

MAHLER'S "GÖTTERFUNKEN"
A GUIDE TO THE FIRST MOVEMENT OF THE EIGHTH

For the ASO Chorus
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Much has been written and said about Mahler's massive "Symphony of a Thousand." So, to help you make sense of the seeming chaos (especially involved in learning the first movement!) I offer below a brief guide to the composer's organizing principles as they appear in the opening movement to his Eighth Symphony.

-But to understand any part, it is best to step back and get a glimpse of the whole:

Eight of Nine

Composed in a white-hot creative flash, between June and August of 1906 (with final touches the following summer), the 8th Symphony was not performed until Mahler led the premiere in 1910 (and then died eight months later).

It is interesting to note that while several of his nine Symphonies involve solo voices and/or choirs (the 2nd, 3rd and 4th), the 8th is the only one that involves singing from start to finish – using the human voice as a musical instrument. Mahler wrote that, while working on the piece, it was as if "the whole universe burst into song."

The Inspiration

As his correspondence reveals, Mahler harbored a secret desire to someday create a fitting grand-scale musical setting of the final scene of Part II of Goethe's *Faust* and that it was not until he stumbled upon the ancient Latin Pentecostal hymn, "Veni creator spiritus," that the idea took hold of how to accomplish it. So, what could this 8th century liturgical text have to do with a German Romantic poetic-drama written 1000 years later?

In his epic E-flat Major setting of the Latin hymn, Mahler took his inspiration from the text's evocation of the divine spark of creation (as Schiller's "divine sparks" ["Götterfunken"] inspired Beethoven in his 9th). He saw this text as a fitting introduction to Goethe's version of the Faust legend, which ends in salvation, not damnation. -And in it, he created a vast aural universe – with carefully structured musical themes and forms taking us beyond the mere dictionary equivalents of words – that transcends the world of opposites referenced in both texts: darkness and light, good and evil, infirmity and health, head and heart, death and life, male and female, and – in the most Freudian sense– conscious and subconscious (Mahler even intuited this in his splitting of the choral forces in two: Choir I and II). Faust's ultimate enlightenment and transcendence becomes ours, in a blaze of Mahlerian (Apollonian) glory.

Two Parts in Four Movements

Though Mahler divided and labeled his 8th Symphony in two "parts" (the Latin part and the German part), he actually constructed this work in the traditional Viennese Classical four-movement symphonic form:

Part I, a setting of the Latin Pentecostal Hymn "Veni creator spiritus," is Movement No.1

Part II, a setting of the final section of Part II of Goethe's *Faust*, comprises:

Mvt. 2. (Slow movement) T/B "Waldung, sie schwankt heran" – our pages 64-72, Figures [1]-[56]
(then, Fig. [56]-[62] which serve as an Introduction to:)

Mvt. 3. (Scherzo) S/A "Gerettet ist das edle Glied" – pp. 74-81, Fig. [63]-[99]

Mvt. 4. (Finale) T/B "Jungfrau, rein im schönsten Sinne" – pp. 82-109, Fig. [100]-end.

Movement I – The Whole

The movement is cast in a grand Sonata-Allegro form:

Exposition – with the customary use of contrasting themes in different key-areas

Development – a thorough working-out of the thematic material, in dramatic fashion

Recapitulation – the reappearance (re-"birth") of the musical themes in the Tonic (home) key

Coda – a closing section with Beethovenian elements of continued compression and energy

Movement I – The Parts

Mahler fashions four ingenious musical themes that become the organic basis for the entire symphony, providing leitmotiv-like commentary, correlation, and elucidation on both texts (the Latin Hymn and the Goethe poem):

Theme 1. – a “Fanfare” theme, marked by a descending 4th (in E-flat Major)

Ve - ni, ve - ni cre - a - tor spi - ri-tus!

Theme 1a. – a “March” theme in ascending motion, over a “walking” bass, at Fig. [3] (in E-flat Major)

spi - ri - tus, o cre - a - tor, ve - ni - ni - cre - a - tor,

Theme 2. – a contrasting, lyrical theme filled with “divine grace” for “Imple superna gratia” (in D-flat Major)

Im - ple su - per - na - gra - ti - a, gra - ti - a,

Theme 2a. – another contrasting, “comforting” theme for “Qui Paraclitus diceris” (in A-flat Major, and later, Minor)

Qui Pa - ra - cli - tus di - ce - ris.

Movement I – Form

EXPOSITION

Theme 1. Fanfare theme, “Veni creator spiritus,” opening through Fig. [3]	E-flat
Theme 1a. March-theme in T/B, “spiritus, o creator veni” [3] - [7]	E-flat
Theme 2. in solo Sopr. 1, “Imple superna gratia” [7] - [12]	D-flat
Theme 2a. in solo Sopr. 1/2, “Qui Paraclitus diceris” [12] - [15]	A-flat
Return of Th. 1, “Veni creator” [15] - [17]	E-flat

Codetta (of Exposition)

Unison vocal cadence, Closing section (orchestral transition) [17] - [19]	E-flat
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DEVELOPMENT

Theme 1, “weakened” for “Infirma nostril corporis” [19] - [22]	D-Minor/E-Flat
Theme 1, inverted on “virtute periti” [22] - [23] deceptive cadence to:	E-flat
Th. 1, in Horns and WW, inverted and segmented: [23] - [30] orchestral depiction of thematic “battlefield,” w/ A-flat pedal pnt.(tolling bell)	B/A-flat ped.
Altered Th. 1, in solo bass, now in octave leaps, on “Infirma,” [30]	C# Minor
Th. 2a, in solo Alto 2, on “firmans perpeti,” [31]-[37]	C# Minor, to F-Major, to D-Major
Orchestral “lumen,” over B-pedal, [37], to	E-Major
*Theme 1 as unison statement of “Accende lumen sensibus” [38] - [42]	E-Major
Th. 1a’s “walking bass” under chromatic “enemy” [“Hostem”] repelled, [42] - [46] -unstable, parenthetical harmony leads to:	E-Minor
Double-fugue at [46] on Th. 1 in coro I Bass, “ductore praevio,” and Th. 1a “March” in coro II S/A, “Te ductore sic vitemus”	E-flat
Th. 1a “March” in augmentation (coro I, Sopr) [50], over Th. 1 (coro I, Bass)	E-flat
Th. 1a “March” in unis. augmentation (solo voices) [54], over Th. 1 (Vc/Cb)	A-flat
Return of “Accende” theme and Th. 1 (basses) [55] - [58]	E-Major
Combination of three themes: Th. 1, 1a, and 2, at [58]	E-flat

RECAPITULATION

Th. 1 “Fanfare” over a 6/4 pedal point (B-flat), [64] - [66]	E-flat
Th. 2a (before Th. 2), in coro I Tenor, now in Tonic key [69] - [76]	E-flat
Th. 2 (formerly in D-flat), now in subdominant, in coro II Tenor [76] -to unis. choral cadence in A-flat [79]	A-flat
Orchestral Interlude [80] - [82] to:	A-flat
	E-Major

CODA

“Infirma” octave-theme from [30] becomes ‘Gloria Patri’ in Knabenchor [83] (Coda starts in original tonality of Th. 2)	D-flat
Return of Tonic, tutti “Gloria” Th. 1 [84] - [89]	E-flat
Stretto to end [89], incl. plagal cadence at [91]	

**The “Golden Mean” around Fig. [38] (.618 of the movement’s ca. 25-minute duration)*

Movement I – Some Interesting Details

1. Diminution (or compression of energy)

As soon as the dynamic Theme 1 is introduced in meas. 2, it is immediately echoed by an energized, all quarter-note version of itself in the trombones:



2. Thematic Transformation

At the start of the Development section at [19], Mahler cleverly “weakens” Theme 1 by the use of an unstable augmented triad: (F-A-C#) to highlight the text about human weakness, “Infirma nostri corporis.”

3. March to Victory

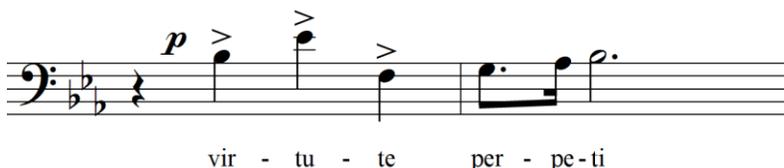
The constant eighth-note “walking bass” found in the strings underneath Theme 1a’s March, at [3], is used to great effect in the Development section, at [42], as a fortissimo undergirding bass-line while the harmonically unstable chromatic “enemy” is repelled [“Hostem repellas”].

4. Hidden Themes

Theme 2a, at [12] on “Qui Paraclitus diceris” actually appears earlier, in the eighth measure of Mvt. I, at [1], as an accompanimental figure in Violins I and II. -Perhaps to equate the “creator spiritus” with the “comforter,” connecting sorrow and joy, both of which are sensed in the various versions of this theme? It is a subtle, almost unnoticed device that was most surely both intuited and intentional on the part of an “in-tune” master-composer.

5. Inversion

An inversion of Theme 1 is heard for the first time after [22], heard first in the Choir II Bass (and Trombone), then Soprano of Choir I:



As if holding a mirror to reality, here Mahler suggests the frailties of human flesh [“Infirma nostri corporis”] may be strengthened by the creative spirit’s perpetual power [“virtute perpeti”]. This is the first time of many uses of this inversion of the “Veni creator” theme at key points in the work, especially in the Symphony’s final measures, after [220], suggesting the ultimate salvation (or enlightenment and transcendence) in the union of the pairs of opposites in the Faust story.

6. The Golden Mean, or .618

Amidst all the clamor and excitement, Mahler never loses his way, or more importantly his intuitive sense of proportion: the “Golden Mean,” or structural and emotional highpoint, occurs at exactly the right moment – around Fig. [38] (.618 of the total number of measures in this movement and just over halfway durationally). Mahler instinctively sensed this moment as the artistic apex. Structurally, this is the Development section, and here the composer momentarily pauses and takes us away from E-flat Major to the distant realm of E-Major.

This blazing burst of E-Major orchestral sunlight at [37] is the same key for Mater Gloriosa’s first (non-vocal) appearance in Part II at [106]. The fact that Mahler’s releases his ray of hope over a 6/4 sonority (a pedal bass note on B-natural) evokes a sense of “Hope:” one hovers above the “ground” of this “un-rooted” (non root-position) sonority, waiting to exhale in ecstatic anticipation (a technique employed by Brahms and frequently adapted by Mahler’s tone-poem contemporary, Richard Strauss).

The Choruses’ unison answer of “Acende lumen sensibus” here at [38], indicates that light [“lumen”] and love [“amorem”] win the orchestral “battle” (with its alarum bells that had sounded at [23]). The martial dotted accompanimental rhythms in the orchestra are now trounced over by the material chanted by the chorus victorious.

