

## Two Settings of Songs from *The Chinese Flute*

### “Der Einsame im Herbst” (“The Solitary Person in Autumn”), from *Das Lied von der Erde (The Song of the Earth)*

Gustav Mahler

### “Imitation of Old Poem: Long Autumn Night,” from *The Song of the Earth for Soprano, Baritone, and Orchestra, Op. 47*

YE Xiaogang

“Only when I experience do I compose — only when I compose do I experience,” wrote **Gustav Mahler** (1860–1911). The experience of mortality weighed heavily on him as he composed *Das Lied von der Erde (The Song of the Earth)*. He had not begun to recover from the shock of his four-year-old daughter’s recent death when, in the summer of 1907, physicians informed him that he was suffering from a heart condition that would probably prove fatal. They advised him to give up all strenuous activity, including the conducting by which he earned his livelihood and the hiking from which he derived spiritual nourishment. “I have lost any calm and peace of mind I ever achieved,” he wrote to his friend Bruno Walter. “I stand now face to face with nothingness, and now, at the end of my life, I have to begin to learn to walk and stand.”

Mahler reined in his walking but otherwise plunged ahead, almost suicidally. That autumn he traveled to New York to prepare for his conducting debut at The Metropolitan

Opera, and in the fall of 1909 he added yet another strenuous obligation, the full-time music directorship of the New York Philharmonic. Given his health and the relentless pace of his activities, it is perhaps surprising that he managed to live almost four years after receiving the initial diagnosis.

A friend had presented Mahler with a book titled *The Chinese Flute*, a collection of Chinese poems assembled, adapted, and translated into German by Hans Bethge. Their basic philosophy both reflected Mahler’s death fears and offered a measure of consolation: nature — the earth — goes on, perpetually renewing itself, but man’s experience of it is inevitably limited to a brief span. Mahler launched into his Bethge settings in the summer of 1907, immediately after receiving his “death sentence,” and completed the orchestration in New York during the 1908–09 season. Although he used a very large orchestra, Mahler deployed his resources selectively, rather as if it were a chamber ensemble with enormous possibilities. He titled his new piece *Das Lied von der Erde: A Symphony for Tenor, Contralto (or Baritone), and Orchestra*.

The second of its six movements is “**Der Einsame im Herbst**” (“**The Solitary Person in Autumn**”). Its lyrics, which Bethge translated from a Tang Dynasty poem by Qian Qi (710–782), speak of the fading of life that we witness in autumn: leaves withered, scent gone from flowers. Mahler marks this introspective movement *Etwas schleichend. Ermüdet (Somewhat dragging. Exhausted)*. The stepwise melodies of the singer and the weeping instruments indeed suggest weariness and resignation, though the orchestra bursts forth with blazing brightness at the mention of the sunshine of love. Mahler never heard *Das Lied von der Erde* performed. Bruno Walter led its premiere on November 20, 1911, six

## In the Composer's Words

Thanks in part to the fact that its text is translated and adapted from Chinese poetry of the Tang Dynasty, Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* has enjoyed considerable popularity in China. **Ye Xiaogang** composed his own ***The Song of the Earth*** as a response, using the same source material, but approaching it from a different point of view, even down to rearranging the order of songs incorporated. He told *China Daily*:

My work is not to challenge Mahler's but is an interpretation of the Chinese poetry from our own cultural background. While Mahler's work is full of disillusion and agnosticism, my work is more of a liberated attitude toward life.

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months after the composer's death. "*Das Lied von der Erde*," wrote Walter, "is the most personal utterance in Mahler's creative work and perhaps in music."

The text for the next song is also culled from the collection of Chinese poems that inspired Mahler, but the setting is composed by a 21st-century composer. **Ye Xiaogang**, born in 1955, is among the most highly esteemed of contemporary Chinese composers. Following farm and factory work during the Cultural Revolution, he entered the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, where he studied from 1978 to 1983. He had hoped to enroll as a pianist, but since the school was not then admitting pianists, he chose to pursue composition instead. Beginning in 1987 he carried out further study at the Eastman School of Music, which granted him a master's degree in 1992. His teachers have included Minxin Du, Samuel Adler, Joseph Schwantner, Louis Andriessen, and Alexander Goehr (with whom he had worked at Cambridge University in 1980). He has taught composition at the Central Conservatory of Music and in 2009 was appointed its vice president. In 1995 he became the first

Chinese composer to join the roster of the German publisher Schott Musik International, which has issued his scores ever since. His recent activities include serving as composer-in-residence of the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, directing the Beijing Modern Music Festival, and serving as vice chairman of the Chinese Musicians' Association and as a member of the China National Congress.

He has been honored with numerous awards, including composition prizes from the Urban Council of Hong Kong, Taiwan Symphony Orchestra, China Cultural Promotion Society, the Li Foundation of San Francisco, and the Chinese National Symphony Orchestra. He has been awarded fellowships by the Metropolitan Life Foundation, Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and (in 2012) the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. In China he has also been singled out for various awards in the field of music education.

In the West, Ye Xiaogang is mostly known through his concert works such as *Starry Sky*, a piano concerto that was premiered at the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, with Lang Lang as soloist. In China, he is more famous as a composer for film and television. He has contributed scores for such acclaimed movies as *The Shower* (a 1999 comedy directed by Zhang Yang) and *The Treatment* (Xiaolong Zheng's 2001 film about cultural conflicts encountered by a Chinese family living in the United States); and he composed the score for *Rise of the Great Powers*, a 12-part CCTV documentary series (from 2006) that explored the emergence of nine influential nations of Asia and Europe.

In 2004, on commission from the China Philharmonic Orchestra and Young Euro Classic music festival of Berlin, Ye Xiaogang composed his own ***The Song of the Earth***, with six movements using the original poems on which Mahler's settings are based. The

piece, which calls for soprano, baritone, and orchestra, was premiered in Beijing in 2005. The third of its six movements is **“Imitation of Old Poem: Long Autumn Night,”** which corresponds to the second movement, “Der Einsame im Herbst,” of Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde*. Here we encounter the poet Qian Qi’s autumnal images again – the chill, the falling leaves, the jade-like frost – which Ye Xiaogang interprets with writing that recalls the delicate orchestra of Mahler’s setting.

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## Translations

### **“Der Einsame im Herbst” (The Solitary Person in Autumn), from Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth)**

Blue autumn mists undulate over the lake;  
the grass is standing stiff with frost;  
one might think an artist had strewn  
    jade dust  
over all the fine blossoms.

The sweet fragrance of flowers has  
    flown away;  
a cold wind forces them to bow their  
    stems low.  
Soon the wilted golden leaves  
    of lotus flowers will drift upon the water.

My heart is weary. My small lamp  
    has gone out with a splutter;  
it reminds me of sleep.  
I am coming to you, comfort place of rest!  
Yes, give me rest – I have need of  
    rejuvenation.

I weep much in my solitude.  
The autumn in my heart has lasted too long.  
Sun of love, will you never shine again,  
gently to dry my bitter tears?

– Text from *The Chinese Flute*,  
translated by Hans Bethge

**Instrumentation:** Mahler’s setting calls for three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons, four horns, two harps, strings, and mezzo-soprano voice. Ye’s song employs two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, vibraphone, small bell, chimes, orchestra bells, and strings, in addition to soprano voice.

### **“Imitation of Old Poem: Long Autumn Night,” from Ye Xiaogang’s *The Song of the Earth***

Autumn sky, jade-like frost drifting,  
northerly wind carries lotus fragrance  
    with love,  
weaving till the lonely lamp fades.  
Wipe tears, fond memory, long cold night  
Eaves edge, blue clouds pure like water  
Rising moon, roosting birds caw; geese soar.

Whose young wife is weaving love birds on  
    her loom?  
Deeply concealed by silk curtain and inlaid  
    screen,  
listening to falling leaves by the white jade  
    window.  
Pity the woman, chilled and alone, without  
    company.

– Text from the poem by Qian Qi