

*SHEPHERD SCHOOL
SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA*

LARRY RACHLEFF, conductor

Friday, April 25, 1997

8:00 p.m.

Stude Concert Hall

RICE UNIVERSITY

the
Shepherd
School
of Music

PROGRAM

Symphony No. 6 in A minor

Gustav Mahler

Allegro energico, ma non troppo

(1860-1911)

Scherzo. Wuchtig

Andante moderato

Finale. Allegro moderato

In consideration of the performers and members of the audience, please check audible paging devices with the ushers and silence audible timepieces. The taking of photographs and use of recording equipment are prohibited.

SHEPHERD SCHOOL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Violin I

Curt Thompson,
concertmaster
Kristen Anthony
Michael Arlt
Zhang Zhang
Angie Smart
Iman Khosrowpour
William Fedkenheuer
Gabrielle Stebbins
Tomasz Golka
Heather Haughn
Gregory Ewer
Yi Ching Fong
Eugenia Wie
Timothy McCann
Adam DeGraff
Jocelyn Adelman

Violin II

Tiffany Modell,
principal
Rolanda Shine
Barbara Downie
Zachary Carrettin
Azure Abuirmeileh
Martha Walvoord
Sasha Callahan
Ari Maron
Jo Nardolillo
Alda Schonke
Thomas McLean
Sarah Swain
Allegra Petti
Jeffrey Issokson

Viola

Kelly Dylla,
principal
Shanda Lowery
Ann Weaver
Alexis Bacon
Michael Galaganov
Adam Clarke
Jonah Sirota
Carol Gimmel
Kimberly Buschek

Viola (cont.)

Jonathan Brown
Paul Reynolds
Andrew Cheung

Cello

Rebecca Carrington,
principal
Robert Howard
Philip King
Jeffrey Zeigler
Benjamin Noyes
Lisa McCormick
Martha Baldwin
Emma Sponaugle
Isabelle Chouinard
Daniel Oliver
Elizabeth Glennon
Lisa Vosdoganes
Karen Maddox

Double Bass

Maxime Bibeau,
principal
Holly Butenhoff
Jennifer Godfrey
Gilbert Deshaies
Kjetil Laukholm
Christopher Simison
Brian Doyle
William Robertson
Juan Carlos Peña

Flute

Lisa Jelle, principal
Merrie Siegel
Jennifer Keeney
Wendy Lin
Kris Guthrie

Piccolo

Wendy Lin
Kris Guthrie

Oboe

Kim Ross, principal
Kelly Newport
Jeffrey Kahan

Oboe (cont.)

Christopher Haag
Jason Sudduth

English Horn

Christopher Haag
Jason Sudduth

Clarinet

Alexander Potiomkin,
principal
Xin-Yang Zhou
Chi-Ju Juliet Lai
Abigail Raymond
Benjamin Freimuth

E-flat Clarinet

Abigail Raymond

Bass Clarinet

Benjamin Freimuth

Bassoon

Michael Sundell,
principal
Damian Montaño
Amy Yeou-Mei Yang
Bohuslav Rattay
Jennifer Gunter

Contrabassoon

Jennifer Gunter

Horn

Shane Smith,
principal
Wade Butin
Carey Potts
Martina Snell
Jeffrey Rogers
Kimberly Penrod
Elizabeth Matchett
Alicia Watson
Jennifer Aynilian

Trumpet

Peter Wiseman,
principal
Matthew Swihart

Trumpet (cont.)

Jeffrey Castle
Mitchell Wechsler
Michael Myers
Jens Larsen

Trombone

Sean Reed,
principal
Steven Wills
Benjamin Pelletier

Bass Trombone

Gregory Harper

Tuba

Bryan Smith

Harp

Naoko Nakamura
Cathy Lin

Celeste

Beth Winterfeldt

Timpani and Percussion

Meredith Nelson
Trent Petrunia
Lucas Scanlon
Michael Sharkey
Karen Slotter
Douglas Smith
Che-Ming Tsai

Orchestra Manager

Martin Merritt

Orchestra Librarian

Lisa Vosdoganes

Library Assistants

Dawn Dale
Gilbert Deshaies
Donald Howey
Rita Lammers
Shanda Lowery
Amy Yeou-Mei Yang

PROGRAM NOTES

"My Sixth will pose puzzles that only a generation which has already taken in and digested my previous five can dare to solve." So spoke Gustav Mahler of his immense, oftentimes terrifying, and overwhelmingly tragic Sixth Symphony in A minor. How ironic it is that this work, along with his *Kindertotenlieder* (*Songs on the Death of Children*, set to Rückert's poems mourning the loss of his own children), emerged in what were perhaps the happiest years of the composer's life.

Around the turn of the century, Mahler was at the peak of his career. In 1897 he had become director of the Vienna Opera, a post he had long desired, and his grueling work as a conductor did not abate his composition of masterful symphonies during the summer holidays. In 1901 he had met and fallen in love with Alma Schindler, the daughter of Austrian painter Anton Schindler and a gifted musician and composer herself. They were married in 1902, and later that year she gave birth to their first daughter, followed by their second daughter in June 1904. Though their marriage was troubled from the start (Mahler strictly forbade Alma to compose, for example, and his devotion to his own work often resulted in harsh neglect of his wife), the summers of 1903 and 1904, during which the composer worked on the Sixth Symphony, were nonetheless pleasant ones for the family. As Alma relates, "the summer [of 1904] was delightful, without any conflicts, happy," and Mahler had never been "more human and more communicative."

Perhaps what makes the presence of the tragic Sixth Symphony at this cheerful time even more unusual are the strong autobiographical implications in the work. Though Mahler's early symphonies relied on programs, sometimes to the extent of using a chorus or song elements to express a specific message, beginning with the Fifth Symphony the composer was strongly opposed to providing any narrative explanation of the work for the audience. Nonetheless, it is clear that when composing the Sixth Symphony Mahler had in mind what Alma referred to as an "autobiographical programmatic concept." This is apparent already in the first movement, where the beautiful second theme, one of the very few optimistic rays of light in the whole work, was said by the composer himself to represent Alma. The composer's wife also provides us with invaluable insight into the other movements:

In the third movement he describes the arrhythmic playing of the two children, staggering through the sand. Horrible—those children's voices become more and more tragic, and at the end there is one fading little voice, whimpering. In the last movement he describes himself and his downfall or, as he said later, the downfall of his hero. "The hero who receives three blows from fate, the third of which fells him like a tree."

How could Mahler have foreseen the three blows, so explicitly illustrated in the symphony's *Finale*, that would strike him in 1907: his resignation from the Vienna Opera, his oldest daughter's death, and the diagnosis of his heart disease? Nonetheless, both husband and wife were deeply moved by this work. As Alma continues, "no other work has flowed so directly from his heart as this one. We both cried at the time [when he first played it for her]; we felt so deeply what this music meant, what it forebodingly told us. The Sixth is his most personal work and is also a prophetic one." Even at the final dress rehearsal in 1906 the work still overwhelmed the composer, after which his wife reports that he "walked up and down in the artists' room, sobbing, wringing his hands, unable to control himself," and she says that he conducted the first performance "almost badly because he was ashamed of his excitement and afraid that his emotions would cause him to lose control of himself while conducting." In a later revision, Mahler even went so far as to strike the final blow of fate from the score, perhaps from superstition. Tonight's performance also leaves out the final blow.

Autobiographical connections aside, just what is it about the symphony that moved its creator so deeply? Above all, it must be that of Mahler's nine completed symphonies, the Sixth is the only one that ends as tragically as it begins; the sorrow does not transform into joy as it does in his other works. One commentator aptly described the first movement as "a powerful statement of man's defiance of his destiny" and the work as a whole as "a merciless struggle against fate, with death the only possible outcome." The first movement is the only one that ends triumphantly; the remaining three merely die away in tragic resignation. Yet for all its emotion, this symphony is remarkably disciplined—it is one of the most classically conceived works in the composer's symphonic oeuvre. Three of the four movements are in the main key of A minor, and unlike the Fifth Symphony, the work begins and ends in the same key. The outer movements, immense as they may be, are in sonata form, and the inner movements also display clearer structures than usual for this composer. Mahler does not explicitly carry themes from one movement to another, yet all four movements are ingeniously linked by harmonic and rhythmic motives, as well as more abstract methods such as sharing sections in the same character.

One of the most striking elements of the symphony is its orchestration, especially Mahler's use of exotic new percussion instruments. The celesta is used for the first time in any symphony, and this work is the composer's only one that employs the xylophone. Other instruments, such as the tam-tam, the cowbells, and the hammer, serve symbolic purposes. The hammer, specifically described as a "short, powerful, but dull-sounding stroke of a nonmetallic character," provides the blows of fate in the *Finale*, and the cowbells appear in the first, third, and final movements in a magical dream-like atmosphere that invokes the impression of something far away (Mahler even labels them "in the distance.") When describing these passages, the composer said that he was trying to invoke "the loneliness of being far away from the world" and that he wished to create "a sound of nature, echoing from a great distance." He also explained that the cowbells "are the last earthly sounds heard from

the valley far below by the departing spirit on the mountain top." Few listeners today would find fault with Mahler's orchestration, but in his own day the enlarged percussion section led to a 1906 cartoon captioned "My God, I've forgotten the motorhorn. Now I shall have to write another symphony" and caused Mahler to tell his orchestra, "Nowhere do I intend to make noise, even though I enlist so many percussion instruments I sought merely to achieve variety in timbre."

The first movement is dominated by a relentless march theme in minor, but this is relieved by the soaring beauty of the "Alma" theme. Several portions of this movement stand out, especially an eerie passage containing woodwind trills that portends the generally spooky character of the scherzo, as well as the first section of music "from far away" that occurs towards the end of the development. The movement ends triumphantly with the "Alma" theme, and this ending is in many ways "the high point by which one can later realize the extent of the fall." The terrifying, demonic scherzo that follows contains truly unusual orchestral effects, with two trio sections standing in strong contrast. These sardonically humorous passages, marked "altväterisch" (old-fashioned), are parodies of the elegant galant style and contain many changes of meter that to Alma represented the "arrhythmic playing of the two children." Towards the end of the movement occurs a large chromatic descent that dies away into nothingness. The hauntingly beautiful third movement, in E-flat major, is the least related in character to the other movements and serves as a welcome respite after the diabolical scherzo. During his many revisions, Mahler considered switching the order of the inner movements, but placed as it is, the slow movement functions, as one writer has said, as "a poignant prelude to the crushing power of the immense finale." Particularly noteworthy touches are the modal inflections of the opening melody and Mahler's use of cowbells in the movement's climax. It is in the Finale that the symphony's weight primarily lies. From the long "impressionistic" introduction, to the relentless march themes, the magical "music from far away," and the dramatic battle scenes violently interrupted by the hammer blows, this movement is a marvel of quickly-changing, strong contrasts, holding our attention taut until the final blow and the last scream of anguish before dying away into oblivion. Very rarely in music do we hear such irrevocable declarations of a doomed fate, and the power of this symphony led one of the composer's friends to ask him, "How can such a kind person as you manage to express so much cruelty and lack of pity?" To this Mahler simply replied, "These are the cruelties that have been inflicted on me and the sufferings I have had to endure," a poignant statement from the creator of this powerfully moving symphony.

— Notes by Andrew Weaver



RICE