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Death of the Composer: How Mahler's Preoccupation with Death Reveals Itself in His Orchestral Works

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Death of the Composer: How Mahler's Preoccupation with Death Reveals Itself in His Orchestral Works

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Annotated Bibliography

Gustav Mahler is a man of juxtapositions, and it shows in his compositions. Between the deaths of his siblings, his parents, eldest daughter, and a fatal heart condition, Mahler was surrounded by ideas and the possibility of death. This likely motivated many of his works, with pieces such as *Das Lied von der Erde* ending with Mahler confronting his own mortality. Throughout these works, death is treated differently, for example, in the Fourth Symphony, Death is personified and is presented as a solo fiddle. However, many of these pieces end with a hopeful note, such as in the Second Symphony ending in its nickname, "Resurrection", or *Das Lied von der Erde* ending with allusions to spring and rebirth. By looking at these themes of death and mortality, we can understand Mahler's compositions better, as well as his philosophy and mindset at the time of composition.

Essays in Collections

1. Berio, Talia Pecker. "Mahler's Jewish Parable." In *Mahler and His World*, edited by Karen Painter, 87-110. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

Talia Berio, an Israeli musicologist, lays out Mahler's Jewish identity, how it can be heard in his music, and the cultural response to Judaism at the time. This provides insight into Mahler's religious aspects, a recurring theme in his music. His religious outlook would also frame his ideas on death and what comes after, which we see evolve throughout his career.

2. Kim, Hyun-Ah. "A Dream of Immortality: Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth)." In *Emotion, Identity and Death: Mortality Across Disciplines*, edited by Chang-Won Park, 175-188. London: Routledge, 2012.

In this essay, Hyun-Ah Kim writes about Gustav Mahler's process in composing *Das Lied von der Erde*, explaining how this allowed Mahler to confront his mortality and accept his death. Kim also notes the idea of rebirth shown in the mentions of spring in the final movement (The Farewell). Kim also brings up an analysis of the poems that Mahler used when composing this piece, The Chinese Flute. By looking at the ideals in the poems and how Mahler used those elements, the listener is able to get a deeper understanding of what Mahler meant and what he was alluding to.

This essay is a part of a collection of essays on death across multiple disciplines including medicine, music, and the grieving process, published through the scholarly publisher, Routledge.

3. Revers, Peter. "...the heart-wrenching sound of farewell'." In *Mahler and His World*, edited by Karen Painter, 173-184. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

Peter Revers, musicologist and lecturer at the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz, analyzes *Kindertotenlieder* as well as the Rückert poems that the work uses. This essay

looks at the theme of the death of children, as this was a common occurrence in Mahler's time. The genre of *Kindertoten* was a common one. Mahler's piece shows a shift in attitude towards the loss of children as more children survive into adulthood. By looking at the poems behind the *Lieder*, the reader is able to get a fuller understanding of the context behind the work.

4. --- "Song and Song-Symphony (I.) *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and the Second, Third, and Fourth Symphonies: Music of Heaven and Earth." In *The Cambridge Companion to Mahler*, edited by Jeremy Barham, 89-107. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Peter Revers discusses the "Tetralogy Symphonies" and their connections to each other. One of the most notable connections is the Second Symphony opening with the death of the hero of the First Symphony. Followed by background information and score analysis of each tetralogy symphony provides context for how Mahler viewed each piece as he wrote them. The background information also serves to place where Mahler was hearing his influences and when.

5. Solvik, Morten. "The Literary and Philosophical Worlds of Gustav Mahler." In *The Cambridge Companion to Mahler*, edited by Jeremy Barham, 21-34. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Morten Solvik, Vice President of the Mahler Foundation, writes about Mahler's influences during his life. Solvik discusses Mahler's love of reading, and how that was shown in the literary references in his music. Solvik also discusses the philosophy of the time, primarily focusing on the German naturalist movement and how that impacted Mahler. This essay shows that the naturalist movement was present, but that Mahler was one of a few thinkers who believed that science was insufficient to describe the universe and its workings. This is shown in many of his works, including his Second Symphony, where there is resurrection at the end, but the focus is the struggle of life until then, or in his Sixth Symphony where Mahler depicts a "world without God". This essay contextualizes Mahler's feelings on life and death, and how philosophy interacts with the concepts.

6. Wildhagen, Christian. "The 'Greatest' and the 'Most Personal': The Eighth Symphony and *Das Lied von der Erde*." In *The Cambridge Companion to Mahler*, edited by Jeremy Barham, 128-142. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Christian Wildhagen explores two of Mahler's later works and how these pieces are alike and represent Mahler's worldview. The Eighth Symphony uses large performing forces, hence the nickname, "Symphony of a Thousand", and explores its themes, such as striving for enlightenment and the purification and subsequent rebirth of the soul. While *Das Lied von der Erde* is smaller in thematic scope, it still shows the progression to acceptance of death and ends with a Farewell and assumed afterlife. This shows Mahler working through his own mortality and finding his belief in what comes next.

Journal Articles

7. Barry, Barbara R. "The Hidden Program in Mahler's Fifth Symphony." *The Musical Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (1993): 47-66.

Barbara Barry, Professor of Musicology at Lynn University, argues that because Mahler's previous three symphonies all used vocal forces, there must be a hidden program in the Fifth Symphony. This search for Mahler's meaning in what may seem to be a more "abstract symphonic force" leads Barry to make connections between Mahler's Fifth Symphony and Beethoven's. The breakdown of themes and how they interact with the ideas of life and death fresh on Mahler's mind after his own near-death experience is useful in understanding his works and thought process.

8. Franklin, Peter. "'Funeral Rites': Mahler and Mickiewicz." *Music & Letters* 55, no. 2 (1974): 203-208.

Peter Franklin serves as an Emeritus Fellow in Music at St. Catherine's College. He has written many articles and essays on many composers, including Gustav Mahler. In this article, Franklin discusses the literary influences on Mahler's works, namely how the 1st Symphony's informal title of "Titan" came from a novel by Jean-Paul Richter, and how a piece called "Totenfeier" likely was derived from a poem by Adam Mickiewicz. "Totenfeier" would later morph into the first movement of Mahler's 2nd Symphony, The "Resurrection" Symphony. "Totenfeier" is usually translated into "funeral rites", showing that Mahler originally intended to write a darker piece, but later adapted it to end with the theme of resurrection and life.

9. Kangas, Ryan R. "Mourning, Remembrance, and Mahler's 'Resurrection'." *19th Century Music* 36, no. 1 (2012): 58-83.

Ryan Kangas, a scholar who has written multiple articles and his dissertation on Mahler, discusses Freudian psychology as it relates to Mahler's Second Symphony. Kangas outlines what Freud deems as healthy mourning, and how that is shown in the Symphony, as well as other forms of grief. This article serves to contextualize Mahler's Second Symphony, which has a mythos of its own, and to deepen the understanding of Mahler through the lens of Freud's work.

10. Lodge, Martin. "Illuminations: A Proposed Taxonomy for Death-Inspired Works in Western Art Music." *Australasian Association of Writing Programs* 45, no. 1 (2017): 1-12.

In this article, Martin Lodge, Head of Composition at the University of Waikato Conservatorium of Music, argues for a taxonomy for works dealing with death. He proposes six categories including celebration/religious affirmation, prediction, death and love, fear, loss, and music of mourning. These categories would give a jumping off point for learning about the pieces. Gustav Mahler's works end up in multiple categories, demonstrating a multi-faceted approach to writing about death.

11. Starcevic, Vladan. "Gustav Mahler as Freud's Patient: A Note on Possible Obstacles to Communication and Understanding." *Australasian Psychiatrist: Bulletin of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists* 21, no. 3 (2013): 271-275.

Vladan Starcevic, Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Sydney and author of multiple books on anxiety, discusses Mahler and Freud's four hour meeting. While Starcevic makes sure to point out, this is perhaps not long enough for a real diagnosis to be made, however it does allow us to look into both of their minds at the time. Many would say (and have said in the other entries of this bibliography) that Mahler had an "obsessional neurosis" over death. However, Freud dismisses this as a fear of itself, instead trying to find the cause in Mahler's childhood. This viewpoint and look into the time period allows for an understanding of the culture at the time and how Mahler interacted with other intellectuals of his time.

12. Steinberg, Stanley. "Tragic Absurdity in the Music of Gustav Mahler." *The Psychoanalytical Review* 86, no. 6 (1999): 853-875.

Dr. Stanley Steinberg, a psychiatrist, uses this article to discuss the contradictions in Mahler's music and their possible causes. Starting at age six, Mahler wrote a polka with a funeral march to start it. Steinberg points out that beginning with one of his first compositions, Mahler "[Juxtaposes] the serious and the frivolous as a stylistic device throughout his work." These contradictions and juxtapositions bleed over into Mahler's personal life, or perhaps vice versa. These can be found in general attitudes such as Mahler sometimes claiming that his symphonies clearly reflect his life, and others saying "Men will have to work a long time cracking the nuts I am shaking down from the tree for them." Steinberg looks at these instances and analyses some causes of this mental state, tying together Mahler's music and his personal life.