ABOUT THE MUSIC

SANTA ROSA SYMPHONY
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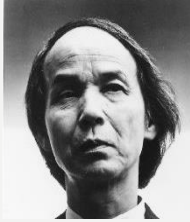
Tiers of Heaven – January 12, 13 & 14, 2019

TORU TAKEMITSU

Signals from Heaven, two antiphonal fanfares



Toru Takemitsu was born in Tokyo, Japan, on October 8, 1930, and died there on February 20, 1996. He composed Signals from Heaven *in two parts.* Day Signal *was written for the tenth anniversary of the Select Live Under the Sky jazz festival in Tokyo and first performed there on July 25, 1987. Its companion piece,* Night Signal, *was commissioned by the Scottish National Orchestra and premiered at a new music festival in Glasgow on September 14, 1987. Both pieces are scored for antiphonal groups of brass instruments. Taken together, they run about 5 minutes, 30 seconds in duration.*

Toru Takemitsu was one of Japan's best-known composers, both at home and abroad. His career came about as an unlikely result of an accident that occurred when he was sixteen. While mountain climbing, he dropped his camera into a waterfall. In trying to retrieve it, he caught pneumonia, and was forced to spend a long period convalescing at home. There he listened to music on the radio for hours on end and—though he had never studied music up to that time—decided to be a composer. He bought scores and taught himself to play the piano. Though he became the private pupil of Kosuji Kiyose at the age of eighteen, he is largely self-taught as a composer. Within three years he had organized Tokyo's Experimental Workshop, a society for the performance of avant-garde music, and in 1966 he created, with Seiji Ozawa and Toshi Ichiyanagi, the group Orchestral Space.

For the most part, his music was entirely *sui generis*, though his earliest music showed fleeting influence of the expressionism of Schoenberg and his followers, the bulk of his music seems to owe much to the melodic and harmonic gestures of Debussy. He composed voluminously in virtually every genre, including large amounts of symphonic and chamber music as well as many film scores (where his style was naturally adapted to the dramatic needs of the film).

The two "signals," day and night, which make up *Signals from Heaven*, are both antiphonal fanfares, meaning that the two sections of instruments respond to one another in a musical conversation. The brass instruments arranged in this way recall the dialogue effects of Venetian composers like Giovanni Gabrieli at the turn of the seventeenth century, a tradition that Takemitsu reflects here.

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K.550

Joannes Chrisostomus Wolfgang Gottlieb Mozart, was born in Salzburg, Austria, on January 27, 1756, and died in Vienna on December 5, 1791. His last three symphonies, K. 543, 550, and 551, were all composed during the summer of 1788, probably for a series of subscription concerts that seem not to have taken place. The dates of the first performances are unknown. Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K. 550, was completed on July 25, 1788. The score originally called for flute, two each of oboes, bassoons and horns plus strings. Duration is about 35 minutes.

One of the greatest miracles in the history of music is Mozart's achievement in the summer of 1788, composing his last three symphonies all in the space of six weeks. The sheer speed is daunting; even more impressive is the striking variety between the three works, each of which has a character and mood all its own. The middle work, in G minor, was completed on July 25; we have no record that any of these symphonies were ever performed in Mozart's lifetime, though he is unlikely to have composed purely "on spec," and he must have anticipated some concert series on which they would be heard.

The G-minor symphony was one of the few Mozart symphonies to remain in the repertory throughout the Romantic era, thanks largely to its "romantic" use of the minor mode, though no less perceptive a critic than Robert Schumann failed to find in it the pathos that seems so striking to us; Schumann regarded the symphony merely as a work of grace and charm. This view of the work is a striking illustration of the way stylistic change—in particular the extremes of romanticism—made the great achievements of the preceding generation seem limited in expressive quality. Only in our time, through the perspective offered by distance and a fuller understanding of the way music functioned in Mozart's own time, can we appreciate the expressive variety, ambiguity and power in a musical language that is so polished and precise. Yet that polish conceals an element of the demonic, too.

The G-minor symphony begins quietly. This is unusual, though not unprecedented. Most symphonies started with a grand *coup d'archet*, a loud chord played with a downbow in all the strings, to help everyone start together (the performances were conductorless), to establish the home key in no uncertain terms, and to signal that the piece was underway. In K. 550, the hushed rustling seems to lead us into the middle of things almost before we know it, and the main theme emphasizes a falling semitone, an age-old expression of yearning.

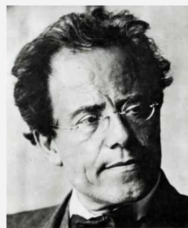
Part of the unsettled effect of the first movement comes from Mozart's masterly control of interlocked phrase structures so that, for example, at the end of the development, the violins are already playing the long upbeat to the opening phrase while the winds are arriving at the cadence.

The slow movement is in E-flat major, but it is filled with passing chromatic figures and melodic sighs, linking it to the expressive world of the first movement. Moreover it is cast as a full sonata-form movement, which lends it greater weight. The development section remains tense in its harmonic adventures before returning to the home key for the recapitulation. The Menuetto, ostensibly a dance genre, is much too severe to suggest dancing at all; only the contrasting Trio, in the major mode, offers a brief respite from the prevailing chromatic character.

The last movement is in G minor throughout, a very rare case at the time. The minor was generally avoided at the very end of works. But Mozart sticks to the dark sound, building the development almost entirely out of the opening figure, leading still further into daring harmonic realms before whirling home to the recapitulation. Even there he stays resolutely in G minor. Grace and charm (as Schumann noted) are indeed present, but Mozart offers obsessive energy and passion, too.

GUSTAV MAHLER

Symphony No. 4 in G major



Gustav Mahler was born in Kalischt (Kalište) near the Moravian border of Bohemia on July 7, 1860, and died in Vienna on May 18, 1911. He wrote his Fourth Symphony between June 1899 and April 1901, employing an older song (composed with piano accompaniment in February 1892), as the basis of the finale. He continued to tinker with the orchestration for the rest of his life. Mahler led the first performance of the work on November 25, 1901, with the Kaim Orchestra of Munich; the soprano was Margarete Michalek. The orchestra consists of four flutes (third doubling piccolo), three oboes (third doubling English horn), three clarinets (second doubling high clarinet in E-flat, third doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, timpani, bass drum, triangle, sleigh bells, glockenspiel, cymbals, tam-tam, harp and strings. Duration is about 54 minutes.

It is possible to claim that all nine of Mahler's completed symphonies, and the unfinished tenth, form part of a single overarching super-work that represents the composer's conception of "Symphony" as "the building of a world" (a phrase he explicitly used with regard to the Third). This is most explicit in the Third and Fourth symphonies, where the final movement composed for the Third ended up as first part composed for the Fourth, then placed as its finale.

It was a song, *Wir geniessen die himmlische Freuden* ("We enjoy the pleasures of heaven"), whose text was drawn from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (an anthology of German folk poetry that Mahler frequently used in his early symphonies) and conceived by Mahler as a seventh movement, in the Third Symphony. When he removed it from the Third, it became an unconnected torso.

The Fourth has been the most often performed and is the most easily accepted by newcomers to Mahler's world. Partly this is because of the relatively modest orchestra required. But audiences accepted the Fourth earlier than many of Mahler's symphonies, owing to its directness, charm and apparent naiveté. Not until October 1904, when Mahler conducted the Concertgebouw Orchestra in a program that consisted of two consecutive performances of the Fourth—once before and once after intermission—did the audience response rise to the kind of enthusiasm the composer must have wanted. The childlike sound of bells that opens the symphony, the very simple, folk-like tune that the violins begin with, and the playful back and forth of interruptions from the other sections are all elements that one finds—with great delight—in the late symphonies of Haydn. Here Mahler fuses the humor and folklore of Austria, such as Haydn might have conceived it, into a late Romantic composition that emphasizes the brighter aspects of life—thus almost unique among Mahler's work.

Since Mahler began this symphony with its finale already composed, he was able to insert into the early movements various elements that return in a climactic and joyous way at the end. These include the opening bell sounds and a lively flute solo in the first movement's exposition; a clarinet tune, purposely folk-like, in the Scherzo's central Trio, hints at the finale's opening; and the trumpets at the massive climax of the slow movement. In short, this is not simply an elaborate song preceded by three preparatory movements, but a strikingly coherent work.

The first movement has long been regarded as a cheerful "walk through the countryside," yet it is not without its storm clouds. That storm causes the music to collapse for a moment, only to resume when the violins grab the thread of the opening theme to initiate the recapitulation, as if consciously refusing to discuss what has just happened.

The dance in the second movement has a sinister quality. Mahler once said that the movement might be called "Freund Hein ["Friend Hal"] strikes up," and indeed the concertmaster has an elaborate solo part in the dance. But this "friend" is a character in German folklore who leads his followers on the dark path to death. The solo violinist must play a second instrument tuned a full step higher than those of the other violins, to produce a somewhat more abrasive sonority. The melody twists in weirdly chromatic steps, suggesting that this dance is not any normal country celebration. The Trio, on the other hand, reverts to the sunny countryside for an effective contrast to the gloomy hints of the main dance.

The slow movement seems at first to be a gentle lullaby, but this sweet music alternates with something much sadder. And they do not simply alternate. At each return, the lamenting, sad theme in the strings becomes more urgent, more passionate, more demanding of a resolution that moves "outside the box." The resolution turns out to be an explosive and brilliant outburst in the key of E major—a very bright key compared to the G major that is the home key both of the symphony's beginning and of this movement. It lifts us triumphantly for a moment to heavenly realms—and foreshadows the symphony's heavenly ending in the same key—before returning to G in a hushed close.

The music of childlike simplicity returns for Mahler's setting of the *Wunderhorn* song about the joys of heaven, with a vocal line assigned to a soprano projecting the child's delight in all innocence—the joys of dancing and singing and (especially, it seems) of eating and drinking. The poem emphasizes in particular all the carnivorous possibilities of heaven—the old folk poets who created the original version of this text would not have had much opportunity to eat meat, and it must have seemed as distant to them as heaven itself. And for earthbound listeners, the sweetness and jolly cheerfulness of the music leads to the bright key of E major again, just before the soprano informs us that "There is just no music on earth that can compare to ours." And, indeed, the delicate close is all sweetness and light.

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