

SANTA ROSA SYMPHONY

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Francesco Lecce-Chong, Music Director
Resident Orchestra, Green Music Center

ABOUT THE MUSIC

MAHLER'S *RESURRECTION*

December 7, 8 & 9, 2024

Program Notes by Elizabeth Schwartz

JONATHAN LESHNOFF

Warum hast du gelitten?



COMPOSER: Born 1973

WORK COMPOSED: 2024

WORK PREMIERED: December 7, 2024 with the Santa Rosa Symphony, Weill Hall, Green Music Center, Rohnert Park, CA

INSTRUMENTATION: 4 flutes, 4 oboes (2 doubling English horn), 5 clarinets (including bass clarinet and E-flat clarinet), 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 10 horns, 6 trumpets, 3 trombones, bass trombone, tuba, timpani, 2 harps, strings, chorus, Soprano solo

ESTIMATED DURATION: 9 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Jonathan Leshnoff's *Warum hast du gelitten?* was commissioned by Francesco Lecce-Chong and the Santa Rosa Symphony as an introductory companion piece to Mahler's Symphony No. 2. The idea for this work arose from a programming conundrum inherent to Mahler's symphony. It is too long to occupy one half of a concert but too short to fill a whole concert. Moreover, it requires solo voices and a large chorus but only for a relatively brief portion of its duration. Mahler himself further complicated the situation by asking for a ten-minute pause between the symphony's first and second movements. He wanted his listeners to take the time to absorb the dramatic impact of the symphony's opening funeral march, difficult as it may be to imagine expecting an audience to sit contemplatively in their seats for that long between movements.

As composer Leshnoff explains, "I have put a lot of thought into how to make my work introduce this most revered masterpiece of the repertoire. I have chosen to write a nine-minute work for the same orchestration as Mahler: full orchestra, full choir, and the soprano soloist (soprano, because she gets the 'lighter' part in the finale, so we figured that the soloist would welcome this opportunity)."

In searching for an appropriate text, Leshnoff asked the writer of this program note, a musicologist colleague of the composer at Towson University, to research and select possible sources to set. Mahler's own words in his surviving letters held the key. Although Mahler often hid the intentions behind his music from the public, he was more forthcoming when writing to friends and loved ones. Mahler's voluminous correspondence proved invaluable as a window into the mind of the composer, and thus his letters supplied the perfect lyrics with which to preface a performance of the Second Symphony.

The text to *Warum hast du gelitten?* consists entirely of excerpts compiled from Mahler's letters. The words heard first come from a letter Mahler wrote to his wife Alma on August 17, 1910, around the time when Alma's recently

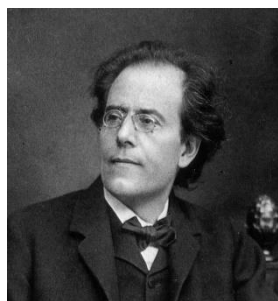
exposed infidelity threatened the stability of their marriage. This letter is in the form of a poem and was written on the staves of music manuscript paper. Excerpts from this letter are sung by the solo soprano, giving voice to Mahler's anguish and the struggle inherent in the creative act of music composition. Two separate sources articulate Mahler's programmatic intentions for his Second Symphony: a letter written to the music critic Max Marschalk on March 26, 1896; and a draft of program notes about the work enclosed in a letter to Mahler's sister Justine written on December 13, 1901. The rhetorical questions excerpted from these documents are sung by the chorus, conveying the existential mysteries that Mahler explores in the symphony's first movement.

Leshnoff describes his composition as follows: "My piece starts quietly, just soprano, strings, and harp (very Mahlerian, I may say), but it soon climaxes to a huge middle section using all the brass, including the ten horns, six trumpets, and full choir that Mahler himself calls for. The piece then subsides to its opening texture, but I don't end the piece conclusively: I arrange the harmony and texture such that my piece will blend seamlessly into the dramatic opening of Mahler 2."

Program Note by Aaron Ziegel
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GUSTAV MAHLER

Symphony No. 2 in C minor/E-flat major, *Resurrection*



COMPOSER: Born July 7, 1860, Kalischt, near Iglau (now Kaliště, Jihlava), Bohemia; died May 18, 1911, Vienna

WORK COMPOSED: Mahler drafted the first movement in 1888, the second and third movements in the summer of 1893, the fourth movement from 1892 to 1893, and completed the finale by December 28, 1894. Mahler also made revisions up through 1909.

WORLD PREMIERE: Mahler premiered the first three movements with the Berlin Philharmonic on March 4, 1895, and conducted the same orchestra in the premiere of the entire work on December 13 of that year.

INSTRUMENTATION: Soprano, mezzo-soprano, SATB chorus, 4 flutes (all doubling piccolo), 4 oboes (2 doubling English horn), 5 clarinets (1 doubling bass clarinet), 4 bassoons (2 doubling contrabassoon), 10 horns, 6 trumpets, 4 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, chimes, cymbals, orchestra bells, snare drum, 2 tam tams, triangle, organ, 2 harps, and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 77 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

How much does knowing what inspires a composer influence a listener's experience? In the case of Gustav Mahler, whose symphonic inspirations came from subjects like poetry, religion, and metaphysics, context can be helpful. However, while it can certainly enrich understanding, knowing the entire story isn't always necessary to grasp the music—an idea that Mahler himself believed.

He was pestered by critics, colleagues, and friends to provide a program for his second symphony; bowing to pressure, he did initially suggest a general outline for the work, but over time, Mahler's attitude towards such explanations soured. In 1901, Mahler described the program outline he had provided to King Albert of Saxony at the king's request as "a crutch for a cripple" and added, "It gives only a superficial indication, all that any program can do for a musical work, let alone this one, which is so much all of a piece that it can no more be explained than the world itself. I'm quite sure that if God were asked to draw up a program of the world he created, he could never do it. At best, it would say as little about the nature of God and life as my analysis says about my C-minor Symphony."

It is interesting that Mahler describes the symphony as "so much all of a piece" because the movements were conceived over a seven-year period, and the first was initially conceived as a stand-alone work. Mahler composed what became the first movement after his successful premiere of the opera *Die drei Pintos* (The Three Pintos), in January 1888. Mahler received many congratulatory bouquets of flowers after the premiere, which he took home and arranged around his bedroom. Lying in bed surrounded by their heady scents, Mahler imagined himself, in his own words, "dead, laid out in state, beneath wreaths and flowers." This macabre fantasy inspired him to compose *Todtenfeier* (Funeral Rites), originally intended as a single-movement work.

Mahler's various conducting jobs, which demanded all his time and energy during the concert season, left him only summer vacations to write his own music. Mahler finished *Todtenfeier* in September 1888, but his busy conducting schedule and work on other compositions, including his First Symphony, kept him from performing it for five years. In 1893, Mahler decided *Todtenfeier* worked better as the first movement of a new symphony rather than as an independent composition.

The Allegro maestoso is one of the longest of the symphony's five movements, second only to the Finale, and, as its original title suggests, the music explores Mahler's lifelong fascination with the ontological questions of life and death. The music alternates funeral marches with contrasting episodes of tender, intimate music. In one of the "programs" Mahler was asked to write, he described the existential questions posed by the first movement: "What now? What is this life – and this death? Do we have an existence beyond it? Is all this only a confused dream, or do life and this death have a meaning? – And we must answer this question if we are to live on."

The gentle serenity of the Andante moderato provides a respite from the relentless philosophical demands of the first movement. It evokes a relaxed day in the country, replete with placid melodies and a cello solo. The drama of the first movement returns briefly about halfway through, followed by a reprise of the lyrical opening music.

As Mahler did with each of his first five symphonies, the Second features a song with text from the poetry collection *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Boy's Magic Horn). In July 1893, while immersed in the Second Symphony, Mahler also composed the song "Des Antonius von Padua Fischpredigt" (St. Anthony of Padua's Sermon to the Fishes) for voice and piano. This song contains hints of music Mahler used in his First Symphony, and he quickly orchestrated it, exploiting its clear vocal lines, as the third movement of the Second Symphony.

The text of *Urlicht* (Primeval Light) also comes from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. Mahler set it for mezzo-soprano, whose voice represents humanity. She pleads with God on behalf of all humankind for the peace of eternal life. The text and music combine in a peaceful benediction, which Mahler ruthlessly destroys in the opening bars of the final movement. This monumental section, over 30 minutes in length, sums up the preceding movements and then, using distant offstage horns (Mahler described this as "The crier in the wilderness," Mahler sets the scene. A flute sounds a solitary birdcall, followed by a rich silence. Then, hushed, the chorus sings, "Rise again, yes, you will rise again, my dust, after brief rest! Immortal life will He who called you grant you!" On the word "rief" (call), the soprano drifts in, floating like a sunbeam above the choir. The text is a combination of the beginning verses of Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock's poem *Auferstehung* (Resurrection) and Mahler's own free verse. In 1894, Mahler's colleague, conductor Hans von Bülow died. At the memorial service—which Mahler attended—a choir sang a setting of Klopstock's poem "It struck me like lightning, this thing," wrote Mahler to a friend, "and everything was revealed to my soul clear and plain." Mahler added his own words to Klopstock's, which speak more specifically about faith and belief in the resurrection of the individual human soul. The two soloists trade lines about transcending pain and death, and the chorus triumphantly declares, "I shall die so as to live!" Cascading chimes and ebullient brasses bring the symphony to a transcendent close.

Critics savaged Mahler's First Symphony, and some reviews of the Second were likewise brutal. In the rabidly anti-Semitic Vienna of the 1890s, one often could not separate a critic's reaction to the music from his inbred anti-Semitism. One such review dismissed the Symphony, claiming the audience was required to "surrender unconditionally to the composer" and that listeners were "overwhelmed rather than convinced." Another critic wrote, "[The Second Symphony is] the work of a skeptic, [a] vast poem of life [that] exalts fatality [and] a joy which is lacking abandonment or confidence ... The work seems to be analyzing itself." Others regarded the Second Symphony more favorably, but with reservations: "[An] uneven work ... very beautiful in parts, weak in others. One is too aware of effort, of its desire to be original." However, several of Mahler's colleagues praised the Second Symphony when it premiered in 1895, and their favorable reactions helped establish Mahler as a composer of great potential.

In 1907, a 33-year-old Arnold Schoenberg heard Mahler conduct the Second Symphony in Vienna. Of this performance, Schoenberg wrote, "I can remember clearly that when I heard Mahler's Second Symphony for the first time I was, especially at certain points, seized by an excitement that took physical expression in the rapid beating of my heart ... the work had made an extraordinary impression on me, it had caught hold of me and overpowered me against my will: a work of art can have no loftier impact than when the emotion that raged in its creator is transferred to the listener, to rage and surge in him as well. For I had been moved; moved to the utmost."

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Elizabeth Schwartz is a writer and music historian based in the Portland area. She has been a program annotator for more than 20 years and works with music festivals and ensembles around the country. Schwartz has also contributed to NPR's "Performance Today," (now heard on American Public Media.)

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