shall have to die. But without trying to explain or describe to you something for which there are perhaps no words at all, I’ll just tell you that at a blow I have simply lost all the clarity and quietude that I ever achieved; and that I stood *vis-à-vis rien*, and now at the end of life am again a beginner who must find his feet.

Could it be that what Mahler could not describe to Walter here in words was in fact the “something” that had been “on the tip of [his] tongue for some time” afterward and found musical expression in the Ninth Symphony? Such a proposition is entirely possible, to judge from the music, for the essence of the Ninth is the transcendence, not the resolution, of conflict. It is the expression of one who “[has] already realized that [he] shall have to die” but has come to peace with that fact—regardless of when or in what circumstances death may come.

In navigating the Ninth Symphony as a listener, particularly for the first time, it is more helpful to abandon generic preconceptions than to adhere to them; Mahler certainly did so in writing it. It features four movements, yes, but their individual and collective makeup is anything but typical. To cite one important example, the keys of the movements—D major, C major, A minor, D-flat major—do not at all resemble the classic model. The first movement opens, just as it ends, in a fragmentary manner. Whether the contrasting themes that emerge from these fragments constitute a functional exposition is a matter of critical dispute. Within a few minutes, however, the work has ensued on a developmental course that unfolds in three successive waves lasting several minutes each. In each the music gradually swells to the breaking point only to collapse in defeat. Thwarted, the movement ends in reflective submission.

The subsequent movements are formed somewhat more lucidly through the alternation of thematic episodes, but with fascinatingly fluid interplay. The second features three alternating dances: a neo-classical ländler, a sarcastic waltz, and a slower one referring to the first movement’s opening theme. These dances, however, intrude upon each other considerably. The effect of this movement is parody—insult added to the injury of the first movement’s frustrated serenity. The third opens with an aggressive, angular, and disjunct theme that alternates twice with a more innocent, jocular one. After a stormy central developmental episode, a placid section ensues only to be encroached upon by mocking winds; successive harp glissandos attempt to repel the intrusion but to no avail. The movement ends in fury.

The final movement, by contrast, is an astoundingly beautiful adagio of the unmistakable Mahler type. A full, solemn opening theme alternates thrice with a sparer one, culminating in what must surely be one of the most striking quiet codas ever written. The symphonic fabric slowly evaporates, leaving the strings to execute an arch-diminuendo down to placid nothingness. This

is not resolution, for none of the disappointments encountered earlier in the symphony—the thwarted culminations of the first movement, the taunting and jeering of the second and third—is resolved. It is, quite simply, acceptance. “In ceasing we lose it all,” said Leonard Bernstein of this moment. “But in letting go, we have gained everything.”