

THE “APOTHEOSIS” OF MAHLER

A GUIDE TO PART II OF THE EIGHTH SYMPHONY

For the ASO Chorus
by Jeffrey Baxter
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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.

As we examined in our earlier discussion, for his epic opening movement E-flat Major setting of the Latin hymn, Mahler took 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.

Part II – Some Interesting Details, in Movement-Order

MOVEMENT II. “SLOW MOVEMENT”

1. New Theme.

To open his Symphony’s “slow movement,” and to introduce the concluding drama that will ensue, Mahler creates an instrumental introduction – a “backstory,” if you will – that suggests the pain and sorrow of earthly existence. It is also graphic musical depiction of the craggy natural landscape, as described by Goethe. The mood of this music recalls the sparse musical mood of the first movement of Mahler’s own Third Symphony (which he once described as “What the rocks tell me”). To accomplish this, he crafts a new theme: a doleful, sighing, stepwise three-note “Nature” theme, played in the flute and high clarinet:



2. Wagnerian Influence: *Parsifal*.

If this “Nature” theme sounds familiar, it might be because it bears a strong resemblance to the “Suffering” or “Wound” Leitmotiv in Wagner’s *Parsifal*. In the Wagner opera, it is this musical theme that separates the Leitmotifs for the “Grail” and the “Spear,” and it is not until the end of that opera that all three themes are united (and “completed”) in a Jungian whole (like the title character). Mahler most definitely was inspired by this approach and set about accomplishing something similar by accompanying his doleful “Nature” theme with a soft, bass (pizzicato) version of the “Accende lumen” music from Part I:



3. Thematic Transformation.

These themes are used throughout the rest of the Symphony, in various guises, but most skillfully when Mahler combines them – the stepwise motion of the “Nature” theme followed by the second half ascending notes of the “Accende” theme – to become the soprano-melody for the final Chorus Mysticus, in “Alles vergänglichliche ist nur ein Gleichnis” [“Everything impermanent is but a symbol”].

4. Chorale.

The two themes are first combined into a chorale-like (homophonic) tune at Fig. [3], played by low strings and then echoed by horns. This chorale version is an introduction to what the low voices of the chorus sing at [31], “ehren geweihten Ort,” [“honoring this consecrated place”], in a moment that recalls the finale of Mahler’s own Second Symphony (where low, dusky voices slowly intone “Aufersteh’n”).

5. Modal Harmony.

During this instrumental “Prelude” to Part II, Mahler also uses a strange, otherworldly, modal version of this “chorale” at [21], played by woodwinds. It is music that will be sung later by the “younger angels” of the female chorus at [81], “Ich spür soeben.” They sing about spotting in the distance an excited troop of cherubs. The use of old church modes (rather than strictly diatonic harmony) at this moment suggests the ancient and ecclesiastical, and the lighthearted woodwind trills evoke the frescoes of frolicking angels.

6. Canonic Imitation.

At [24] the men of the chorus sing this three-note “Nature” theme – canonically, choir against choir, representing the dual nature of existence –to set the stage for Goethe’s drama: “Waldung, sie schwankt heran” [“Woodland wavers into view”].



7. Wagnerian Influence: *Tristan*.

At the Moderato after [32], we are introduced to the first of several characters in Goethe’s finale. They are the hermits who inhabit the mountain gorges and are presented in an ascending order of divine knowledge:

- Pater Ecstaticus (baritone)
- Pater Profundus (bass)
- Doctor Marianus (tenor)

Pater Ecstaticus, at [32] sings a back-to-back combination of the “Nature” and “Accende” theme, in “Ewiger Wonnebrand, glühendes Liebesband” [“Eternal spark of bliss, glowing bond of love”]:



Around [35] Mahler creates for him a mini “Liebestod” to sing the Goethe text that cries out – like the famous John Donne sonnet – for arrows to “pierce me; lances, subdue me; clubs, shatter me... lightning shoot through me!” These are words calling for a destruction of the ego – a purification – and Mahler even uses an accompanying figure in the strings and winds straight out of the “Liebestod” of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, a work with similar poetic themes:



MOVEMENT III. "SCHERZO"

1. *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*.

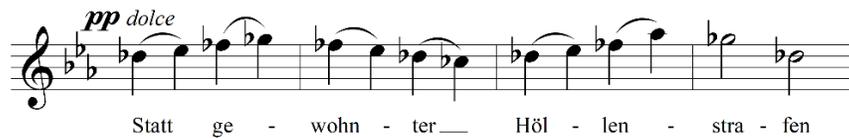
Mahler's lifelong obsession with – and musical settings of – the Clemens Brentano collection of youthfully innocent folk-poems, "Des Knaben Wunderhorn" ["The Boy's Magic Horn"] finds its way into almost all of his music. One find that style here, in this light-hearted section of playful music for all the various angelic groups who will sing.

2. "Accende" Theme.

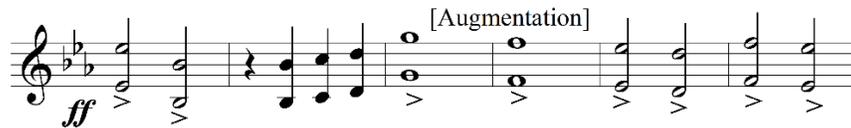
The women of the chorus begin in a unison B-Major version of the "Accende" theme at [56], at the text, "Gerettet ist das edle Glied" ["Rescued is the noble limb"] – the "limb" being Faust's immortal soul, or soon-to-be gloried body.

3. Looking Forward: *Das Lied von der Erde*.

In the full score – at the double bar, at the fifth measure of [63] – Mahler writes "Scherzando" ("playful") for this youthful E-flat Major music for sopranos and altos singing in dulcet thirds (and their inversion, sixths) for "Jene Rosen" ["those roses"]. Interestingly, the phrase at [69] on "Statt gewohnter Höllenstrafen" ["instead of the accustomed punishments of Hell"] pre-figures a tune that Mahler would re-use in song #3, "Von der Jugend" ["Youth"], of his later *Das Lied von der Erde* [The Song of the Earth], where the tenor sings of the "Pavillion aus Grünem."



This section concludes with an orchestral statement at [73] of the "Accende" theme, played by the trumpets, in augmentation:



4. References and Allusions from Movement I.

At [76]-[77], the D-Minor music from Mvt. I's "Infirma nostri corporis" ["the infirmities of our bodies"] is recalled at "Uns bleibt ein Erdenrest" ["With us remains an earthly residue"].

One of the more interesting thematic referential points is the moment where the "more perfect angels," around Fig. [80] sing,

*"Kein Engel trennte
geeinte Zweinatur
der innigen beiden:
Die ewige Liebe nur
vermags zu scheiden."*

[No angel can separate
the united dual nature
of the two intimates (Faust and Gretchen);
Only eternal Love
can part them.]

When the united dual nature is mentioned at [80], Mahler has the tenors, followed by the basses, of Choir II sing an inversion of the "Veni creator" theme from Movement I:



Enlightenment for the poem's hero (and for the reader and listener) is ultimately achieved through a transcendence of the world of the pairs of opposites. -Where the ego is burned away and later, in the ecstatic soprano-line at Fig. [112], the "chains of desire" [Gelüste Ketten] are "torn apart [zerreißt]."

MOVEMENT IV. "FINALE"

1. Return of the Tonic.

The fourth and final "movement" of Mahler's 8th begins in the home key of E-flat Major, between Figs. [99] and [100], at Doctor Marianus' "Jungfrau, rein im schönsten Sinne" [Virgin, pure in the finest sense"].

2. Return of "Golden Mean" E-Major.

The Virgin (Mary) soars into view at [106] in the remote and otherworldly key of E-Major (the key of Mvt. I's Golden Mean at "Accende lumen sensibus"). Her soaring instrumental theme, built on an ascending sixth, is played by the first violins and accompanied by harps and harmonium (a small "pump-organ"). This theme appears later, prominently, at [112] in the choral sopranos at "wer zerreist aus eigener Kraft" and in the final pages at [210] on "Ewig, ewig."

The second half of this theme, at four before [108], is of course built on the ascending part of the "Accende" theme:



and appears later in "Zieht uns hinan" ["draws up upwards"] at [206].

3. Trio of Penitent Women.

At [114], the chorus of "Penitent Women," along with one named "Una Poenitentium" [aka Gretchen, of the Faust story] plead for mercy from the Virgin. They are joined at [117] by three (solo) penitent women who intercede on Gretchen's behalf. They are:

- Magna Peccatrix (soprano I), the woman who bathed Christ's feet at the house of Simon the Pharisee.
- Mulier Samaritana (mezzo-soprano I), the Samaritan "woman at the well."
- Maria Aegyptiaca (mezzo-soprano II), Mary of Egypt, who repented her sins after an invisible hand kept her from entering the temple and who, at her death after forty years in the desert, asked to be buried there.

These female characters represent universal symbols of water (Magna Peccatrix and Mulier Samaritana) and drought (Maria Aegyptiaca), as well as birth and rebirth. After their respective solos, the three sing a trio, at [136], in canonic imitation, with a flute and clarinet accompaniment based on the playful scherzando music of [69].

4. Gretchen.

At [148] a solo mandolin introduces music for Una Poenitentium (or Gretchen, of Schubert's "Spinnrade"). The use of this plucked instrument suggests Gretchen's naiveté and innocence; her former earthiness: a peasant. She sings the music that introduced the Mater Gloriosa, from [106] as she pleads for the salvation of her former beloved, Faust.

At [165], her tune for the text, "Er ahnet kaum das frische Leben, so gleich er schon der heiligen Schar" ["Scarcely perceiving the fresh life within him, he already resembles the holy troop"] is a quote of Mvt. I's theme "Imple superna gratia" ["Fill with divine grace"].

5. Coming "Home" to E-flat Major.

The Mater Gloriosa sings at [172], from high above, calling down to Gretchen, "Komm!" in the Symphony's tonic (home) key of E-flat Major.

6. Themes Recalled and United.

At [175] "Blikket auf" ["Lift your eyes"] to the end, all themes are woven together in an ecstatic contrapuntal tapestry.

At [178] Doctor Marianus sings "auf zum Retterblick" ["Lift your eyes to the gaze of salvation"] in a combination of the "Nature" and "Accende" themes, that also looks ahead to the music for the Chorus Mysticus at "Alles Vergängliche."

At [202] the Chorus Mysticus sings a *pianissimo* combination of the “Nature” and “Accende” themes in “Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis” [“Everything impermanent is but a symbol”], illustrating the poet’s reflections on time and eternity, image and reality, longing and fulfillment:

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line. It is written on a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The music begins with a *ppp* dynamic marking. The first phrase, labeled "Nature" theme, consists of a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note A4. The second phrase, labeled "Accende" theme, begins with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a half note C5, and a quarter note B4. The lyrics "Al - les Ver - gäng - li - che" are aligned under the first phrase, and "ist nur ein Gleich - nis;" are aligned under the second phrase.

At [213], a *fortissimo, tutti* statement of “Alles Vergängliche” recalls a similar moment in the composer’s own Second Symphony (the final *fortissimo* statement of “Aufstehen!”).

At [218] as the singers cadence, an offstage band of brass instruments proclaims the “Veni Creator Spiritus” theme in its original full glory, complete with a triple *forte* inversion of it, at five after [220]. The original and its inversion represent the pairs of opposites reconciled, in a way that the Leitmotifs in Wagner’s *Parsifal* come together in the final scene. To quote the writer Michael Steinberg, Mahler’s “dissonances are dissolved in concord. Prayer has become affirmation. We are home.”

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