THE SONG
OF MAHLER’S NINTH
Randall Keith Horton

How is it that my first experience of hearing Mahler’s Ninth Symphony in a 2005 performance at Carnegie Hall has resulted in the privilege of writing this article? More importantly: why, in the one hundred years since Bruno Walter premiered the Ninth (1912, Vienna), has no recognition emerged regarding the arguably most important musical mystery contained beneath the surface of this symphony’s Finale?

I charge—and completely understand—that it is highly unlikely that one could have heard this “silent” musical catalyst to which I refer unless one had first gained familiarity with it as a song, i.e., as a hymn, in fact, intend for this mystery song to remain submerged, unheard and unseen? We cannot know. Whatever the answer, my life has changed because of the revelation of its discovery. Its hidden presence is entirely consistent with similar applications of song form in Mahler’s previous compositional oeuvre. My musical life, thus, is now dedicated to researching “The Song of Mahler’s Ninth.”

A new member of GMSNY, I am a retired church and synagogue musician; hence, my forty-year experience of living with hymns and other sacred music. As a Fellow in the January 2005 Orchestra Management Seminar of the League of American Orchestras, I attended a Philadelphia Orchestra performance of the Ninth at Carnegie Hall, conducted by Christoph Eschenbach. As the orchestra performed the Finale, the Adagio movement, I repeatedly heard the complete Protestant hymn melody, “Abide with Me (Eventide),” tacitly present—embedded—and recurrently progressing throughout the movement in widely varying harmonic contexts. The breathless experience of it riveted me to my seat.

Seminar Fellows visited Maestro Eschenbach immediately after the performance. I asked him if the hymn is embedded in the movement. He smiled affirmatively, but I still am not sure if he understood my question: Does the entire hymn melody tacitly—and repeatedly—support specific sections of the movement? Of course, I assumed that his affirmative nod confirmed my experience; however, seven years of searching for a definitive answer to my inquiry have, to date, yielded no prior research or analysis supporting or confirming my assertion that the complete hymn melody is subliminally present. I have therefore matriculated toward the Master of Arts degree in music theory at Queens College, CUNY, in a deep search to find my answer. In January, 2012, the Greater New York Chapter of the American Musicological Society honored me by authorizing presentation of my early findings; in May, 2012 at a CUNY Graduate Center seminar, I was privileged to present a Schenkerian analysis of the relationship between the hymn and the first three strophes in the Finale; and presently I thank Mr. Lewis M. Smoley, President, and other officers of the GMSNY for authorizing both this article and my forthcoming 13 November 2012 presentation.

My brief correspondences with Dr. Henry-Louis de La Grange, and with Professor Stephen E. Hefling, have provided very helpful guidance in my search. I am grateful for each of their responses to my inquiries. Before initiating contact with him, I reviewed de La Grange’s examples of similarities between the theme at the opening of the Finale (Ex. 33, m. 3-4) [HLG4, p. 1443] and the hymn, (Ex. 34, m. 1-4) [ibid.]. De La Grange also cites musicologist, Deryck Cooke: “for British audiences theme A (Ex. 33) is ‘utterly banal’ because it resembles a well-known Victorian hymn tune (Ex. 34, “Abide with Me”); all italics mine).

In Ex. 34 and footnote 275 (pp. 1443 – 44 n), de La Grange credits, “William Henry Monk (1823–89), [as] the author of the hymn [who] was an English organist, choirmaster, and composer of a great many popular hymn tunes, of which ‘Abide with Me’ remains the best known. However, the original harmonization (I, II, V, I), which is banal, has nothing in common with Mahler’s.” In the same footnote, he continues, “To this author it appears possible that Mahler heard this hymn, which is also well known in America, sung below his windows at Hotel Majestic [NYC] in February 1908 during the ceremony held in memory of Deputy Fire Chief Krueger (p. 1444n).”

When I wrote to Dr. de La Grange through an acquaintance who is his close friend, I was quite reticent in presenting my thoughts. I showed, among other interrelationships, examples of the structurally congruent relationships between the hymn and the Finale, and thanked him for the honor and privilege of submitting work for his review. His response was entirely gracious; his questions were pointed, and have provided highly valued insight for my research.

De LaGrange’s footnoted reference to W.H. Monk establishes him as the composer of the hymn melody. The author of the hymn text was the Reverend Henry Francis Lyte (1793–1847), who had been pastor of All Saints Episcopal Church in Devonshire (England), and who wrote the hymn text as he was dying of tuberculosis. He died three weeks after completing the text. This fact should not be lost on those who consider the subject matter of the text—solace...
in the face of life's vicissitudes, and in the face of death itself: Can the poet's theme of the hymn melody be understood as the genesis for musical metaphor in the Finale of Mahler's last completed work?

I will suggest exactly such a quasi-programmatic influence, including a history of the hymn, in my November presentation. Please visit the website www.gmahler9adagio.net: I have super-imposed the hymn melody where it is sub-structural to the first three rondo sections (and an orchestral transition) in the Finale. On Track 1, the first realized melody becomes briefly dissonant and is set over the first rondo section. I suggest that Mahler is word-painting here, metaphorically transforming the hymn text. Tracks 2 and 3 provide the second and third realizations, set over the next two rondo sections (variations). Track 3 then dovetails into an orchestral transition, over which the fourth realization is super-imposed. These consistently congruent structural relationships between the embedded hymn and the Finale rondo sections (and the transition) would appear to be no mere coincidence [LBGM].

The hymn melody is also traceable within the orchestral texture, either in exact union pitch-class contexts, or in what would have been contrapuntal passages, had the hymn melody been audible (which, of course, it was not). Later rondo/variation passages reveal similar melodico-structural relationships between the imagined hymn melody and Mahler's score. These contrapuntal relationships modulate frequently and become highly dissonant. Each, however, as rondo, is always appropriately approached and resolved: in D Flat major. Each of the six occurrences of the subsumed hymn melody will eventually be similarly posted to the site [LBGM].

Mahler is unlikely to have heard the hymn in Roman Catholic Vienna prior to his 1907 emigration to New York. Dr. Heffling informed me of two publications in 1903 (MMNC, p. 480n). He also informed me that: “After writing that chapter, however, I found that Mahler had actually sketched the opening of what became the main theme in the finale of the Ninth much earlier, in a sketchbook for the Seventh Symphony that must date chiefly from the summer of 1905... So the kernel of this idea was in the back of Mahler's mind well before he came to New York (December 1907), where he would have been most likely to encounter 'Abide with Me' for the first time’” [Wouter, p. 49].

Heffling notes the similarities between this 1905 melodic/harmonic sketch—the “motto theme” and “motto progression” — and the Cant the poetic impetus of “Abide with Me” therefore be understood as the genesis for musical metaphor in the Finale of Mahler's last completed work?

Ellsworth Hipsher), “The Pipe of Desire” has the distinction for all time of having been not only the first American Opera to be presented at the Metropolitan Opera House but also the first opera to be sung there during the seasonal run of the Metropolitan Opera Company.” This doubleheader! [GCAM, p. 543].

So Mahler was obviously attracted to American religious texts in 1908 when he chose to program the 1910 premiere of the opera at the Met. In his first year of life and work in America, he might have heard “Abide with Me” for the first time (February, 1908). In the meantime (1909–10), throughout his last completed work, he might have utilized and re-harmonized the initial motive — the “motto theme and progression” — from the hymn, or was it borrowed from Beethoven, exclusively?

The hymn’s poetry (which he would not have heard in Vienna) provides personal solace. Beethoven’s ‘Lebewohl’ motive, already present in his symphonies and chamber works as a composer, Mahler was gaining recognition in the New World. His Fourth Symphony had been premiered in New York (1904); his Fifth in Cincinnati (1905) and in Boston (1906) [KPMW, pp. 259 – 53].

As an erudite artist within his new American social milieu, Mahler could not have escaped the ubiquitous presence of religious folk music, especially through “New England” composers had interpreted psalms, hymns and other American folk music in their symphonic and chamber works. As a composer, Mahler was gaining recognition in the New World. His Fourth Symphony had been premiered in New York (1904); his Fifth in Cincinnati (1905) and in Boston (1906) [KPMW, pp. 259 – 53].

New York, while professionally challenging to his new life as an emigrant artist, had provided a needed change: in 1907, his marriage was beginning to feel the strains that led to later trauma. The hymn’s poetry (which he would not have heard in Vienna) provided personal solace. Beethoven’s ‘Lebewohl’ motive, already familiar to Mahler, closely resembles the opening motive of the hymn. His experience in America was, indeed, intrinsic to the composition of his Ninth Symphony.

In the Finale of the Ninth, Mahler repeatedly transformed the entire hymn melody—and, possibly, the hymn text, with its end-of-life poetic supplications—into a type of personal symphonic song and metaphor, the mysteries of which are at once traceable and unfathomable: the Song of Mahler’s Ninth, as a tragic musical catalyst, is the recurring hymn, “Abide with Me.” The hymn is contained beneath the surface with reverential influence over all movements and movements throughout the entire Ninth Symphony.
Symphony No. 1
New Philharmonic, Bruno Walter, conductor. (October 25, 1942) 2-Music & Arts CD-1264 [51:22]

With this release, we now have nine Firsts under Walter’s baton, more than any with other conductor! Only his 1939 performance with the NBC Symphony—the earliest Mahler First on disc—can top this one. Fast tempos are more isolated and flexible than either of his two commercial recordings: a 1954 performance with the New York Philharmonic and a 1961 studio recording with the Columbia Symphony. A few interesting touches in the 1942 reading distinguish it from the later commercial releases: heightened contrasts in mood and temperament; more frequent mannerisms; hyper-tense energy levels in the outer movements; and eliminating the repeats in the second movement as well as in the first. Some creative details also appear here, but not in the 1961 performance: repeated cuckoo calls in the first movement have an echo-like effect, and the repeated single notes in the Presto of the second movement creates an enormous orchestral outburst; high-level energy and intensity make the opening of the finale truly sound like a raging storm; and, in the same movement, a coloring closer section from (the segment marked “Triumphal” in the New York Philharmonic recording) in the closing section does its

Symphony No. 2

Honeck has a tendency to set brisk tempi and hurry forward awkwardly with this work, sacrificing tempo adjustments, particularly during the first and third movements. Brash power overpowers during climaxes in the third movement, causing them to sound blatannt, if not pretentious. Overenthusiastic accentuation is a characteristic of Honeck’s general approach, as if force-feeding the musical line. In the third movement, an added timpani stroke at the end of the big dive (around 12:20) is an unnecessary intrusion that Mahler was intelligent enough to avoid. Jeannette Wernecke, soprano, Stuttgart Philharmonic, Gabriel Feltz, conductor. Dreyer Gaido 21072 [58:44]

This wayward performance, replete with both technical and interpretive flaws, would normally not merit a review, but for the fact that it is the fifth recording (!) in a projected complete symphony cycle. Feltz’s treatment of tempi, from stately to the most brisk tempos, instead of Feltz’s (much slower) which he used in the commercial recording. The two vocal soloists and the chorus (the latter also in the 1957 release) sing their collective hearts out in a magnificent conclusion to this impressive performance. Mahlerians and Walterians should not be without it.

Symphony No. 3
Michaela Schuster, alto; Women and Boys of the Cologne Church Choir; Women’s Chorus of the Cologne Opera, Gürznerich Orchestra, Cologne, Markus Stenz, conductor. 2-Oehms OC 648 [94:03]

Stenz delivers another outstanding performance in his traversal of the Mahler symphonies. On his previous recordings with the ensemble (e.g., 64), instrumental balances excellent; clarity incisive and revealing; and sonics bright and forward with well-honed bass response. Interpreting the Second Symphony, Stenz impresses with propulsive tempos and sound structural coordination. Volume levels are high opening during the finale bears no resemblance to its first appearance. Orchestra and conductor are not always in sync (e.g., from around 12:50 in the first movement). Roth overplays his hand in trying to create the rustic character to the opening movement, forcing the soloist to sound excessively coarse. A brisk trio is light and airy but virtually shorn of its lyrical beauty. After a rather uninteresting third movement, the finale begins with a very loud timpani roll, followed by a stiff four-square treatment that before the first posthorn segment play slightly out of tempo, as if imitating the piccolo’s inebriated twirling in the first movement. Although the alto is in fine voice in the NCI performance, giving the impression of a stylish uttering profound pronouncements, she is too far forward, thus underlining the music’s spaciousness needed to create a mystical atmosphere. Lip slurs (natural) on the oboe don’t quite work. Stenz chooses a fairly brisk tempo for the finale. But he gives due weight to the three climaxes during which the dark forces of the first movement try to break through. The closing section is simply magnificent.

Symphony No. 4
Suzanne M. Jim, soprano, Pittsburgh Symphony, Manfred Honeck, conductor. Exton OCVL-0406 [73:58]

Honeck’s treatment of tempi in the opening movement (e.g., c. 11’), enhancing the purported fallacious adagio marking, is unconvincing. From the weak entry of the solo horn at the opening of the finale, and an almost inaudible echo of its A by the strings (as if carried over from the end of the third movement); genuine “Wunderhorn” spirit, sounding half-hearted and unconvincing. Pittsburgh Symphony, Manfred Honeck, conductor. Exton OCVL-0406 [73:58]

Jeannette Wernecke, soprano, Stuttgart Philharmonic, Gabriel Feltz, conductor. Dreyer Gaido 21072 [58:44]

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Symphony No. 6
Symphony Orchestra of Baden-Baden and Freiburg, Francois-Xavier Roth, conductor. Hänssler Classic 93-294 [53:10]

François-Xavier Roth and Mark Gorenstein, while others, such as Jeanette Wernecke, Nadine Connor, Mona Paulee, mezzo-soprano. Westminster Choir, New York Philharmonic (January 25, 1942) 2-Music & Arts CD-1264 [57:40]

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Symphony No. 7
Sunhae Im, soprano, Pittsburgh Symphony, Manfred Honeck, conductor. Exto...
imagery of ‘night’. During the coda, the dark side of the tenor horn theme merges with a vibrant, demonstrative main theme, giving the impression of fulfillment. A nightmarish quality pervades the second movement, enhanced by strong accents that create the effect of ‘things that go bump in the night.’ By contrast, the parody of the Third Symphony’s Fan march that occurs in this movement is full of spirit and yet tautly precise. Dotted rhythms are sometimes given full value and elsewhere clipped, even when they are not written that way in the score. Pointed portamenti in the interwoven triplets runs of the third movement’s first subject highlight its spooky character. Nott’s tendency for the ‘agitateante animato’ movement is a perfect compromise between Horenstein’s brisk pace and Bernstein’s more relaxed stride, thus treating the music as a romantic serenade, rather than a parody of it. The finale makes the strongest impression.

From the emphatic timpani solo that opens the movement to the fun-loving way that Notti jockeys back and forth between march and minuet during the closing section, this is a rare example of a performance that understands and can communicate Mahler’s parodic humor and deliciously impish wit with aplomb.

**Symphony No. 8**

Erika Sunnegårdh, Ricardo Merbeth, Christine Oelze, soprano; Lisa Braun, Gerhild Romberger, alto; Stephen Gould, tenor; Dietrich Henschel, baritone; Georg Zeppenfeld, tenor; Jane Henschel, mezzo-soprano; Georg Kunde, tenor, Houston Symphony, Hans Graf, conductor. Naxos 8.572498 [62:46] For those who prefer the noble and dramatic presence of Bruno Walter in this work, this recording is for you. For the most part, Graf takes the great Mahler conductor’s approach to tempo, character and expressivity, making for a generally satisfying performance. Tenor Gregory Kunde’s full-throated, charismatically singing in both ‘drinking songs’ (‘Trinklied’ and ‘trunkene hinahinaut’) is impressive. He really makes the graveyard scene in the former sound terrifying (listen to how he emphasizes the G-sharp on the word finaenhält) and imbues the latter with a flippant, devil-may-care attitude that is a perfect foil for the serious final that follows. Mezzo Jane Henschel is captivating in der Abschied, singing with warmth and tenderness. An ominous atmosphere pervades the first, its underlying impulsive slackening during the beginning of the development. The final regie really do seem to fade into the ether. For a budget label recording, it’s quite a bargain.

**Symphony No. 9**

Bavarian Radio Symphony, Bernard Haitink, conductor. Br Klassik 900113. [79:55] We have all seen this 1969 Haitink/Concertgebouw recording of the 9th to be one of the best ever made. Although the BRSO is not as highly polished as the Concertgebouw, it is an excellent orchestra and performs brilliantly here. Haitink’s moderate, basically temperate approach has not changed since the Concertgebouw release. As in the earlier performance, he captures the mood of each movement brilliantly, engendering a feeling of wishful nostalgia in the first, a need it darkens and becomes frightening during an increasingly intense struggle to sustain life; creating a perfect contrast between the naive, bumptious ländler and the brashly arrogant waltz in the second movement, giving the character of a furious ‘dance with the devil’ to the scherzo subject of the third movement, and evoking the impression of an aged person fervently praying for redemption from the struggles of life in the final. No other conductor has so successfully fused these extremely diverse movements into a cohesive whole as Haitink. In the first movement, listen to how disheartening the horns sound during the climax around 12:35, or how the trombones and tuba roar like monstrous demons during the climax of the development, evoking a sense of hopelessness; or how willfully the violins shunt aside the woodwinds’ vain attempt to intrude upon the waltz by butting in with scraps of the ländler (4:10); or how meekly the oboes make another attempt to insert the ländler theme around 13:51; Haitink’s finale doesn’t push with passion, but nevertheless it is forcefully expressive without becoming maudlin, and softer, more spacious passages communicate with a simple, unaffected naturalism. Clarity is remarkable for letting no important inner voice be either lost or exaggerated. Undoubtedly, this Ninth is a worthy nominee for the best Mahler recording of the year.

**WUNDERHORN**

Gustav Mahler Symphonie Nr. 9

Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks
Bernard Haitink

**Mahler Symphonie Nr.9**

Bavarian Radio Symphony, Bernard Haitink, conductor. Oehms OC 792 [62:25] In an apparent attempt to ‘resolve’ the question of which voices to use in this work, conductor Albrecht creates his own version, with a soprano replacing the tenor in der Jungfrau and a baritone singing only der Abschied. Some slight touches in instrumentation are also made, though of little significance. But the problem with this performance is not the singers per se, but Albrecht’s sufficient restraint in both tension and dramatic character. Notwithstanding a strong reading of the ‘graveyard’ scene in the Trinklied, the rest of the movement is simply a wash out. The alto’s rather m attractively voice doesn’t produce the right color for the Herbst movement, which fails to elicit an emerald (tired) quality that should evoke a feeling of ennui. Although the idea of replacing the tenor with a soprano for der jungfrau is intriguing, there is no apparent reason for ignoring Mahler’s designation of a tenor here. Best is the characterful singing of the tenor in the trunkene movement, who gives a bravura performance that sends caution to the winds. Close micro-ing of both the baritone soloist and woodwind instruments detracts from what should be a valedictory atmosphere in der Abschied. One minor annoyance is the way when adding a crescendo at the end of long, sustained tones and treating passages (around 12) in an operatic style, making them sound segmented. Simply said, the conductor’s ‘revisions’ provide little reason to acquire this often stellar, middling performance.
sorrow, as if bemoaning its having to concede defeat to the waltz theme. Long ritards make the trio of the Burleske sound labored. Strong emphasis on the many accented ‘turn’ figures in the first theme of the finale make up for the strings’ occasional lack of sufficient dynamic thrust. After a heartbreaking horn solo (after 8:25), Gorenstein suffuses the second theme with a sense of world-weariness, exquisitely shaping each phrase. Fearlessly, he holds back during the end of the exposition to allow its poignant character to emerge with deepest expressivity. How tenderly the strings lament life’s passing in the final measures.

SOCIETY NOTES

July 7 usually happens to be one of the hottest and steamiest days of the summer, and such was the case, once again, this year, when about 30 members and guests gathered to celebrate Mahler’s birthday. The festivities took place in the cool and spacious private dining room of Fagiolini on 40th. Alexandra Fendrick, an original member of the Mahler Society, was honored for her many years of service as Treasurer and for her long and faithful membership.

Our first program of the fall season, on September 27, featured two speakers: Stephen Hefling, Professor of Music at Case Western Reserve University, presented a fascinating look at Justine Mahler's Faust Notebook, with handwritten notes on Goethe's great work, and discussed the influence of the work on Mahler in the composition of the Eighth Symphony; and Caroline Kita, professor at the College of the Holy Cross, spoke on the friendship between Siegfried Lipiner and Mahler, and the former's influence on the composer.

On October 11, Deborah Kirshner, violinist and author, discussed her novella “Mahler’s Lament,” a multi-layered portrayal of the composer at a turbulent point in his career.

Please save the dates for our next two programs: on Tuesday, November 13, Randall Keith Horton will present his paper on the little-explored topic of the hymn “Abide with Me” and its relationship to Mahler’s Ninth Symphony; on Thursday, December 13, conductor Andrew Litton will engage in a musical conversation. Both programs will be held at the 3 West Club, 3 West 51st Street, at 7:30 pm.