

The Mahler Festival at Amsterdam

Author(s): Samuel Langford

Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 61, No. 929 (Jul. 1, 1920), pp. 448-450

Published by: [Musical Times Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/908774>

Accessed: 07-01-2016 18:36 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Musical Times Publications Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Musical Times*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE MAHLER FESTIVAL AT
AMSTERDAM

BY SAMUEL LANGFORD

It is in every way to be regretted that England was so poorly represented at the Mahler Festival, both in criticism and in the important concerts of International chamber music where she was not represented at all. The fault was not all ours, for though invitations to Sir Edward Elgar and Mr. Cyril Scott had eventually to be declined from unfortunate circumstances, our friends in Holland should have known that we have other composers of chamber music or songs who would have done us and them every credit. Our recently-formed British Music Society might conceivably have served us better in this connection, which would seem to be quite in its line of business. We have every excuse at the present time for not being very eager about Mahler, and the Germans themselves have flattered our want of interest in him by their own long neglect of his genius as a composer. Mahler himself had Whistler's gentle art of making enemies pretty highly developed, and in his music he is far from continuously ingratiating; yet one would not think it could take more than a glance to see the genius of his melody in his more condescending moments, and that the fascinating art and the invention with which he associates his melodies with the instruments of the orchestra could not easily be overlooked. That Mahler is not in the harmonic sense a modern is no doubt one reason why we continue to neglect him now. It is doubtful, even, whether he should be called a harmonist at all in any strict sense, so purely is melody the spring of his writing and so careless is he that the harmonic ear should be satisfied. We have had no such strictly melodic composer as Mahler since the days of Bach, but though his melody has often a likeness to the *obbligati* of Bach, it is by no means housed in the harmonic security which makes Bach's melody so satisfying. Having heard the last six Symphonies and other works of Mahler, we do not leave Amsterdam greatly envying the diet of Mahler first and every other composer afterward to which Mengelberg is training the music-lovers of that city; but we do leave it with an abounding admiration for the work of Mengelberg, and the conviction that Mahler was a great composer whom all the world must hear. We found in some parts of the fifth and sixth Symphonies a harshness intolerable, and could only marvel how the man who had the charm and genius to write the lighter parts of the Symphonies could have the hardness to imagine the rest. The symphonic song-cycle, 'The Song of the Earth,' appeared to be the most completely beautiful of all the works we heard, and a continual ravishment both in its easeful and manifold melody and in the exquisite aptitude of its orchestration. Whether it were sung in English or German, this work would now be the most suitable for the reintroduction of the composer's music to England. It presents him only in his

most fascinating and poetic aspects, is the most easily-practicable of his compositions, and the poems, altered slightly by Mahler from lyrics in 'The Chinese Flute' of Hans Bethge, are themselves beautiful enough to give the whole a special appeal. It may be remembered that Mahler passed away shortly before the date of the first performance at Munich, in 1911. The pathos and beauty of the work are enriched by many premonitions of approaching death, though its lightness is not marred but its tenderness enhanced by the imminence of pathos which is felt throughout its gaiety. It is so far death-devoted, and its cadence of melody is so much elongated by this devotion as it reaches the final close, that the work may be regarded as Mahler's 'Tristan,' and the ninth Symphony, which separates itself in its closing *Adagio* from the rest of his work by its beautiful and daring use of chromatic harmony, does so in what seems an attempt to carry further, and into purely instrumental regions of abstract music, the noble emotions of this vocal and symphonic miniature. We are not in every way reconciled, even by this lovely work, to the purely symphonic treatment of the voice which seems less an aim than a necessity of Mahler's mind. Both in this 'Song of the Earth' and in the 'Songs of Dead Children'—which have a more immediate pathos—the poetic beauty of the instrumental melodies lures the mind so far from its usual pre-occupation with the voice that the continuity of the text is imperilled. We have the same feeling in Bach's *obbligati*, though in Bach the vocal melody itself is more continuous. The 'Song of the Earth' is in six movements, written alternately for tenor and contralto solo, and while the emotional power of the contralto numbers is the special feature which gives the work its high standing among Mahler's compositions, the symphonic poem seems more justified in the tenor numbers, which are essentially dances for voice and orchestra. Mr. Jac. Urlus, who sang them, realised very finely the staccato touch essential to their symphonic impression, and Madame Charles Cahier, whose power in the volcanic climax of Mahler makes her the greatest of all singers in his music, helped to make the presentation of this number the most perfect of the Festival. It was apparent that the harshness of Mahler's purely melodic methods in the energetic and heroic movements decreased gradually in his later works, as the combinations of melody became more manifold and masterly in their contrapuntal aspect. The *Scherzo* is always with him an important and finely developed movement. It has so much more variety of orchestral treatment, and this variety has in itself so much suggestion of pictorial effect, that it also provides a means of developing the form of the movement to greater symphonic proportion and with less monotony than in the symphonies of Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, and Bruckner, who are the great masters of this movement. While one has an increasing respect for the constructive merits of Mahler's music

with every successive symphony that he wrote, one feels even to the end that the composer is greatest when the texture of his music is the lightest, and that while sensibility to the varieties and combinations of instruments can be reckoned of the first order, as a pure harmonist he takes a lower rank. He asks much of his hearers, for his works are so long that a symphony and a few songs, and several times a symphony alone, were reckoned sufficient for a concert at the Amsterdam Festival. They were given with leisurely pauses which we might more often adopt in our English concerts. But there are limits, in a busy world, to our patience with the simplicity of the naïve in music. The Jewish-Catholic attitude to religion was common enough in the Vienna of Mahler's day, but it is not a position which gives us much confidence as a religious source of the naïve in music, when we find that quality carried to such lengths as in Mahler's scores. That, melodically, Mahler had a gift for this type of writing must be admitted, for all the success of his music is in it. But we begin to doubt him when, as in the first part of his great Choral Symphony on the hymn 'Veni, Creator Spiritus,' he leaves his own style, with all its exquisite sensibilities, to adopt the manner of the Church, and that not its most exalted manner, and to pile up by its means effects of mere sonority. The solo parts of this hymn were given with such splendour by Madame Gertrude Foerstel, Madame Cahier, and other singers, and its whole effect was so imposing and fine sounding, that the popular enthusiasm over its performance is quite explicable. But the closing scene from the second part of Goethe's 'Faust,' which Mahler uses to complete his great 'Symphony of Love,' calls out in a far greater degree the true imagination of the composer. The dactyl rhythm of this poetry makes it a not very promising subject for naturalisation into the English language, but no doubt the experiment will be tried sooner or later, and the 'Symphony of the Thousand,' as it is called from the number of performers, will some day be heard in England.

No criticism of Mahler could neglect to speak of his peculiar vein of naturalism, or realism. It is a defect of the ingenuous when carried to extremes, that it ceases to be selective and falls into the banality of literalism or realism. This danger Mahler has not escaped. But his naturalism is also a source of very great merit. It lies at the root of all his fascinating powers of instrumentation, and everywhere counts to him as invention. He never goes out of his way to hide anything, but if he wants a poetic suggestion, or an effect, seeks only the most direct way of expressing it. If a melody is to suggest anything in nature he asks only on what instrument it will do so most completely. From this use comes a fine sensibility to the timbre of melody itself and an exquisite individuality of melodic expression. He learns a whole gamut of nature. The *naïveté* of his religious imagination helps him to extend it. In his earlier works we find him manu-

facturing for himself out of the folk-song almost a language of animals and flowers, and when, as in his fourth Symphony, he transforms its exquisite fancy into the most artless realism of religious feeling, his whole scale of expression becomes gradually completed. His fifth and sixth Symphonies take on the sternness of personal tragedy, and here we find him showing a relationship with the Strauss of 'Ein Heldenleben' and 'Also sprach Zarathustra.' There is an effort to unify himself with nature, and to separate himself from ordinary levels and the mass of men. In the heroic aspects of these Symphonies he indulges a harshness of ejaculation less pleasing than perhaps anything else in his works. He signals his 'Hail and Farewell' as he ascends the lone heights, in fragments of melody made intelligible by association, and strains the instruments of the orchestra to give emphasis to his call. His imagination gains in mystery and swiftness as we pass from the 'Tragic' sixth Symphony to the 'Nature' or 'Night' Symphony, which comes seventh, and which shows, again, signs of a harmonious solution of life. But in this Symphony already there are signs also that Mahler's hold on life is slackening, and in the 'Song of the Earth' we feel its positive relinquishment. The soul of the eighth or Choral Symphony we find in Goethe's picture, from the second part of 'Faust,' of the holy mountain in which nothing shall hurt or destroy. We fear the picture, even in Mahler's Symphony, remains more a poetic than a musical one, and rather completes Mahler's philosophical view of life and art than adds anything definite to his musical achievement. We hold the broken pathos of his ninth Symphony to be musically more significant. How far the enthusiasm over the eighth Symphony at Amsterdam might be due to Mengelberg's driving power, and how far to the real, or popular merits of the work itself, it is not easy for a stranger to estimate. It is due both to Mahler and to Mengelberg that we should remember there is no longer anything tentative about the success of Mahler in Holland. The fourth Symphony has been given over forty times, the bulk of the Symphonies between twenty and thirty times, and the whole of the works quite often enough to make them well-known. The Festival wound up with a scene of much popular enthusiasm, but manifestly a great deal of this enthusiasm was due to the popularity of Mengelberg himself. He is anxious to introduce Mahler's music to England, and his understanding of the composer certainly marks him as the man. No composer need have greater justice done to his music than was done to Mahler at this Festival.

The solo work of the women singers throughout the Festival was amazingly good. Anything finer in its contrasted merit than the singing of Madame Foerstel in the naïve innocence and charming grace of the fourth Symphony (in which her precision seemed that of the composer's own spirit) and her powerful singing above the choir in the eighth Symphony, I could hardly imagine. She sang

B

throughout from memory, and was evidently a great enthusiast for the composer. The choir of boys was greatly applauded, and it was reckoned in accordance with Mahler's naturalism that no attempt was made to refine their style. The orchestra of a hundred and sixty performers worked every morning from nine till one, and played like an animated machine. We have no such combination of instruments in our British musical life. Mengelberg was not less than Mahler an object of enthusiasm, and his fire and directness of style make him with his untiring energy an ideal apostle of Mahler's music. Mahler's widow and daughter, and we think also a sister of the composer were present, and many famous musicians of the Continent.

The most striking feature of the chamber concerts was Arthur Schnabel's setting, for voice and pianoforte, of a poem of Richard Dehmel, which occupied thirty-five minutes in a continuous movement. The poem depicts a dream, and every chord of its exceedingly slow music seems designed to intrigue the ear harmonically. The scene was sung by the composer's wife with an expression of the most exquisite poetic pain imaginable, and was played by the composer. He is a magnificent pianist, and had just given a glorious performance of Nielsen's second Sonata for violin and pianoforte—a beautiful but not very strong work in itself. Kreutzer at the pianoforte gave also a most imposing performance in the Concerto Quintet of Chausson, and two splendidly sonorous pieces much emulous of Debussy, by a Viennese composer, Wessezchl.

THE ORGAN WORKS OF BACH

(Continued from June number, page 381)

BY HARVEY GRACE

II.—THE WEIMAR PERIOD (continued)

The Toccata and Fugue in C (IX., 137) is on the whole a less successful concert piece than those we have just been considering. It was probably one of the works with which the composer went touring. It is however a good deal more than a mere show piece, even its over-plentiful florid passages being full of character. As Parry says, 'Bach makes such passages almost sufficiently interesting to redeem a branch of art which has been more piteously discredited than any in its whole range, save and except the operatic aria.' The long single-part manual flourish with which the Toccata opens leaves the average contemporary writing of the type far behind. We do little more than tolerate such flights to-day, but we can easily imagine that by their freedom and originality, and by their success in implying a fine harmonic background, the best of Bach's examples were extremely popular when new. Opinions differ widely as to the registration of the one we are considering. As in all similar

passages we must be guided by the resources at our disposal. On one point only is it possible to be definite, and that is the question of pace. We may differ in the matter of power and tone-colour, but we must surely agree that high speed and brilliance are called for. When Bach writes a bravura passage, we do him poor service by trying to make it dignified or meditative.

The pedal solo is one of the finest ever written,—perhaps the finest. Such things are not often perpetuated to-day—fortunately—and the only modern examples worthy of a place beside this of Bach is the sweeping tune with which Franck opens his Finale in B flat, and the more obviously attractive example in Guilmant's D minor Symphony. Bach's solo covers a good deal of ground. That in itself is not a matter for praise, because we have seen how easy it was even for Bach to give the organist quite a long walk with nothing happening to make it worth while. But this solo is unconventional in several ways. Its ejaculatory opening, with repetitions that may be regarded either as emphasising a point or echoing it (and which may perhaps be registered accordingly by the addition or subtraction of a reed or some other telling stop), its rhythmical variety, and its highly organized character put it in a class by itself. Of course, like all pedal solos with any pretensions to length, it is ineffective unless played on an organ of big scale. It is a fatal weakness of the type that purely musical considerations have so little to do with it. We may play any of Bach's fugues on a small organ with one stop drawn, or on a pedal pianoforte, and enjoy it. But a pedal solo that does not set any loose window-panes rattling is a thing of naught. If it goes delicately it does nothing that cannot be managed with greater ease and effect on a manual. Before leaving this solo, we should note in bar 4 the unusual down-leaping seventh, a favourite device of Bach, but used in no other pedal solo. The effect is that of a bad shot, until the repetition reassures the ear. In bar 16, the last note of the third group should surely be A. Most editions give G, but if we look at the next section, we shall see that Bach develops a good deal of the movement from the second half of this bar, and a comparison makes it pretty certain that the note should be A. Here is the second half of bar 16:



and here is the figure as it appears in the same key at the end of the *Allegro*:



This evidence ought to settle the point.

The pedal solo leads into a fine, vigorous movement, in style unlike any of Bach's previous organ music. Here, as in the *Adagio* which