MAHLER AND HIS PROGRAMS VIS-À-VIS STRAUSS

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Introduction

The sometimes-amiable sometimes-abrasive relationship between Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss spanned from 1887 until Mahler's death in 1911[1]. Mahler had, by the 1890s, gained prestige as a conductor, yet Strauss's achievements as a composer, most notably with tone poems, earned the Bavarian wider fame and fortune. Around the same time as Strauss premiered *Don Juan* (1889) and *Tod und Verklärung* (1890), Mahler was working to secure performances of his own programmatic orchestral works, first the *Symphonisches Gedicht in zwei Teilen* (the initial form of the First Symphony) and later *Todtenfeier* (what became the opening movement of the Second). After disappointing results, he extensively revised both, adding descriptive movement titles and other programmatic details to the *Symphonisches Gedicht* while expanding *Todtenfeier* into a multi-movement work with a narrative program, seemingly following Strauss's lead[2]. Further unsuccessful performances followed, and Mahler grew increasingly wary of sharing programmes for his works though they inspired their composition. The so-called *Münchener Erklärung* (Munich Declaration) of 1900, his most-cited statement dismissing such explanatory descriptions, seemed to react to the negative reception of the early symphonies, which stood out in stark relief when compared to the acclaim for Strauss's orchestral output.

Assessments of Mahler's shifting approach to his programmes have generally focused on his position relative to New German School aesthetics and broader socio-cultural changes in music consumption around the turn of the century[3]. But, as Stephen Hefling (1988: 45) has pointed out, 'It remains uncertain to what extent Mahler's adoption of a program may have been influenced by the success of Strauss's early tone poems'. Were the *Münchener Erklärung* and similar statements reactions to the critical and commercial triumphs of Mahler's rival? If so, did he feel the need to differentiate himself from Strauss so as to not invite comparison while also carving out his own aesthetic space? Constantin Floros (2020: 115) recently suggested that Mahler's eventual suppression of programmes was an effort 'to distance himself from Straussian musical illustration' while also attempting to avoid misunderstanding by the listener. Yet Hefling's statement, written three decades earlier, encourages a deeper reflection on the influence Strauss's achievements in the genre exerted over Mahler's own music, perhaps elevating Strauss's role to a level greater than has been acknowledged.

This article explores Mahler's ambivalent relationship to programme music against the backdrop of his complex relationship with Strauss. Their parallel activities in the mid-1880s, when Mahler worked on what became his First Symphony and when Strauss premiered the first of his many tone poems, form a crucial context: over the years that followed, Mahler was repeatedly stung by negative reception specifically of the very large-scale programmatic works with which Strauss was enjoying tremendous success. Reflecting on their careers in tandem helps to contextualise Mahler's often-cited renunciation of programmes in October 1900, one statement among many he shared on the limitations of explanatory guides. The article then briefly compares the *Mitternachtsgedicht* in Mahler's Third Symphony and Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, works composed concurrently and which both make use of Friedrich Nietzsche's well-known text, albeit in different ways. This example, together with Mahler's revisions of the first two symphonies, illuminates how his stance on the programme shifted. Later he was clearly most concerned with comprehension, or rather felt that musical meaning transcended programmatic descriptions so much so that such narratives were unhelpful or even harmful. Mahler's earlier approaches to his own programmatic compositions, however, including what he shared with the public, were clearly bound up with Strauss's own creative output and suggest envy of his rival's success and deep frustration with his own failures.

Strauss and Mahler: 1886–1900

Just as Mahler was establishing himself as a conductor following appointments in Kassel and Prague, Strauss wrote a series of orchestral works that made him the foremost composer of the day[4]. Before starting in a coveted position at the Hofoper in Munich for which Mahler had also applied, Strauss traveled to Italy and was inspired to write the 'symphonic fantasy', *Aus Italien*. It was the first of eight tone poems he would complete in the following decade. Though he worked at one of the most important opera houses in Germany, Strauss's subordinate position as third conductor allowed him much time to compose. He finished three more tone poems while in Munich: *Macbeth* (1888), *Don Juan* (1888) and *Tod und Verklärung* (1889).

Mahler meanwhile began a new position in Leipzig in August 1886 where his reputation as a keen interpreter of Wagner spread through performances of *Rienzi* and the *Ring* cycle. In the autumn of 1887, Mahler tackled what became his first compositional success: the completion of Carl Maria von Weber's unfinished opera, *Die Drei Pintos*. Although its popularity dwindled following its premiere, performances across Europe won Mahler both name recognition and a financial windfall. He then began three ultimately more important projects: songs from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, a yet-unnamed *Symphonisches Gedicht* [symphonic poem][5] and a funeral march entitled *Todtenfeier*. Youmans ([2016: 125–6](#)) unpacks how the *Symphonisches Gedicht*, from its inception, drew upon material from Mahler's earlier songs as well as ideas from Liszt and Wagner, with further allusions to Beethoven and Berlioz. Mahler completed the work in April 1888 but it proved to be just the first of several versions. [Table 1](#) outlines the genesis of his first four symphonies and illustrates that lengthy gestation and revisions were common in Mahler's compositional process. The premieres of several tone poems by Strauss are also included for reference.

In October 1887, Mahler (aged 27) met Strauss (aged 23), who was in Leipzig to conduct a performance of his Symphony in F minor with the Gewandhaus Orchestra. Recalling this first meeting to Hans von Bülow, Strauss wrote:

> I made a new, very delightful acquaintance in Herr Mahler, who seemed to me a highly intellectual musician and conductor; one of the few modern conductors who knows about tempo modification, and who in general had excellent views, particularly on Wagner's tempi. Mahler's arrangement of Weber's *Die Drei Pintos* seems to me a masterpiece ([Schuh and Trenner 1955: 54](#)).

Bülow's evaluation of the new opera was quite the opposite, and Strauss somewhat embarrassingly retracted his glowing endorsement. In May of the next year, ongoing conflicts with management led to Mahler's dismissal at the Leipzig Stadttheater. He was soon appointed director of the Royal Hungarian Opera in Budapest, one of the most important theatres in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Mahler's most prestigious position to date. He was scheduled to begin in October and spent the foregoing summer trying unsuccessfully to arrange the premiere of the *Symphonisches Gedicht*. In his earliest extant letter to Strauss[6], Mahler asked about a possible performance in Munich, but the premiere was delayed until 20 November 1889 in Budapest, just nine days after Strauss's career-defining triumph with *Don Juan* in Weimar. Mahler shared, in advance of the performance, a detailed programmatic description of his work with Kornél Ábrányi, a local journalist, who then published an essay on Mahler and the piece the morning before the premiere. An excerpt reads as follows:

Table 1. Chronology of Mahler's Early Symphonies and Strauss's Tone Poems

1884	•	Mahler begins work on *Symphonisches Gedicht in Zwei Teilen*
1888	•	Mahler completes *Symphonisches Gedicht in Zwei Teilen*
	•	Begins work on *Todtenfeier*; pens sketches for an Andante (Second Symphony)
1889	•	Premiere of Strauss's *Don Juan*: quickly achieves international success (11 November)
	•	*Symphonisches Gedicht in Zwei Teilen* premieres in Budapest with no programme; negative reviews (20 November)
1890	•	Premiere of Strauss's *Tod und Verklärung* (21 June)
1891	•	Mahler asks Schott Verlag to publish *Todtenfeier* as a symphonic poem
1893	•	Mahler completes revisions of *Symphonisches Gedicht in Zwei Teilen*, retitled as 'Symphony ("Titan") in 5 Movements (2 Parts)' with programmatic movement titles and descriptions, Hamburg performance
	•	Resumes work on the Second Symphony (Andante and Scherzo)
	•	Initiates preliminary work on what would become the Third Symphony
1894	•	Mahler continues revising *Titan*, performance in Weimar
	•	*Todtenfeier* becomes the first movement of the re-orchestrated Second Symphony
	•	Works on the last five movements of the Third Symphony
1895	•	Mahler continues revising *Titan*
	•	Continues work on the last five movements of the Third Symphony
	•	Premiere of Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche* (5 November)
	•	First complete performance of Mahler's Second Symphony (13 December)
1896	•	Mahler eliminates the 'Blumine' movement for a performance in Berlin (16 March) and cuts all programmatic titles and descriptions from *Titan*; retitles the work Symphony in D Major
	•	Composes the opening movement to complete the Third Symphony
	•	Performance of the second movement of the Third Symphony (9 November)
	•	Premiere of Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra* (27 November)
1897	•	Performance of the second, third and sixth movements of the Third Symphony (9 March)
1898	•	Premiere of Strauss's *Don Quixote* (8 March)
1899	•	Mahler begins the first two movements of the Fourth Symphony
	•	Premiere of Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben* (3 March)
1900	•	Mahler re-orchestrates and completes the Fourth Symphony

> While in the first three parts different moods of illusions alternate with each other: in the first the intoxication of spring, in the second (Serenade motif) blissful infatuation, in the third (wedding dance) a wealth of boundless pleasure and enjoyment — the fourth movement suddenly turns tragic with an unexpected, tremendous twist and, sounding a poignant funeral march, the ceremony of carrying illusions to their grave begins. [...] And finally, the fifth and last section brings the solution. [...] Struck down, man picks himself up again and wins victory by creating his own inner world that neither life nor death can take away from him again.[7]

Mahler was evidently forthcoming with the press but refrained from including an explanatory narrative in the concert programme. The work was presented under the title *Symphonisches Gedicht in zwei Teilen*, with only the fourth of five movements bearing a descriptive title ('A la pompes funebres'). Critical reception was largely negative, and at least one newspaper blasted Mahler specifically for not providing his audience with the necessary commentary to help them understand it (Roman 1991: 79) [8]. Natalie Bauer-Lechner (1980: 161) quotes Mahler as saying after the premiere, 'My friends avoided me afterwards; no one dared to mention the performance or the work to me, and I went about like a leper or an outlaw'.

Strauss began, a few weeks earlier, an appointment as Kapellmeister in Weimar, a position he held until 1894. Although he did not compose any new tone poems, it was during this period that the premieres of *Macbeth*, *Don Juan* and *Tod und Verklärung* took place; the latter two brought Strauss widespread fame and earned him the reputation as Germany's leading modernist. Mahler by this time had found limited success as a composer and, seeking to escape mounting political tensions in Hungary, he negotiated a contract with the Hamburg Stadttheater where he began serving as chief conductor in March 1891. In his first year, he composed large portions of the *Wunderhorn Lieder* and completed *Todtenfeier*, which he intended to publish as a symphonic poem. A meeting with Bülow took place that September during which Mahler shared his new programmatic work, and he later described the encounter in a letter to Fritz Löhr: 'When I played my "Todtenfeier" to [Bülow], he became quite hysterical with horror, declaring that compared with my piece *Tristan* was a Haydn symphony, and went on like a madman' (Blaukopf 1996: 139). Mahler also shared his disillusionment with Strauss:

> My 'scores', dear friend, I am about to consign to my desk. You do not know what incessant rebuffs I receive with them. To see these gentlemen fall off their chairs each time and declare it an impossible audacity to perform something like this — in the long term this is unbearable. This endless, fruitless peddling of them. [...] You have not been through anything like this and cannot understand that one begins to lose faith in them (Blaukopf 1980: 16; English translation in La Grange 2020: 471).

Mahler spent the early months of 1893 orchestrating the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* and revising his *Symphonisches Gedicht* into a 'Symphonie' he briefly entitled *Titan* after the novel by Jean Paul. He, at this stage, added descriptive headings to all five movements that together suggest a loose narrative. Mahler, for Hamburg that October when the work received its second performance, expanded the title to *Titan: eine Tondichtung in Symphonieform* [A Tone Poem in Symphonic Form] and penned longer descriptions of the first, fourth and fifth movements[9]. Still in Weimar, Strauss helped arrange a third performance for the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein* festival in June 1894[10]. Mahler refused to supply the Weimar attendees with programmatic details, unlike at the Hamburg concert just seven months earlier, declaring to a local journalist that he wished to avoid 'confus[ing] the audience with marks of a technical nature ... and forcing them to *look* instead of *listen*' (Blaukopf 1996: No. 134) [11]. The performance garnered a mixed reception with applause interrupted by passionate boos, but he considered it a partial success (La Grange 2020: 569).

Mahler, in the summer of 1894, revisited *Todtenfeier*, which had still not been performed. Abandoning the idea of the composition as a tone poem, he repurposed the funereal work as the opening of what became his massive Second Symphony. He wrote the second and third movements in short order and, by the end of the year, incorporated the *Wunderhorn* song, 'Urlicht', for alto voice as the fourth. He added a fifth movement that featured Klopstock's poem, *Aufersteh'n* [Resurrection], which he had heard sung at Bülow's funeral earlier that spring, and he finished orchestrating in the autumn[12].Thanks to the organisational aid of Strauss, Mahler conducted the opening three movements of the Second Symphony in Berlin to mixed reviews (March 1895), and the full premiere followed in December. It was a major success, although perhaps due to the symphony's length, many subsequent performances featured just the opening movement or the first three movements.

While Mahler was toiling on his symphony in the autumn of 1894, Strauss returned to Munich to assume the position of Kapellmeister at the Hofoper. The failure of his first opera, *Guntram*, which had a disastrous premiere in Weimar earlier that year, discouraged him from composing another until 1900 when he completed *Feuersnot*. Strauss instead followed up the success of *Don Juan* and *Tod und Verklärung* with *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche* (1894–1895), *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1895–1896), *Don Quixote* (1896–1897) and *Ein Heldenleben* (1897–1898). He also expanded his conducting engagements across Europe, including a season with the Berlin Philharmonic that laid the groundwork for his twenty-year tenure in the German capital, beginning in 1898.

Mahler, too, spent time in Berlin during this period. In the spring of 1895, an important performance of his revised First Symphony took place with the *Titan* title and movement descriptions were suppressed. It was another failure, and so Mahler turned that summer to composing what would become his longest work: the six-movement Third Symphony. Mahler envisioned, as was the case with the first two, a detailed programmatic framework with the third and fifth movements incorporating the *Wunderhorn* songs, 'Ablösung im Sommer' and 'Es sungen drei Engel', and the fourth movement drawing on Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*. It was a period of great compositional productivity, as he also managed to finish the sixth movement, 'Was mir die Liebe erzählt', by the end of the summer. He orchestrated the latter five movements in June 1896 and shortly thereafter tackled the opening. As the work took shape, Mahler openly discussed its programme in conversations and letters with friends, and he shared various descriptions with newspapers and prospective concert venues[13]. Several concerts in 1896 and 1897 featured extracted movements, particularly the second, but, when it came time to publish the score in 1898, Mahler dropped the descriptive titles. The first complete performance waited until June 1902 when the symphony was played at the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein* festival at Krefeld, again arranged by Strauss. Mahler, in a letter to his wife Alma, emphasised Strauss's active role in ensuring the concert's success:

> [He] walked right up to the stage and applauded demonstratively, thus instantly sealing the [first] movement's success. As further movements followed, the audience seemed even more deeply moved. […] Strauss took a progressively passive part in the proceedings and by the close he was nowhere to be seen (La Grange & Weiss 2004: 105).

Critics responded to the performance with great enthusiasm, and Mahler's refusal to circulate his descriptive programme appeared to pay off.

Beyond The Munich Declaration

After more than a decade questioning the utility of descriptive programmes, Mahler appeared to reach a crossroads in 1900. For what became the first successful performance of the Second Symphony that October, at the *Gesellschaft für moderne Tonkunst* in Munich, Mahler disallowed previously-used programmatic descriptions from the concert. La Grange (1995: 596) notes that Mahler was disgusted when he discovered an old programme still in circulation because he wanted to distance himself from enthusiasts of descriptive music, who, in Mahler's view, 'commit one of the biggest musical and artistic errors'. Ludwig Schiedermair, Mahler's first biographer, later published the following words that Mahler allegedly spoke during a gathering with friends after the concert:

> Away with programs that arouse false notions. Leave the public to its own thoughts about the work being performed; do not force [the public] to read while [the work] is being performed and do not teach them to be prejudiced! If a composer has imparted to his listeners the feelings that flowed through him, then his goal has been achieved. The language of music has then come close to the words but has revealed infinitely more than they can express (Schiedermair 1900: 13–4, translation mine).

This is undoubtedly a fanciful embellishment: nonetheless, the statement has often been used to make facile generalisations about his view of programmes. Herta Blaukopf (1984: 122), for instance, neatly packages four crucial years of Mahler's perspectives on this issue with the casual observation, 'He started in 1896 with the suppression of the title "Titan" and all the subtitles of the First Symphony, and ended in 1900 with a radical renunciation of programmes and all literary auxiliaries'. For many, the *Münchener Erklärung* essentially serves as a catchphrase that implies an event of unequalled consequence.

As I have summarised, Mahler made several related comments in the years before and after October 1900. While earlier he shared programmes with the intention of explaining his works and their inspiration, or to help make their performance more likely, he consistently objected to them as definitive explanations of his music. He wrote, for instance, to Otto Lessmann, 'Acquaintance with and understanding of a musical work must be acquired through detailed study, and the more profound the work, the longer and more difficult the process' (Blaukopf 1996: 127). A more revealing and forceful critique was penned in late 1901, about a year after the Munich performance of the Second Symphony. Youmans (2016: 128–9) details how the document was sanctioned by the composer, though written by Bruno Walter, and it arose in response to a request by Schiedermair that Mahler provide a programme for the Fourth Symphony. Walter opens the essay with the stark proclamation, 'Mahler utterly loathes all programs'[14]. Yet the composer still allowed them to circulate, or was powerless to prevent it, and even offered on occasion to provide additional commentary to concert organisers. La Grange (1995: 523) documents one such instance in December 1901 when Mahler 'carefully devised a new, detailed programme' for audiences of the Second Symphony in Dresden. While Mahler later refrained from publishing a programme for the Fourth Symphony, he revealed descriptive elements to friends and colleagues as he had in the past. Not until the premiere of the Fifth Symphony in 1904, four years after his supposed renunciation of programmes, did Mahler essentially stop sharing explanatory descriptions with the public, even though the symphonies were clearly inspired by extramusical material.

Floros turns a critical eye toward Schiedermair's remembrance but supports the notion that 1900 was the turning point. Pondering Mahler's motives for distancing himself from programmatic music around that time, he points to the composer's fear that audiences would misinterpret them (Floros 1977: 30–3). Addressing his refusal in 1901 to circulate a programme for the Fourth, Mahler stated that critics 'are already so corrupted by program music that they are no longer capable of understanding a work simply as a piece of music!' (Bauer-Lechner 1980: 184). Conservative critics like Eduard Hanslick were clearly influential in this regard and tended to favour the absolute music of Brahms and opposed the growing Academic Wagner Society in Vienna of which Mahler was a member. Hanslick's harsh criticism of Strauss's tone poems is well documented: the following excerpt from a review of *Don Juan* in 1892 offers but one example:

> The younger generation has developed a virtuosity in the creation of sound effects beyond which it is hardly possible to go. Color is everything, musical thought nothing. […] The tragedy is that so many of our younger composers think in foreign languages — philosophy, poetry, painting — and then translate their thoughts into the mother tongue, music (Hanslick 1950: 309–10).

The implication is that Mahler, who was still fairly new at the Hofoper in Vienna, de-emphasised explicit descriptions of his early symphonies in part to gain favour with some in the critical press. He was also sympathetic to Hanslick's contention that clear communication with the audience was paramount. Dana Gooley summarises Hanslick's perspective as follows:

> The composer who asked the listener to correlate sounding music with a printed program or a philosophical concept, and furthermore expected the listener's judgment to be the result of such successful correlation, was asking too much. Such composers hindered the listener's judgment, and they owed the audience an experience in which reasoned judgment could be exercised without such interference (Gooley 2011: 315).

Yet even critics predisposed to reject programmes had to balance the listener's capacity for reasoned judgment with the increasing complexity of modern orchestral works. Exemplifying this tension is a review of Mahler's First Symphony in the Leipzig weekly *Musikalisches Wochenblatt* (November 1900) in which Theodor Helm opined:

> In my humble opinion the music of his First Symphony is not well served by this veil of mystery. With its entirely puzzling design, the symphony literally screams for an explanatory program. […] In light of such difficulties, it was cruel of the composer to deprive his unprepared audience of not only the program book but also any technical guide to this labyrinth of sound (Painter 2002: 292), first printed in Helm 1977).

While interpretations of Mahler's various declarations have acknowledged the influence of critics, less attention has been paid to how his comments relate to Strauss. Though their relationship was collegial by and large, they spent many years competing for conducting positions while concurrently introducing their own works to the public. Mahler, after writing mostly Lieder early in his career, devised his

first large-scale orchestral works as programmatic tone poems, fully aware of Strauss's achievements in the genre. Yet, as I have outlined above, Mahler suffered from disappointing performances of these works for over a decade. It is reasonable to conclude that Mahler felt envious of Strauss's coveted conducting position with Bülow in Meiningen (1885–1886) as well as of Strauss's subsequent success with his tone poems and growing international reputation. In a letter to Max Marschalk from 1896, Mahler writes:

> Take the Strauss case! They [the critics] now proclaim with mighty complacency that the days of unrecognized genius are over. For behold: hardly has he appeared than we trumpet his praises! Hurrah: from now on geniuses will be paid forthwith in cash! (Blaukopf 1984: 127).

The two exchanged scores on several occasions and, as Blaukopf (1984: 122) points out, Mahler studied Strauss's manuscripts 'not only to learn from them, but also, no doubt, to mark himself off from them [and] to preserve his own sound'. La Grange (1995: 521) concurs, in his own reflection on the early symphonies, arguing that 'gradually the music of Strauss, and of all the *neudeutsch* school for that matter, turned him against all attempts at [writing] descriptive music'. Youmans (2016: 129–30) elaborates, writing that, in distancing himself from the Straussian tone poem, Mahler aligned himself with Wagner's 'theory of programmaticism' whereas Liszt, in comparison to Berlioz, 'used music to convey deep meaning that lay beneath the programmatic content — a meaning that could only be communicated by music'.
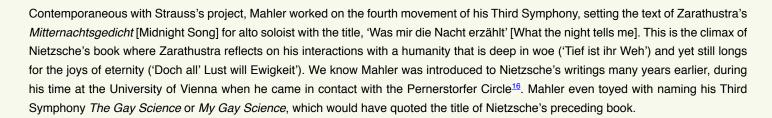
The argument here is that Mahler was motivated to revise his early symphonic works to strike out on a new path, but it is significant that the First and Second Symphonies initially fared no better even after substantial alterations. It is likely, however, that it was Mahler's reworking of their musical content over time, not his decision to strip programmatic descriptions, that ultimately led to their success. Mahler thus broke away from Strauss both in genre and in his approach to conveying the meaning of his music. It is noteworthy that by the time Mahler firmly retracted his programmes, which came well after the *Münchener Erklärung*, Strauss had already shifted his attention away from composing tone poems to focus on opera. Mahler's stance on the descriptive programme, in the years after 1900, was seemingly less about his envy of Strauss than about his fear others would misunderstand his music, works whose meaning could not be encapsulated by words. A comparison of Mahler's Third Symphony and Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra* anticipates this change in Mahler's position and highlights their different approaches to programmatic music.

Responses to Nietzsche

As noted above, Mahler and Strauss each completed pieces in the late summer of 1896 that engage with Nietzsche's work of 1885. Strauss claimed to base his tone poem freely on the book ('frei nach Friedr. Nietzsche'), dividing it into nine sections with labels drawn directly from Nietzsche's chapter titles while also including its opening lines in the printed score. Strauss shared in the programme notes for the November 1896 premiere:

> I did not intend to write philosophical music or to portray in music Nietzsche's great work. I wished to convey by means of music an idea of the development of the human race from its origin, through the various phases of its development, religious and scientific, up to Nietzsche's idea of the superman. The whole symphonic poem is intended an homage to Nietzsche's genius, which found its greatest expression in his book *Also sprach Zarathustra*[15].

Central to Strauss's conceptualisation on the largest level is the tensional, vain struggle of humanity, as reflected by the tonal centre B, to reach nature or the universe, as represented by the tonal centre C. From the immediate portrayal of the sunrise, Strauss proceeds to depict the events of Zarathustra's journey through musical metaphor. He conveys religiosity in 'Von der Hinterweltlern' through the evocation of the Latin *Credo*, complete with sombre orchestration that features an organ. In 'Von der Wissenschaft',Strauss embodies science with a fugue that blends the tonalities of B and C, implying that the path from humanity to the beyond is through science (and, implicitly, not through conventional religion). Nietzsche's 'Tanzlied' for human revelry is incarnated as a Viennese waltz and, in the final section, the 'Nachtwandlerlied', Strauss signifies the night watchman's warning at midnight with the striking of bells.

Contemporaneous with Strauss's project, Mahler worked on the fourth movement of his Third Symphony, setting the text of Zarathustra's *Mitternachtsgedicht* [Midnight Song] for alto soloist with the title, 'Was mir die Nacht erzählt' [What the night tells me]. This is the climax of Nietzsche's book where Zarathustra reflects on his interactions with a humanity that is deep in woe ('Tief ist ihr Weh') and yet still longs for the joys of eternity ('Doch all' Lust will Ewigkeit'). We know Mahler was introduced to Nietzsche's writings many years earlier, during his time at the University of Vienna when he came in contact with the Pernerstorfer Circle[16]. Mahler even toyed with naming his Third Symphony *The Gay Science* or *My Gay Science*, which would have quoted the title of Nietzsche's preceding book.

There is a substantial commentary on Strauss's and Mahler's understanding of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* and the extent to which they respond to and incorporate his philosophy[17]. An obvious and important difference between their respective settings is that Mahler utilises *Zarathustra*'s text as one programmatic element of a multi-movement symphony, while Strauss uses the whole of Nietzsche's book as the narrative framework for his tone poem. Batstone (2019: 21) convincingly argues that Mahler's larger interest in Nietzsche's Apollonian-Dionysian duality serves as a useful frame for understanding not only the Third, but the first four symphonies as 'a perfectly self-contained tetralogy', as Mahler himself grouped them[18]. In short, Nietzsche remains relatively unchanged in Strauss's setting, while Mahler's descriptive programme, which he eventually suppressed, incorporates the *Mitternachtsgedicht* into a broader narrative that extends well beyond the isolated passage from *Zarathustra*. Disinterested in the philosopher's idea of eternal recurrence, Mahler appropriates the notions of joy superseding pain, and *tiefe Ewigkeit* [deep eternity], while the affirmative fifth movement, 'Was mir die Engel erzählen' [What the angels tell me], offers a fairly conventional narrative of Christian resurrection that Nietzsche never would have endorsed. This nuanced yet independent appropriation of Nietzsche posed a significant challenge to critics and audiences familiar with the book, so much so that, by the 1902 premiere, Mahler refused to circulate programmatic details aside from the descriptive movement titles. When he conceived of the work in the mid-1890s, however, the programme was both useful as a creative framework and still in vogue with Strauss's tone poems.

First Envy, Then Misunderstanding

Where Mahler questions, in many instances, the utility of sharing his programmes, he mentions Strauss as a counterexample. Mahler summarises their differences in a letter to Bruno Walter in 1897:

> You have very aptly characterized my goals in contrast to those of Strauss. You are right that my music attains to a programme as its final intellectual elucidation, whereas in Strauss the programme is given from the outset as a task to be performed (Blaukopf 1984: 122–3).

Four years later, he writes to Alma:

> I had a very earnest talk with Strauss, in which I tried to show him the cul-de-sac he is in. Unfortunately he didn't really understand me. He's such a dear fellow, and he takes a really touching attitude towards me. But where I have a clear view of him, all he can see of me is the pedestal on which I stand — hence he can make nothing of me (La Grange & Weiss 2004: 76).

While earlier commentators have cited such letters and acknowledge Strauss's influence, they overlook the increasingly condescending manner with which Mahler addressed his rival. In the composers' own era and in more recent times, Mahler is characterised as philosophical, intellectual and troubled, while Strauss is described as pragmatic, goal-oriented and grounded. Peter Franklin (2003: 37) asserts that Mahler 'tended to play the idealist to Strauss's worldly materialist, in their own understanding if not also in that of the wider public'. Blaukopf (1984: 131) suggests that Mahler even felt morally superior in his disregard of practical concerns, such as moneymaking and the aesthetic tastes of his audience. Some writers on Strauss have perpetuated these characterisations. Matthew Boyden (1999: 125, 209), for instance, contends that 'Strauss was too much the bourgeois and too concerned with the success and prosperity of his music to move very far from the interests and appetites of his ticket-buying public' and claims 'Strauss cared nothing for aesthetic movements or ideologies'. Such assertions are easily disputed, but there is evidence to suggest that, while Mahler and Strauss both respected and sometimes condemned one another on professional and on personal levels, Mahler more strongly criticised Strauss's apparent misdirection as a composer of explicitly programmatic works. As Mahler's disfavour for Strauss grew more apparent in his

letters, he became increasingly opposed to sharing descriptive programmes. This abated somewhat in the first few years of the new century, after which Mahler's chief concern was that audiences and critics would misunderstand his programmatic narratives, which were inadequate to begin with.

Regardless of Mahler's decision to withhold the programmes of his early symphonies, they continued to disseminate during his lifetime. Given that they provided his music with narrative and ideological frameworks, the programmes continue to offer invaluable windows into his creative process, as do those by Strauss.

ENDNOTES

1. Their correspondence of around one hundred letters was first published by Herta Blaukopf in 1980, with the English translation by Edmund Jephcott following in 1984.

2. Julian Johnson (2009: 186) contends that Mahler titled the Symphonisches Gedicht as such 'to identify with the modernity of the (Straussian) symphonic poem' and to separate himself 'from the Classical tradition of Brahms'.

3. Jonathan Kregor has written widely on the New German School, its influence on later composers, and the fast-changing middle-class audience in the late nineteenth century. See, for instance, his chapters, 'Program Music' (Kregor 2020) and 'Programmatic paths around the fin de siècle: Mahler and Strauss' (Kregor 2015).

4. Gilliam (1999) provides a concise account of Strauss's early years and professional appointments, while Trenner & Trenner (2003) exhaustively documents the repertoire Strauss conducted over his long career.

5. Mahler himself sometimes referred to the work as a symphony and at other times as a symphonic poem.

6. Mahler wrote this letter in August 1888 (Blaukopf 1984: 19).

7. Ábrányi's preview was published in Pester Lloyd, a German-language newspaper in Budapest. This English translation appears in La Grange (2020: 384).

8. The finale received the greatest criticism. Recalling the Budapest premiere, Friedrich Löhr wrote, 'An elegant lady next to me was so shocked at the attacca leading up to the last movement that she dropped everything she was holding onto the floor' (Roman 1991: 83, translation mine). Not all the performances were complete failures, and some critics found promising moments. Ábrányi defended the earlier portions of the symphony:

    If the composer were to add to the first three movements a suitable finale of a type for which his qualifications are amply evident from the attractive thematic development and the brilliant orchestration, he could present a symphony which would rise well above the every-day, dime-a-dozen works (Roman 1991: 81).

9. The complete programme appears in Danuser (1991: 135–6).

10. The Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein was established in 1861 to encourage performances of new music, at first primarily the works of Liszt. Strauss became president in 1901 and helped champion performances of a number Mahler's compositions, see Deaville (2020: 153).

11. The English translation appears in La Grange (2020: 568).

12. A truncated version of the programme he revealed reads as follows:

    The first movement depicts the titanic struggles of a mighty being still caught in the toils of this world; grappling with life and the fate to which he must succumb — his death. The second and third movements, Andante and Scherzo, are episodes from the life of the fallen hero. The "Urlicht" represents the soul's striving and questioning attitude towards God and its own immortality. While the first three movements are narrative in character, in the last movement everything is inward experience. It begins with the death-shriek of the Scherzo. And now the resolution of the terrible problem of life — redemption (Bauer-Lechner 1980: 43–4).

13. La Grange (2020: 688, n. 46) references no fewer than eight distinct programmes Mahler devised over the course of the work's evolution.

14. Youmans' chapter, 'Programmmusiker' (2016: 122–36), discusses this document in detail, specifically the ways in which it responded to larger aesthetic debates over absolute and programmatic music.

15. This introductory note, along with the other programmatic descriptions he annotated throughout the score, appear in Strauss (1999).

16. Batstone's dissertation (2019) is the first substantial English-language study centered on Mahler's interest in Nietzsche and builds on the earlier work of McGrath (1974), Nikkels (1989) and Solvik (1992).

17. Other studies that address Mahler's engagement with Nietzsche include Roman (1990) and Dammeyer (2005). Youmans (2005) demonstrates that Strauss's own understanding of Nietzschean philosophy was far deeper than earlier scholars had suggested.

18. Mahler described the symphonies as 'eine durchaus in sich geschlossene Tetralogie' (Bauer-Lechner 1980: 154). Batstone (2020: 384) encourages readings that move beyond 'merely acknowledging the composer's explicit references to Nietzschean ideas' by contextualising the first four symphonies within Nietzsche's larger body of work.

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ABSTRACT

Gustav Mahler had, by the late 1880s, achieved considerable prestige as a conductor, yet Richard Strauss's early success as a composer of tone poems earned him wider fame and fortune. Around the time of Strauss's triumphant premieres of *Don Juan* and *Tod und Verklärung*, Mahler was securing performances of his own programmatic orchestral works, the *Symphonisches Gedicht in zwei Teilen* and *Todtenfeier*. After disappointing results, he revised both, adding descriptive movement titles and other programmatic details, seemingly following Strauss's lead. But further unsuccessful performances followed and Mahler grew wary of publicly sharing such descriptions of his works. The so-called 'Munich Declaration' of 1900 in which he denounced the programme seemed to be a reaction to this negative reception, which stood out in stark relief compared to the acclaim Strauss received.

Scholars have long reflected on Mahler's comments on his programs, but the extent to which his adoption and subsequent rejection of such descriptions was influenced by Strauss has remained elusive. Viewing the early symphonies against the backdrop of works such as Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, this article illuminates how Mahler's stance on the descriptive programme shifted. Later he was more concerned with comprehension and with setting himself apart from Strauss. But Mahler's earlier approaches to his own programmatic compositions, including what he chose to share publicly, were clearly bound up with Strauss's own creative output and suggest envy of his rival's success and frustration with his own failures.

KEYWORDS

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