Song of the Earth: A Week with Gustav Mahler

The School of Music pays tribute to the celebrated late-Romantic Austrian composer, Gustav Mahler

Saturday, January 11, 2014, 8:00 p.m.
Pre-concert talk at 7:30 p.m. with Harald Krebs

Phillip T. Young Recital Hall
MacLaurin Building, University of Victoria
Adults: $17.50 / Students & seniors: $13.50
Das Lied von der Erde
Gustav Mahler (1860–1911)
arr. Arnold Schönberg / Rainer Riehn

1. Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde
2. Der Einsame im Herbst
3. Von der Jugend
4. Von der Schönheit
5. Der Trunkene im Frühling
6. Der Abschied

Suzanne Snizek, flute & piccolo
Alexandra Pohran Dawkins, oboe & English horn
Patricia Kostek, clarinet & bass clarinet
Jenny Gunter, bassoon
Alana Despines, horn
Michelle Mares, piano
Harald Krebs, harmonium & celeste
Aaron Mattock & Alexei Paish, percussion
Ann Elliott-Goldschmid & Sharon Stanis, violin
Joanna Hood, viola
Pamela Highbough Aloni, cello
Alex Olsen, double bass
Benjamin Butterfield, tenor
Nathaniel Watson, baritone
Ajtony Csaba, conductor (Der Abschied)
1907 was a difficult year for Gustav Mahler. In July, his daughter Maria died of scarlet fever. Soon thereafter, Mahler was diagnosed with a dangerous heart condition. Furthermore, he felt compelled to give up his longstanding directorship of the Vienna Court Opera because, in his own words, “he could no longer endure the rabble.” On the one hand, he was happy to be rid of the tensions that the position brought with it, but on the other, he missed it and became nervous and irritable.

Although Mahler’s creative capacities lay fallow during 1907, the events of this year left their mark on his major composition of the following year—Das Lied von der Erde. In October 1907, the poet Hans Bethge published a volume of poems based on works by Li Po and other Chinese poets, entitled The Chinese Flute. It is uncertain when this volume came into Mahler’s hands, but during 1908 he began to draft settings of seven of Bethge’s poems and to forge them into a unique song-symphony composed of six songs or movements (the final song sets two related poems). Mahler prepared versions of the work for voices and piano and for voices and orchestra; the voices were to be alto and tenor in alternation, with the alto potentially replaced by baritone. The version to be performed tonight is an arrangement (begun by Arnold Schoenberg in 1921, and completed in the 1980s by the German composer Rainer Riehn) for chamber ensemble, including piano, harmonium and celeste. Since the scoring of Mahler’s full orchestral version is for the most part delicate and economical, an arrangement for smaller ensemble works exceedingly well.

The poems Mahler selected focus on various significant aspects of life, and, not surprisingly, given Mahler’s recent experiences, on death. In the first song, entitled “Drinking Song of the Sorrow of the Earth,” we three times hear the refrain “Dark is life, [dark] is death,” and at the shattering climax we are confronted with the horrifying image of an ape crouched on a grave, howling out into the night. Mahler’s music for this text, however, possesses a triumphant élan that suggests the surmounting of the darkness of death. In the melancholy second song, “The Lonely Man in Autumn,” autumnal images such as mist, frost, wind, and withered leaves are juxtaposed with allusions to fatigue and the need for comfort and love. The third, fourth, and fifth songs, “Of Youth,” “Of Beauty,” and “The Drunkard in Springtime,” are lighter in mood, both poetically and musically. The poem that underlies “Of Youth” refers to a group of friends drinking, chatting, and writing verses; the music is dominated by flowing eighth notes tracing the pentatonic scale. “Of Beauty” relates an encounter between a group of beautiful maidens and a horde of macho horsemen. The maidens’ charms are evoked by gentle, graceful music that again features the pentatonic scale, whereas the brief intrusion of the men is represented by appropriately loud and forceful music of a martial character. The “Drunkard in Springtime” spends his life drinking.
singing, and sleeping, caring nothing for the passing of time. Mahler’s music recaptures the bacchantic energy of the first song without, however, returning to its tragic quality.

The sixth and final song, “The Farewell,” is as long as the others put together. The first of the two poems that Mahler selected for this song describes a man waiting for his friend in the beauty of evenfall. In the second poem, the friend has come but, in search of rest for his lonely heart, is about to depart again on a long journey. There is no doubt that this is the journey of death—but here, in contrast to the first song, death is represented in a gentle, transcendent light. The close of Mahler’s music, suffused with ethereal arpeggios from the celeste, creates the effect of looking down at the beauty of the world from an increasing distance as the final journey into eternity begins.

Mahler was concerned about the effect of this work on the public; he asked his student Bruno Walter (who was destined to conduct the premiere of Das Lied in 1911, after Mahler’s death) whether listeners wouldn’t go out and commit suicide after hearing it. May our listeners’ reactions after tonight’s performance rather be like those of Schoenberg and Webern after playing through the score (as described in a letter from Webern to Berg): “We could not speak”!

Harald Krebs
I. Drinking Song of the Sorrow of the Earth (by Li-Po/Hans Bethge)

The wine already beckons in the golden goblet,
But do not drink yet – first, I shall sing you a song!
The song of sorrow shall resound
Laughingly in your soul. When sorrow draws near,
The gardens of the soul lie desolate,
Joy and song wilt away and die.
Dark is life, [dark] is death.

Master of this house,
Your cellar holds an abundance of golden wine!
This lute here I call my own!
Strumming on the lute and emptying glasses –
These are the things that go together.
A full goblet of wine at the proper moment
Is worth more than all the kingdoms of the world!
Dark is life, [dark] is death.

The heavens are forever blue, and the earth
Shall stand firm for a long time and burgeon in spring.
But you, Man, how long then shall you live?
Not a hundred years are you allowed to take pleasure
In all the rotten trumpery of this earth!
Dark is life, [dark] is death.

Look down there!
In the moonlight, on the graves crouches
A wild, ghostly figure. It is an ape!
Do you hear how its howls shrill out
Into the sweet fragrance of life!
Now take the wine! Now it is time, comrades!
Empty your golden goblets to the bottom!
Dark is life, [dark] is death!

II. The Lonely Man in Autumn (by Ch’ien-Ch’i/Hans Bethge)

Blue autumn mists undulate over the lake;
All grasses stand there, coated with frost;
One might think an artist had strewn jade dust
Over all the fine blossoms.

The sweet fragrance of the flowers has dissipated;
A cold wind bends their stems downward.
Soon the wilted, golden leaves
Of the lotus flowers shall drift on the water.
My heart is weary. My small lamp
Went out with a sputter;
It urges me to go to sleep.
I come to you, familiar place of rest!
Yes, give me rest – I have need of refreshment!

I weep much in my solitudes.
The autumn in my heart is lasting too long.
Sun of love, will you never shine again,
Gently to dry my bitter tears?

III. Of Youth (by Li-Po/Hans Bethge)

In the middle of the little pond
Stands a pavilion of green
And white porcelain.

Like the back of a tiger,
The jade bridge arches
Across toward the pavilion.

In the little house sit friends,
Finely dressed; they drink, chat,
Some write verses down.

Their silk sleeves slide
Back, their silk caps
Perch jauntily far back on their necks.

On the little pond’s still
Surface, all things appear
Strangely mirrored.

Everything standing on its head
In the pavilion of green
And white porcelain;

The bridge seems like a half-moon,
Its arch inverted. Friends,
Finely dressed, are drinking and chatting.

IV. Of Beauty (by Li-Po/Hans Bethge)

Young maidens pick flowers,
Pick lotus flowers at the water’s edge.
Among bushes and leaves they sit,
Gather blossoms in their laps and call
To one another teasingly.
Golden sunlight weaves about the figures,  
Mirroring them in the shining water. 
The sun reflects their slender limbs,  
Their sweet eyes,  
And the zephyr caressingly lifts the fabric  
Of their sleeves, wafting the magic  
Of their lovely fragrance through the air.

Oh see, what handsome young men disport themselves  
There along the shore on their mettlesome horses,  
Glittering out into the distance like sunbeams;  
Already among the branches of the green willows,  
The fresh-faced young men are approaching at a trot!  
The horse of one whinnies merrily  
And shies and speeds away;  
Over flowers and grasses, its hooves are stumbling,  
Abruptly trampling the fallen blossoms in its stormy flight.  
Ah, how wildly its mane flutters in its frenzy,  
How hotly its nostrils steam!  
Golden sunlight weaves about the figures,  
Mirroring them in the shining water.

And the fairest of the maidens sends  
Long glances of yearning after him. pretence  
Her proud demeanour is mere pretence.  
In the glistening of her great eyes,  
In the darkness of her ardent glance,  
Still lingers lamentingly the agitation of her heart.

V. The Drunkard in Springtime (by Li-Po/Hans Bethge)

If life is only a dream,  
Why then toil and vexation?  
I drink until I can drink no more,  
The whole, livelong day!

And when I cannot drink any more,  
Because my gullet and my soul are full,  
I stagger to my doorstep  
And sleep wondrously well!

What do I hear as I awaken? Listen!  
A bird sings in the tree.  
I ask him whether it is already spring –  
I feel as if I were dreaming.

The bird twitters, “Yes! Spring  
Is here, it has come overnight!”  
Out of my profound gazing I took note.  
The bird sings and laughs!
I fill my goblet afresh
And drain it to the bottom
And sing, until the rising moon shines forth
Upon the dark firmament!

And when I can sing no more,
I fall asleep again,
For of what concern is spring to me?
Let me be drunk!

**VI. The Farewell**

The sun departs behind the mountains.
Into all the valleys, evening descends
With its shadows, replete with coolness.
Oh look! Like a silver boat,
The moon floats upward on the blue lake of the heavens.
I feel the wafting of a light breeze
Behind the dark spruces!

The brook sings euphoniously through the darkness.
The flowers grow pale in the twilight.
The earth breathes, full of peace and sleep,
And all yearning wishes to dream now.
Weary people walk homeward,
In their sleep to learn anew
Forgotten happiness and youth!
The birds crouch silently in their branches.
The world falls asleep!

A cool breeze blows in the shadows of my spruce trees.
I stand here and wait for my friend;
I wait to bid him a final farewell.
I yearn, my friend, at your side
To enjoy the beauty of this evening.
Where do you tarry? You leave me alone for so long!
I wander up and down with my lute
On paths swelling with soft grass.
Oh beauty! Oh world, intoxicated with eternal love and life!
[by Mong-Kao-Jen/Hans Bethge]

He dismounted and handed him the drink
Of parting. He asked him where
He would go, and also why it had to be.
He spoke, his voice was veiled: My friend,
On this earth, fortune was not kind to me!
Where do I go? I go, I wander into the mountains.
I seek peace for my lonely heart.
I wander toward my homeland, the place where I belong.
I shall never stray into the distance.
Quiet is my heart, waiting for its hour!
The dear earth everywhere
Burgeons in spring and greens
Afresh! Everywhere and eternally,
Distant places grow blue and bright!
Eternally... eternally...
[by Wang-Wei/Hans Bethge]

Translations into English by Emily Ezust and Harald Krebs

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Portions of Deryk Barker’s extensive collection of historical recordings of Mahler’s work were made available for the Mahler Listening Room and graduate student Michael Dias was Technical and Volunteer Coordinator for the audio/visual sessions. Both are sincerely thanked for their contributions and their enthusiasm for A Week with Gustav Mahler.

Many thanks to David Barss for the use of his harmonium.
Benjamin Butterfield, tenor

Regarded by the Washington Post as a tenor who sings “…with taste, authority and agility…”, Benjamin Butterfield has performed across North America, throughout Europe and in Asia. Recent highlights have included Haydn’s Die Schöpfung with the Orchestra of St. Lukes at Carnegie Hall, Mendelssohn’s Elijah at the Kennedy Center and Mozart arias and duets with the American Classical Orchestra at Lincoln Center in New York. Upcoming engagements include Mozart’s Requiem with the Augusta Symphony, Bach’s B minor Mass with the Bach Choir of Bethlehem and touring with pianist Arthur Rowe to the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas performing Janacek’s The diary of one who disappeared. Mr. Butterfield has recorded for Analekta, Dorion, CBC, Koch and Timpani.

Nathaniel Watson, baritone

Baritone Nathaniel Watson is a versatile artist who has performed successfully in a wide variety of musical styles. Originally from Boston, Mr. Watson attended the Eastman School of Music and Yale University. Career highlights have included performing in Der Freischütz with the New York Philharmonic under Sir Colin Davis, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony under Kurt Masur, and in Carnegie Hall with Sir Roger Norrington. He has appeared with the Boston Early Music Festival, Tanglewood and at the Utrecht Festival in Holland, as well as being featured in the Salzburg Festival production of Weill’s Mahagonny. Recent seasons have included performances of Bach’s Christmas Oratorio with Nicholas McGegan and the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra; Messiah with the National Symphony at the Kennedy Center; Mahler’s 8th Symphony with Orchestre symphonique de Québec; and Handel’s Semele with Pacific Opera Victoria. He is featured in recordings of the Bach Passions: the St. Matthew with American Bach Soloists (San Francisco), and the St. John with Arion Baroque Orchestra (Montreal).
UPCOMING EVENTS

Sunday, January 12, 2:30 p.m. ($17.50 & $13.50)
FACULTY CONCERT SERIES: Eugene Dowling, tuba
With Michelle Mares, piano and the Pinnacle Brass Quintet
A mostly Canadian concert with works by Barbara York, Elizabeth Raum, Oskar Morawetz, David L. MacIntyre, Murray Adaskin, André Previn and Malcolm Arnold.
Phillip T. Young Recital Hall

Tuesday, January 14, 8:00 p.m. (Admission by donation)
VIOLA CLASS RECITAL
Students from the studio of Joanna Hood perform works by
Bach, Brahms, Doheny, and Prokofiev.
Phillip T. Young Recital Hall

Wednesday, January 22, 12:30 p.m. (Free admission)
LIEDER AT LUNCH: Hollywood Elegies
An exploration of the German Lied repertoire with Sharon and Harald Krebs.
The Hollywood Elegies of Hanns Eisler and Bertolt Brecht. Bring your lunch!
Rm. B037, MacLaurin Building B-Wing

Saturday, January 25, 2:30 p.m. (Admission by donation)
SAXOPHONE CLASS RECITAL
Students from the studio of Wendell Clanton.
Phillip T. Young Recital Hall

Saturday, January 25, 8:00 p.m. (Admission by donation)
VOICE SHOWCASE
Students from the studios of Benjamin Butterfield, Susan Young and Anne Grimm.
Phillip T. Young Recital Hall

Sunday, January 26, 1:00 p.m. (Admission by donation)
CLARINET CLASS RECITAL
Students from the studio of Patrician Kostek.
Phillip T. Young Recital Hall

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