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Individualism for the Masses: Aesthetic Paradox in Mahler's Symphonic Thought

Pour parler de soi, il faut parler de tout le reste.

Simone de Beauvoir, *Les Mandarins*

1. Greatness

Greatness, in almost any sense this word might take, is both Mahler's aspiration and Mahler's achievement. The very monument of his aspiration for and – more controversially – achievement of greatness may be the Eighth Symphony. But as far as an ambition for greatness is concerned, we do not have to look at Mahler's late music; rather we can start early on.

The beginning of Gustav Mahler's A minor piano quartet is not quite what we would expect from the opening of a piece of chamber music, composed in the 1870s. This reaction implies a certain standard taken, in this case, from Johannes Brahms. So much seems fair enough not only because today we consider Brahms as the composer of chamber music par excellence of that period of music history. Taking Brahms as a model for this kind of music was also suggested to Mahler himself in the course of his studies at the Vienna Conservatory he had taken up in 1875. But rather than following his teachers' suggestions, Mahler – at least in the quartet's initial bars – looked out for a different model, a model, indeed, taken from another genre. The repeated thirds do not bring the piano as a chamber music instrument to the fore; in that regard they rather constitute a problem. Unmistakably, the repeated thirds are meant to lay a primordial ground of non-thematic music from which the principal subject of the movement will emerge. This is a genuinely symphonic idea set up in the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and varied in a number of ways by Bruckner.

Instead of having chamber music do what only chamber music can achieve, Mahler's piano quartet hankers for something else – for something greater and, indeed, grander. The piano quartet represents chamber music dissatisfied with the very idea of chamber music. Such dissatisfaction inspires the movement's orchestral ambitions. The composer is eager to create background and foreground sonorities (as exemplified already by the very beginning), a sound that has got fullness to it and spatiality; he does so by way of pedal points and octave doublings. And while we should not make too much fuss about the work of a 16-year-old student who was in no way a youth prodigy as a composer – a far cry from young Mendelssohn –, there are passages of marked symphonism that anticipate Mahler's mature style, as towards the end of the development section where heated energy is built up only to let it then seep away and dissolve (bars 131–138). At any rate, what is really going on here has got little to do with technical problems of a student of composition. Rather, it points to an aesthetic problem. That problem, involving the genre distinction between chamber music and orchestral music, also stirs in acknowledged masterpieces of the era such as César Franck's F minor piano quintet, the work of an experienced composer. The problem, furthermore, did not emerge in the 1870s – or, at least, it had a prehistory.¹

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, chamber music hardly constituted a problem. For Haydn's, Mozart's, Beethoven's or Schubert's practice as composers, rather, chamber music was a major attraction. Yet around 1850 composers such as Liszt, Berlioz and Wagner found no attraction in chamber music at all. Eminently conscious of the historical situation, these later composers considered their age as an era of the masses to which mere chamber music could hold little appeal.²

2. Expression

Thus one part of the aesthetic problem of chamber music in the 19th century was constituted by social changes to the musical audience: Who listens where, and in what way? To the other part of the problem we get a clue from Mahler's piano quartet. After the recapitulation in this sonata movement, and before its coda, Mahler sets out a cadenza for the violin, “*rubato und leidenschaftlich*”, “*rubato and passionately*” (bars 218–220). Clearly this is not symphonic at all. Yet at the same time the cadenza's

emotional temperature rises beyond the confines of decent chamber music. In terms of genre, we might locate such music in orchestral music including a soloist, e.g., Tchaikovsky's violin concerto. Once again, chamber music tries to be something else.³ The aesthetic issue raised by the cadenza is that of musical expression. Here, the question is not: Who listens?, but rather: What do they listen to?

Expression was put centre-stage by Mahler when, nearly two decades later, he discussed his chosen musical apparatus, an extended symphonic orchestra that seemed to have left behind the aesthetics of chamber music in each and every regard. Since he had finished his studies at the Vienna Conservatory, Mahler had not written a single piece of chamber music.

The composer's argument is to be found in a letter to Gisela Tolnay-Witt of 7 February 1893⁴ – not long before completion of his Second Symphony. The argument leads to the conclusion that at the stage reached in the development of music, chamber music ought to be excluded from the domain of art, and could at best fulfil the purpose of an auxiliary reminder of real art, if and when the 'real thing' were temporarily unavailable:

So be gone, piano! Be gone, violin! They are all right for the 'chamber', when you, by yourself or with some good companion, want to recall the works of the great masters – like an echo – just as an etching may bring back memories of the brilliantly colourful paintings of a Raphael or a Böcklin.

Also fort mit dem Klavier! Fort mit der Violine! Die sind gut für die 'Kammer', wenn Sie allein oder in Gesellschaft eines guten Kameraden sich die Werke der großen Meister vergegenwärtigen wollen – als Nachhall – etwa wie ein Kupferstich Ihnen das farben glänzende Gemälde eines Raffael oder Böcklin in die Erinnerung zurückruft (108).

What is at issue here is a public-private distinction. Chamber music in its original scoring for solo players, Mahler was persuaded in 1893, remained a private pursuit. For the public, Mahler took the opposite route: He orchestrated chamber music works that he considered substantial works of art, such as Beethoven's F minor quartet op. 95 and Schubert's D minor quartet D. 810. As Mahler links his argument about outdated forms of expression with the figure of the soloist, not only chamber music – or the ensemble of solo performers – is under attack, but also the genre of the solo concerto at which Mahler had hinted (ironically, we might wonder) in the violin cadenza of his piano quartet and which he seemed to shun consistently in his creative output ever after.

3. Largeness

What sort of reasoning led Mahler to both his aesthetic position and his artistic practice? Mahler's correspondent had put forward doubts about the orchestral expansion characteristic of the later 19th century. While Mahler's response is clearly apologetic, it could still be illuminating; he may well have had a good cause to defend. Here is Tolnay-Witt's question: "Does it require such a large apparatus as an orchestra to express a great thought?" ("ob es denn eines so großen Apparates wie des Orchesters bedarf, um einen großen Gedanken auszudrücken") (106). While this is put forward as a question, it might easily be seen as implying an objection. Tolnay-Witt's query could be taken to charge composers like Mahler and Strauss with the naïve assumption that an art work's inner worth corresponds to its outward display. Perhaps, these two issues are completely independent. This must have been Hugo Wolf's conviction when, around the same time (1890/91), he introduced the first volume of his *Italienisches Liederbuch* with a setting of Paul Heyse's "Auch kleine Dinge können uns entzücken, / auch kleine Dinge können teuer sein". Twenty years later, on 12 September 1910, Mahler's Eighth Symphony was to be premiered in Munich by several hundred performers.⁵

Mahler enters the discussion by pointing at two features of musical development from the 18th to the 19th century that, he believes, should have struck Tolnay-Witt and those who, like her, remained sceptical about the monumentalism of the age.

First, Mahler argues, the farther one goes back in time, the more elementary are the marks for the performance, i.e., the more do composers leave the interpretation of their thoughts to performers ("daß, je weiter Sie in der Zeit zurückgehen, desto primitiver die Bezeichnungen für den Vortrag werden, d. h. desto mehr die Autoren die Auslegung ihres Gedankens den Interpreten überlassen") (106).

In Bach, e.g., you find only in very rare instances a designation of tempo, or any other indication as to how he thinks the work should be performed – even the crudest differentiations like *p* or *ff* etc. are missing. (Wherever you do find them, usually the editors have added them, mostly even quite incorrectly.)

Z. B. bei Bach finden Sie nur in den seltensten Fällen eine Tempobezeichnung oder sonst irgend eine Andeutung, wie er sich die Sache vorgetragen denkt – selbst die allergrößten Unterscheidungen wie *p* oder *ff* etc. fehlen. (Dort wo Sie

sie finden, sind sie gewöhnlich erst von den Herausgebern, meist sogar ganz verkehrt, hinzugefügt.) (106)

Secondly, Mahler points out, the more music develops, the more complex becomes the apparatus which the composer summons to express his ideas (“Je weiter sich die Musik entwickelt, desto komplizierter wird der Apparat, den der Komponist aufbietet, um seine Ideen auszudrücken”) (106).

Just compare the orchestra Haydn uses in his symphonies [...] with the orchestra Beethoven requires in his Ninth – not to mention Wagner and modern composers. Why is this so? – Do you believe such a thing to be accidental or even unnecessary waste brought on merely by a composer’s presumptuous whim?

Vergleichen Sie nur einmal das Orchester, das Haydn in seinen Symphonien anwendet [...] mit dem Orchester, das Beethoven in seiner IX. fordert – von Wagner und den Neuern gar nicht zu reden. Woher kommt das? – Glauben Sie, daß so etwas Zufall ist oder gar eine unnötige, bloß aus anmaßlicher Laune hervorgegangene Verschwendung des Komponisten? (106)

Mahler’s rhetorical question turns from statement of fact to explanation of fact. It is a fact that Bach’s compositions contain few dynamic and no expressive markings while Mahler’s scores contain many. It is also a fact that more musicians are required for Beethoven’s Ninth than for any Haydn symphony. It is not a statement of fact but a contentious philosophy of history to claim that music had to move in that direction. How does Mahler try to substantiate that claim? The idea is this: As we compare the facts we can all agree on, we get a sense of direction in history. We then only need to extrapolate contrary to that direction and arrive at a hypothetical origin:

In its beginnings, music was merely ‘chamber music’, i.e., meant to sound in a small room before a small audience (often consisting only of the performers). The feelings on which it was based were, in keeping with the period, simple, naïve and reflected subjective experience only in bare outline: joy, sadness, etc.

Die Musik war in ihren Anfängen lediglich ‘Kammermusik’, d. h. darauf berechnet, in einem kleinen Raum vor einem kleinen Auditorium (oft bloß aus den Mitwirkenden bestehend) zu erklingen. Die Empfindungen, welche ihr zu Grunde lagen, der Zeit gemäß einfach, naiv, nur in allergrößten Zügen die Erlebnisse des Gemüts wiedergebend: Freudigkeit, Traurigkeit, etc. (106)

The passage reveals Mahler’s historical horizon. When he wrote it in the 1890s, the ‘beginnings of music’ were widely discussed in terms of Darwinian evolution.⁶ But Mahler would not go back to the cavemen’s

songs or to the music of Greek drama Nietzsche had celebrated a while ago in *The Birth of Tragedy*. His ‘Anfänge der Musik’ must be in the 17th century. And here we are back to Bach, the composer born in the 17th century, and his supposedly primitive instructions. Primitive instructions correspond to primitive feelings – or familiar and firmly limited feelings, since Mahler longed nostalgically for that world, a world, he opined, of far fewer misunderstandings than he himself had to suffer from his contemporaries.

The ‘musicantes’ were confident of their business, they moved within a circle of ideas familiar to them and on the grounds of a firmly delimited artistic skill, well grounded within these limits! Therefore, the composers did not give any instructions – it was taken for granted that everything would be correctly seen, felt, and heard.

Die ‘Musicantes’ waren ihrer Sache sicher, sie bewegten sich in einem ihnen geläufigen Kreise der Ideen, und auf Grund einer festbegrenzten und innerhalb dieser Grenzen wohlgegründeten Kunstfertigkeit! Daher schrieben die Komponisten nichts vor – es war selbstverständlich, daß alles richtig gesehen, gefühlt und gehört wurde (106–107).

In a sense, this must be envisaged as a happy state – happy because free from misapprehension. But no happy state of human affairs will ever keep. The limits enabled correct understanding, but they also constrained art. A work in which you can see the limits smells of mortality, Mahler once said; “I absolutely cannot stand that in art”⁷.

4. Feeling

In the letter to Tolnay-Witt, Mahler goes on to describe a historical process of individualization and differentiation of feeling – both generally, in the course of European societies, and specifically for music. Composers, he claims,

now aimed to convey their intentions to the performer by unambiguous signs. – Thus resulted, gradually, a wide system of sign language which – like the heads of notes indicating pitch – provided definite indications of tempo or dynamics. Hand in hand with this went also the appropriation of new elements of feeling as objects of imitation in sound – i.e., the composer began to include ever deeper and more complex aspects of his emotional life in the area of his creativeness – until with Beethoven the new era of music began: from then on not just the fundamentals of mood – as, e.g., mere joy or sadness, etc. – are

objects of musical imitation, but also the transition from one mood to the other – conflict – nature and its effects upon us – humour and poetic thoughts.

wurden nun darauf bedacht, durch nicht mißzudeutende Zeichen ihre Intentionen dem Ausführenden mitzuteilen. – So entstand allmählich ein großes System einer Zeichensprache, welche – wie die Notenköpfe für die Tonhöhe – für Zeitmaß oder Tonstärke bestimmte Anhalte gab. Hand in Hand damit ging aber auch die Aneignung neuer Gefühlselemente als Gegenstände der Nachbildung in Tönen – d. h. der Komponist fing an, immer tiefere und kompliziertere Seiten seines Gefühlslebens in das Gebiet seines Schaffens einzubeziehen – bis mit Beethoven die neue Ära der Musik begann: Von nun an sind nicht mehr die Grundtöne der Stimmung – also z. B. bloße Freudigkeit oder Traurigkeit etc. – sondern auch der Übergang von einem zum anderen – Konflikte – die äußere Natur und ihre Wirkung auf uns – Humor und poetische Ideen die Gegenstände der musikalischen Nachbildung. (107)

“Mere joy or sadness” before Beethoven? 21st-century critics will be alert to the fine “transitions” (“Übergänge”) and ambivalences of feeling in the music of, say, Mozart’s *Così fan tutte* (1790); compared to its delicacies, the musical psychology of love in Beethoven’s *Fidelio* (1806/14) appears rather fixed or even schematic. But we must place Mahler’s judgement in historical perspective. A century later, it has become hard to imagine how firmly the idea of Beethoven as a hero of progress – in each and every regard – was once entrenched in musical minds.⁸

Beethoven came up earlier as the master who expanded the orchestra – and that is what Mahler is really driving at in the course of his argument. For the point about dynamic and expressive markings does not account for an increase of musical means at all. Yet Mahler envisages a connection. The “wide system of sign language” (“große System einer Zeichensprache”) proved doubly insufficient from composers’ points of view. For, first, composers remained at the mercy of performers; and performers would never take dynamic or tempo markings as sacrosanct as indications of pitch or meter. Secondly, while dynamic and tempo markings can require gradations, corresponding to transitions of sentiment, these would be gradations of volume or speed, not of colour. Hence if composers aimed at gradations of colour, they had to make them part of the actual structure of their works. Instead of trying to get performers to produce so many shades on their individual instruments, composers would then use “a separate instrument for each colour” (“für je eine Farbe ein Instrument”) (107).

Here Mahler suggests that a qualitative aesthetic concern urged quantitative change, the emergence of the modern symphony orchestra, a musical ensemble of unprecedented size. This explanation is guided by art's internal logic: a purpose set by composers, artistic expression, creates the means suitable to it. Yet Mahler supplements this internal logic by an account of the external circumstances operating on art. He approaches the development not only from an aesthetic, but also from a sociological angle: the emergence of modern mass society that is linked to the historical triumph of the bourgeoisie. On this line, quantitative purposes join quantitative means. Bigger audiences required bigger spaces – “in place of the chamber there now was the concert hall” (“aus der Kammer wurde der Konzertsaal”) (108) – and hence, to be filled, a bigger apparatus for the production of sound. Thus Mahler's two distinct takes on the historical development of music through the 18th and 19th centuries dovetail neatly.

5. Progress

The key question, then, is: Does the development Mahler describes constitute progress? On this count, Mahler seems deliberately ambiguous. As far as the sociological aspect is concerned, he is, on the one hand, not committed to claiming progress anyway. Bigger audiences are not necessarily ‘better’, i.e., more discerning audiences. In a fashion of characteristic self-irony, Mahler links big-sized audiences with the notion of “noise”: “in order to be heard by the multitudes in over-large concert halls and opera houses, we have to make a big noise” (“weil wir, um in den übergroßen Räumen unserer Konzertsäle und Operntheater von vielen gehört zu werden, auch einen großen Lärm machen müssen”) (108). The aesthetic line of Mahler's argument, on the other hand, does suggest an increase in artistic complexity. This could be called progress in a sense analogous to Darwinian evolution. A lion is a more complex living being than a single-cell organism, and Mahler's Third Symphony is something more complex than a folk song. Yet does increase in complexity by itself amount to aesthetic superiority? Many songs by Mahler's contemporary Max Reger are more complex than Schubert's – sometimes strophic – songs, but do we doubt for a moment who was the greater composer of *Lieder*? This sort of scepticism about progress was not alien to Mahler. “We moderns need such a large apparatus to express our thoughts, be they great

or small” (“Wir Modernen brauchen einen so großen Apparat, um unsere Gedanken, ob groß oder klein, auszudrücken”) (108). So much for the record: Thoughts expressed by a gigantic apparatus may still be petty.

We are confident that Mahler himself, employing vast means, aimed at nothing less than “great thoughts”⁹; his Eighth Symphony sets the seal on that purpose. Yet Mahler lacked the naïveté to generalize his highly personal vision. The great orchestra, according to his reasoning, does not prevail because modern composers have great ideas to express, or necessarily greater ones than past composers, but rather because they have modern thoughts to express. That slightly unexpected turn of the argument emerges from Mahler’s defiant self-assertion in reply to a question he anticipates in this epistolary dialogue, viz.: “Well, does that mean that Bach was less great than Beethoven or that Wagner is greater than he?” (“Ja, war denn Bach kleiner als Beethoven oder ist Wagner größer als er?”) (108). Mahler responds neither by affirmation nor by negation. Rather he insists that individuals have no choice to be other than what they are, and ends his argument with a slightly humorous *argumentum ad hominem*:

We are the way we are! We ‘moderns’! Even you are that way! If I now prove to you that you, little nuisance, require a more complex apparatus for your living than did the Queen of England in the 17th century who – as I read recently – had a pound of bacon and a mug of beer for breakfast, and whiled away the tedium of her evenings in her chamber by spinning, or the like, in the light of a tallow candle? What do you say now?

Wir sind einmal so, wie wir sind! Wir ,Modernen’! Sogar Sie sind so! Wenn ich Ihnen nun beweise, daß Sie, kleiner Plagegeist, einen größer[en] Apparat für Ihr Leben beanspruchen als die Königin von England im 17. Jahrhundert, welche, wie ich kürzlich gelesen, zum Frühstück ein Pfund Speck und eine Maß Bier bekam, und am Abend beim Scheine einer Talgkerze in ihrer Kemenate sich die Langeweile mit Spinnen oder Ähnlichem vertrieb? Was sagen Sie nun? (108)

If this remark is mere jest, its topic, suggesting a parallel between material and spiritual orientations, could be taken up in more profound ways, as the finale of Mahler’s Fourth Symphony were to do. More generally, Mahler’s line of reasoning highlights the mode of thought that informed his conception of a symphonic ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’, and it does so both in its intriguing and its spurious aspects. The point of Mahler’s argument is that history can provide an aesthetic justification – assuming that history is not just factual, a series of events, but inherently normative. In order to drive this point home, Mahler constructs an alternative between historical

necessity on the one hand and individual caprice on the other hand. Whoever does not acknowledge that the increase of the musical apparatus was inevitable, he suggests, would have to make the implausible case of ascribing it to mere personal will.

6. Complexity

That suggestion is spurious. It leaves out a broad field of reasoned aesthetic decisions against monumentalism, consciously taken by composers like Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Johannes Brahms or Hugo Wolf. Such decisions informed, for instance, the southern lightness of Mendelssohn's *Italian Symphony* and of his concerto for violin, the parsimony in colour of Brahms's orchestral serenades or of his *Alto Rhapsody*, the artful simplicity of a considerable number of Brahms's songs, as well as the economy and brevity of many of Hugo Wolf's *Spanish* and *Italian Songs* or of his *Italian Serenade*.

To his purpose, Mahler presents the succession leading from Beethoven via Berlioz, Liszt, Wagner up to himself as the authentic tradition of 19th century music. But then even Liszt in his late work seems to have become sceptical about the monumentalism to which he himself had contributed in his symphonic works and oratorios, and had entered a project of reduction, to the point of austerity.

Whoever wishes to fit history into a philosophical schema that justifies his own position has to be choosy as to the figures who constitute history: Only those who 'lead up' to himself can be admitted. But selectiveness will not suffice. The normative historian will also have to create a link between certain features that will be agreed to have been in place on the one hand side and certain other features that will be considered either desirable or undesirable on the other. Clearly this is Mahler's intention when he links "chamber music", as music sounding "in a small room before a small audience", with "naïve" and "simple" "feelings". Is that link really successful?

Nobody contests that Frederick the Great's 18th-century music chamber at Sanssouci is rather small compared to the 19th-century Große Musikvereinsaal in Vienna. But then there is nothing wrong with it. Rooms aren't generally better when bigger; rather, they should fit their respective purpose. The distinction between big and small does not carry value, but is

meant to anchor Mahler's claim in historical ground. It is the distinction between simple and complex that carries value. "Naïve", uttered by Mahler, bears a dismissive note. Mahler wishes us to believe that where rooms and audiences were small, feelings were naïve and simple. But that is a mere suggestion. In truth, it is not credible. The ciaccona from Bach's D minor partita for solo violin was composed for a small room but is more complex than many monumental symphonies from the 1890s. Monteverdi's madrigals were vocal chamber music; their erotic subtleties, some of them drawn from mannerist literature (e.g., Guarini) and fully endorsed by the music, make the musical love stories of many grand operas of the 19th century look innocent or clumsy. In fact, there is a connection. Monteverdi's chamber audiences were refined circles governed by exquisite taste; they apprehended and appreciated niceties of detail and complex interrelations or Monteverdi would not have produced them. For there was not much of an idea of a future audience; music had to be successful here and now or not at all. The grand opera, by way of contrast, had to be poured into a much more mixed bag of an audience. There was a premium on hitting the listeners' lowest common denominator. If there is any link at all between complexity and size, then it is rather the opposite of what Mahler suggests: Beethoven's op. 127 or Brahms's clarinet quintet could allow for greater complexity than contemporaneous products for the operatic stage very much because they aimed at smaller audiences.

7. Individuality

Yet this amounts precisely to the sort of logic rejected by Mahler. Great thoughts, he is confident, could be taken in not merely by a highly educated elite, but actually by lots of people – by the new urban masses he was confronted with in Vienna and in cities elsewhere. According to common sense standards this remains a paradox. If mass art were not expressly designed for easy access – i.e., for intelligibility on the part of many with little effort –, we normally assume, it would not command a mass audience. Mahler, however, in his Eighth makes access difficult already through choice of texts: Latin liturgical verses, followed by fragments from a heavily allegorizing, virtually impenetrable dramatic text – a text that many have believed to resist actual performance, thus apparently doomed to be taken in by the silent reader only.

Mahler links his aesthetic argument concerning an art for the new urban audiences with a historical claim about the doom of chamber music. In retrospect, the latter may look plainly false; but then nothing could be less interesting than to refute Mahler. Like any great artist, he had to believe that he was right and others were wrong. It is the historian's and the aesthetician's task to account for the glory of chamber music in the late 19th and early 20th century, in the work of composers as different as Brahms and Debussy. With hindsight, it is easy enough to consider Mahler a poor prophet as he failed to foresee chamber music's central role in the developments of the 20th century¹⁰, testified by the work of composers like Schönberg, Webern and Berg, Bartók and Janáček, Ravel and Shostakovich. What is at stake should be the content of Mahler's claims rather than our judgement of them.

Crucially, an intriguing aesthetic paradox is at the core of Mahler's argument: He argues in favour of stronger collective forces for the sake of individuality. This paradox is backed up by a double-faced assessment of individuality. Mahler can never have enough of professional musical individuality. The individual parts of his works, he said, were so difficult to play that in principle he needed nothing but soloists.¹¹ But this is not a plea for the individuality of empirical selves. In fact, Mahler celebrates the conductor's, that is: his own "terrorism by which I force each player to leave his little ego behind"¹².

Along the line of this argument, Mahler wishes to link chamber music with the past. Chamber music testifies to closeness between performers and audiences; chamber music manifests understanding of composers' intentions; chamber music displays skill and professionalism; even now, chamber music has kept a commemorative function. In fact, these are qualities. Yet evocation of the past is a crucial feature of Mahler's symphonic art. Consequently, in that art chamber music is not so much rejected but rather preserved.¹³ If modern music, as Mahler claims, aims at all shades of the colour palette, then chamber music is an important one among those shades. *Nachtmusik II* ("Andante amoroso") from Mahler's Seventh Symphony and "Ich atmet einen linden Duft" spring to mind as incorporating highly transparent chamber music textures within music composed for symphony orchestra. Such textures even occur where one would hardly expect them – the string quintet episode in the rather ostentatious finale of the Seventh Symphony is a case in point. The massive chordic orchestral opening of the Eighth Symphony is counterbalanced

already after less than two minutes by the quasi chamber music lines of woodwind instruments and muted strings in the “Imple superna gratia”-section (from cue 7 onwards). Even the solo voices are set here against each other very much like the instrumental voices in a classical string quartet, alternating between homophonic and polyphonic writing. Notoriously, the solo violin that Mahler meant to banish as bearer of merely individual rather than collective expression is applied lavishly by him in the Eighth Symphony.¹⁴ Mahler’s idea of a totality of means does not preclude selectivity about means at any given moment. His large orchestra can be a constellation of different smaller orchestras – indeed, chamber orchestras. More amazing than the vastness of the Eighth Symphony’s orchestra is Mahler’s art in using it quite sparingly through much of its second part. This has been obscured by the popular sensationalist label of a ‘Symphony of the Thousand’ – as if the thousand had to produce sound altogether all or most of the time.

As Mahler’s symphony comprises drama, epic poetry, novel, ballad, song, aria, hymn and march,¹⁵ it also comprises chamber music. The way his work includes them – avoiding the obvious route of complete assimilation – remains a source of lasting fascination. Mahler designed his symphony as an art for the new urban masses, but one that would not offer them quick and easy diversions ready to ward off their boredom. He does not take the masses – ‘die Vielen’ – to be a shapeless blob. Nor does he simply take them as a given that will sit unaltered through his symphony. Rather, Mahler sees them as numerous individuals who, irrespective of class, *vis-à-vis* the greatest art are bound to be elevated to the status of a community.¹⁶ In this regard, he implicitly rejects the logic of the culture industry as well as a cultural criticism of elitist brand that both emerged during his times. They have since agreed that the masses, to be reached by anything, must sink to the lowest level common to all. Mahler did not join in. Scale, he maintains, is indeed relevant to the quality of art, but not necessarily in the sense of downgrading it. In his argument connecting aesthetics with history – history of music as well as social history –, Mahler makes his claim for a more highly individualized form of expressive art in an era of the masses: his symphony. What reaches the masses need not be superficial. A river that is broad, Mahler trusted, could still be deep.

NOTES

- ¹ Cf. Carl Dahlhaus, 'Brahms und die Idee der Kammermusik', *Brahms-Studien* 1 (1974), pp. 45–57, 47–48.
- ² On the relevance of the 'masses' to 19th-century music see Alexander Rehding, *Music and Monumentality: Commemoration and Wonderment in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, New York 2009, pp. 38–43.
- ³ There is a concertante cadenza in the finale of Brahms's G minor piano quartet op. 25, no. 1, a rare instance of that composer trying out limits of chamber music.
- ⁴ Gustav Mahler, *Briefe*, ed. Herta Blaukopf, Vienna/Hamburg 1982, pp. 106–109. Page numbers inserted in the text refer to this edition.
- ⁵ Gustav Mahler, *Symphonie Nr. 8 (Es-Dur), Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 8, ed. Karl Heinz Füssl, Vienna/London 1977, Revisionsbericht [not paginated].
- ⁶ Cf. Friedrich von Hausegger, *Musik als Ausdruck*, Vienna ²1887.
- ⁷ *Gustav Mahler in den Erinnerungen von Natalie Bauer-Lechner*, ed. Herbert Killian, Hamburg 1984, p. 190: "Ein Werk, bei dem man die Grenzen sieht, riecht nach Sterblichkeit, was ich in der Kunst absolut nicht vertragen kann!"
- ⁸ Cf., e.g., Adolf Prosniz, *Handbuch der Clavier-Literatur. Historisch-kritische Übersicht*, vol. 1, Vienna 1884, p. xv: "Beethoven erfüllte die Instrumentalmusik mit dem bedeutendsten Inhalt. Die tiefsten Empfindungen der Menschenseele, die gewaltige Tragik des Lebens, wie die beseligenden Eindrücke der Natur, sie spiegeln sich in seiner Musik. Das Tonspiel wird ihm zur Ton-sprache, und in dieser ward es ihm gegeben zu sagen das Unsagbare." Cf. *ibid.*, p. 74. Prosniz (1829–1917) taught music history at the Vienna Conservatory from 1869 to 1900; his teachings substantially influenced Mahler's views.
- ⁹ Cf. Rehding, *Music and Monumentality* (note 2), p. 9: "Rather than any kind of 'bigness' in its own right, monumentality is better understood, for now, as the imaginary link between musical bigness and greatness".
- ¹⁰ Cf. Dahlhaus, 'Brahms und die Idee der Kammermusik' (note 1), pp. 45–57, 48.
- ¹¹ *Erinnerungen von Natalie Bauer-Lechner* (note 7), p. 193: "Die einzelnen Stimmen sind so schwierig zu spielen, daß sie eigentlich lauter Solisten bedürften."
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 148: "den Terrorismus, durch den ich jeden einzelnen zwingte, aus seinem kleinen Ich herauszufahren".

- ¹³ Cf. Julian Johnson, *Mahler's Voices: Expression and Irony in the Songs and Symphonies*, Oxford 2009, p. 36: "Mahler's music can present itself as the most intimate kind of chamber music".
- ¹⁴ Cue 19–20; 32–36; 68–69; 77–79, after a passage of the solo viola; 97–102; 109; 116–124; 127–133; 136–137; 148; 167; 174; 199.
- ¹⁵ Cf. Johnson, *Mahler's Voices* (note 13), pp. 17, 25, 315.
- ¹⁶ Julian Johnson claims (*ibid.*, p. 250): "In Mahler's lifetime the idea of a unified sense of identity among the audience for symphonic works could no longer be taken for granted; the capacity to create one was, at the same time, becoming increasingly weaker – a trend not significantly altered by the powerful exception of the Eighth Symphony."

ABSTRACT

In his Eighth Symphony, Gustav Mahler envisions modern artistic production to steer clear of an alternative emerging at the time: that between popular music on the one hand and esoteric avantgarde music on the other; Mahler's music is meant to reach the masses, but without descending to audiences' lowest common denominator. One query through which Mahler's paradoxical aesthetic vision of an 'individualism for the masses' can be explored has been hinted at by the composer himself: Does his integral symphonic work of art ('Gesamtkunstwerk') include or rather exclude chamber music?