

An Outline of Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*

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Abstract: - Alongside Mozart and Beethoven, Gustav Mahler has always been one of the most analyzed figures of the music history. His style, unusual and bold through the heterogeneity of its elements, determined the public to adopt either a positive, or a negative attitude, never an indifferent one. Mahler's output, divided between songs, song cycles and symphonies, displays an extremely tight and complex unity. *Kindertotenlieder* belongs to what one may call a second group of works, due to their common affiliations and stylistic idiosyncrasies, also featuring the *Symphonies* from 5 to 8. They show a substantial evolution in the technique of instrumentation, in the approach of the harmonic parameter, in the much more intense expression, and, most important, in the essential part received by the counterpoint. Beyond the strict musical aspects of *Kindertotenlieder*, the cycle is yet another testimony of how Mahler's course of life served as a catalyser for musically adapting a wide range of emotions and ideas deeply rooted in his psychic structure.

Key-Words: - Gustav Mahler, *Kindertotenlieder*, song cycle, Friedrich Rückert, psychoanalysis, instrumentation

1 Introduction

In 1905, Mahler published two song cycles. The first, entitled *Sieben Lieder aus letzter Zeit*, consists of two poems from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and songs on lyrics by the German poet Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866). In the best known of them, *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen*, Mahler reiterates the theme of love far from the world and its tumult: *Ich bin gestorben dem Weltgetümmel/ Und ruh in einem stillen Gebiet'./ Ich leb allein in meinem Himmel,/ in meinem Lieben, in meinem Lied (I am dead to the world's tumult,/ And I rest in a quiet realm!/ I live alone in my heaven,/ In my love and in my song!)*.

The second song cycle is, again, a setting of Rückert's poetry. From the 425 *Kindertotenlieder* (*Songs on the Death of Children*), Mahler carefully selected five poems, merging them into what was to become a masterpiece of the genre. The lyrics have an autobiographic origin: following the death of two of his children, Rückert wrote hundreds of poems which were never intended for publication, as the poet himself considered them a private in nature exercise. Thus, they appeared only posthumously.

The precise chronology of the songs has never been unanimously established and it differs according to the sources. Guido Adler, for instance, considers that the first three songs of *Kindertotenlieder* were written in the same time as the first three from *Sieben Lieder aus letzter Zeit*,

namely in the summer of 1901. Nevertheless, Alma Mahler says that only two of them were completed by 1904, when Mahler wrote the next three. Other testimonies, linked to Mahler's sketches, draft scores, fair copies, and autograph copies [1], attest what seems to be most plausible, that 1, 3 and 4 were composed in 1901, whereas 2 and 5 were added in 1904. Even as late as 1904, with Mahler at the pinnacle of Austrian musical life, there is much we still don't know for sure.

These details are relevant, as they indicate that the repressive atmosphere of the lyrics attracted Mahler in a time when he was not married yet, and his conducting career was at its heights. Even more peculiar is the moment the cycle was completed, when Mahler's wife had not for long given birth to their two daughters. The incongruence between the actual facts in the composer's life and the need to musically express quite the opposite has always been a basic feature of his ambivalent personality.

The uncertainty about the date of composition also strengthens one of the prominent aspects of Mahler's music, namely the constant exchange of ideas and techniques within his works, either song cycles, or symphonies. His works intersect in their essential points, a direct consequence of Mahler's conduit: his duties as a conductor limited his possibilities to simultaneously create. Sketching his thoughts along the working periods of the year, Mahler composed and finalized most of his pieces

during the summer holidays, subsequently subjecting them to multiple revisions. Thus, it is not surprising to see that ideas for a work would often cross paths with the fulfillment of other, whence the numerous correspondence between them.

The tragic death of Mahler's elder daughter, Maria, in 1907, was seen by Alma as a response to the provocation of destiny. Mahler's music seems, at first sight, to abound of such biographic anticipations. The composer himself believed to have the capacity to predict events in his life. Influenced by one of his favorite writings, Goethe's *Conversations with Eckermann*, Mahler named his own work an "anticipando of life", thus looking at *Kindertotenlieder*, after Maria's death, as a presentiment of the catastrophe that was about to occur. Talking to Guido Adler, many years later, Mahler confessed that, while composing the songs, he took the place of a father who had lost his child; he added that, after really losing his daughter, he could have never written them at all [2].

Nevertheless, the idea that Mahler tempted faith and somehow foretold his daughter's death is hardly acceptable. It has nothing to do with a prophecy of any kind. If we are in search of a psychological reason for Mahler's poetic choice in one of the few quiet moments of his life, that must not be found in an anticipation of the future, but rather in the memories of his gloom childhood and the trauma caused by his siblings' early death. What was probably a determinant factor in reliving these scenes was the name coincidence between one of Rückert's children and Mahler's favorite brother, Ernst. Thus, what Mahler told Adler receives psychoanalytical significance: unconsciously identifying himself with his own father, Mahler was able to feel the intensity of the loss and mourning caused by the children's premature disappearance.

In another remark he made, this time to his close friend and confidant Natalie Bauer-Lechner, Mahler expressed the sorrow he felt for himself while working on *Kindertotenlieder*, but also for the ones who would eventually hear the work and feel its sadness [3]. 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 prediction capacity Mahler believed to have finds its expression in his unconscious anxiety of enduring the same destiny as his father.

2 Analytical Overview

Kindertotenlieder (for alto/baritone and orchestra), a product of extreme introspection, is one of the highest peaks of the late romantic orchestral song. Mahler proves himself to be a master in both music and literature, but most of all in human psychology and nature. It is worth mentioning that every chosen poem speaks of light and darkness, symbolizing the eternal life and hope as opposed to despair and death. On the first page of the original score, Mahler had the following warning printed: "These five songs form a complete and indivisible whole, and for this reason their continuity must be preserved (by preventing interruptions, such as for example applause at the end of each song)". The innovations in these songs prefigure the conquests from *Das Lied von der Erde*.

"The complete and indivisible whole" Mahler speaks of begins with *Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgeh'n!* (*Now will the sun so brightly rise*, d minor). One venerates the sun, source of light and heat, principle of order and accuracy, symbol of measure of all things. The lyrics refer to the morning following the tragedy, when the grieving parent tries to drive the darkness away from his soul. But the musical development betrays him. It is the perfect poem to begin the cycle, as it surprises the parent oscillating between two different types of attitude and emotion.

On a technical scale, Mahler achieves this by using what Donald Mitchell calls "alternate orchestras", according to the question-answer principle. Through their colors, these orchestras generate opposite sonorities. Thus, sadness and despair are represented by an austere and rarefied writing, where the vocal line is accompanied by the winds, meanwhile the parent's hope and his struggle to surpass the dramatic moment are sustained by the strings, featuring a harmonically and melodically enriched discourse. Nevertheless, Mahler does not apply this solution rigidly, continuously seeking maximum variation in a poem that allows a psychological interpretation.

The song begins with a lamentation of the oboe, which precedes the entrance of the voice, whose tonal range will remain in the middle. The only time the middle range overlaps the high range is on the words *ew'ge Licht* (*eternal light*), when it extends up to E flat 2. The counterpoint of the horn follows immediately, the two melodic lines creating a grim and sad world of sounds. This almost ascetic counterpoint is one of the perfect balanced sections in Mahler's music, sharing its place with similar

moments from *Das Lied von der Erde* and *Symphony No. 9*.

Although the solo line praises the sun, it does it on a descending melodic scale, describing a diminished fifth. Then, invoking the misfortune brought by the night, the vocal line follows an ascending chromatic pattern. Besides, the entire song is concentrated on this idea: a continuous oscillation between backwards and forwards, between suffering and consolation.

Though the last verse, *Heil sei dem Freudenlicht der Welt! (Light of joy in the world, be welcome!)*, seems to bring a trait of optimism, the musical discourse comes in contradiction: the soloist sings a minor third and the harp avoids the resolution on the tonic. The last sound of the song belongs to the glockenspiel and the tension it raises will be released only in the last song.

The glockenspiel represents, all through the entire cycle, the instrument whose sonority expresses the children's tragedy. Furthermore, it seems that using it was one of Mahler's first ideas: on an early sketch of the first song, he had noted this instrument alone.

Within this song, Donald Mitchell identifies what he calls a "symphonic organization". The first two musical strophes, corresponding to the first four poetic verses, differ only through subtle changes of instrumentation. The third strophe brings a development of the basic motives, while the fourth resumes the pattern of the first, thus functioning as a recapitulation. Far from settling with a univocal solution, Mahler overlaps the beginning of the last recapitulative strophe (oboe) with the continuation of the motivic elaboration (flute), in a process that Mitchell names "telescopic", also found in other works, such as *Symphony No. 4*.

The second song, *Nun seh' ich wohl, warum so dunkle Flammen (Now I can see why such dark flames, c minor)*, piece of great passion and suffering, is melodically related to the first, as it begins with its last phrase, on the words *Freudenlicht der Welt*. Besides, the text is very rich in light references, which Mahler musically metamorphoses through specific orchestral means: opposed to the austerity of the sonority in the first song, the second displays a variety of the color palette, especially through the importance with which Mahler endows the harp and strings. Actually, every song is characterized by ever new modalities of exploiting the orchestra, indissolubly tied to the meaning of the poetic text.

The same melodic configuration can be detected in the *Adagietto* from *Symphony No. 5* and in the song *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen*. The

relation between the strings and the harp, which dominates the color configuration, outlines the same atmosphere as the orchestra in the *Adagietto*.

Furthermore, if *Nun will die Sonn'* is built on a strophic structure, solidly anchored in a unique tonality (d minor), *Nun seh' ich wohl* is rather a through-composed, evolving in a free, quasi-rhapsodic manner, thus being governed not only by tonal instability, but metric and agogic as well.

Mahler's compositional techniques are varied and subtle: the first entrance of the percussion, and the only one until the last song, is a trill in *pianissimo* at the timpani, on the verse *Ihr wolltet mir mit eurem Leuchten sagen (You would have told me with your brilliance)*. On the word *Leuchten*, Mahler modulates for a few measures to D major, tonality that one would encounter only in the end of the cycle.

The dark flames Rückert speaks about become the subject of a mystical allusion: the light in the children's eyes no longer belongs to this world, going all the way back to its origins. This coincides with Fechner's philosophy, to which Mahler was profoundly attached (especially to its animistic component), which states that the universe functions under its own consciousness and that we forever maintain our presence in it, in a superior form.

If the first song ended with the sound of the glockenspiel, the second ends with a chord bearing the indication *morendo*, symbol for the disappearance of the light and, along with it, of the sight.

The musical onomatopoeia, so often met in Mahler's music, is sophisticatedly used in the third song as well, *Wenn dein Mütterlein (When thy mother dear, c minor)*. The composer chooses to accompany the voice with the cellos in *pizzicato*, thus imitating the mother's steps, whereas the melodic solo line is configured around the fourth, which has a special function all over Mahler's output. Later on, the *pizzicato* of the violas will become the embodiment of the daughter's steps. *Wenn dein Mütterlein* is the only poem in the cycle that mentions the poet's daughter; in fact, it is the only one that refers to a certain child.

After the formal freedom of the second song, Mahler goes back to the strophic organization of the first: the two stanzas of the poem are further divided into two more sections. From the first song, Mahler also assumes the technique of alternate orchestras, but on a level highly more difficult to detect. The contrast does not end here, as it evolves deeper inside the syntax of each musical section: thus, the horizontal plan alternates with the vertical one,

respectively the polyphonic discourse with the homophonic one.

The restless contour of the melodic line expresses the parent's anxiety while walking in the empty room. In support of this state of mind, Mahler continuously changes the time signature, thus emphasizing the parent's lack of purpose. The 70 measures are crossed by over ten changes of time, in an alternation of 4/4 and 3/2. Furthermore, Mahler potentiates the dark atmosphere with the help of the instrumentation: the violins lack completely, the violas and low strings shadow the entire musical discourse, while the solo part given to the oboe in *Nun will* is here entrusted to the English horn. We deal with a new change in sonority, after the color alternation in the first song and the predominance of strings and harp in the second. The father's inability to accept his children's death again finds its musical correspondence in the last measure, which brings an unresolved dominant chord.

The fourth song, *Oft denk'ich, sie sind nur ausgegangen* (*Oftentimes I think that they have only stepped out*, E flat major), radically changes the mood of the cycle so far, also being the only song in a major tonality. The orchestral foreplay introduces a luxuriant instrumentation, and the rhythmic pulsation reestablishes the equilibrium lost in the previous song. It is the most optimistic of all five, but hope is destroyed once the voice enters with a minor sixth, thus undermining the major tonality. The soloist's words come as a confirmation that the tragedy has not been overcome yet: *Oft denk'ich, sie sind nur ausgegangen./ Bald werden sie wieder nach Hause gelangen* (*Oftentimes I think that they have only stepped out,/ and that soon they will reach home again*). The basic principle is, again, the strophic one. The three strophes, based on the same thematic material, continuously varied, are, like in *Wenn dein Mütterlein*, divided into two contrasting sections each.

Although Rückert makes here no direct reference to the darkness from the previous three songs, that does not mean it is actually missing. The emotional conflict of the cycle has not yet been solved, although foreshadowing the light becomes far more highlighted then at the end of the first song (*Heil sei dem Freudenlicht der Welt*). Thus, it is not surprising that the rising sun from the last song is hidden by the bursting storm.

In diesem Wetter (*In this weather*, d minor) subjects the parent to a last try, as he must, in order to find his peace, survive a psychological storm. The unleashing of the nature is surpassed by the father's madness. The reproach he makes to himself is devastating: *In diesem Wetter, in diesem Braus./ Nie*

hätt' ich gesendet die Kinder hinaus (*In this weather, in this storm,/ I would have never sent the children out*). The orchestra actively participates in the parent's sufferance, through apocalyptic rhythms and sonorities, and the generated discourse reminds us of how far we have come in a cycle that began with a dialogue between the oboe and the horn. Besides, the entire construction in *Kindertotenlieder* follows an ascending path both dynamically and from the perspective of the orchestra, reaching its highest point in the last song and coming back to the initial state in its postlude, once the orchestra and the musical discourse become ever more rarefied.

The theme of the song, of a force and intensity yet not seen, represents the combination of two contrasting types of motivic structure, namely conjunctive and disjunctive, highly chromaticized and disposed in ascending and descending patterns. This self-generating melody is a typical example of the way Mahler handles the same conglomerate of motives, unceasingly configured in new patterns.

Man hat sie getragen hinaus./ Ich durfte nichts dazu sagen! (*They were carried outside/ I could say nothing about it*). These are the last words prior to the sudden change announced in the first song by the glockenspiel, in the same rhythmic configuration of two equal strokes (quarters). But before that, one must make some observations regarding the strophe preceding the last section. Here, the chromatism is used on a large scale, thus the discourse coming in accordance with the parent's desperate state of mind; nevertheless, the main tonality is declared by the pedal point on *d*, which sustains the entire edifice.

This time, the return of the glockenspiel receives a special brightness and is upheld by the harp (with the indication *sf*), piccolo and cello which, within the same measure, rapidly describe a *decrescendo* from *fortissimo* to *piano*. The way Mahler uses the piccolo in this particular case is essentially different from the ironic part the instrument receives in other works. The highest range and the indication *ff* entitle us to look at its intervention as symbolizing the first ray of light, which disperses the darkness of the storm. The telescopic technique, identified by Mitchell as one of the most important elements to define Mahler's unique style, is present here through the repetition of the storm motive even after the appearance of the first signs of light. Actually, this motive will occur up to the last measure.

The light wins the battle with the storm and, for the first time in this song cycle, one can feel a sense of resignation. The pain and the sufferance are finally being accepted. Right in this moment, Mahler introduces a lullaby, on the first words of the

poem which, instead of the reproach from the beginning, are followed by the words *Sie ruh'n* (*they rest*). The diverse colors of the orchestra in the lullaby determined Donald Mitchell to consider it as a foreshadowing of what was to become the technique of *Klangfarbenmelodie*. The resolution of the conflict begins here, as Mahler prepares the final modulation to D major. Once again, the composer fully demonstrates his brilliant imagination: besides the achievement of the rhymes between *Braus*, *Saus*, *Graus* and *hinaus*, he completes them, in the final verses, with a final consolation, *Mutter Haus*. The lullaby gradually fades, leaving way for an orchestral postlude that functions as an echo of it, in which Mahler brings the D major, this time for good.

3 Conclusions

Although he uses a large orchestra, Mahler often subordinates the writing to the rigors of chamber music and abandons the massive sonorities in favor of more intimate and rarefied ones. This justifies the often asserted opinion that the 20th century concept of chamber orchestra was born with *Kindertotenlieder*. Nevertheless, the cycle makes reference, as we have already seen, to later symphonies, but without being mere sketches of them. Finished, according to Alma Mahler, in the same time with *Symphony No. 4*, *Kindertotenlieder* bears a series of similarities of writing, the most evident of which one encounters in the last song and the end of the symphony. The rhythmic and melodic pattern finds its echoes in the horn theme of the slow introduction to the last movement of the symphony.

The general frame of the work is not a mere consequence of joining the five songs, interrelated through a common subject dictated by the content of the poems. It represents a synthesis which implies, along with the aspects of form, aspects of instrumentation: we refer especially to the symbols Mahler endows his instruments with, of which the most significant is the glockenspiel. Furthermore, *Kindertotenlieder* and the other song cycles as well are the examples of a conception that goes well beyond the traditional model of a melody accompanied by the orchestra. The idea of an accompaniment itself made way for a perfect balanced dialectics between the vocal part and the symphonic one. In *Kindertotenlieder*, the voice is embraced by a polyphonic texture, which switches the attention from the concrete dimension of the poetic text to a general emotional state – that

“sentimental abstraction”, according to Étienne Souriau, towards which musical semiotics leans.

Even if the songs does not reveal, musically speaking, a thematic unity as *Das Lied von der Erde*, the architectural dimension of the entire cycle is the more significant if one considers the two stages of its composition. The tonal organization, through its concentric disposal, is the one giving the sense of unity, as *Kindertotenlieder* is built in a small circle of tonalities, featuring d minor, c minor, E flat major and D major. This concentric pattern represents a characteristic of Mahler’s late thinking and a step forward compared to the progressive type in earlier works.

Except for the second poem, with its mystical connotations, the other four have in common the reference to the interior space: along with explicit words (*tent*, *room*, *inside*, *home*, *house*), one can detect an omnipresent feeling that the parent has withdrawn in a shelter which sensitizes him through his sufferance. If, as Gaston Bachelard puts it in *The Poetics of Space*, “every shelter, refuge, room has consonant dream values” and “through dreams, the various dwellings of our life intermingle and preserve the treasures of the ancient days” [4], the tragedy of the father losing his children find its highest expression in his desire to see his daughter entering the house once again (*Wenn dein Mütterlein*) or to witness the children’s return from their walk (*Oft denk’ich*). “If we were asked about the house’s greatest blessing”, Bachelard continues, “we would say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows us to peacefully dream” [5]. Thus, it is the space that strengthens the parent’s denial to accept his children’s premature death.

The *inside-outside* dichotomy, which can be aesthetically extended to the conceptual *ideal-real* polarity, becomes the carrier of positive or negative messages: in the interior defined space of the house, the children are safe, whereas the vast exterior dimension is perceived as an abyss in which the light of their eyes follows its path back to the originate infinite. “Through inside and outside”, Bachelard notes, “the philosopher thinks the being and the non-being” [6].

References:

- [1] See Christopher O. Lewis, ‘On the Chronology of the *Kindertotenlieder*’, *Revue Mahler Review*, 1, BMGM, Paris, 1987
- [2] This statement can be found in Theodor Reik’s *The Haunting Melody*, although one was still

not able to discover Reik's source for this quotation.

- [3] Herbert Killian (Hsgb.), *Gustav Mahler in den Erinnerungen von Natalie Bauer-Lechner*, Hamburg, Verlag der Musikalienhandlung Karl Dieter Wagner, 1984, p. 193

[4] Gaston Bachelard, *Poetica spațiului (The Poetics of Space)*, Paralela 45, 2003, p. 37

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 38

[6] *Ibidem*, p. 239.