

Nietzsche, Mahler and the Modeling of Mortality

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Background

In 2008, I set out a proposal for a book on death and leave-taking in music which, four years later, would be published by Pendragon Press as ***Lebewohl: Reconstructions of Death and Leave-taking in Music***. (<http://www.pendragonpress.com/book.php?id=714>) There were three main aspects of intent for the book: the purpose was, first, to consider our own fears about dying and the pain of being left or abandoned, and to see how music both mirrors these dilemmas, and – in an Aristotelian kind of way – helps us to cope. Secondly, to construct/reconstruct narratives that would provide insight into the work's multi-dimensionality – that is, to be a story teller, and understand better Adorno's "wir verstehen nicht die Musik- Sie versteht uns." The third purpose was to examine certain structural dimensions of musical works from new theoretical points of view.

Models and Meaning

One of those theoretical stances was modeling. Unlike categories, where an object, whether a common object like a chair or table, or a specific one, like a musical work, is part of a group or class of objects, modeling is primarily one-to-one, where a great painting or musical work provides the stimulus for emulation and transformation. Often, in music, the modeling is intentional, such as between Mozart's string quartet in A, K. 464 and Beethoven's A major string quartet, op. 18 no.5, or between the 'Ode to Joy' theme of the finale of Beethoven's 9th symphony and the finale theme of Brahms' 1st symphony. At other time, though, modeling is further back in the creative process. Intrinsic to modeling are two important factors: one is that **modeling is selective**, and that only some of the characteristics of the original work will be present in the later one; and secondly, especially for modeling at this further remove, that there may be **more than one model** in a subsequent work, which requires awareness of models in different dimensions or planes of the work, which accordingly inflect its meaning.

Mahler and Nietzsche

In the case of Mahler, we can identify two primary models: **Nietzsche** and **Beethoven**. It is well documented that Mahler had read Nietzsche avidly when he was a student at the University of Vienna in the 'Pernersdorfer' literary circle, headed by Siegfried Lipiner. Two aspects of Nietzsche seemed to have resonated particularly strongly with Mahler: one was **Nietzsche's highly subversive content**, that was anti-Establishment, highly individual and also creative as a critic of society calling for an incisive *Umwertung alle Werte* (re-evaluation of all values); the other was **Nietzsche's style as a discourse of voices**. *Also sprach Zarathustra*, which Nietzsche regarded as his most important book, is populated by a poet/narrator (Zarathustra), animals such as a camel and a lion, an old man and a chorus of critics. Reality for Nietzsche, then, is not a

uniform story, played out on the chessboard of fate, like the *Ring of the Nibelungen*, but a jostling array of styles, each of which has its voice in the larger whole.

Mahler's famous response to Bruno Walter that "the symphony is a world" accordingly helps us understand that this literary background absorbed and pre-occupied him as a stylistic means that could be made manifest in music; and, at the same time, Mahler needed to violently reject Nietzsche's presence after the 3rd symphony, arguably the apogee of his involvement with Nietzsche, even to the extent of ordering his fiancée, Alma, to burn her complete set of Nietzsche's works. However, the author of *Zarathustra*, and the 'éminence grise' in Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus*, was not so easily exorcised.

Behind this level of literary modeling is another, equally fascinating part of the dynamics of creativity, transformation and rejection – because *Zarathustra* was itself modeled on Wagner's *Ring* libretto, as a radical critique. While *Zarathustra* is a close reading of the *Ring*, so close that Nietzsche actually borrows lines from the libretto with minimal changes, Nietzsche's book ("for everyone and no-one") is a corrosively ironic rejection of Wagner's saga of greed, jealousy and destruction through 'amor fati'. In his twenties Nietzsche had been a fervent adherent of Wagner, using his time and influence as a literary professor to further Wagner's cause, but gradually he realized that Wagner had obtained all he could from Nietzsche and no longer included him in his inner circle. This painful realization of a friendship betrayed, from Nietzsche's perspective, forced him to distance himself from Wagner. One of the means was using Wagner's literary themes, but re-working them in a new, open-ended, multi-voiced transformation that presented alternative views on reality. It was this narrative dissonance that was to be so critical for Mahler, and at the same time, necessitated him distancing himself from Nietzsche.

Mahler and Beethoven

As both conductor and composer, the most powerful musical model for Mahler was Beethoven, and especially Beethoven's symphonies. Mark Evan Bonds, in *After Beethoven*, describes the importance of Beethoven's symphonies for later composers of the 19th century. We can identify three aspects of Beethoven's symphonies as models: one is as **precedent for breaking ground**, in terms of size, style, orchestration and form; the second is as **anxiety**, to measure up to the model, particularly critical for Brahms; and last, as transformations of the model, which will be the case study of Beethoven's 9th and *Das Lied von der Erde*, Mahler's ninth symphonic work.

Arguably, Mahler had used Beethoven's 5th as a model for his 2nd symphony – also a taut, C minor work – and his 5th symphony, whose peremptory opening trumpet gesture duplicates almost exactly the famous motto of Beethoven's 5th. But the 9th provides what we will call an inversional model: that while certain features are retained, Mahler inverts certain salient features.

Beethoven's 9th projects four important components: it traces the experiential journey from conflict in the first movement to resolution in the finale; it is end-weighted, with a huge finale towards which the work is directed; the finale 'replays' earlier stages in the work (the incipits of the preceding movements) and reworks the journey, but at a higher level; and the finale is "form-full" – that is, it does not have a single form, but the variation finale is interspersed by other forms and styles (in an almost pre-Nietzschean way).

By comparison, *Das Lied* is also an experiential journey, from conflict in the first movement to a transcendent dissolution in nature at the end of the finale; its finale is also end-weighted and replays the earlier journey, but encompassed within the finale, and at a higher level; and the finale's form incorporates and juxtaposes formal elements of symphonic sonata form with strophic song form.

Evidence of the Model: Recitative

Not only is Beethoven's finale vocal but it is also operatic in provenance. This manifests not as vocal recitative but as Instrumental recitative, where the cellos and basses attempt to restore order after the chaotic opening '*Schreckensfanfare*.' The function of recitative in opera is primarily to tell the story, but in the 9th symphony it also has the additional function of providing breathing spaces that allow for order (as thematic presence, and, by extension, philosophical resolution) to take place.

Mahler's use of recitative in *Das Lied von der Erde* equally provides breathing spaces to reach the next strophe or stage of the journey, but not the restitution of order. On the contrary, in Mahler's most imaginative and radical re-working of the model, order **collapses** at every stage prior to the C major resolution – that the 'story' the recitatives tell is not one of construction so much as deconstruction. That the end of life is not a glorious apotheosis of solidarity – which, despite various digressions, is what Beethoven's finale projects – so much as a place where the known co-ordinates of life are either pitted in opposition or unravel – musically, texturally, experientially.

But Mahler presents us with a multi-leveled story: just as Beethoven's search for order is waylaid in the successive stages of the journey, so, through the successive stages of the journey in Mahler's finale, the search for order finally takes on a new dimension and a new meaning. Underpinning the vocal story of the recitatives in the finale and the life journey of wandering is a **symphonic structure** based on the opening motif – and which is ultimately opened out, like a Chinese fan – in the C major transcendent *die liebe Erde* motif of the luminous texture and being at one with nature at the end of the work. This rich and subtle reworking of Beethoven's model is truly "the symphony as a world" and an experiential and musical journey of discovery.