MAHLER'S "GÖTTERFUNKEN" A GUIDE TO THE FIRST MOVEMENT OF THE EIGHTH

For the ASO Chorus by Jeffrey Baxter October 1, 2019

Much has been written and said about Mahler's massive "Symphony of a Thousand." So, to help you make sense of the seeming chaos (especially involved in learning the first movement!) I offer below a brief guide to the composer's organizing principles as they appear in the opening movement to his Eighth Symphony.

-But to understand any part, it is best to step back and get a glimpse of the whole:

Eight of Nine

Composed in a white-hot creative flash, between June and August of 1906 (with final touches the following summer), the 8th Symphony was not performed until Mahler led the premiere in 1910 (and then died eight months later).

It is interesting to note that while several of his nine Symphonies involve solo voices and/or choirs (the 2nd, 3rd and 4th), the 8th is the only one that involves singing from start to finish – using the human voice as a musical instrument. Mahler wrote that, while working on the piece, it was as if "the whole universe burst into song."

The Inspiration

As his correspondence reveals, Mahler harbored a secret desire to someday create a fitting grand-scale musical setting of the final scene of Part II of Goethe's *Faust* and that it was not until he stumbled upon the ancient Latin Pentecostal hymn, "Veni creator spiritus," that the idea took hold of how to accomplish it. So, what could this 8th century liturgical text have to do with a German Romantic poetic-drama written 1000 years later?

In his epic E-flat Major setting of the Latin hymn, Mahler took his inspiration from the text's evocation of the divine spark of creation (as Schiller's "divine sparks" ["Götterfunken"] inspired Beethoven in his 9th). He saw this text as a fitting introduction to Goethe's version of the Faust legend, which ends in salvation, not damnation. -And in it, he created a vast aural universe – with carefully structured musical themes and forms taking us beyond the mere dictionary equivalents of words – that transcends the world of opposites referenced in both texts: darkness and light, good and evil, infirmity and health, head and heart, death and life, male and female, and – in the most Freudian sense– conscious and subconscious (Mahler even intuited this in his splitting of the choral forces in two: Choir I and II). Faust's ultimate enlightenment and transcendence becomes ours, in a blaze of Mahlerian (Apollonian) glory.

Two Parts in Four Movements

Though Mahler divided and labeled his 8th Symphony in two "parts" (the Latin part and the German part), he actually constructed this work in the traditional Viennese Classical four-movement symphonic form:

Part I, a setting of the Latin Pentecostal Hymn "Veni creator spiritus," is Movement No.1

Part II, a setting of the final section of Part II of Goethe's Faust, comprises:

Mvt. 2. (Slow movement) T/B "Waldung, sie schwankt heran" – our pages 64-72, Figures [1]-[56] (then, Fig. [56]-[62] which serve as an Introduction to:)

Mvt. 3. (Scherzo) S/A "Gerettet ist das edle Glied" - pp. 74-81, Fig. [63]-[99]

Mvt. 4. (Finale) T/B "Jungfrau, rein im schönsten Sinne" – pp. 82-109, Fig. [100]-end.

Movement I - The Whole

The movement is cast in a grand Sonata-Allegro form:

Exposition – with the customary use of contrasting themes in different key-areas

Development – a thorough working-out of the thematic material, in dramatic fashion

Recapitulation – the reappearance (re-"birth") of the musical themes in the Tonic (home) key

Coda – a closing section with Beethovenian elements of continued compression and energy

Movement I - The Parts

Mahler fashions four ingenious musical themes that become the organic basis for the entire symphony, providing leitmotiv-like commentary, correlation, and elucidation on both texts (the Latin Hymn and the Goethe poem):

Theme 1. – a "Fanfare" theme, marked by a descending 4th (in E-flat Major)



Theme 1a. – a "March" theme in ascending motion, over a "walking" bass, at Fig. [3] (in E-flat Major)



Theme 2. – a contrasting, lyrical theme filled with "divine grace" for "Imple superna gratia" (in D-flat Major)



Theme 2a. – another contrasting, "comforting" theme for "Qui Paraclitus diceris" (in A-flat Major, and later, Minor)



Movement I – Form EXPOSITION

E-flat
E-flat
D-flat
A-flat
E-flat

Codetta (of Exposition)

Unison vocal cadence, Closing section (orchestral transition) [17] - [19] E-flat

DEVELOPMENT

Theme 1, inverted on "virtute perpiti" [22] - [23] deceptive cadence to: E-flat

Th. 1, in Horns and WW, inverted and segmented: [23] - [30] B/A-flat ped.

orchestral depiction of thematic "battlefield," w/ A-flat pedal pnt.(tolling bell)

Altered Th. 1, in solo bass, now in octave leaps, on "Infirma," [30] C# Minor

Th. 2a, in solo Alto 2, on "firmans perpeti," [31]-[37] C# Minor, to F-Major, to D-Major

Orchestral "lumen," over B-pedal, [37], to

*Theme 1 as unison statement of "Accende lumen sensibus" [38] - [42]

Th. 1a's "walking bass" under chromatic "enemy" ["Hostem"] repelled, [42] - [46]

E-Major

E-Major

E-Major

-unstable, parenthetical harmony leads to:

Double-fugue at [46] on Th. 1 in coro I Bass, "ductore praevio," and E-flat

Th. 1a "March" in coro II S/A, "Te ductore sic vitemus"

Th. 1a "March" in augmentation (coro I, Sopr) [50], over E-flat

Th. 1 (coro I, Bass)

Th. 1a "March" in unis. augmentation (solo voices) [54], over A-flat

Th. 1 (Vc/Cb)

Return of "Accende" theme and Th. 1 (basses) [55] - [58] E-Major Combination of three themes: Th. 1, 1a, and 2, at [58] E-flat

RECAPITULATION

Th. 1 "Fanfare" over a 6/4 pedal point (B-flat), [64] - [66]	E-flat
Th. 2a (before Th. 2), in coro I Tenor, now in Tonic key [69] - [76]	E-flat
Th. 2 (formerly in D-flat), now in subdominant, in coro II Tenor) [76]	A-flat
-to unis. choral cadence in A-flat [79]	A-flat
Orchestral Interlude [80] - [82] to:	E-Major

CODA

"Infirma" octave-theme from [30] becomes 'Gloria Patri" in Knabenchor [83] D-flat

(Coda starts in original tonality of Th. 2)

Return of Tonic, tutti "Gloria" Th. 1 [84] - [89] E-flat

Stretto to end [89], incl. plagal cadence at [91]

^{*}The "Golden Mean" around Fig. [38] (.618 of the movement's ca. 25-minute duration)

Movement I - Some Interesting Details

1. Diminution (or compression of energy)

As soon as the dynamic Theme 1 is introduced in meas. 2, it is immediately echoed by an energized, all quarternote version of itself in the trombones:



2. Thematic Transformation

At the start of the Development section at [19], Mahler cleverly "weakens" Theme 1 by the use of an unstable augmented triad: (F-A-C#) to highlight the text about human weakness, "Infirma nostri corporis."

3. March to Victory

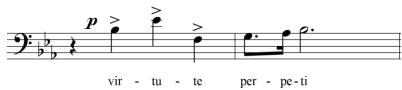
The constant eighth-note "walking bass" found in the strings underneath Theme 1a's March, at [3], is used to great effect in the Development section, at [42], as a fortissimo undergirding bass-line while the harmonically unstable chromatic "enemy" is repelled ["Hostem repellas"].

4. Hidden Themes

Theme 2a, at [12] on "Qui Paraclitus diceris" actually appears earlier, in the eighth measure of Mvt. I, at [1], as an accompanimental figure in Violins I and II. -Perhaps to equate the "creator spiritus" with the "comforter," connecting sorrow and joy, both of which are sensed in the various versions of this theme? It is a subtle, almost unnoticed device that was most surely both intuited and intentional on the part of an "in-tune" master-composer.

5. Inversion

An inversion of Theme 1 is heard for the first time after [22], heard first in the Choir II Bass (and Trombone), then Soprano of Choir I:



As if holding a mirror to reality, here Mahler suggests the frailties of human flesh ["Infirma nostri corporis"] may be strengthened by the creative spirit's perpetual power ["virtute perpeti"]. This is the first time of many uses of this inversion of the "Veni creator" theme at key points in the work, especially in the Symphony's final measures, after [220], suggesting the ultimate salvation (or enlightenment and transcendence) in the union of the pairs of opposites in the Faust story.

6. The Golden Mean, or .618

Amidst all the clamor and excitement, Mahler never loses his way, or more importantly his intuitive sense of proportion: the "Golden Mean," or structural and emotional highpoint, occurs at exactly the right moment – around Fig. [38] (.618 of the total number of measures in this movement and just over halfway durationally). Mahler instinctively sensed this moment as the artistic apex. Structurally, this is the Development section, and here the composer momentarily pauses and takes us away from E-flat Major to the distant realm of E-Major.

This blazing burst of E-Major orchestral sunlight at [37] is the same key for Mater Gloriosa's first (non-vocal) appearance in Part II at [106]. The fact that Mahler's releases his ray of hope over a 6/4 sonority (a pedal bass note on B-natural) evokes a sense of "Hope:" one hovers above the "ground" of this "un-rooted" (non root-position) sonority, waiting to exhale in ecstatic anticipation (a technique employed by Brahms and frequently adapted by Mahler's tone-poem contemporary, Richard Strauss).

The Choruses' unison answer of "Acende lumen sensibus" here at [38], indicates that light ["lumen"] and love ["amorem"] win the orchestral "battle" (with its alarum bells that had sounded at [23]). The martial dotted accompanimental rhythms in the orchestra are now trounced over by the material chanted by the chorus victorious.

7. (More) Thematic Transformation

At [30], in the Development section, Mahler alters Theme 1 (in the solo bass), now in octave leaps and in C#-Minor, on "Infirma."



This altered form of Theme 1 becomes the Knabenchor's "Gloria Patri," at [83], the start of Mvt. I's Coda:



8. Double Fugue

One very clever technique employed in Mahler's development of the thematic material is the choice of a double-fugue on theme 1 and 1a, at [46], at the text, "Ductore sic te praevio" ["Leader, with you preceding"]. Mahler was doubtless inspired by (and reminded of) the old Latin technical terms for composing contrapuntal (imitative) music – specifically canons – where the first melody heard was called "dux" ["leader"], and the imitative melody that followed was called "comes" ['follower"]. This composer "leads" with a whirlwind of contrapuntal wizardry in a double-fugue that is "followed" by yet another section, at [58], where three themes (1, 1a, and 2) are all combined in a frenzied rush to the Recapitulation at [64].

9. Triumphant Return

The Recapitulation of Mvt. I's main thematic material, and its home key of E-flat Major, occurs over a dramatic Bach-like use of pedal-point, at [64]. As in many a great Fugue of Bach, the near final statement of the subject is given in dramatic fashion over a pedal-bass (the fifth of the chord), here, a B-flat. In Mahler's hands, it lends both an unsettled sense of arrival and anticipation. We have "arrived" at this point in the musical journey, but the familiar "landscape" of E-flat seems different, transformed. We experience it in a new light, after what Mahler has put us through in the Development section. Themes return, some in the Tonic (home) and some re-ordered.

Theme 2a comes first, at [69], followed by Theme 2 (which Mahler carefully delays until after [76], now setting it in the subdominant key of A-flat Major. This allows his Coda of "Gloria Patri" at [83] to be in D-flat Major, and thus saving the final inexorable root-position *fortissimo* exhale (or proclamation) of E-flat Major for the final pages, at [89], with choirs shouting antiphonally.

All of this, of course, with a nod to Beethoven at [91], and the final measures of "Amen" in the Credo of his *Missa solemnis*, with the upwards sweep of subdominant scales. However, here at [91] the ascending scales are sung *fortissimo* by the chorus at a breakneck speed. It is a grand plagal cadence, recalling not only Beethoven's mighty work but the spirit of Bach as well – and presented only as a mind like Mahler's could conceive.

A Black "Whole?"

There are those who wonder if the Symphony No. 8 is Mahler's best effort. They question whether the two poems really belong together and whether the composer makes the best case for them in one work. -And then there are those skeptical of an overstated late-Romantic piece requiring such enormous performing forces and the massive sonority they can generate – a Dionysian free-for-all where the depth of the ocean cannot always be judged by the height of its waves. But here one finds a master-composer who has crafted a work of genius that unites technique (Apollo) and spirit (Dionysus) – head and heart – taking his cue from the ancient Latin text, to "enkindle our minds with light" and "fill our hearts with love."

If there were any question that – as Robert Shaw often mused – the inverse of the Biblical phrase, "And the Word was made flesh," could be true, it is nowhere more positively and emphatically answered than here, in Mahler's Eighth. There are few instances of human endeavor where the world of opposites is so eloquently united. -And a century later (like Beethoven before him), Mahler continues to make a strong case for the hope of a spark of divinity in all of humanity.