

## GUSTAV MAHLER'S *DAS KLAGENDE LIED*. THE STORY OF A BEGINNING

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**SUMMARY.** Together with Beethoven and Mozart, Mahler is one of the most analyzed composers in the history of music. The notes he wrote on his manuscripts, rich in extra-musical meaning, allowed the clinicians and musicologists to analyze both the man and the musician. The controversies built around his personality reached a level almost without precedent.

The permanent conflict that one can feel in Mahler's music has been explained in terms of the struggle between his activity as a conductor and the necessity for creation. Furthermore, his music reflects the turbulent social-cultural environment typical for the last days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as well as the tensions of his childhood and youth.

Mahler began working on *Das klagende Lied* when he was still a student. The composer himself considered it as his *opus 1*. Indeed, in this work, one can find the roots to his later works that occupied the next thirty years of his career as a composer.

**Keywords:** Gustav Mahler, *Das klagende Lied*, archetypes, fairy-tale

One of the most important centers of Europe, Vienna gave rise to some of the most radical and revolutionary currents of thinking of the *fin-de-siècle*. As capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, whose symbol was Franz Josef, Vienna was responsible for maintaining the political and cultural order. Although Vienna had an exceptional musical inheritance, due to the classical style emerged here, it began, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to show signs of anxiety. Despite the prosperity of art and science, the monarchy was already old and exceeded, and a sensitive observer could feel the proximity of an imminent catastrophe. The political tensions, which predicted the dissolution of the empire, were reflected in the works of radical artists and scientists. Among them, the physician Sigmund Freud, the architects Otto Wagner and Adolph Loos, the painters Gustav Klimt and Oskar Kokoschka, the writers Arthur Schnitzler and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the composers Gustav Mahler and Arnold Schönberg. Vienna would eventually become the expression of the wish to keep the values of the past and, as a contradiction, to generate the new.

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Gustav Mahler's complex personality embodied perfectly the duality that was characteristic for Vienna at that time. As an opera conductor, he chose the masterpieces of the standard repertoire, being known also for his revolutionary visions. In the same way, his compositions were the perfect example of the conflict between the melancholy for the past and the continuous struggle for finding the new. Furthermore, even though Mahler was one of the greatest opera conductors, he never composed one single work of this kind. He chose to depict his inner life through the dramatic force of his songs and symphonies.

Mahler's life and artistic achievements were dominated by the battle between the duties of one of the most appreciated conductors of his times and the high requirements of a creative genius. His two-folded personality, which determined Leonard Bernstein to describe him as "*one of the most miserable men in history*", was intimately bound to the special circumstances of his life. The difficult situation of his family and the twisted picture of his childhood and youth affected Mahler's life and determined, in a way, its course.

The artistic creativity can be either amplified, or inhibited by the artist's contact with the outer world, by the interaction of his conflicts and desires with the present, by the sanctions from the society or from the most severe critic, his conscience. Composers like Schumann or Wolf had to face serious obstacles as mental disorders were destroying their creative activity. But for Mahler, his psychic conflict led his art to a superior level of efficiency. Moreover, he turned his inner disquiets into symbols, thus adding extra-musical significances to his compositions, reaching the deepest level of human sufferance and depicting the dark forces that invade it.

Mahler's complex personality, with Austrian, Czech, German and Jewish elements, remained a mystery for many. Mahler's work is, above all, based on his personal experience, on his philosophy of life. His style, unusual and bold through the heterogeneity of its elements, determined the audience to adopt either a positive attitude, or a negative one, but never one of indifference. Besides, the effort of his disciples, like Bruno Walter, Richard Strauss or Otto Klemperer, increased his reputation substantially after his death. The less decent sides of the human existence, as well as the sublime ones find an expression in Mahler's music. Thus can one explain the contradictions, the sudden changes in mood and character, the predilection for grotesque, the street tunes, followed by some of the most elevated ideas.

Composed between 1879 and 1880, the cantata *Das klagende Lied* is one of the few works of Mahler's youth that subsequently managed to be successful<sup>2</sup>. In a letter addressed to Max Marschalk, dated December 1896,

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<sup>2</sup> There are proofs that the work has been submitted to a competition for the Beethoven Prize, organized by the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde*. Brahms and Hanslick were presidents of the jury and Mahler's work was rejected. The prize went to Robert Fuchs, for his *Piano Concerto*.

Mahler wrote: “*The first of my works in which I find myself again as «Mahler» is a fairy-tale for choir, soloists and orchestra, **Das klagende Lied**. I have designated this work as op. 1<sup>13</sup>.*”

In his biography of Mahler, Henry-Louis de la Grange paints a picture of the composer’s childhood as one absorbed with the acoustical and psychological elements of sound, both as music and as spoken word. As Mahler’s personal life is practically indistinguishable from his art, we can say that the sensual experiences of his childhood infused his song-cycles and his symphonies with deep spiritual and psychological implications. Mahler himself said: “*The impressions of the spiritual experiences of that period gave my future life its form and its content...*”

It becomes quite understandable why Mahler chose to base his first major work upon folktale. As it is well known, most of all through the work of the analytical psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, folktale and myth contain psychological archetypes embedded in the receding hinterland of the human psyche. These archetypes give birth to primordial images and motifs that, through the mediation of metaphor in art and religion, reconnect our consciousness (individual and collective) to our common human origins. The archetypal motif disguised in metaphor has the power to create in us a resonance so deep as to cause recognition of ourselves in an archaic past, a past that could be seen as a “childhood” of humanity. It is clear that Mahler understood (intuitively or consciously, it’s not so important after all) the great potential of the metaphoric aspects of folktale in bringing primeval archetypal motifs into the present. This can readily be inferred from the poem he wrote as the text for the cantata, at the center of which lies the ancient crime of fratricide and the innocence of a child’s soul.

Some of Mahler’s most important scholars, such as H.F. Redlich, Paul Stefan or Henry-Louis de la Grange, have considered that, originally, the work had been meant to be a fantastic opera in three acts: *Waldmärchen*<sup>4</sup>, *Der Spielmann* and *Hochzeitstück*. Donald Mitchell contradicts this hypothesis, due to the lack of evidence to support it. The history of the composition and revisions is fascinating. Mahler composed the original three-movement work between 1878 and 1880. In this version, the bone flute was scored for a boy’s voice and an off-stage band was used in the second and third movement. The orchestration involved six harps and natural horns.

In the 1893 revision, Mahler dropped the first movement, deleted the off-stage band, reduced the number of harps to two and cut the vocal soloists from eleven to four, eliminating the boy’s voices. The year 1898 brought a second revision. He once again added the off-stage band into the orchestra

<sup>3</sup> Gustav Mahler, *Briefe*, Herausgegeben von Mathias Hansen, Verlag Philipp Reclam jun., Leipzig, 1985, pp. 205-206

<sup>4</sup> In an undated letter to Anton Krisper, Mahler wrote the text that would eventually serve for *Waldmärchen*, bearing the title *Ballade vom blonden und braunen Reitersmann*.

and rewrote the textural balances between the soloists, chorus and orchestra. However, he never rejoined the first movement to the other two.

The unpublished manuscript of the first movement was in Justine Mahler Rosé's possession and, later, in Alfred Rosé's who, up until 1969, kept the score away from the critics' eyes. *Waldmärchen* was first performed in 1970, in London. Some musicologists considered Mahler's decision of removing the first section as a very inspired one. As a motivation, they invoked its high level of eclectic, as well as its less original music. Besides, Mahler's revisions on the second and the last movement have made the discrepancies between the early style and the mature one even deeper.

The text of the cantata, completed by Mahler in 1878, is inspired from Ludwig Bechstein's anthology of fairy-tales *Neues deutsches Märchenbuch*. Another notable source is the tale *Märchen von singenden Knochen* by Brothers Grimm. With some significant changes, Mahler tells the story of two brothers fighting for the love of the same woman.

Mahler's version relates, in *Waldmärchen*, about the challenge of a queen: she will marry the man who will find a rare red flower in the woods. Two brothers set off in search for the flower. The youngest one finds it, hides it under the hat and falls asleep under a willow. But his brother murders him and buries him deep in the woods. Then he steals the flower, goes back to the castle and proposes to the queen.

The plasticity and power of expression that will become distinct features in Mahler's later works can already be detected in the first measures of *Das klagende Lied*. Naturally, Mahler begins his story with the famous *Once upon a time...*, underlined by the tremolos of the timpani, the horn signals and the ascendant arpeggios of the harp, followed by a development of the texture. The large orchestral prelude introduces the most significant musical items of the movement, in the manner of an overture. This was probably one of the reasons leading to the belief that Mahler had intended to compose an opera.

Mahler builds the entire section around two basic motifs and their multiple variations.

Ex. 1

**Motif α**

Horn in F

*ppp*

Ex. 2

**Motif β**

Bass Clarinet in B $\flat$

*sfp* *pp* *sfp*

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One of the elements that were suppressed when Mahler decided to remove this first movement was the flower theme. Its importance however deprived the story of the intrigue itself.

Ex. 3

The flower theme

Bar. Im Wald ei - ne ro - te Blu - me stand ach so -  
 schön - wie die Kö - ni - gin - ne

Tenor 1 welch' Rit - ters-mann die Blu - me fand, der konnt' die Frau ge - win - nen  
 Tenor 2 welch' Rit - ters-mann die Blu - me fand, der konnt' die Frau ge - win - nen

The choir interventions, although discrete, have a powerful effect, either as isorhythmic harmonic structures, or as imitative polyphony.

Ex. 4

Isorhythmic harmonic structures

C h o r  
 A O weh! Du stol - ze Kö - ni - gin! Wann bricht er wohl, dein stol - zer Sinn?  
 T O weh! Du stol - ze Kö - ni - gin! Wann bricht er wohl, dein stol - zer Sinn?  
 B O weh! Du stol - ze Kö - ni - gin! Wann bricht er wohl, dein stol - zer Sinn?!

Ex. 5

Imitative polyphony

C h o r  
 S baum, der Al - tel  
 A ... der Al - tel  
 T der Al - tel  
 B der Al - tel

In the second movement, *Der Spielmann*, a minstrel, walking in the woods, finds a bone and uses it to make a flute. Once he starts playing, the flute tells the story of the horrible murder. The minstrel decides to go to the castle in search of the king and his bride. The “sorrowful” song of the flute displays tonal and metrical instability in its progression fragmented by frequent leaps.

## Ex. 6

## Song of the flute

Alto *ppp*  
Ach Spiel-mann lie - ber Spiel-mann mein! Das... muß ich dir nun kla -

A. *ppp*  
gen Um ein schön far - big Blü-me-lein hat... mich mein

A. *ff*  
Bru - der er - schla - gen! Im Wal - de

A. *ff*  
bleicht mein jun - ger Leib! O Lei - de! Mein Bru - der

A. *f*  
freit ein\_won - nig Weib! O Lei - de, Lei - de. Weh!\_\_\_\_\_

The contradictory attitude Mahler had toward the harmonic parameter of his works is excellently announced in the first measures of this second movement, where the composer displays the particular function he will later confer to empty fourths and fifths. The same technique will be applied to the symphonies (that often begin with fourth or fifth signals), as well as to the songs for voice and orchestra (where these intervals denote a harmonically austere writing) (see Ex. 7).

Traces of the cantata can be easily found in later works, such as *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, *First* or *Second Symphony*. For instance, the *tremolo* at the opening of the second movement, followed by the motif of celli and basses, can also be heard in the first measures of the *Second Symphony*. Furthermore, the two fragments are similar by setting them in the same key, c minor.

The last movement of the cantata, *Hochzeitstück*, takes us to the castle, in the wedding day. The minstrel plays the flute, revealing the secret of the grave hidden in the woods. The king grabs the flute and takes it to his mouth, thus telling the story of the dreadful fratricide once again. The queen collapses, the guests run away and the walls of the castle fall down.

Empty fourths and fifths

Sehr gehalten.  
(im Anfang M. M.  $\text{♩} = 58$ )

The image shows a page of a musical score for Gustav Mahler's 'Das Klagenlied'. The score is for a full orchestra and includes parts for Piccolo, Flutes, Oboes, English Horn, Clarinets, Bass Clarinet, Fagott, Contrabassoon, Horns, Trompete, Posaune, Pauke, Triangel, Becken, Grosse Trommel, Harfe, Violine, Viola, Violoncell, and Contrabass. The tempo is 'Sehr gehalten.' (im Anfang M. M.  $\text{♩} = 58$ ). The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor). The score is divided into measures. A red box highlights a specific measure in the woodwind section, showing empty fourths and fifths. Another red box highlights a specific measure in the string section, showing 'spring. Bogen' (spring bow) markings. The score is written in a standard musical notation with various dynamics and articulations.

Piccolo.  
(3. Flöte)

1. 2. Flöte.

1. 2. Oboe.

Englisch Horn.  
(3. Oboe)

1. 2. Clarinette in B.

Bassclarinette in B.  
(3. Clarinette)

1. 2. Fagott.

Contrafagott.

1. 2.  
Horn in F.  
3. 4.

1. 2.  
Trompete in F.  
3. 4.

1. 2. Posaune.  
3. Posaune.  
Bass tuba.

Pauke.

Triangel Becken

Grosse Trommel

1. Harfe.

2. Harfe.

1. Violine.  
2. Violine.

Viola.  
mit Sordgetheil

Violoncell.

Contrabass.

gedämpft  
*pp*

Sehr gehalten.

*pp*

spring. Bogen

spring. Bogen

Mahler obtains an outstanding acoustic effect by using an off-stage band (*Fernorchster*), which has the role of evoking the atmosphere of festivity and joy. In the original version, Mahler wrote that the orchestra should be such positioned so that the musicians, although playing *fortissimo*, sound *piano*.

Ex. 8

Fernorchester

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(Anmerkung für den Dirigenten: Das Fernorchester muss so postiert sein, dass die Musik *ff* blasen, jedoch nur *p* gehört werden können.)  
*L'istesso tempo.*  
 In der Ferne.

1.2. Fl. (wo möglich auf Des-Flöten.)  
 1.2. Ob.  
 1.2. Cl. in B.  
 1.2. Cl. in Es.  
 1.2. Horn in F.  
 3.4.  
 1.2. Trp. in B.  
 Perc. Beck.  
 Pk.  
 1. Harfe.

*Fernorchester in der Ferne aufgestellt.*

*Im Orchester.*

Bechstein's story, the source of Mahler's text, tells about the king's two children, a boy and a girl who, after their father's death, dispute over the succession to the throne: the one who finds the flower in the woods will lead the kingdom. The little princess finds it, but she is killed by her brother. Many years later, a peasant's child finds a bone and makes a flute. The instrument repeats the murder story. A knight hears the song and decides to go to the castle. There, the princess's brother is already the king and the mother still grieves her daughter's death. The queen hears the flute and then plays it in front of her son and a festive gathering. During the night, the queen breaks the flute to make sure its horrible story is never heard again.

The changes Mahler brings to the original literary version are essential. First of all, he suppresses the brother-sister rivalry and, as a consequence, any feminine intervention. Furthermore, the composer omits another element from the story, namely the child's voice that can be heard out of the flute. In his work it is the king who tells the guest about the terrible crime. Donald Mitchell's explanation to the significant substitutions regards the relationship between the composer and his family: "The roots of the variations made by Mahler on Bechstein's text can be found in his psychological structure, the altered relationships being conditioned by the emotional attitude Mahler



had toward the members of his family<sup>5</sup>.

Critics have assumed that one of the reasons for the removal of the first movement was Mahler's wish to repress the feelings of guilt he had when his brother Ernst died. Another explanation would be purely dramaturgical: *Waldmärchen* has been seen as redundant in the context of the cantata, since both the second and the third movement repeat the story. What is missing though is the flower motif, the actual reason for the fratricide. Choosing the minstrel as the character who reveals the secret (in the original legend it is the shepherd's child who finds the bone and makes the flute) brings back, along with the theme of love, rivalry, revenge and final justice, the ancient belief that music has the power to change people.

Mahler's elaborate rhymes resemble Heine's and Eichendorff's, displaying a remarkable simplicity, as well as a predisposition toward German medieval sonorities (besides, while working on the text, Mahler was taking part, at the Vienna University, to a series of lectures on the history of ancient German literature<sup>6</sup>). The songs on *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* are foreshadowed, especially by absorbing the language of popular origin within an elaborated structure. This dichotomy can also be detected in Mahler's musical vocabulary, thus explaining the opposition between the "old" and the "modern" sonorities.

As for the instrumentation, Mahler proves himself, even as a young composer in his 20s, to be a very refined connoisseur of the timbres and their combinations, fully exploiting their importance and efficiency within the texture. Furthermore, by using the large-scale romantic orchestra, Mahler already expresses his preference for less used instruments, such as the flute in d-flat or the cornet in e-flat. When employing the off-stage band (*Fernorchester*, as Mahler names it), the composer brings the contrast, through different rhythms and opposed tonalities, also creating the sensation of distance and great dimensions. He will also use this technique in later works, such as, for instance, the *Second Symphony*.

Surprisingly original, although it still keeps the influences of the great romantic composers, the music displays some of the features that will compose Mahler's artistic profile, as known from his mature works. We can already detect his predilection for the march-like rhythms, for the tools meant to help him depict the nature or for the pronounced contrast between the various orchestral levels. One of the cantata's most original moments is represented by the lights that turn off and the walls that fall down. The rarefied writing in counterpoint, sustained only by the pedal, anticipate the austerity of Mahler's last works and also destroys, in the listener's mind, the impression of conventionality that the cantata may often create.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, Donald, *Gustav Mahler. The Early Years* (1958), Boydell Press, Suffolk, 2003, p. 143

<sup>6</sup> The intellectual and artistic ambiance out of which Mahler's poem emerged was one dominated by a late Romanticism and historicism preoccupied with the German Middle Ages and with the influence of opera steeped in Nordic legend and mythology emanating from the pen of Richard Wagner.

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The two essential features in *Das klagende Lied*, which represent elements that will define Mahler's unique style, reside in the epic dimension of the work, as well as in the technique of instrumentation. The epic flavour that Mahler gives to his cantata is a result of the formal structure that the composer uses in order to shape his musical "story". Already in *Das klagende Lied*, Mahler succeeds to create the illusion of a stage where the characters of his imaginary novel play their roles. What is also obvious is Mahler's tendency to refer to various literary texts, subjecting them to adjustments that fit his musical goals. Generally speaking, Mahler's oeuvre has a prominent narrative component, connected either to a legend, fairy-tale, philosophical idea or to aspects from his own life. All these made Pierre Boulez observe that "from its very beginning, Mahler's form strives for the epic".

(Translated into English by Oana Andreica)

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