

## 2<sup>nd</sup> theme.

# New Approaches to Music Analysis

## Psychoanalytical Inquires on Music.

### Gustav Mahler's Orchestral Songs

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ABSTRACT: Psychoanalysis represented a turning point in science, being also the origin for some of the most controversial ideological changes at the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its father, Sigmund Freud, was not satisfied with the therapeutic practice, applying it instead to various products of human thinking and spirit, such as literature, painting or sculpture. Although much later and with many more difficulties, music also became an instrument used by some psychoanalysts to verify their theories. Together with Ludwig van Beethoven and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Gustav Mahler is one of the most analyzed composers in the history of music. The notes he wrote on his manuscripts, rich in extra-musical meanings, allowed the clinicians and musicologists to analyze both the man and the musician. The controversies built around his personality reached a level almost without precedent. The permanent conflict that one can feel in Mahler's music has been explained in terms of the struggle between his activity as a conductor and the necessity for creation. Furthermore, his music reflects the turbulent socialcultural environment typical for the last days of the AustroHungarian Empire, as well as the tensions of his childhood and youth.

KEYWORDS: *psychoanalysis of art, Sigmund Freud, Gustav Mahler, orchestral songs*

MARKING a turning point in human knowledge, psychoanalysis became a fascinating field of exploring the human being, its resources and behavioural motivations. Emerged in a time of political, economical, social, most of all scientific and artistic frenzy, psychoanalysis contributed substantially to the revolutionary change of mentality that accompanied the transition between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century, influencing the most diverse ideologies. Its pioneers were not afraid to apply it to the most various ways of human expression, whereas its enemies harshly criticized its theories, concepts and therapeutic practice.

Psychoanalysis was not limited to the results obtained from this practice, instead extending its applicability over products of human thinking and spirit. Thus, psychoanalysts approached literary, pictorial, sculptural or musical works, in order to verify their assertions on how the psyche functions. Trying to detect those particularities that determine the originality and value of an artistic work, psychoanalysis began to explore the deepest springs of the artist's life, offering a completely new solution to understanding the superior products of the spirit.

The application of psychoanalysis to art departs from the idea that the artist is a human being who has suffered a traumatism during childhood, thus choosing to symbolically release the complexes censored by the conscience. Basically, the artist creates with the help of the unconscious formations, which he brings to light through new and original models. At first, psychoanalysis was oriented towards personalities of the Renaissance, romantic and symbolist artists. Later on, it ascribed a special place to modern art and especially to surrealists. The instruments of analysis are analogous to the one used in the dream interpretation, following the paths that lead to the fulfilment of unconscious desires in the work of art.

Often neglected by theorists, especially due to its ambiguity, psychoanalysis of music proposes a type of aesthetic investigation that sets off from the unconscious side of the work. Furthermore, it offers the possibility of transcending to an interpretation that allows the emphasis on the extra-musical meanings of the score.

Freud's lack of interest in music is indeed difficult to understand, if we take into account that his life in Vienna comprised three quarters of century, with everything that this implied on an aesthetic and cultural level. Furthermore, we cannot help noticing the coincidence of the dates of appearance for an important number of masterpieces, such as Mahler's Eighth Symphony, Strauss's *Elektra*, Schönberg's *Erwartung* or Webern's Passacaglia on the one hand, and Freud's *Analyse der Phobie eines fünfjährigen Knaben* (*Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy*, also known as *The Little Hans*), *Bemerkungen über einen Fall von Zwangsneurose* (*Notes Upon A Case of Obsessional Neurosis*, also known as *The Rat Man*), *Der Fall Schreber* (*The Schreber Case*) or *Totem und Tabu* (*Totem and Taboo*), on the other. If one tries to find an explanation, the first thing that one must consider is the material that art works with. Most of the time, art is a copy of the surrounding world. The artist chooses the model and then modifies it according to his own rules and psyche forces. Nevertheless, this method failed in the case of music, giving the fact the music did not work with objects from the outer world. These precise objects represented the very centre of the psychoanalytical preoccupations. The impact of music on our psyche has long been analyzed. One of the hypotheses was that music managed to determine the person to escape from the physical world, subjecting it to a hallucinatory regression of fantasies and memories.

The fascination that many artists, poets and musicians had for the discoveries of psychoanalysis is already a very well-known fact. Vienna, a small town at that time, was the perfect ground for a continuous exchange of knowledge within a specific group of thinkers and artists, whose activities were concentrated in the institutions on Ringstrasse: the Opera, *Burgtheater*, *Volkstheater* and the General Hospital. Personalities such as Richard Strauss, Alfred Roller, Hugo von Hoffmannstahl or Arnold Schönberg were enthusiastically discussing and spreading Freud's and his

disciples' ideas. But, for the acclaimed leader of this brilliant constellation, the composer and conductor Gustav Mahler, this new approach of the human personality represented a personal therapeutic hope, which went far beyond his colleagues' intellectual interests.

Gustav Mahler's complex personality embodied perfectly the duality of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Vienna, the origin of some of the most radical changes in thinking at the turn of the century. At the same time, Mahler found himself at the border between two musical eras, looking nostalgically at the disappearance of Romanticism and being among the first to explore the new musical possibilities. His dual personality was closely related to the special circumstances of his childhood.

The uncertain situation of the Jews living in Bohemia and Moravia has been long debated. This uncertainty was intensely felt by Mahler as well. Having converted to Christianity in order to become head of the Vienna Opera, he nevertheless always sought to explain his peculiar identity: "I am three times homeless: as a Czech among Austrians, an Austrian among Germans and a Jew throughout the world. Everywhere an intruder, never welcomed" (Mitchell 2003: 2). The premature death of eight of his thirteen brothers influenced Mahler's entire personal and artistic life. The ascendant route taken by his activity culminated when he became head of the Viennese artistic institution, where he made numerous innovations in the repertoire and the artistic conception. Some even stated that the period Mahler led the Opera was never to be equalled again.

In 1902, Mahler married Alma Schindler, the daughter of a respected Viennese painter and also a highly talented and cultivated young lady. Nevertheless, after they married, Mahler forbade her to engage in any creative activity.

Mahler met Sigmund Freud in one of the most difficult times of his life, having recently found out that his wife was involved in a love affair with the young architect Walter Gropius. Trying to salvage his marriage, Mahler decided to see the psychoanalyst. It is again hard to understand why the two had never met in person before although, obviously, each one knew about the other's fame.

The meeting took place in Leiden, Holland, at the end of August 1910. As a result of the discussion between the two, Freud remarked the special relationship Mahler had shared with his mother, which would prove to be fundamental for the composer's life and his ideal of a woman. Returned home, Mahler radically changed the attitude towards his wife. The last period of his life was considered to have been a "pathological reattachment" to her.

The works that I have chosen to briefly present in the current paper (*Das klagende Lied*, *Kindertotenlieder* and *Das Lied von der Erde*) were investigated from the perspective of the specificities which distinguish them and which

are psychoanalytically relevant. Thus, I extracted only those components which served as a premise for our subject: the biographical factors, the identification of symbols, the correspondence between the text and the musical gesture.

Composed between 1879 and 1880, the cantata *Das klagende Lied* (*The Sorrowful Song*) is one of Mahler's few early works that subsequently enjoyed success on the concert stage. Important biographers, such as Paul Stefan (1913: 16–17) or Hans Ferdinand Redlich (1955: 173), have spread the idea that, originally, the work was designed to be a fantastic opera in three acts: *Waldmärchen* (*Forest Legend*), *Der Spielmann* (*The Minstrel*) and *Hochzeitstück* (*Wedding Piece*). What we know for a fact is that Mahler later suppressed the first movement and made numerous other changes to the remaining score.

The text of the cantata, completed by Mahler in 1878, was inspired by Ludwig Bechstein's fairy tale *Das klagende Lied*, comprised in *Neues deutsches Märchenbuch*. Another source was the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale *Der singende Knochen* (*The Singing Bone*). Modifying both sources, Mahler tells the legend of two brothers rivalling for the hand of the same woman. She is a queen, who decides to organize a contest: the man able to find a rare red flower in the woods will win her hand. The brothers leave in search for the flower. The youngest finds it, hides it under his hat and falls asleep under a willow tree. But he becomes the victim of his sibling, who kills and buries him. Then he takes the flower and returns to the castle. Wandering in the woods, a minstrel finds a bone and manufactures a flute. Once he starts playing it, the instrument tells the story of the fratricide and the minstrel goes in search of the king and his wife. He finds them on their wedding day and reveals the terrible secret. The queen faints, the guests spread and the old walls of the castle collapse.

In Bechstein's story nevertheless, the protagonists are the king's two children, a boy and a girl, disputing the succession to the throne after their father's death: the one who finds the flower will lead the kingdom. The princess gets it, but her brother kills her. Many years later, a peasant boy finds a bone and manufactures a flute, which starts to tell the story of the horrible fratricide. In his way through the woods, the child meets a knight who, touched by the song of the flute, goes to the castle in order to disclose the secret. There, the princess's brother has already become king, whereas their mother still mourns her daughter's death. The flute tells the story only to the queen, who then tells it further to her son and a festive gathering. During the night, the queen breaks the flute, so its story is never to be heard again.

The changes Mahler brings to the original tale are essential. What can be first noticed is that he suppresses any brother-sister rivalry and, therefore, any feminine intervention. Furthermore, he also omits another element, namely the child's voice coming out of the flute. In his version, it's the

king who tells the guests about the fratricide. Donald Mitchell, one of Mahler's main biographers, comes up with an explanation in terms of the relationship between the composer and his family: "It must be that the roots of Mahler's variations of Bechstein's story lay in his own psychological make-up, that the changed relationships were conditioned by emotional attitudes of Mahler's towards members of his family" (Mitchell 2003: 143).

Surprisingly original, although still bearing influences from the great romantic composers, the music already displays some of the later features of Mahler's creative personality. One can already detect his preference for march-like rhythms, sounds of nature or the heavy contrast between orchestral layers. One of the most remarkable moments of the work is when the lights in the castle go off and the walls collapse. The rarefied contrapuntal writing, sustained only by a pedal, anticipates the austerity of Mahler's late pages and destroys, in the listener's mind, the impression of conventionality otherwise quite often felt in the cantata (Example 1).

83 *Sehr langsam und schleppend.*  
(noch etwas langsamer als vorher die  $\text{♩}$ ) (M.M.  $\text{♩} = 40$ )

84

1.2. Fl. *pp*

1. Klar. in B *pp*

Bklar. in B *pp*

Pk.

84

1. VI. *ppp*

2. VI. *ppp*

Vle. *ppp*

Ten.-Solo *pp*  
 Die Lich-ter ver-lo-schen im Kö-nigs-saal. Was ist es

Vc. *pp*

Kb.

Example 1. The rarefied contrapuntal writing.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mahler created two song cycles. The first, entitled *Sieben Lieder aus letzter Zeit* (published 1910), comprised two poems from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and songs on the lyrics by the German poet Friedrich Rückert whose were composed 1901–1904. The second cycle (composed 1901–1904, published 1905) was based again on Rückert's poetry. From the collection *Kindertotenlieder* (*Songs on the Death of Children*), Mahler chose five poems, unifying them in what was to become one of his most acclaimed masterpieces. The lyrics have an autobiographic origin: following two of his children's death, Ernst and Luise, Rückert dedicated a few hundred poems to their memory, which were not intended for publication, appearing posthumously. What is strange about these songs from the very beginning is why Mahler was attracted to the lyrics in a time when his life was in one of its quiet periods: when he first began working on the cycle, he was still unmarried and his career as a conductor was reaching its highest peaks. Then, when he completed it, he was a newly father of two girls. His eldest daughter's death, in 1907, was considered by Alma as a response at provoking the destiny. Mahler himself thought he had the capacity to foresee events in his life.

Nevertheless, if we are in search for a psychoanalytical reason why Mahler chose Rückert's lyrics in one of the few happiest moments of his life, we must not consider the anticipation of the future, but the reminiscences of the composer's childhood and the trauma caused by his brothers' early death. What Mahler wrote to his good friend Guido Adler, namely that he has placed himself in the situation of a man whose child had died, thus receives psychoanalytical dimensions (cf. Reik 1960: 315): unconsciously identifying himself with his own father, Mahler was able to feel the intensity of the pain and mourning caused by the children's premature disappearance.

In another remark he made, this time to his close confidant Natalie Bauer-Lechner, the composer expressed the sorrow he felt for himself while working on *Kindertotenlieder*, but also for those who would listen to the work and feel its sadness (cf. Killian 1984: 193). If we go back to the psychoanalytical process of identification, we can detect, behind Mahler's words, the compassion that he, as a child, must have felt for his father's grief. Seen from this perspective, the capacity for prediction that Mahler believed to possess finds its expression in the unconscious anguish of having the same destiny as his father.

*Kindertotenlieder* is one of the masterpieces of the late romantic orchestral songs. Mahler proves himself to be a master as much in music and literature as, especially, in the human nature and psychology. It is interesting to note that every poem Mahler chose speaks of light and darkness symbolizing the eternal life and hope and, by opposition, the despair and death.

Regarding the psychoanalytical symbols, we notice that every poem Mahler picked for his songs have in common the reference to the interior space: besides explicit words ('room', 'inside', 'home', 'house'), one senses in the text a permanent feeling that the parent has withdrawn in a shelter

which he sensitizes through his grief. If, as Gaston Bachelard sustains in *The Poetics of Space*, “all the shelters, all the refuges, all the rooms have consonant dream values” and “through dreams, the different dwellings of our life intermingle and keep the treasures of the long gone days” (Bachelard 2003: 37), the tragedy of the father who loses his children finds its highest expression in the desire of seeing his daughter entering the room once again (the third song) or to witness his children’s coming back from the stroll (the fifth song). This last song, *In diesem Wetter (In This Weather)*, subjects the parent to one last try: in order to find his peace, he must survive a psychological storm. The madness of nature is surpassed only by the father’s and the reproach he makes to himself is devastating: “In this weather, in this storm / I would never have sent the children out”. The orchestra participates in the parent’s grief, through apocalyptic rhythms and sonorities (Example 2).

Z

K.Fl. *f* *pp* *f* *pp*  
 Fl. *pp* *pp* *pp* *pp*  
 Ob. *pp* *pp* *pp* *pp*  
 E.H. *f* *pp*  
 Klar. *sf* *p* *f* *f*  
 Bklar. *f* *f* *f* *p*  
 Fg. *f* *f* *f* *pp*  
 C.-Fg. *p*  
 Hr. *p*  
 Hf. *f* *f*  
 1.VI. *f* *pizz.*  
 2.VI. *f* *arco* *f* *pizz.* *f*  
 Vle. *f* *p* *f* *arco* *f*  
 Sgstr. *f* *f*  
 Vc. *f* *f* *f*  
 Kb. *f* *f* *f*

*geteilt*  
*arco*  
*pizz.*  
*f*  
*arco*  
*pizz.*  
*f*

*geteilt*  
*f*  
*f*  
*f*  
*f*

In die - sem Wet - ter, in die - sem  
*p*  
 am Steg *marcato*  
*pizz.*

**Example 2.** The reproach of the grieving parent.

Considered as one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most inspired and consistent artistic dialogues between Orient and Occident, *Das Lied von der Erde* (*The Song of the Earth*, 1908–1909) brings the communication between the individual, nature, and the essence of life to a new level of comprehension. It represents the total synthesis between the musical image of a symphony and the poetic reflection imposed by the song. The main idea of the work is centred on the individual's interaction with the vital resources of the terrestrial environment. The succession of the texts highlights an ever



intimate and intense relation of the individual to his natural entourage: departing from a feeling of loneliness and isolation, the poetic idea gradually evokes a perfect communion of the human being with the environment that surrounds it. Mahler's nature is not a real one, but comes from the intense feelings of the individual in search for the very reason of existence. What the composer sets to music are the questions of his childhood, which also accompanied him until the end of his life.

The last song of the cycle, *Der Abschied* (*The Farewell*) was the subject of extreme controversies and passionate discussions. The intimate expression and the profoundness of sufferance had never been equalled before. The song describes the separation of this world and of the beauty of nature as an ultimate solution for every human being.

The image of separation is omnipresent in the text: the sun sets, the night casts its cold shadow, the birds and the people are asleep and the poet is taking his farewell. There is no trace of a fight with the destiny, but reconciliation with the idea of the imminent end. The French psychoanalyst Michel Imberty notices the duality of the emotional experience: on the one hand, the illusion of plenitude, on the other the torment of the dying human being. The final nothingness suspends time and the psychological dimension concentrates on the confrontation between Eros and Thanatos, namely between life and death (Example 3).

Fließend. Im Takt. 3

1. Fl. *p* *dim.* *pp*

1. Ob. *sf* *p*

1. 2. Fg. *p* *pp* *pp*

2. 4. Hr. in F *zu 2* *p*

1. Hf. *f* *dim.* *p*

2. Hf. *f* *dim.* *p*

Alt-Stimme. (In erzählendem Ton, ohne Ausdruck.) *sempre p*

Die Sonne scheidet hin ter dem Ge-

Vc. *arco* *pp sempre*

The image shows two systems of a musical score. The first system is for Flute (Fl.), Alto-Soprano (Alt.-St.), and Violoncello (Vc.). The Flute part has a melodic line with dynamic markings 'pp' and 'sempre pp'. The Alto-Soprano part has lyrics: 'bir - ge. In al - le Tä - ler steigt der A - bend nie - der mit sei - nen Schat - ten.' The Violoncello part has a bass line. The second system continues the same parts with lyrics: 'die voll Küh - lung sind.' and dynamic markings 'pp' and 'morendo'.

**Example 3.** The lamentation of the oboe and the vocal line.

An overwhelming personality in the history of music, Gustav Mahler was the author of an oeuvre subjected to influences of the past, as well as to openings for the revolutionary conquests of the 20<sup>th</sup> century musical language. Choosing Mahler as a paradigm for our psychoanalytic inquiry was based on the fertile ground that his music had to offer to a psycho-aesthetic analysis. His tumultuous life, filled with tragic episodes, his controversial personality and the duality of his nature found their expression in a music with extremely abrupt contrasts, often reaching a level of asceticism never encountered before. Mahler's orchestral songs are proof of the evolution of his musical style, of its refinement and its exploration of the hidden territories in the human soul.

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