

Das Lied von der Erde (*The Song of the Earth*)

Gustav Mahler

The horrified contemplation of death was a central experience in Gustav Mahler's life. The subject 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 passing when, in the summer of 1907, his 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. He wrote to his friend Bruno Walter:

At a single stroke, I have lost any calm and peace of mind I ever achieved. 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.

He 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 accepted the Music Directorship of the New York Philharmonic. Given his health and the relentless strain of his activities, it is perhaps surprising that he managed to live almost four years after receiving a diagnosis.

Mahler seems to have tried tricking death with *Das Lied von der Erde*. He subscribed to the superstition that composers did not survive beyond their ninth symphonies (à la Beethoven and Bruckner). He accordingly avoided calling this his Ninth Symphony, which it essentially is, since Mahler's symphonies often include prominent parts for vocal soloists. On the other hand, it is distinct among his ostensible symphonies in that, at

least initially, he imagined the work as being performable in versions with the two soloists and either orchestra or piano, the piano version being considered a full equal of the orchestral setting rather than a poor relation. He did go on to compose a Ninth Symphony; fatefully, it would be his last, and his Tenth remained an incomplete fragment.

A friend had presented Mahler with *Die chinesische Flöte* (*The Chinese Flute*), a collection of Chinese poems assembled and translated into German by Hans Bethge — more accurately described as poetic paraphrases than literal translations of the T'ang Dynasty texts. Their basic philosophy both reflected Mahler's death fears and offered a measure of consolation. The message is that nature — the earth — goes on, perpetually renewing itself, but that man's experience of it is limited to a brief span. Mahler launched

In Short

Born: July 7, 1860, in Kalischt (Kaliště), Bohemia, near the town of Humpolec

Died: May 18, 1911, in Vienna, Austria

Work composed: 1907 through 1909, mostly in the summer of 1908

World premiere: November 20, 1911, by the Munich Tonkünstler Orchestra, Bruno Walter, conductor, with Sara Cahier, contralto, and William Miller, tenor

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 3, 1929, Willem Mengelberg, conductor, with Margarete Matzenauer, contralto, and Richard Crooks, tenor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: April 22, 2016, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Stefan Vinke, tenor, Thomas Hampson, baritone

Estimated duration: ca. 58 minutes

into his Bethge settings immediately after receiving his 1907 “death sentence,” and completed the orchestration in New York during the 1908–09 season. While calling for a large orchestra, Mahler deployed his resources selectively, almost as a chamber ensemble with vast possibilities.

This is among the most introspective of Mahler’s works. Such ear-tickling details as the *chinoiserie* of occasional pentatonic scales (as in the third and fourth songs) do little to obscure that this is a valedictory masterpiece of autobiography. The finale is one of Mahler’s greatest movements. A half-hour in duration — and therefore nearly as long as all that has come before — it comprises two of Bethge’s poems (with a final verse of Mahler’s own appended), and a desolate funeral march provides no relief from its heartbreaking sense of yearning and regret.

Mahler never heard *Das Lied von der Erde* performed. Bruno Walter led its premiere

on November 20, 1911, six months after the composer’s death. Walter wrote:

Das Lied von der Erde is the most personal utterance in Mahler’s creative work and perhaps in music. Invention, too, which, beginning with the Sixth Symphony, was occasionally of less importance in itself to the great symphonic artist than as mere material for his creative forming, regains its highly personal character and, in that sense, it is quite in order to call *Das Lied von der Erde* the most “Mahleresque” of his works.

Instrumentation: piccolo and three flutes (one doubling piccolo), three oboes (one doubling English horn), four clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet) and E-flat clarinet, three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tam-tam, bells, celesta, two harps, mandolin, and strings, plus mezzo-soprano and tenor soloists.

Mahler’s Twilight

The widespread image of Mahler as being overwhelmingly sick and depressed in his final years is to a large extent based on the way his wife, Alma, depicted him in her writings and later comments. The Mahler biographer Henry-Louis de La Grange argued that this may not be accurate, and that Alma was skewing the truth to justify her own romantic infidelities. An alternative view to Alma’s was expressed in 1948 by the conductor Otto Klemperer, whom she was apparently intent on seducing not long after her husband’s death:

It would be a grave mistake to regard Mahler as a world-weary man. The best biography that has been written about him is by his wife Alma Mahler, who also emphasizes these traits. I myself,



Alma and Gustav Mahler on one of his customary strolls in the countryside

since I was privileged to know Mahler, can vouch that he was of a very lively, even cheerful nature. He could become very angry only with those who failed to do their duty The last song in *Das Lied von der Erde* is *Der Abschied*. It was his farewell to life, and the piece is profoundly moving. Right at the end can be heard the words: “I go, I wander, I seek peace for my lonely heart.” For even if, as I say, he was by nature lively and by no means world-weary, he was nonetheless a lonely man. He died too early.

Texts and Translations

Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*,
with texts from Bethge's translations in *The Chinese Flute*

Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde

*Schon winkt der Wein im gold'nen Pokale,
Doch trinkt noch nicht, erst sing' ich euch
ein Lied!*

*Das Lied vom Kummer
soll auflachend in die Seele euch klingen.
Wenn der Kummer naht,
liegen wüst die Gärten der Seele,
so erstirbt die Freude, der Gesang.
Dunkel ist das Leben, ist der Tod!*

*Herr dieses Hauses!
Dein Keller birgt die Fülle des goldenen Weins!
Hier, diese Laute nenn' ich mein!
Die Laute schlagen und die Gläser leeren,
Das sind zwei Dinge, die zusammen passen.
Ein voller Becher Weins zur rechten Zeit
ist mehr wert, als alle Reiche dieser Erde!
Dunkel ist das Leben, ist der Tod!*

*Das Firmament blaut ewig, und
die Erde
wird lange fest steh'n und aufblühn
im Lenz.
Du aber, Mensch! Wie lang lebst denn du?
Nicht hundert Jahre darfst du dich
ergötzen
an all dem morschen Tande dieser Erde!*

*Seht dort hinab!
Im Mondschein auf den Gräbern
hockt eine wildgespenstische Gestalt!
Ein Aff' ist's! Hört ihr, wie sein Heulen
hinausgellt in den süßen Duft des Leben!
Jetzt nehmt den Wein! Jetzt ist es Zeit,
Genossen!
Leert eure gold'nen Becher zu Grund!
Dunkel ist das Leben, ist der Tod!*

The Drinking Song of Earthly Sorrow

Wine in the golden goblet is beckoning,
But do not drink yet. First I'll sing
you a song!
The Song of Sorrow!
Let its mockery laugh itself into your soul.
When sorrow approaches, the soul's gardens
lie desolate,
Joy and song wither and die.
Dark is life and death!

Master of this house,
your cellar holds the fullness of golden wine!
Master, this lute I call my own!
Strike the lute and empty the glasses.
These are things that fit each other.
At the proper time, a goblet full of wine is
worth more than all the kingdoms of earth!
Dark is life and death!

The firmament in its eternal blue, and
the earth
will long endure and will blossom
in springtime.
But you, O man, what is the span of your life?
Not even for a hundred years are you
permitted
to enjoy the vanities of this earth!

Look there below!
In the moonlight upon the graves
crouches a wild, ghostly figure!
It is an ape! Hear how his howling
hovers on the sweet fragrance of life!
Bring on the wine! The time has come,
my comrades!
Drain your golden goblets to the bottom.
Dark is life and death!

— Based on Li Bai

(Please turn the page quietly.)

Der Einsame im Herbst

*Herbstnebel wallen bläulich
überm Strom.
Vom Reif bezogen stehen alle Gräser.
Man meint, ein Künstler habe Staub von Jade
über die feinen Blüten ausgestreut.*

*Der süße Duft der Blumen ist verflogen,
ein kalter Wind beugt ihre Stengel nieder.
Bald werden die verwelkten, gold'nen Blätter
der Lotosblüten auf dem Wasser zieh'n.*

*Mein Herz ist müde.
Meine kleine Lampe erlosch mit Knistern,
Es gemahnt mich an den Schlaf.
Ich komm' zu dir, traute Ruhestätte,
Ja, gib mir Ruh; ich hab'
Erquickung not!*

*Ich weine viel in meinen Einsamkeiten.
Der Herbst in meinem Herzen währt zu lange.
Sonne der Liebe, willst du nie mehr scheinen,
um meine bitteren Tränen mild aufzutrocknen?*

— Based on Chang Tsi

Von der Jugend

*Mitten in dem kleinen Teiche
steht ein Pavillon aus grünem
und aus weißem Porzellan.
Wie der Rücken eines Tigers
wölbt die Brücke sich aus Jade
zu dem Pavillon hinüber.*

*In dem Häuschen sitzen Freunde,
schön gekleidet, trinken, plaudern,
manche schreiben Verse nieder.
Ihre seidnen Ärmel gleiten rückwärts,
ihre seidnen Mützen hocken lustig tief im Nacken.*

*Auf des kleinen, kleinen Teiches
stiller, stiller Wasserfläche
zeigt sich alles wunderbar im Spiegelbilde.
Alles auf dem Kopfe stehend
in dem Pavillon aus grünem
und aus weißem Porzellan.*

The Solitary One in Autumn

The mists of autumn build their blue wall over
the sea.
The grass stands covered with hoarfrost.
It seems as if an artist had strewn the
dust of jade over the delicate blossoms.

The flowers' fragrance has faded.
A cold wind bends them to earth.
Soon the withered, golden leaves of lotus
flowers will be scattered upon the waters.

My heart is weary.
My little lamp has gone out with a crackle,
reminding me of need for sleep.
I come to you, trusted place of twilight!
Yes, give me rest, for I am in need of
refreshment!

I weep and weep in my solitude.
Autumn lingers too long in my heart.
O sun of love, will you not shine once more
to gently dry my bitter tears?

Of Youth

Midway in the little pool stands
a pavilion of green and
white porcelain.
Like the back of a tiger, the bridge
of jade
arches across to the pavilion.

In the little house friends are seated,
beautifully gowned, drinking, chatting.
Some are writing verses.
Their silk sleeves glide backwards,
silk caps perched on their necks.

On the smooth surface of
the small pool,
all is wondrously mirrored.
All stands upon its head
in the pavilion
of green and white porcelain.

(Please turn the page quietly.)

Wie ein Halbmond scheint die Brücke,
umgekehrt der Bogen.
Freunde, schön gekleidet,
trinken, plaudern.

— Based on Li T'ai-po

Von der Schönheit

Junge Mädchen pflücken Blumen,
pflücken Lotosblumen an dem Uferrande.
Zwischen Büschen und Blättern sitzen sie,
sammeln Blüten in den Schoss
und rufen sich einander Neckereien zu.

Gold'ne Sonne webt um die Gestalten,
spiegelt sie im blanken Wasser wider.
Sonne spiegelt ihre schlanken Glieder,
ihre süßen Augen wider,
und der Zephyr hebt mit Schmeichelkosen
das Gewebe ihrer Ärmel auf,
führt den Zauber ihrer Wohlgerüche durch
die Luft.

O sieh, was tummeln sich für schöne Knaben
dort an dem Uferrand auf mut'gen Rossen,
weithin glänzend wie die Sonnenstrahlen;
schon zwischen dem Geäst der grünen Weiden
trabt das jungfrische Volk einher!

Das Ross des einen wiehert fröhlich auf,
und scheut und saust dahin,
über Blumen, Gräser wanken hin die Hufe,
sie zerstampfen jäh im Sturm die
hingesunk'nen Blüten,
Hei! Wie flattern im Taumel seine Mähnen,
dampfen heiß die Nüstern!

Gold'ne Sonne webt um die Gestalten,
spiegelt sie im blanken Wasser wider.
Und die schönste von den Jungfrau'n sendet
lange Blicke ihm der Sehnsucht nach.
Ihre stolze Haltung ist nur Verstellung.
In dem Funkeln ihrer großen Augen,
In dem Dunkel ihres heißen Blicks
schwingt klagend noch die Erregung ihres
Herzens nach.

Like a half-moon stands the bridge,
reversed in its bow.
Friends, beautifully gowned, are drinking,
chatting.

Of Beauty

Youthful maidens are plucking flowers,
lotus flowers at the edge of the shore.
Between bushes and leaves they are sitting,
gathering blossoms in their laps
and calling to each other in jest.

The golden sun plays about their forms,
reflected in the still water.
The sun mirrors their slender limbs and
their sweet eyes.
A gentle zephyr caresses the fabric of their
sleeves
and wafts the magic of their perfume through
the air.

See the beautiful lads on fiery horses,
there at the edge of the shore.
They glisten from afar like rays of the sun
between the green branches of the willows.
Fresh youth is making its way!

One of the steeds whinnies for joy
and rushes past,
galloping over flowers and grasses,
his hoofs crushing the fallen
blossoms.
How his mane flies in the breeze,
how his nostrils dilate!

The golden sun plays about their forms,
reflected in the still water.
And the loveliest of the maidens
sends the rider glances of yearning.
Her haughty bearing is no more than feigned.
In the sparkle of her wide eyes,
in the darkening of the eager glance,
longingly beats the passion
of her heart.

— Based on Li Bai

(Please turn the page quietly.)

Der Trunkene im Frühling

*Wenn nur ein Traum das Dasein ist, warum
dann Müh' und Plag'?*
*Ich trinke, bis ich nicht mehr kann, den ganzen
lieben Tag!*

*Und wenn ich nicht mehr trinken kann, weil
Keh! und Seele voll,
so taum! ich bis zu meiner Tür und schlafe
wundervoll!*

*Was hör' ich beim Erwachen? Horch! Ein Vogel
singt im Baum.*
*Ich frag' ihn, ob schon Frühling sei; mir ist, als
wie im Traum.*

*Der Vogel zwitschert: Ja! Ja! Der Lenz! Der
Lenz, der Lenz, sei kommen über Nacht!
Aus tiefstem Schauen lausch' ich auf, der Vogel
singt und lacht!*

*Ich fülle mir den Becher neu,
und leer' ihn zum Grund
und singe, bis der Mond erglänzt
am schwarzen Himmelsgrund!*

*Und wenn ich nicht mehr singen kann,
so schlaf' ich wieder ein.*
*Was geht mich Welt und Frühling an?
Lasst mich betrunken sein!*

— Based on Li Bai

Der Abschied

*Die Sonne scheidet hinter dem Gebirge.
In alle Täler steigt der Abend nieder
mit seinen Schatten, die voll Kühlung sind.*
*O sieh! Wie eine Silberbarke schwebt der Mond
am blauen Himmelssee herauf.*

*Ich spüre eines feinen Windes Weh'n
hinter den dunklen Fichten!
Der Bach singt voller Wohllaut durch das Dunkel.
Die Blumen blassen im Dämmerchein.
Die Erde atmet voll von Ruh' und Schlaf.
Alle Sehnsucht will nun träumen.*

The Drunkard in Spring

If life is no more than a dream, why work and
worry?
I'll drink till I can drink no more, the whole
livelong day!

And when I can no longer drink, when throat
and soul are full,
I'll tumble down before my door and sleep
wonderfully!

What do I hear as I awaken? Listen! A bird
sings in a tree!
I ask him whether Spring has come. I feel I am
in a dream.

The bird twitters: Yes! The Spring!
Overnight, the Spring has come!
In deep contemplation I listen, the bird sings
and laughs!

I fill my goblet anew and drain it
to the bottom.
I sing until the moon shines bright
in the darkening firmament!

And when I can no longer sing,
I'll go to sleep again.
For what does Spring matter to me?
Just let me be drunk!

The Farewell

The sun is sinking beneath the hills.
Evening descends into the vales
with its cool, quiet shadows.
Behold! As a bark of silver the moon rises
into the blue heaven.

I feel the motion of a gentle wind
behind the dark pines.
The brook sings its music through the dark.
The flowers grow pale in the twilight.
The earth breathes the quiet of rest and sleep.
All longing now becomes a dream.

*Die müden Menschen geh'n heimwärts,
um im Schlaf vergess'nes Glück
und Jugend neu zu lernen.
Die Vögel hocken still in ihren Zweigen.
Die Welt schläft ein.*

*Es wehet kühl im Schatten meiner Fichten.
ich stehe hier und harre meines Freundes.
Ich harre sein zum letzten lebewohl.*

*Ich sehne mich, O Freund, an deiner Seite
die Schönheit dieses Abends zu genießen.
Wo bleibst du? Du lässt mich lang allein!
Ich wandle auf und nieder mit meiner Laute
auf Wegen, die von weichem Grase schwellen.*

*O kämst du! O kämst du
ungetreuer Freund!*

*Er stieg vom Pferd und reichte ihm den Trunk
des Abschieds dar.
Er fragte ihn, wohin er führe
und auch warum, warum es müsste sein.
Er sprach, seine Stimme war unflort:*

*Du mein Freund,
mir war auf dieser Welt das Glück nicht hold!
Wohin ich geh? Ich geh', ich wandre in
die Berge.
Ich suche Ruhe,
Ruhe für mein einsam Herz.
Ich wandle nach der Heimat, meiner Stätte.
Ich werde niemals in die Ferne schweifen.
Still ist mein Herz und harret seiner Stunde!*

*Die liebe Erde allüberall
blüht auf im Lenz und grünt auf's neu!
Allüberall und ewig blauen licht
die Fernen!
Ewig ... ewig ...*

Weary humanity is homeward bound,
to discover in sleep their forgotten fortune
and youth.
Birds are perched upon their branches.
The world falls into sleep.

The cool wind is in the shadow of my pines.
I stand here and await my friend.
I wait to bid my friend a last farewell.

I long, O friend, at your side,
to drink in the beauty of this evening.
Where are you? You leave me long in solitude!
I wander to and fro with my lute
on paths thick with soft grass.

O that you would come! If only you would
come, faithless friend!

He climbed from his horse and gave his friend
a farewell cup.
He asked him where he was going, and why it
must be.
He spoke. His voice was quiet:

O my friend,
fate in this world has not been kind to me!
Where am I bound? I go, I wander into the
mountains.
I seek rest,
rest for my lonely heart.
I am wand'ring toward my native place, my home.
I shall never roam in foreign lands.
My heart is at rest and awaits its hour!

The dear earth blossoms in the spring and
buds anew.
Everywhere and forever the luminous blue of
distant space!
Forever ... forever ...

— Based on Mong-Kao-Jen / Wang Wei

(English version is based on that of A.H. Meyer)