

Gustav Mahler, Symphony No. 2 in C minor (Resurrection)

Mahler composed his second symphony over a long period of time, beginning in 1888 and finishing the piece in 1894. He composed the first movement, which he called “Funeral Rite [*Todtenfeier*]” as an independent piece – perhaps a tone poem – not necessarily part of a symphony. Some years later he decided the Funeral Rite would be the first movement of a C minor symphony, and he set to work on additional movements but stalled on the finale. According to Mahler the inspiration for the finale came at a memorial service for the conductor Hans von Bülow, where he heard a children’s choir singing a chorale on the text, “My ashes, after a brief rest, you shall rise again.” Mahler composed a choral finale, rearranged the middle movements, and now the symphony was about death and resurrection. Thus the meanings or “program” of the Resurrection Symphony came neither before nor after the composition of the work but simultaneously with it.

The third and fourth movements (the ones on the CD) are both based on songs Mahler was composing during the same years on texts from *The Youth’s Magic Horn* [*Des Kanben Wunderhorn*], an early 19th-century collection of German folk poetry. The third movement (scherzo) uses the tune and accompaniment from Mahler’s “St. Anthony of Padua preaches to the fish,” a comic, perhaps ironic, song in which St. Anthony finds his church empty, so goes to the river and delivers his sermon to the fish, who like it very much and promptly forget every word (just like a human congregation). Here are some excerpts from the poem:

The carp full of roe
have all come here,
their mouths wide open,
listening attentively.
No sermon ever
pleased the carp so.

Sharp-mouthed pike
that are always fighting,
have swum here in haste
to hear this pious man;
No sermon ever
pleased the pike so. . . . [etc.]

The sermon having ended,
each swims off in turn;
the pikes remain thieves,
the eels, great lovers.
The sermon has pleased them,
but they remain the same as before.

The crabs still walk backwards,
the stockfish stay thin,
the carps still stuff themselves,

the sermon is forgotten!
The sermon has pleased them,
but they remain the same as before.

For the fourth movement (Solemn but simple) Mahler adds a contralto, who sings an arrangement of his setting of "Urlicht" (eternal light). The text in English reads:

O red rose!
Man lies in direst need!
Man lies in deepest pain!
If only I were in heaven!

I walked along a broad path:
an angel sought to turn me back.
Ah no! I will not be turned away!
I come from God, and to God I will return!
Dear God will give me light,
will light me to eternal, blessed life!