# The Harvard Radcliffe Orchestra

Gilbert Levine, guest conductor



Sanders Theatre Harvard University May 2, 1987 8:00 P.M.

# The Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra

GILBERT LEVINE, Guest Conductor

JIM ROSS, Resident Conductor

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

## Ninth Symphony

- I. Andante comodo
- II. Im Tempo eines gemöhlichen Ländler
- III. Rondo-Burleske: Allegro assai Sehr trotzig
- IV. Adagio: Sehr langsam und noch Zurückhaltend

Saturday, May 2, 1987, 8:00 o'clock Sanders Theatre, Harvard University

#### **Program Notes**

Gustav Mahler Ninth Symphony

Mahler's Ninth Symphony is a deeply tragic work whose darkness is neither poetic nor metaphorical, but rather the musical response to a death sentence. Diagnosis of a fatal heart condition hit the composer with brutal shock. At age 47 Mahler found himself staring suddenly into the depths of a void. As he wrote to his protegé Bruno Walter, "Without trying to explain or describe something for which there probably are no words, I simply say that at a single stroke I have lost any calm and peace of mind I ever achieved. I stand *vis-a-vis de rien* [face to face with nothing], and now, at the end of my life, I have to begin to learn to walk and stand." The Ninth Symphony is the result of this lesson, and is the musical expression of a tragic dilemma of life and death. Confronted with the specter of personal extinction, Mahler made this symphony the tragic testament of a desperate will to live, stung by the inescapable knowledge of his own dying.

The symphony has four movements grouped in three main divisions (I; II and III; IV) of approximately equal length. The first division corresponds to the first movement Andante comodo, which presents in sonata form the paradox of passionate attachment to living twined with the agonizing knowledge of his rapidly approaching death. The next division, consisting of the middle two movements, further develops the unresolved tension of this paradox in an entirely different light, full of bitter irony and furious energy. Mahler instinctively connected his strongest feelings of tragedy with a mordant sense of farce, and in these middle movements this "second dimension" of tragedy is used to extend, relieve and, ultimately, to intensify the original paradox. To this tension the Adagio brings musical resolution in a passionate farewell of infinite strength, and the cry of something beyond sorrow. It acts as the recapitulation of the first movement's high tragedy in the light of resolution. In a sense, the whole symphony is constructed as a sonata of successive exposition, development and resolution organized around a single tension of life and death musically expressed. The overall harmonic plan of the symphony appears to have been formed with this goal in mind, and, indeed, Mahler wrote all four movements simultaneously, not successively, designing them from the start as an integrated whole preparing the resolution of the Adagio.

#### I. ANDANTE COMODO

The first movement is the song of a dying heart, loving life but dying, and crying for life as it dies. It is founded on the concept of musical interconnection, in which the interpenetration of themes and their transformation from mood to mood expresses that tragic connection between life and death which is perhaps best exemplified by the irony of Mahler's heart condition — his heart, whose beat was the life pulse of his existence, was also the cause of his death.

The musical material presented in the first few bars (three rhythms and an open set of harmonic relationships) is the essence out of which the entire movement is developed, giving birth both to themes expressive of the most passionate sweetness and warmth, and to the hideous summons of death. The statement, opposition, and transformation of these themes into each other's opposite moods is built up in a series of rising crises, to the cataclysmic confrontation with death which is the movement's focus. Throughout this progression the death-sting which lies hidden within the main theme's passionate song (like a heart-murmur) is increasingly revealed, until it stands naked and ferocious in monstrous revelation.

The six-bar opening forms the core of the entire movement (example 1). It opens with a dotted-quarter-eight note throb (A) syncopated between celli and horn, uneven, like a bad heartbeat. It reappears in multiple forms as a sigh, a warning, and a prophecy turned hideous. The harmonic relationships presented in B and C establish the harmonic foundations and tensions on which the rest of the movement is based, and both give rise to critical components of the melody. B may be seen as a pair of ascending and descending intervals; it gives rise to the pulse-like flutter in the violas and the sighing figure heard throughout the movement, and forms the nucleus for the main theme first stated by the violins. The syncopation in C is used in the exultant brass themes of the first (ex. 2) and second (ex. 3) climaxes.



This introduction leads directly into the first subject (I), stated by the second and first violins, a sweet, sad song of a wounded heart crying out for love of life. It undergoes a darkening transformation in the brass punctuated by a grave warning, and returns in a more strident and agitated form (II) in the violins. The orchestra builds up to a hollow climax which grows, punches through in the brass (example 2), grows . . . and then vanishes into a return to a full-blooded repetition of the first theme, which is slowly undermined by modulation. This again builds through a return of II in more energetic and menacing form to a bright exultant climax which trails off into a sudden darkness. The horns offer a grim warning of what is to come (rhythm A again). But what is this new darkness? It is the introduction and main theme transformed into a phantom - let us compare this to the image of watching a loved one lie peacefully asleep, with the added detail that this time we know that she is - dead. The bassoon mutters incomprehensible threats, the violins' theme runs cold, and the horns snarl what used to be a warm sigh (ex. Bii). The celli take up the transfigured theme in a sorrowful and lonely solo which fades away

To the throbbing of a new pulse from the harp. A rising pulse, like a heart beat, beneath which slowly rise the violins, creeping upwards as if by a great struggle of half-steps up — to the sweet original theme. Such longing in this return to life! This yearning eventually becomes rage, however, and the movement launches forth into a frenzied onslaught (marked "With Rage" in the score) which hits a simultaneously tragic and exultant climax (ex. 3), and dives into a prophetic downward descent diverted from its eventual goal by a savage chord in the brass.

A new darkness surrounds us. The celli mutter the bassoon's old threat agitatedly, and the violins and full orchestra reenter with a restless and passionate tranformation of the main theme. The brass snarl out the old exultant climax theme (ex. 2), and eventually the music loses energy and sags into a mournful restatement from the brass of the climactic theme, and of the main theme from the violins. Once again the decline ends in a renewed creep upwards, the lower strings muttering a slow upward crawl while the violins struggle up to regain the main theme, which breaks through in a sweet, brief solo. The restless growth of the earlier climaxes resumes; but this time there is no stopping it from its true goal. As Alban Berg wrote, 'The whole movement is permeated by the premonition of death. Again and again it makes itself felt. All the elements of terrestrial dreaming culminate in it . . . most potently, of course, in the colossal passage where this premonition becomes certainty – when in the midst of the deepest and most painful joy in life, death announces itself "with the greatest force." ' Here is the Greatest Force - for here, at the peak of exultation in life, begins a furious descent, carefully prepared in the abortive previous climax, which here leads straight to death! A furious chord in the brass, nakedly brutal, and no less than the exact rhythm of the opening of the symphony (A). This is the End, that Mahler made his beginning. In this total darkness wails an unworldly transformation of the main theme, and an angry trumpet call punches out an insistent summons. The introduction returns as an angry ghost, and, in an angry trumpet call punches out an insistent summons. The introduction returns as an angry ghost, and, in an infinite test of strength slowly gathers force to revoice the sweet first theme, more passionately than ever, before it too becomes disfigured and bitter with something like knowledge. A cadenza wanders on as a sad parade of distortions of the first theme, culminating in a brief recollection of the original theme by a lone horn, "an echo of what might have been." (Deryck Cooke) The figure of ascending and descending intervals (B) from the introduction returns as a series of sighs descending . . . A few solos quietly heart breaking . . . The oboe holds interminably long, and the harp climbs upwards, upwards (meagre last heart beats), like a climber observed climbing a distant peak, up, ever up, until lost eternally from sight . . . And the last beat - impossibly high - then a single long tone, like the drone of an EKG machine after the last, pulse.

#### II. LANDLER

Between the stormy confrontation with death of the first movement and the passionate farewell of the Adagio come the technically and musically difficult middle movements Ländler and Rondo-Burleske. Both present radically different moods from the outer movements, and may at first seem startling, or even inappropriate. After the agonizingly unresolved sorrow of the first movement the Ländler opens as an exageratedly clumsy peasant dance whose naive charm gradually revels a tawdry and brutal underside. The movement is a loosly organized progression of three types of dances - ländler, waltz and menuet - begun with deliberately wooden charm by a ländler marked "Clumsy and very unrefined." Both charming and stupid, the ländler's simplistic and repetitious themes are nonetheless winningly naive, and offered with that brand of wry humor which is uniquely Mahler's. The waltz begins with a sudden acceleration into an agitated and energetic theme declared by the violins, building in temper to racuous fanfare from the brass, music simultaneously stirring and stupid. After renewed fanfare of this second waltz theme comes a guttural threat from the strings which becomes suspended in midair, melting away to a menuet in which the ländler's themes are presented with lush gentility. An undertone of darkness infects the music again, and it dives with renewed vigor into a return of the waltz. After a shrill rendition of the first waltz, its second theme returns as a blunt combination of charm and hysteria whose full threat is once again withheld in favor of a repeat of the menuet. Nostalgic and wistful, it dies away to a hollow rendition of the ländler by solo instruments, this time punctuated by veiled threats from the brass and winds. These threats ripen to a petulant fury in the waltz, and culminate in a return of the ländler theme as a rude curse, menace grotesquely superimposed on its former sweetness, at once both charming and snarling. The threat is resheathed again leaving behind the empty-headed ländler to end the movement, jauntily pathetic in its sweetness.

The Rondo-Burleske is perhaps one of the hardest of Mahler's compositions to understand. It has been called the "most modern" movement written by Mahler because of its "masterly structure of dissonant linear counterpoint." (Cooke) It complements the farcical mood of the Ländler with a brutal evocation of furious energy. While both moods present an ironic reflection of life, the sense of dark menace kept beneath the surface in the second movement here emerges as an invincible force whose fury reflects a bitter disgust with the chaos of life. The movement is a fascinating exercise in controlled pandemonium, based upon an elaborate contrapuntal presentation of the key melodic fragments given in the opening measures (ex. 4). This stirring uproar passes through three refrains in alternation with a jaunty grazioso section which treats the rhythms of the first section in calmer style. In the third refrain of the "furious" theme there enters a turn-like figure (ex. 5) which forms the basis of the Adagio, introduced here in the character of a jaunty band tune. The uproar is suddenly interrupted, however, by a somber fanfare of chords from the winds and brass, above which emerges the turn figure transfigured into a state of rapturous tranquility. From the very beginning, however, this new mood is undercut by subtle intrusions of the rhythmic and melodic material from the opening of the movement, and the new figure's repeated upward surges towards climactic resolution are cut deliberately short. These attempts at resolution are rudely interrupted by a return of the original form of the turn figure disfigured into a hideous joke by the winds. This marks the beginning of a transitional section in which repeated attempts to return to the beauty of the second version of the turn figure are cut short by themes from the first part of the movement, which grow gradually on an invincible swell until they sweep all before them in a victorious tide of fury. All restraint is abandoned as the movement plunges into a storm of frantic energy ever accelerating through a dizzy cascade of bombast and noise. This indignantly unpleasant music represents the final stage in the development of Mahler's musical problem of life and death so passionately set forth in the first movement. What was high tragedy in the Andante comodo has seen transformation in the Ländler to a low farce of glib and bitter irony, and in the Rondo-Burleske to a hysterically demonic despair. One of the most unnerving qualities of these middle movements is their sense of incompletion and lack of resolution. The mordant irony which turns all joy to dust, and the stormy energy building endlessly to climaxes which never arrive - that gnawing sense of incompleteness which makes the listener shift restlessly in his seat this is the essential purpose of these movements. The Rondo-Burlesque in particular can only be understood in terms of its function to intensify the tension of the first movement's dilemma by cultivating an agonizing incompleteness which cries out for resolution . . .

In a sense, the *Adagio* is a resolution of the unresolvable. It is the musical response to a dilemma of life and death which *has* no solution, a fact expressed musically as a repeated striving to rise to a tonal major resolution which is denied time and time again. The movement is built from two main thematic episodes, the first based on a passionate transfiguration of the turn figure from the third movement (ex. 6), and the second a melody of unworldly and chilling stillness (ex. 7). The movement throughout remains attached to the tonic of D flat — a half-step down from the D minor key of the opening movement — developing its internal tension not from tonal contrast but from the struggle between the two principal themes, and from the movement's function as resolution of the tensions built up through the preceeding three movements.

Rise and fall is the essence of the entire movement. It opens with a passionate declaration of the main theme from the violins surging upwards ... only to retreat back down into a warmly expressive resolution. The main theme returns and grows in strength, only to be cut off by an eery premonition of the second main theme from the bassoon. This in turn is swept away by a full-blooded return of the main theme in its most expressive strength. Two new elaborations worth noting are introduced: an inverted variant on the original turn, and a modified version of the tragic fanfare from the first movement (ex. 8) which captures exactly the sense of a desperate and passionate attachment to living expressed here. Again it is cut short in upward surge, vanishing suddenly to a void. A dark theme (ex. 7) devoid of passion or sorrow takes over, unwinding slowly with a neutrality terrifying in its emptimess, a message of something not of this world. After a struggle the motto theme reemerges triumphant, and again its climactic rise toward the heavens stops short in a plunge back to earth - but what a plunge! Not a fall but a passionate, powerful plunge that knows nothing of surrender, back into the heart of a courageous declaration of the motto-turn theme. A grim warning from the brass ensues, but the motto pushes forward undetered into the shadows. The next return of the underworld theme is clouded with ambiguous connections to the main theme that seem to be bringing them to a sorrowful linkage, until the main theme itself reemerges victorious, rising to an earthshattering climax. Once again, the retreat from the heights is anything but resigned, but rather a passionate withdrawal culminating in a fervent redeclaration of the motto theme. This brave figure makes its way through sadness to yet another powerful buildup whose climax fails to resolve upwards, but instead hangs suspended on the heights while the tragic fanfare theme makes a sorrowful descent of sighs. The ending, heartbreaking in its vanishing nobility and sweetness, evaporates everlastingly through a slow playing out of the basic themes of the movement, each time returning a little thinner and more slowly, holding on desperately to the last strands of life. And the absolute stillness between those last whispers of farewell . . . The last four notes - barely a murmur, of the original motto theme - barely a murmur . . . And then nothing.

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JAMES YANNATOS, Music Director

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Bass Clarinet

\* Concertmaster

Assistant Conductor

#### About the Artists



#### Gilbert Levine, Guest Conductor

Gilbert Levine's appearances with many American and European orchestras have earned him high acclaim from the most respected music critics. The 1985-86 season marked his debuts with the New York Philharmonic, the Toronto Symphony, the San Francisco Symphony and the Dresden Staatskapelle at the Dresden Music Festival, the first American ever to conduct that orchestra. In December 1986 he made his debut with the Philadelphia Orchestra in their main subscription

series in the Academy of Music, and appeared with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra at the Prague Spring Festival.

Gilbert Levine has also appeared with the Minnesota, Seattle, and Rochester orchestras, and has enjoyed successful collaboration with such artists as Yo-Yo Ma, Shlomo Mintz, Garrick Ohlsson, Emanuel Ax, Barry Tuckwell, Boris Christoff, Mitsuko Uchida and Salvatore Accardo. A finalist in the 1975 Herbert von Karajan International Competition, he has made guest appearances with such orchestras as the Royal Philharmonic, the NDR Orchestra of Hamburg, the RSO Berlin, the Nouvel Orchestre Philharmonique of Paris, the Danish Radio Orchestra, and the Iceland Symphony, including performances at the Reykjavik Festival founded by Vladimir Ashkenazy. In 1973, he served as the assistant to Sir Georg Solti in the RCA recording of La Boheme. From 1974 to 1980, he was Music Director of the Norwalk Symphony Orchestra, succeding Dennis Russell Davies. Mr. Levine is also an experienced opera conductor, during the 1980-81 season he conducted the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra in a performance of *Fidelio*.

Born in New York City, Gilbert Levine studied with Nadia Boulanger and Franco Ferrara, and attended Princeton, Yale, and The Juilliard School. He was a Graduate Fellow at Yale University, a Princeton University Scholar, and won a Juilliard School Honorary Scholarship. He has also received a Martha Baird Rockefeller Music Grant and a Rockefeller Foundation Creative Arts Fellowship. As a student, Levine was a protege of Klaus Tennstedt, whose high opinion of his work led to many important recommendations in the early stages of his career. He currently holds the honorary position of Associate Fellow of Trumbull College, Yale.

#### James Yannatos, Music Director

Since James Yannatos became the music director of the Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra in 1964, he has brought great success and renown to the Orchestra through his enthusiastic introduction of "contemporary" works by Bartok, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Schuller, and by bringing pieces of the established repertoire to life. He has appeared as guest conductor fo the Boston Pops, the Winnipeg, Edmonton, and San Antonio Symphony Orchestras, and as conductor-composer at the Aspen, Tanglewood, Saratoga, Chautauqua, and Banff Festivals.

Yannatos' commissions include *Cycles* (recorded by Collage), *Sounds of Desolation and Joy* for soprano Lucy Shelton, and *An Overture for the Uncommon Man* for Phi Beta Kappa. His works, performed in the U.S., Canada, and Europe, may be heard on Sonory Recordings.

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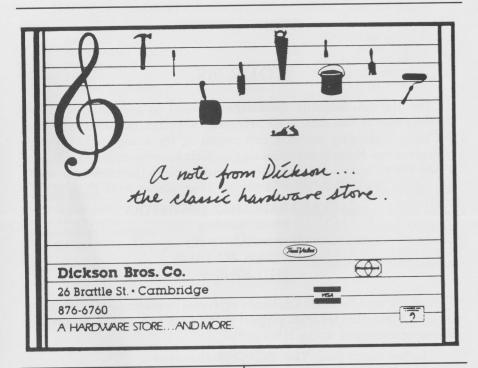
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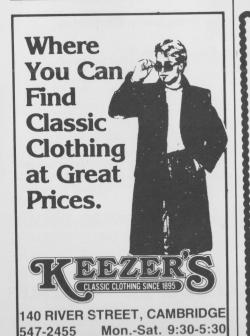
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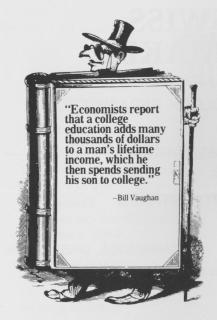
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