

## Featured Essay

# Mahler's Seventh Symphony Revisited

by James L. Zychowicz

Among Mahler's symphonies, the Seventh stands out for the various ways in which it has been received within the century since its premiere. When praised, it is not without qualification, and yet the grounds for reservations about Mahler's Seventh Symphony have changed over the decades. At one time performances were infrequent, but in recent years, the Seventh has been programmed

Commentators since Richard Specht have placed the Seventh as the last of the trilogy of instrumental symphonies in the middle of Mahler's oeuvre, a position just before – but not among – the composer's late works. Such ranking serves best a construct to identify the placement of the Seventh among Mahler's works and not necessarily a judgment about that Symphony. Nevertheless Deryck Cooke referred to the Seventh as the "Cinderella" of Mahler's symphonies which points up its status as a neglected or even undervalued work.<sup>1</sup>

Writing in the 1960s, Cooke held that of Mahler's symphonies, the Seventh was then "the least well known, and of all those who know it

"Classical" Model	1. Sonata (Sonata-Allegro)		2. "Slow movement"	3. Scherzo			4. Finale	
<b>Symphony No. 1 (original version)</b>	1. Langsam. Schleppend. Im Anfang sehr gemächlich	2. Blumine  Double arrows show where Mahler reversed the convention of placing the Scherzo after the slow movement.	3. Kräftig bewegt, doch nicht zu schnell (Scherzo)	4. Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen			5. Stürmisch bewegt	
<b>Symphony No. 1 (revised version)</b>	1. Langsam. Schleppend. Im Anfang sehr gemächlich		3. Kräftig bewegt, doch nicht zu schnell (Scherzo)	3. Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen			5. Stürmisch bewegt	
<b>Symphony No. 2</b>	1. Allegro maestoso. Mit durchaus ernstem und feierlichem Ausdruck		2. Andante moderato. Sehr gemächlich. Nie eilen.	3. In ruhig fließende Bewegung (Scherzo)	4. Sehr feierlich, aber schlicht (Choralmäßig)			5. Im Tempo des Scherzo. Wild herausfahrend
<b>Symphony No. 3</b>	1. Kräftig. Entschieden		2. Tempo di Minuetto. Sehr mäßig	3. Comodo. Scherzando. Ohne Hast (Scherzo)	4. Sehr langsam. Misterioso	5. Lustig im Tempo und keck im Ausdruck ("Es sangen drei Engel")		6. Langsam. Ruhevoll. Empfundener
<b>Symphony No. 4</b>	1. Bedächtig. Nicht eilen		2. In gemächlicher Bewegung. Ohne Hast (Scherzo)	3. Ruhevoll				4. Sehr behaglich
<b>Symphony No. 5</b>	1. Trauermarsch. In gemessenem Schritt. Streng. Wie ein Kondukt	2. Stürmisch bewegt. Mit größter Vehemenz		3. Scherzo. Kräftig, nicht zu schnell	4. Adagietto. Sehr langsam		5. Rondo-Finale. Allegro/Allegro giocoso. Frisch	
<b>Symphony No. 6 (original)</b>	1. Allegro energico, ma non troppo		2. Scherzo. Wuchtig	3. Andante moderato			4. Finale. Allegro moderato	
<b>Symphony No. 6 (revised)</b>	1. Allegro energico, ma non troppo		2. Andante moderato	3. Scherzo. Wuchtig			4. Finale. Allegro moderato	
<b>Symphony No. 7</b>	1. Langsam (Adagio)/Allegro risoluto, ma non troppo	2. Nachtmusik. Allegro moderato		3. Scherzo. Schattenhaft		4. Nachtmusik. Andante amoroso	5. Rondo-Finale. Tempo I (Allegro ordinario). Tempo II (Allegro moderato, ma energico)	
<b>Symphony No. 8</b>	I. Hymnus: Veni Creator Spiritus. Allegro impetuoso	II Schluß-szene aus <i>Faust II</i> . Poco adagio.						
<b>Symphony No. 9</b>	1. Andante comodo		2. Im Tempo eines gemächlichen Landlers.	3. Rondo-burleske. Allegro assai			4. Adagio. Sehr langsam und noch zurückhaltend	

more often and become familiar to modern audiences. The criticism is part of the work's reception history, and the variety of perspectives that exists for it may warrant further exploration.

<sup>1</sup> Deryck Cooke, *Gustav Mahler: An Introduction to His Music* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 88. This book is based on program notes written during the 1960s and subsequently revised for publication in a single volume.

well, hardly anyone is prepared to praise it wholeheartedly...<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it is difficult to escape the judgment of Theodor Adorno, who held that in the Finale of the Seventh Mahler expressed himself as a "poor yes-man" ("ein schlechter Jasager").<sup>3</sup> Both comments emerged in the 1960s, when Mahler's works were just then being performed and recorded more often, and reflect in some ways the perspective of their time.

In the subsequent decades, the Seventh has earned a different reputation, and it benefits from further performances and certainly deeper familiarity. Mahler's Seventh Symphony was the first of Mahler's works to which an entire symposium was devoted, and the proceedings of that conference are impressive for the level of discourse that the work inspired.<sup>4</sup> If previous generations had regarded the Seventh as the last of a set of three works somewhere in the middle of the composer's oeuvre, the Paris Symposium gave the Symphony a prominent place. That symposium was an opportunity to begin to reevaluate the Seventh, and the questions raised in it have since been taken up in the published proceedings.

In a recently published survey of symphonic literature, the late musicologist A. Peter Brown suggests a more balanced understanding of the Seventh, when he concludes that "While repeated hearings do not resolved all of its perceived shortcomings, they do reveal Mahler's considerable, if not complete achievement."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it is time to assess the status of the Seventh in light of recent criticism and to establish a new context for discussing the music.

### Critical Thought on the Seventh Symphony

After the Mahler revival of the 1960s, one would expect a clearer understanding of the composer's music, and a rejection of the stereotypes that might have occurred earlier in the century. Nevertheless, even around 1970 some commentators still expressed their indifference about the Seventh, if they discussed it at all. In a study that attempted to examine the nature of modernism from Wagner to the composers of the mid-twentieth century, Laurence Davies discussed Mahler and his music. In identifying the role of Mahler's works in the context of twentieth-century modernism, Davies made an effort to include many of the composer's works. For Davies, the Seventh is the middle work in a trilogy comprised of the Sixth through Eighth Symphonies, thus placing it firmly in the middle of those works, and without a connection to the Fifth, which this author placed in his grouping of earlier works.<sup>6</sup> In dealing specifically with the Seventh, Davies acknowledges the affinities with the Fifth, which Redlich had already discussed,<sup>7</sup> and even though Davies is not explicit about it, this suggests a pattern at the end of a set of works, where the last one retreats to a formula. Such an inference may be made from Davies specific comments about the Seventh:

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2 Deryck Cooke, *ibid.*

3 Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler: Eine musikalische Physiognomik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1960), pp. 180-81; English trans. by Edmund Jephcott as *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 192), p. 137.

4 James L. Zychowicz, ed., *The Seventh Symphony of Gustav Mahler: A Symposium* (Cincinnati: The University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, 1990). The Symposium was held at the Sorbonne, Paris, 9 to 11 March 1989.

5 A. Peter Brown, *The Symphonic Repertoire*, vol. 4: *The Second Golden Age of the Viennese Symphony: Brahms, Bruckner, Dvořák, Mahler, and Selected Contemporaries* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2003), 697.

6 Laurence Davies, *Paths to Modern Music: Aspects of Music from Wagner to the Present Day* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), p. 61. Davies discussion about Mahler's music occurs in the chapter entitled "Mahler and the Beethoven Succession." It is useful to compare Davies' assessment of the "Beethoven Succession" with the discussion of Mahler's Fourth Symphony in *After Beethoven* by Evan Bonds (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). The discussion of Mahler occurs on pp. 175-200

7 Hans F. Redlich, *Bruckner and Mahler, The Master Musicians*, (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1955), pp. 202-4.

The Seventh Symphony, however, had been completed during the same summer as the Sixth, and had even been started before it. It therefore bears no traces of added sadness, and could be said to have suffered from having been composed alongside a greater work. Repetition obviously becomes a dangerous addition to a composer of Mahler's particular cast of mind, and there is no worse case of this in his canon than between these two symphonies. Redlich goes further and argues that, not only is there a similarity between the first themes of their respective opening movements, but that No. 7 harks back in patently imitative ways to Nos. 3 and 5. The most arresting feature of this seldom played work is probably the "nachtmusik" [Redlich's capitalization] which, taken with the thumping waltz-like scherzo, forms a sort of nocturnal triptych in its midst. By comparison, the outer movements are devoid of interest to such an extent that even the composer himself (usually very enthusiastic about his work, once completed) was "torn by doubts" as to whether it should be performed. As he was allowed the customary long period in which to decide, he was able to make extensive alterations to the orchestral coloring. When eventually played in Prague in 1908, it secured a lukewarm reception, and continues to be the least often heard of all the symphonies, despite some recent protestations on its behalf by both Leonard Bernstein and Otto Klemperer. Possible it is a work that holds more fascination for the conductor than for the listener, since its instrumental revisions have resulted in some rare sounds ...<sup>8</sup>

The perspective on the outer movements of the Seventh Symphony bears scrutiny, as does the interpretation of Mahler's feelings about the work. Davies goes on to discuss Mahler's Eighth Symphony and concludes with comments on the then recently completed Tenth. As a book that emerged in the early-1970s, it is a product of its time, when performances of this particular work were not occurring as frequently as they would thirty years later.

In another book that focuses on the emerging modernism in the early twentieth century, *The Arts Betrayed*, which was published in 1978, John Smith calls attention to Mahler's Seventh Symphony, almost as if it were a transition piece between the composer's first six symphonies and the later works. The Seventh does not fair well when Smith compares it with *Das Lied von der Erde*. For Smith, the Seventh Symphony falls short:

... despite the praise it [Mahler's Seventh Symphony] has won from many critics, is surely for the most part of exceptional banality, and, like the banal in Rilke or Rodin, becomes more intolerable when we realize with what earnestness it was written down. It is not merely that the overall banality of the themes is so distressing but also that those "tricks" of style which are so identifiable in Mahler are here remorselessly used for all the wrong ends. The work involves, as only a work of late romanticism can, a total self-deception, since it is produced out of a mood of self-indulgence ... In the Seventh Symphony we have the worse of two possible worlds, for if it lacks the obsessiveness that marks certain of his other greater works, it is not greater for this, because, like it or not, that very obsessiveness is the bulwark against our criticism. Listening to this enormous ill-conception we can be excused if we smile somewhat ironically at the composer's supreme arrogance in rewriting the symphonies of Schumann and at his sardonic comments on the symphonies of Brahms. Well, perhaps the Seventh Symphony was necessary, since it cleared away much unwanted matter that might otherwise have clogged the infinitely more distinguished song symphony *The Song of the Earth*, the Ninth Symphony and the unfinished Tenth Symphony.<sup>9</sup>

Elsewhere, Smith returns to the Seventh and refers to it as "long winded and meandering" and mentions Mahler's "exploitation of effect after effect" in that score.<sup>10</sup> For Smith, the Seventh is not on par with

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8 Davies, *Paths to Modern Music*, pp. 62-63

9 John Smith, *The Arts Betrayed* (New York: Universe Books, 1978), pp. 26-27.

works that Mahler composed later in his career, and which, perhaps, he perceives as less indulgent. Without a further definition of what comprises the quality of indulgence, this judgment seems relative, since the criticism quoted above should not allow for the kind of “obsessiveness” that can be found in a movement like “Der Abschied,” which is itself approximately the same duration as the five movements before it taken together. At the same time, Smith’s reference what others celebrated in Mahler’s Seventh calls to mind the way the work was greeted at its premiere, when the critics did not have the benefit of later works like *Das Lied von der Erde* and the Ninth Symphony as points of comparison.

In fact, in contrast to the qualified responses elicited in the 1960s and 1970s, the Seventh was received favorably when it was first performed, and some of the comments about the work may provide useful perspectives for understanding the work as it was perceived by Mahler’s contemporaries. The premiere took place on 19 September 1908 in Prague, an event which was appreciated by the Czech press.<sup>11</sup> In his review of the premiere, the critic Felix Adler mentioned that the first performances of some of Mahler’s earlier works were failures and also pointed out that “No true artist has been unnerved by such failure; rather it is cheap success that discredits.” He goes on to state that

One can rest assured that Mahler’s success yesterday [19 September 1908] was in no way cheap. Nothing in the Seventh even approaches a concession to the crowds. There is no sign that the composer in any way became disloyal to himself. . . . The value and significance of this symphony lie in the purely musical. The work does not describe, narrate, or illustrate; nor is it written merely for the sake of combining sonorities. Rather, it harkens back to the original purpose of music – to express moods, feelings, and emotions for which there are no words. But these moods are very complicated and differentiated. Mysteriously dark, demonic forces and drives, of which we are not conscious but merely sense – the subcurrents of both nature and mankind – become musically alive. The composer’s world of ideas is realized in themes that are outlined sharply and carved three dimensionally. They are entirely diatonic and therefore accessible, even singable. The self-conscious popularity of these themes is of immense value in following the widely spread branches of a Mahlerian symphony movement. Already with the uncannily somber first theme in the tenor horn, what palpable conciseness lies in the Seventh Symphony. It almost bores into the ear and brain; one feels its emergence and growth viscerally. . . .<sup>12</sup>

This review bears consideration for Adler’s acceptance of the music on its own terms, that is, without the expectation of an explicit program or some sort of descriptive narrative to accompany the work. Rather, it is the narrative of musical ideas that allows Adler to point out the purely musical values within the work and, then, not to dwell on specific meanings but to appreciate the way in which Mahler elicited aural sensations within the structure of the Symphony. The Seventh is hardly a problematic work for Adler, but seems immediately accessible. For him, the work speaks directly to the audience without, if one can infer, being condescending, and the comments about Mahler’s use of diatonic sonorities and a cantabile style seem to juxtapose his accomplishments in the Seventh against the atonal music that was emerging at the time. For this reason, perhaps, the music attracted Adler, since his comments suggest an immediate understanding of the Seventh when it was first performed and without, necessarily, referring to anyone else’s perception of the work.

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10 Smith, p. 27.

11 See the review by Zdeněk Mejedly, excerpted in *Mahler: His Life, Work and World*, edited by Kurt and Herta Blaukopf (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992), pp. 216-17.

12 Felix Adler’s review of Mahler’s Seventh Symphony was originally published in *Bohemia*, 20 September 1908. This translation is quoted from *Mahler and His World*, ed. by Karen Painter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 318-19.

A similar appreciation may be found with the critic Richard Batka, who dealt more with the structure of the Seventh in his review of the premiere. Batka was disposed toward new music, and so welcomed the work. In his assessment, he stated that:

To me, the first movement is the most colossal, the second the most popular, the fourth a dainty morsel, and the fifth finally the most effective in general. They all are interesting, like their creator. This symphony is undoubtedly an important state in his development. Mahler, whose enormous reach impressed even those who reject him as a composer, has entered his years of full artistic maturity and finally found his standard of measure within himself. The concentrated quality in his new creative period brings out all the more distinctly the coherence and logic of his formal design and musical language. . . .<sup>13</sup>

Batka perceives immediately the organization of the Seventh Symphony and does not take issue with the varying character of the movements within the musical structure. Rather, the coherence of the work is paramount, as is the function of the final movement to cap the structure without detracting from the perception of the first movement as “most colossal.” His critical thinking allows Batka to deem the first movement colossal without eroding the efficacy of the last movement. The rhetoric in Batka’s review almost presumes the structure of a well-constructed speech, which begins with a strong, continues with supporting statements, and ends with a satisfying conclusion. By necessity, the opening and closing parts of a speech must be related, but cannot be the same. Batka juxtaposes the outer movements in a similar way, so that he could allow for a “colossal” first movement that exists along with an effective Finale.

Not all the critics were as favorably impressed with the Seventh Symphony as Adler and Batka. Robert Hirschfeld, who was always critical of Mahler, regarded the work as firmly entrenched in the world he already knew from the composer’s other symphonies. As he states in his review Mahler

. . . is still in locked inside his usual emotional limits. The endless ironic funeral marches, the ballet interludes, the incessant blaring of violins, the strained naïveties, the persiflage of frothy Bohemian music, the tirelessly bucolic fawn-like melancholy – are these sufficient to fulfill the life of an artist? Let us hope that Mahler’s Eighth will be free of these symphonic anecdotes. . . .<sup>14</sup>

Hirschfeld’s perspective also presumes that Mahler will continue to compose other symphonies, and it allows him the freedom to pursue another direction in his next work. Batka suggested the same in his review, with his understanding of the Seventh as “an important stage in his development” and his comments about the promise of Mahler’s “new creative period.” Even though he was already pursuing the latter works, what Mahler would do next was not clear to the critics of his time, and for even as harsh a critic as Hirschfeld, the Seventh suggested a composer whose potential was still unfolding.

As occurs with much criticism, it is difficult to find absolute agreement about Mahler’s Seventh Symphony. While some of the critics responded favorably, others were less disposed to the work. The Finale posed problems from the start, and even critics disposed to Mahler’s music, like Julius Korngold, were reluctant to subscribe fully to the way Mahler ended the then-new Symphony. Korngold, for example, found that with the repetition of the Rondo theme in the Finale, Mahler allowed the music to “roar too much.”<sup>15</sup> Perhaps it is this kind of repetition that caused Adorno to judge the Mahler of the

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13 Richard Batka’s review of Mahler’s Seventh Symphony was originally published in *Prager Tagblatt*, 20 September 1908. This translation is quoted from *Mahler and His World*, ed. by Karen Painter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 323-24.

14 A. Peter Brown, *The Symphonic Repertoire*, vol. 4, p. 695.

15 Julius Korngold’s review of Mahler’s Seventh Symphony was originally published in *Neue Freie Presse*, 6 November 1909. This translation is quoted from *Mahler and His World*, ed. by Karen Painter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 332.

Seventh Symphony as the “poor yes-man” who held onto positivism perhaps too tightly.

### Considerations about the Finale

As A. Peter Brown indicates in his survey of reviews from the premiere to the early 1990s, the Finale of the Seventh Symphony has been the subject of some of the strongest criticism. Several of Mahler's contemporaries interpreted the Finale metaphorically as daylight after the night suggested by the three *Nachtstücke* (“Night Pieces”),<sup>16</sup> while others took issue with the movement for its apparent weaknesses. The critic Robert Hirschfeld commented about the strengths of the first movement when compared with “the wretchedly scatter-brained finale.”<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the mixture of ideas, which include quotations from music by other composers, suggested a less thematically focused piece than some of Mahler's critics expected to here or, which may have been suggested by the title of the movement as “Rondo-Finale.”

Mahler conceived the Rondo-Finale on a grand scale and incorporated into it a variety of musical ideas, which the conductor must make clear in the performance. Just as Mahler cautioned the concert agent Emil Gutmann to make certain that an adept timpanist were hired for the premiere and even took care to allow the wind players to rest so as not to overtax them, the movement requires a facile and effective interpretation on the part of the conductor. The movement needs to be shaped in performance, just as Mahler himself molded the score of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* when he conducted that score.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, the use of quotations is an important element that needs to be explored further so that it becomes not a matter of finding the tunes, so to speak, but of understanding the quotations in the context of the musical structure. Taking a cue from the music of Charles Ives, whose own quotation-filled Third Symphony dates from 1904 (and which Mahler could only have encountered in 1907, that is, after he completed his own Seventh Symphony), analytic models for the Finale might exist outside of the conventional approaches to Mahler's music. In dealing with quotation in Ives's music, J. Peter Burkholder offers a highly constructive approach to apprehending it. Burkholder's comments about the Finale of Ives's Third Symphony can offer a perspective on Mahler's use of quotations in the Seventh. In discussing the specific hymn tune “Woodworth,” Burkholder provides a model that could be applied to Mahler's suggestion of a theme from Wagner's “Meistersinger” in the final movement of the Seventh:

The meaning of the [Ives's] Third Symphony finale is less specific, as it lacks a text or explicit program. But if the song is about the experience of hearing, hymn sung from a distance, this movement is also about the experience of hearing the hymn. The process of development gives the tune associations that re psychologically similar to those it might acquire for a person who sings or hears it on many occasions, noticing now one aspect, now another. It has at its final appearance a richness and depth gained through our experience of its many earlier manifestations, combined with a sense of rightness as it achieves its ultimate form.<sup>19</sup>

Borrowings and quotations are highly contextual, and it is important to understand them within the structure that the composer invoked the ideas. If they change upon repetition or are combined with other ideas, the quotations become part of the substance of the new work and gain a musical significance with the work. No longer can those quotations

16 Paul Bekker, *Gustav Mahlers Sinfonien*, reprint ed. (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1969), p. 238.

17 Quoted by Brown, *The Symphonic Repertoire*, vol. 4, p. 695.

18 Ernst Decsey described Mahler's intensive work with the orchestra during a performance of *Tristan und Isolde* in his memoirs, which are quoted by Norman Lebrecht in *Mahler Remembered* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1988), pp. 250-73. See esp. pp. 267-68. Decsey's memoirs were originally published as “Stunden mit Gustav Mahler” in the periodical *Die Musik* 18 (June 1911): 352-56 and continued in *Die Musik* 21 (August 1911): 143-53.

19 J. Peter Burkholder, *All Made of Tunes: Charles Ives and the Uses of Musical Borrowing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 150.

be regarded as something imported into the new composition, but rather must be considered as part of its substance. Without such a perspective it is difficult to consider quotation with any composer, especially Mahler, who reworked musical ideas of his own throughout his oeuvre.

### Programmatic Ideas and Interpretation

Questions continue to arise about the possible program for the Seventh Symphony. Even though Mahler included programmatic ideas in his sketches,<sup>20</sup> he never published an explicit program for the work. Likewise, the ideas that Alma Mahler conveyed about Eichendorff-inspired visions<sup>21</sup> and even the connection with Rembrandt's painting “The Night Watch” are evocative, even without the explicit imprimatur of the composer. At the same time the use of movement titles like “*Nachtmusik*” suggest a mood that would not necessarily be part of music assigned only a tempo marking without necessarily an indication of mood. In the context of two *Nachtmusik* movements, the Scherzo marked *Schattenhaft* reinforces the idea of night in the context of the works. Yet the existence of words and phrases in the sketches, as well as the use of quotations in the score begs the question of an overarching program which may require further decoding to comprehend.

All of these ideas connote something beyond abstract musical forms, but they must remain only suggestions in the absence of further details from the composer himself. Without an explicit program to denote the meaning of various programmatic ideas, it is impossible to assign any deeper significance to them. Thus, the marking “Belfast” in the sketches for the Scherzo may have meant something to Mahler himself, but he did not choose to publish that reference or the suggestion of stones dropping in water, as found in a sketch for the first movement. Nevertheless, the latter annotation is written confirmation of a natural sound and, as such, confirms the comments of Alma Mahler about her husband's finding inspiration while rowing, where the sound of oars striking water inspired him.<sup>22</sup> Programmatic association are important for understanding Mahler's music, but without some more explicit text, like the list of motives and their verbal equivalents for the Third Symphony,<sup>23</sup> it is possible only to speculate on what Mahler might have had in mind and perhaps never apprehend what he specifically intended.

As equivocal as it sounds, those ideas are only a means to an end. As much as an explicit program can offer only guideposts for interpreting music, such texts should not substitute for the music itself. As much as one could take the suggestions from Mahler himself to imagine even one of the programs that Mahler devised for the Second Symphony, those texts function best as a tool for understanding the music. What is more important is the music itself, which ultimately defies a verbal explanation or textual equivalent. As laudable as it may be to study the Scherzo of the Seventh Symphony some deeper clue for “Belfast,” that suggests only one line of inquiry into the multiple dimensions that exist in the musical structure of that movement.

20 Two sketch pages include some annotations that suggest extramusical idea: (1) a page of the short score for the Scherzo (third movement), contains the word “Belfast”; and (2) a page of the draft score for the first movement includes the phrase “Steine pumpeln ins Wasser” [“stones drop in the water”]. Both pages are part of the Bruno Walter Collection, New York Public Library, New York City, and also reproduced in facsimile in *Gustav Mahler: The World Listens*, ed. by Donald Mitchell (Haarlem: TEMA, 1995), p. 4-16 and p. 4-17. (The pagination of the book is not continuous throughout.)

21 Peter Revers comments about the Eichendorff reference in “The Seventh Symphony,” pp. 376-99 in *The Mahler Companion*, edited by Donald Mitchell and Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.384.

22 See the letter of Gustav Mahler to Alma, 8 June 1910, pp. 423-26 in *Ein Glück ohne Ruh’: Die Briefe Gustav Mahlers an Alma*, ed. by Henry-Louis de La Grange and Günther Weiß (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1995), esp. p. 424.

23 Gustav Mahler, “Plan der 3. Sinfonie,” Berlin: Musiksammlung, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz.

### Considerations of Symphonic Structure

When it comes to the structure of the Seventh Symphony, the number and order of movements is a critical aspect of this work. Throughout his symphonies Mahler manipulated the conventional four-movement symphonic structure to suit his own expressive needs. As early as the First Symphony, Mahler composed a five-movement work, rather than a more “traditional” symphony in four movements. As shown in Table 1, the number and order of movements evolved between Mahler’s works, as he allowed his symphonic structure to evolve. In comparison with someone like Bruckner, Mahler is less tied to formulaic symphonies and, instead, experimented with the number and kind of movements that he would use.

Few of Mahler’s symphonies adhere strictly to a four-movement model, and of the works that do, only the Sixth has affinities with the conventional structure. In the revised version of the First Symphony, Mahler included the Scherzo as the second movement, and followed by the “funeral march” in the third movement, rather than a more traditional slow movement. In contrast, the Second Symphony begins in a more traditional way, where the first three movements adhere to a more conventional order; but he follows the Scherzo with the movement entitled “Urlicht,” which precedes the choral Finale. In composing the Third Symphony in six movements, Mahler expanded the structure to accommodate two vocal movements and end with a slow movement, thus deviating from the more traditional way of ending a symphonic work. Likewise, the Fourth ends with a song-Finale, which sets it apart from his other symphonies.

With the Fifth Symphony, however, Mahler invoked a structure that puts the Scherzo in the central position, directly in the middle of the work. This kind of movement order anticipates the way that Mahler would position the Scherzo in the Seventh Symphony, where it occurs squarely in the middle of the work and flanked by the two *Nachtmusik* movements. The latter seems to be a more balanced ordering than the one Mahler used in the Fifth Symphony. Moreover, it reinforces the centrality of the Scherzo in Mahler’s symphonic thought, as he evolved various types and orders of movements in his music.

Taking a cue from ideas found in early criticism of the work, in which commentators like Batka juxtapose the outer movements that complement each other at beginning and the end of the Seventh, it is possible to posit a multi-layered structure for the Seventh Symphony. The first movement offers a dramatic opening for the Symphony in its extended sonata form, where Mahler developed some of his ideas further in the recapitulation (see. mm. 338-522) by starting in the key of the introduction, rather than the more conventional choice of the key used for the exposition, and only afterward returning to the E-minor tonality in which the movement ends. The first movement is imposing and, despite any reservations that might be expressed about the way that the composed executed it, the Rondo-Finale is conceived an equally grand scale. The two movements stand at either end of the Symphony as complementary points of departure and arrival.

As shown in Table 2, the structure may be expressed as an arch form in which two pairs of movements may be seen to nest the central Scherzo. At the center of this structure is the Scherzo, which is another large movement, which is comparable to the Scherzo of the Fifth Symphony in terms of length and conception. Surrounding it are the two *Nachtmusik* movements, which offer contrast in terms of length but are stylistically connected to the Scherzo in terms of character. The Scherzo evidences a similar nocturnal character with its initial marking of *Schattenhaft* (“shadowy”), which is reinforced by its tonality and scoring, as well as the thematic content. Rather than attempt to place the Scherzo before or after a slow movement, Mahler used a pair of movements to set off the Scherzo in the Seventh.

At another level, the use of paired movement anticipates the two Scherzo movements that Mahler used in the Ninth Symphony and which occupy the central position in that work. Either as the single-movement Scherzo of the Seventh or the dual Scherzos of the Ninth, the Scherzo became for Mahler the middle of his symphonic structure, rather than a gratuitous “light” movement before a more serious Finale that is more characteristic of the symphonic structure of the late-eighteenth century than the early twentieth. The pairs of movements

also suggest a compositional strategy that allowed Mahler to experiment with the larger structure of works like the Seventh and Ninth Symphonies. By changing the order of the movements, Mahler was able to create structures that departed from some of the convention of the nineteenth century.

### Toward a Further Reassessment

Any reassessment of the Seventh must be firmly based on the criticism that exists for the work while, at the same time, such reevaluation must also be prepared to question ideas that have been imposed on the work without necessarily emerging from the score as Mahler left it. While they offer some hint at interpretation, it is important not to remain entrenched exclusively in images of the night, but to integrate any such imagery into the work as a whole. Even the early critics acknowledged such a progression of thought, in which the composer takes the listener from suggestions of the night resolve into day in the contrasting tonality and character of the Rondo-Finale.

If any movement of the Seventh Symphony demands a reassessment, it is the final one that bears further scrutiny. It is a remarkably complex Rondo, in which the repetition of ideas is hardly literal, but involves variation and, at times, development. At the same time the various quotations that many perceive in this movement are worthy of attention for the music that they suggest and the possible meaning that they convey. The early criticism of the Seventh contains harsh assessments of the Finale, including comments about the “madcap” combination of ideas. Mahler’s compositional process was, however, nothing if not meticulous, and it is difficult to conceive of ideas being thrown together without purpose.

Only through further analysis might it be possible to understand more clearly the meanings that Mahler intended for this movement. While Mahler had suggested that the Sixth Symphony would pose problems that only future generations familiar with his music might comprehend,<sup>24</sup> such a comment would be appropriate to the Seventh, which has left generations of critics equally puzzled about some aspects of this fascinating work. The Seventh Symphony need not remain a puzzle, a tough nut, a riddle, but rather remains a wonderfully complex novel of a work that bears further scrutiny and rewards the listener with enhanced meanings through repeated hearings.

### Did you know?

Bruno Walter, Mahler’s own protégé conductor and good friend, conducted Mahler’s Seventh Symphony, for the first and last time in his career on March 6 and 7, 1920. The Ensemble was composed of the Konzertverein and Tonkünstler orchestras (which would later merge to form the Vienna Symphony). Both concerts, along with the open rehearsal were sold out and Walter received very enthusiastic review of the performances. Despite the positive reaction to Walter’s performance, Mahler’s Seventh was a symphony that the conductor consciously avoided on later occasions, at least in part because he wanted to present to the public “only the strongest works that Mahler wrote”, and he clearly did not consider the Seventh such a work.

Adapted from *Bruno Walter. A World Elsewhere* by Erik Ryding and Rebecca Pechefsky. 2001 Yale University Press

24 Mahler made this comment in at least two letters: (a) Gustav Mahler to Richard Specht, undated letter, probably from Autumn 1904, Herta Blaukopf, ed., *Gustav Mahler: Briefe*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Vienna: Zsolnay, 1996), p. 318; English translation, *Selected Letters of Gustav Mahler*, edited by Knud Martner, translated by Eithne Wilkins, Ernst Kaiser, and Bill Hopkins (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), p. 276; and (b) Gustav Mahler to Willem Mengelberg, letter postmarked 15 October 1906, *Briefe*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 340; *Selected Letters*, p. 297.