

Das Lied von der Erde

Programme note

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) [arr. Cortese]
Das Lied von der Erde (1909)

- I: Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde
- II: Der Einsame im Herbst
- III: Von der Jugend
- IV: Von der Schönheit
- V: Der Trunkene im Frühling
- VI: Der Abschied

Nowhere is the oscillation between the public and private spheres captured more meaningfully than within the music of Gustav Mahler, whose whole output treads a fine balance between the quiet, private moment and the magnitude of the world around us. Mahler believed in taking inspiration from the sounds that surrounded him in daily life – birdsong, the sound of cow bells, folk song and hunting calls – and incorporating these elements of the everyday into his works. A symphony, he believed, 'must be like the world. It must embrace everything'. But unlike most of his contemporaries, Mahler composed very little across different genres: with the exception of a few early works, he confined himself entirely to the song and the symphony. While they may appear to be polar opposites, these two genres co-exist in Mahler's works in a way never before witnessed in the music of any other composer – the symphonies embrace the intimacy of song, while the songs grasp at the magnitude of the symphony.

While Mahler's orchestral songs expand the genre to new proportions, at their heart they may also be heard as responses to Schubert's own Lieder. It was through Schubert's Lieder that Mahler learned to combine the intimacy of the miniature with the splendour of the larger cycle, but it was through Beethoven's Ninth Symphony that Mahler received the 'permission' to introduce the voice to the symphony. Mahler had already included movements for voice in his second, third, fourth and eighth symphonies, but the first fully-integrated partnering of song and the symphony came with his orchestral song cycle, *Das Lied von der Erde* ('The Song of the Earth'), later termed a 'song-symphony'. Although the work calls for a large orchestra, Mahler uses the instrumentation in a chamber-like way, at times paring down the scoring to pairs of woodwinds and only deploying the full force of the orchestra sparingly at key moments. It is this sense of restraint that preserves the intimacy of song within the grandeur of the symphony, creating a truly unique new genre.

As the title suggests, like much of Mahler's music this work is inspired by the natural world, with each of its six movements tracing a different aspect of life and our small part in it. Composed following one of the most difficult years in Mahler's life, *Das Lied von der Erde* is at times deeply melancholic, probing questions of death and our place in the circle of life, with every mood from drunken hedonism (as in the fifth movement scherzo) to meditative serenity (in the thirty-minute 'farewell') finding its place. Based on excerpts from Hans Bethge's volume of ancient Chinese poetry rendered into German, *Die Chinesische Flöte* ('The Chinese Flute'), it was for Mahler 'probably the most personal composition I have created thus far'. However, the work was not performed until after Mahler's death in 1911, partly due to Mahler's own reluctance to bring the work before the public. 'Won't people go home and shoot themselves?', he asked.

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