

“ADAGIETTO” BY GUSTAV MAHLER IN THE PERFORMANCE PRACTICE OF CHINESE CONDUCTORS: INTERPRETATIVE ASPECTS

TYMUR IVANNIKOV¹, YINUO GENG²

SUMMARY. This article explores the distinctive features of the performance interpretation of Gustav Mahler’s symphonies within the context of contemporary Chinese conducting practice. It identifies the main trends in how Chinese orchestras are engaging with Mahler’s symphonic repertoire, as well as their interpretive strategies. The conducting style of Long Yu is analyzed in comparison with the interpretative tradition of Leonard Bernstein, allowing for a deeper understanding of the differences between Eastern and Western approaches to Mahler’s orchestral dramaturgy. Comparative analysis of tempo-rhythmic development, dynamic balance, and orchestral texture in various conductors’ performances highlights the influence of cultural traditions on interpretative practice. The growing interest in Mahler’s symphonies in China is shown to contribute not only to the expansion of national orchestral repertoires but also to the emergence of new performance standards that integrate European traditions with local stylistic characteristics. The findings make it possible to broaden the musicological panorama of the modern reception of Mahler’s symphonies and contribute to further research into the processes of cultural adaptation of European academic music to the East Asian artistic space.

Keywords: performance interpretation, conducting practice, Long Yu, orchestral dramaturgy, cultural adaptation, Chinese orchestras, Chinese musical culture, European musical tradition, Gustav Mahler’s symphonies.

¹ *Dr. Habil. of Arts, Associate Professor, Head of The Department of Theory and History of Music Performing, Tchaikovsky National Music Academy of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine. Email: premierre.ivannikov@gmail.com*

² *Postgraduate student, Department of Theory and History of Music Performing, Tchaikovsky National Music Academy of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine. Email: porryhatter666@gmail.com*



Introduction

In today's cultural space, symphonic music performance remains relevant, as it not only reflects the development of society's aesthetic guidelines, but also actively shapes them through a variety of repertoire strategies and various concert formats. Large-scale festivals, the expansion of the network of concert halls, and the ever-growing interest in digital broadcasts and sound recordings all testify to the continuous demand for the high art of symphony, which encompasses both the classical and romantic heritage and modern or avant-garde examples. In this context, performers must master not only virtuoso technique and a deep understanding of the score but also demonstrate exceptional interpretive insight to adequately realize the composer's semantic and aesthetic concepts.

An illustrative example of a performance challenge is the work of Gustav Mahler, who went down in music history as one of the most influential masters of the late Romantic symphony. His large-scale and complex in terms of drama and formative features, his classical cycles, saturated with philosophical and existential issues and innovative compositional methods, require a significant level of conducting skill and serve as a kind of "quality mark" in the context of world performance practice.

China is no exception, where today there is a growing interest in Mahler's work. The development of the local network of professional orchestras, the expansion of educational institutions, and the entry of Chinese conductors on the international stage have created favorable conditions for the inclusion of Mahler's heritage in the local repertoire. This process is taking place not only in view of high performing self-assertion, but also as a response to global trends that outline Mahler's cycles as a kind of benchmark for large-scale symphonies of the XX century. That is why the study of the specifics of the interpretation of Mahler's symphonies in China becomes an important step towards understanding how the iconic compositions of Western European musical culture enter new cultural paradigms and continue their evolution in a foreign cultural environment.

The relevance of this article is determined by several factors that align with the context of contemporary musicology. First, the symphonic oeuvre of Gustav Mahler remains a pivotal reference point for the ongoing development of the symphonic genre in global academic music practice. Despite the extensive body of research dedicated to Mahler's life and work, the analysis of performance approaches to his music within the cultural context of China has yet to receive sufficient theoretical elaboration. Second, the rapid institutionalization of orchestral art in the People's Republic of China - including the expansion of professional ensembles, the active international tours of Chinese conductors,

and the synthesis of Western and Eastern aesthetic models – create a unique basis for musicological discourse. Third, the growing interest in Mahler's music in China opens new perspectives for investigating the transnational circulation of cultural values: how large-scale symphonic works are integrated into local performance practices, how they are received by audiences, and how new interpretative strategies are being developed. Thus, research into the performance specifics of Mahler's symphonies in China not only broadens the musicological panorama of global discourse but also helps to uncover the mechanisms by which European large-scale academic compositions are manifested in other cultural paradigms.

The aim of this article is to examine the specific features of the performance interpretation of Adagietto from Gustav Mahler's Fifth Symphony in the context of contemporary Chinese musical culture, in particular to reveal the main performance trends, analyze repertoire approaches, and outline the influence of Mahler's heritage on the formation of artistic guidelines for Chinese orchestras and conductors.

Gustav Mahler's symphonic heritage has long been a subject of research in musicology. The questions arising from this phenomenon cover various aspects of the composer's creative method and style evolution, only indirectly touching upon the problems of symphony performance. For instance, Donald Mitchell³ explores the connection between song tradition and symphonism, and Constantin Floros⁴ investigates timbral dramaturgy and formative principles. David Hurwitz⁵ places emphasis on performance aspects, while Norman Lebrecht⁶ explores the global impact of the composer on the musical culture of the XX-XXI centuries. Renate Ulm⁷ analyzes the historical context and the reception of Mahler's symphonies. A valuable source is the work of Irina Barsova⁸, which investigates Mahler's orchestral language, dramaturgy, and certain interpretative aspects of his symphonic works, which are important for understanding the composer's music.

Along with this, within Chinese musicological discourse, interest in Gustav Mahler's work has recently been growing, due to both the expansion of professional music education and the persistent efforts of Chinese conductors

³ Mitchell, Donald. *Gustav Mahler: Songs and Symphonies of Life and Death. Interpretations and Annotations*. Boydell Press. 2002.

⁴ Floros, Constantin. *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies*. Amadeus Press. 2003.

⁵ Hurwitz, David. *The Mahler symphonies: an owner's manual*. Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press. 2004.

⁶ Lebrecht, Norman. *Why Mahler? How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed the World*. Faber & Faber. 2011.

⁷ Ulm, Renate. *Gustav Mahlers Symphonien: Entstehung, Deutung, Wirkung (Bärenreiter-Werkeinführungen)*. Bärenreiter Verlag. 2018.

⁸ Barsova, Irina. *Symphonies of Gustav Mahler*. Moscow: Soviet Composer. 1975.

and orchestras to popularize Western European symphonic masterpieces. Representative examples include a monograph by Lin Hengzhe⁹, which, among other topics, addresses issues of performance and interpretation of the Viennese composer's symphonies. However, a comprehensive and systematized overview of the reception of Mahler's work in the People's Republic of China is still lacking. Furthermore, comparative analysis between different interpretative approaches, and comparison with Western models of interpretation remain largely unexplored. Therefore, the current review of scientific sources proves the urgent need for a focused study that would elucidate the specific characteristics of interpretative understanding of Mahler's performance practices in China today and assess the influence of these practices on the evolution of both domestic and global musical culture.

Results

Generalization of analytical observations published in the reports of the world-famous online analytical magazine *Bachtrack* over the past few years¹⁰, shows that the symphonic heritage of Gustav Mahler occupies an extremely prominent place in the world performance practice of today. On the one hand, the leading orchestras of Europe and North America regularly include Mahler's monumental symphonies in their programs, as they are the benchmark of professional maturity and performance potential of the ensemble. On the other hand, in recent years, there has been a significant expansion of geographical coverage, as not only traditional "Mahler" centers (Vienna, Berlin, New York) are turning to the complete cycle of his symphonies, but also orchestras in Asia, particularly China and South Korea. This leads, firstly, to the growing attention of festival organizers and concert hall managers to the late Romantic repertoire, and secondly, to the further popularization of Mahler's work, whose music is able to effectively represent the orchestra in the globalized musical space.

It is worth emphasizing that *Bachtrack*, analyzing the statistics of concert activity in many countries, consistently records the high dynamics of performances of Mahler's symphonies. Among the key factors of popularity

⁹ Lin, Hengzhe. 林衡哲.《西方音樂巨人：馬勒》.台北縣：望春風文化 (Mahler, the giant of Western music: My time has come). Yuanliu. 2011.

¹⁰ <https://cdn.bachtrack.com/files/409805-Annual%20classical%20music%20statistics%202024.pdf> (accessed on 22.05.2025); <https://cdn.bachtrack.com/files/350970-Annual%20classical%20music%20statistics%202023.pdf> (accessed on 22.05.2025); <https://cdn.bachtrack.com/files/293747-Annual%20classical%20music%20statistics%202022.pdf> (accessed on 22.05.2025).

“ADAGIETTO” BY GUSTAV MAHLER IN THE PERFORMANCE PRACTICE
OF CHINESE CONDUCTORS: INTERPRETATIVE ASPECTS

are the scale of the form and the inevitable dramatic intensity of Mahler’s scores, which attracts the audience and guarantees high emotional involvement of the audience. At the same time, this opens up space for interpretative diversity: each conductor develops their own approach to the tempo-rhythmic logic, sound balance, and symbolic and philosophical layers embedded by the composer.

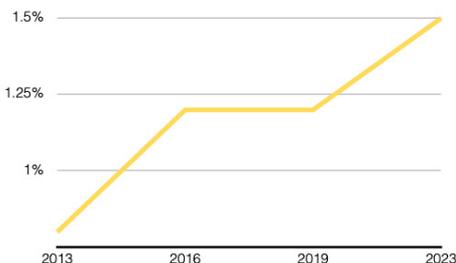
To confirm this, we note that according to the Bachtrack report for 2024, Mahler’s Symphony No. 5 was ranked sixth in the list of the most performed orchestral compositions. The report for 2022 mentions his Symphony No. 3, which was ranked 12th in the top 100 works of the XX century that were performed during the year. And the 2023 materials indicate an increase in the precedents of performances of the composer’s symphonies over the past ten years (from 2013 to 2023) and emphasize that his Symphony No. 1 “Titan” has become the most popular.

E. g. 1

HOT OR NOT?

Mahler and Weill on the rise

Number of performances of Gustav Mahler
(percentage of all listings)



Mahler's most performed work is his *Symphony no. 1*

Performance schedule of Mahler’s compositions according to Bachtrack. Report for 2023

Thus, Mahler’s current place in the performing hierarchy is related to several aspects. Firstly, orchestras and conductors themselves perceive the composer’s symphonies as a challenge and an opportunity to demonstrate high professionalism. Secondly, concert organizers, focusing on the sustainable interests of the public, offer “Mahler’s” programs to expand the repertoire palette and raise the level of concert practice. Thirdly, the global dimension is manifested

in the fact that Asian, Latin American and other “new” music centers are attracted to Mahler’s monumental works as a kind of “test” of the maturity of their own performing groups. As a result, the symphonic heritage of the Austrian composer not only continues to retain a significant position in the canon of world academic art but also has the potential for further expansion due to the general increase in the number of concerts and festivals dedicated to the musical heritage of the late XIX - early XX centuries.

At the same time, a study of Bachtrack reports in recent years leads to the conclusion that Chinese orchestral performance practice has not yet reached the peak of its development, because, unfortunately, none of the Chinese orchestras has been ranked among the world’s top 10 orchestras in the last three years. Nevertheless, in 2022, Chinese conductor Elim Chan took 12th place in the TOP 100 conductors and became the first female conductor in the ranking.

An analysis of conducting approaches, as reflected in numerous performances by leading Chinese orchestras, allows us to identify a group of maestros who are actively shaping the symphonic repertoire and systematically engage with both canonical “classical” masterpieces and expansive works of late Romanticism. Of particular note is a cohort of conductors who regularly include Gustav Mahler’s symphonies to their programs, thereby demonstrating their orchestras’ readiness to engage with this highly demanding musical language.

Yu Long, for example, has repeatedly performed Symphonies No. 1, No. 4, and No. 5, in addition to selecting movements from other symphonic cycles of the composer. His work with the China Philharmonic Orchestra and the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra evidences a sustained and profound interest in Mahler’s dramaturgy. Yang Yang works in the similar way: his interpretation of Symphony No. 1 (Titan) with the Guangzhou Symphony Orchestra is marked by its ambitious scale and reflects the conductor’s aspiration to present Chinese ensembles on the world stage.

Zhang Lu, who collaborates with both the Shanghai Youth Symphony Orchestra and the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, has also made a significant contribution to Mahler’s popularization in China. His interpretations of Symphonies No. 5 and No. 7 reveal a refined balance between traditional late-Romantic idioms and a search for fresh interpretative accents. A comparable “Mahler’s approach” is evident in Xia Xiaotang’s performance of Symphony No. 7 with the China Philharmonic Orchestra, in which the conductor displays agogic flexibility and an expansive unfolding of thematic material.

The work of Shao-Chia Lü with the National Centre for the Performing Arts Orchestra is characterized by a high level of professionalism; his performance of Symphony No. 3 reflects a deliberate attempt to deepen the orchestra’s

repertoire through one of Mahler's most monumental and philosophically rich scores. Likewise, Huang Yi's use of Adagietto from Symphony No. 5 in the context of concert programs of the China Philharmonic Orchestra serves as a notable example of interpretative engagement with Mahler's expressive idiom.

From a conducting perspective, Mahler's symphonies are increasingly being affirmed as repertoire that signals both the interpretative maturity of orchestras and the exploration of the spiritual and existential dimensions of late Romantic art. Conductors such as Yu Long, Yang Yang, Zhang Lu, Xia Xiaotang, Shao-Chia Lü, and Huang Yi, who systematically engage with Mahler's scores, form a distinctive stratum of China's performance elite, attuned to the new complexities of timbral polyphony, dynamic contrast, and profound philosophical expression. Through their efforts, the ongoing "Mahler boom" in China is taking on clearly defined contours, enriching the broader canon of symphonic masterpieces and positioning Chinese performers within the international circle of leading interpreters of high Romanticism.

Comparing the strategies of performing Mahler's symphonies by different conductors is an extremely difficult task, given the complexity of the music itself, the number of interpretations, and the existence of "benchmark" versions. At the same time, one of the most famous interpreters of the Austrian composer in China is Long Yu, a world-class conductor whose work helps to strengthen the position of Western classical music in China. He performs extensively with the country's most prestigious orchestras both at home and abroad, representing his country on the international stage.

To demonstrate the peculiarities of Long Yu's interpretative version, let us turn to Adagietto from Mahler's Fifth Symphony, which we will compare with one of the "benchmark" interpretations by L. Bernstein. It is well known that the initial public presentations of Mahler's Fifth Symphony gave rise to polarized assessments among critics and listeners. The resonance in Vienna was also symptomatic, where, after the premiere there, some critics openly condemned the audience's "inability" to distinguish between true aesthetics and a passion for the "bizarre." The author's own dissatisfaction led to a rewrite of the composition in 1911. Despite all this, the Fifth Symphony, and especially Adagietto, has become one of the most popular compositions in the academic repertoire.

Gustav Mahler's Fifth Symphony is not only a style turning point in the composer's work, but also an important milestone in the development of the symphonic genre. By abandoning the poetic word, the composer greatly enhances the role of the musical fabric, enriching it with expressive and constructive possibilities. This tendency determines the specifics of the symphonic form, contributing to the active development of polyphonic texture, the emancipation of individual voices and new technical requirements for performance. Mahler's

orchestra is a complex organism in which various lines of orchestral evolution of previous centuries are intertwined. In general, the Fifth Symphony is a complex artistic structure in which Mahler not only develops new principles of orchestral writing but also creates a multilayered symphonic narrative. The composer offers us a kind of illusion of resolving the tragic conflict, creating an artistic image of overcoming.

The structural logic of the symphony is based on the principle of large-scale form creation. Mahler himself outlined the main milestones of its dramatic development, organizing the five movements into three large sections. The central parts – the third, fourth and fifth – are a sequence of states, where the fourth part, on the one hand, is a concentrated philosophical meditation, and on the other hand, serves as a semantic epigraph to the finale. Researchers interpret Adagietto as an instrumental Lied, a “romance without words” for strings, laconically supplemented by a harp part, emphasizing its subjective time dimension. The “infinite melody” in the spirit of Wagner, which is the basis of Adagietto, is based on major diatonic motifs with ascending sustained motifs, and the melodic line unfolds within a single process of wave-like development that eventually returns to the starting point. In the middle section, the movement is revitalized by a change in intonational patterns (for example, a descending septet) that precedes the finale. The polyphonic complexity of the music also draws attention to itself, as the fabric is formed as a result of complex counterpoint work.

One of the key elements of the symphonic language of Adagietto is timbral expression. Its orchestral palette becomes a carrier of meaning, and the timbre acquires an independent artistic value. In this aspect, the use of the harp is indicative: while in the Romantic tradition it performed mostly a decorative function, creating a halo of sonority, in Mahler’s case this instrument goes beyond the traditional orchestral coloring, imitating the sound of the piano, which opens up new expressive possibilities.

Adagietto from Gustav Mahler’s Fifth Symphony is one of his most famous compositions, full of deep lyricism and symbolic connotations. Its interpretation has undergone significant changes during the XX and XXI centuries, demonstrating the flexibility of the interpretative possibilities of Mahler’s music. In this context, the performances under the direction of Leonard Bernstein, who played a key role in popularizing Mahler’s work and consciously positioned his music to resonate with the social cataclysms of the XX century, are particularly significant.

Known for his deep personal approach to Mahler’s music, Bernstein offers an interpretation in Adagietto that is characterized by a slow tempo and expressive agogic. The music lasts more than 10 minutes, making this one of the longest interpretations in the history of performance. His version is based

on romantic expression: the tempo is breathy, variable, with expressive rhythmic strains that create a sense of meditative, almost frozen time. This performance takes on a special emotional significance due to its historical context: it was in a similar interpretation that Adagietto was performed at Robert F. Kennedy's funeral in 1968, which fixed its perception as music of mourning and sorrow.

Instead, Long Yu approaches Adagietto from the perspective of the contemporary conducting school, tending toward a more restrained and structured performance. His tempo is closer to the original meaning of Adagietto – moderately slow, but not overly extended. The duration of his version is about 8 minutes, which gives it greater rhythmic stability and lightness. His agogic is less expressed, allowing him to focus on the smooth development of the melodic line and the internal balance of the form.

Another key aspect of the comparison is the dynamic range. In Bernstein's case, it is extremely wide: from almost inaudible pianissimo to dramatic climaxes. This creates the effect of a gradual build-up of emotional tension, reaching its climax in the most expressive moments and gradually dissolving into silence. Long Yu, on the other hand, offers a more balanced dynamic model: his orchestra sounds with less sharp contrasts, making the sound more chamber-like and transparent. In his performance, the emphasis shifts to plastic phrasing and structural logic rather than extreme emotionality.

The difference between the interpretations is especially noticeable in the interpretation of the strings. Bernstein uses this instrumental group as the main carrier of expression, giving it a rich, flexible sound with broad, vocal-like phrases, which adds sentimentality to the performance, emphasizing the personal dimension of the music. Meanwhile, Long Yu's sound is clearer, focused more on classical clarity of phrasing. In his performance, the strings sound lighter with less vibrato, making the overall image of the composition closer to academic than to freely romantic.

The context of understanding this composition is also important. While for Bernstein Adagietto is primarily a symbol of inner worry, pain, and existential search, for Long Yu its interpretation tends to be about the idea of harmonious sound that maintains a balance between emotionality and restraint. This is the difference between the Western romantic tradition and the modern Eastern approach to the European symphonic heritage.

In Bernstein's interpretation, the melodic line acquires special expressiveness and sensuality. The conductor emphasizes the smoothness and continuity of the melody, which creates a sense of calm and meditation. The harmonic development in his performance is marked by a gradual increase in tension, which reaches a climax and smoothly dissolves, returning to the original theme. One of the key features of his interpretation is the multilevel differentiation of the polyphonic fabric: Bernstein clearly articulates each voice, creating an effect of depth and volume.

Long Yu, known for his ability to combine Western musical traditions with Asian aesthetics, offers a different vision of Adagietto. In his interpretation, the melodic line is characterized by restraint and elegance, which may reflect the Eastern philosophy of contemplation and inner peace. Long Yu emphasizes the transparency of the texture and the purity of the sound, which gives the composition some special lightness. The harmonic development in his performance is less dramatic, with an emphasis on uniformity and stability, which creates a sense of continuous flow. The polyphonic structure in the performance of the Chinese conductor becomes particularly clear: he strives to maintain a balance between the voices, emphasizing the horizontal movements of the timbre layers, which contributes to the creation of the effect of balance. The dynamics remain mostly within soft shades, avoiding sharp contrasts, which emphasizes the meditative nature of the work.

Thus, the comparison of these two performances demonstrates two conceptually similar but different approaches to the interpretation of Adagietto. Bernstein offers a deeply personal performance full of emotional contrasts, tending to the Romantic tradition, while Long Yu adheres to a more restrained and analytical approach, emphasizing the purity of form and the balance of the orchestral sound. Both versions reveal different facets of this masterpiece, which confirms the versatility of Mahler's music and its ability to adapt to different performance traditions and cultural contexts.

Conclusions

Consequently, Gustav Mahler's symphonies play an important role in shaping the contemporary Chinese conducting school, strengthening the foundation of its repertoire policy. The active involvement of the Austrian composer's works in the concert practice of Chinese orchestras not only expands their performance palette but also facilitates their integration into the global musical space. A comparative analysis of Bernstein's and Long Yu's interpretations of Adagietto from the Fifth Symphony reveals a certain difference between Western and Eastern approaches to the interpretation of Mahler's music. While Bernstein builds his interpretation on the principles of emotional extraversion, using extended agogic, great timbre contrasts and intense dynamics, Long Yu tends to be more balanced, focusing on the purity of lines, structural transparency and meditative sound. Thus, Chinese conductors, in particular Long Yu, are actively expanding the boundaries of the interpretation of Western European symphonic music, adapting it to the specifics of the local musical space, and Mahler's symphonism in the performance practice

of Chinese conductors appears not only as a repertoire tribute to the European tradition, but also as a field for the development of new interpretative strategies. In further research, it is advisable to broaden the comparative analysis of Mahler's symphonies performed by Chinese, European and American conductors, which will enable a deeper understanding of the peculiarities of the global reception of Mahler's music in the contemporary musical space.

REFERENCES

- Barsova, Irina. *Symphonies of Gustav Mahler*. Moscow: Soviet Composer. 1975.
- Floros, Constantin. *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies*. Amadeus Press. 2003.
- Hurwitz, David. *The Mahler symphonies: an owner's manual*. Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press. 2004.
- Lebrecht, Norman. *Why Mahler?: How One Man and Ten Symphonies Changed the World*. Faber & Faber. 2011.
- Lin, Hengzhe. 林衡哲. 《西方音樂巨人：馬勒》.台北縣：望春風文化 (*Mahler, the giant of Western music: My time has come*). Yuanliu. 2011.
- Mitchell, Donald. *Gustav Mahler: Songs and Symphonies of Life and Death. Interpretations and Annotations*. Boydell Press. 2002.
- Ulm, Renate. *Gustav Mahlers Symphonien: Entstehung, Deutung, Wirkung (Bärenreiter-Werkeinführungen)*. Bärenreiter Verlag. 2018.

