

On Mahler's Cuckoos: Ironies of Text and Music

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1 Aside from the standard works that appear in all Mahler bibliographies, there are two items of particular relevance to the present paper. Chapter 5 of McGrath, "The Metamusical Cosmos of Gustav Mahler," contains much useful analysis of the literary, philosophical, and political background of the Third Symphony. Niekerk's article contains pertinent observations about the "rupture between sound and content, between music and text" in Mahler and about voice as "the ultimate place of competing visions and ideologies." Neither writer has much to say about "Ablösung im Sommer" specifically.

It is a commonplace, though an important and frequently neglected one, that understanding a song involves attending to its text. In the symphonies of Gustav Mahler the words of an incorporated song are important even when they do not appear in the final product. The aim of the present paper is to demonstrate this point by analyzing the song "Ablösung im Sommer" from *Die Lieder und Gesänge* (Volume Three, composed 1887-90) and then considering the implications of its incorporation into the Scherzando movement of the Third Symphony (1895-6, shortly before Mahler moved from the Hamburg Municipal Theater to assume the directorship of the Vienna Court Opera). Much good work has been done on the Third Symphony, but the specific pertinence of "Ablösung im Sommer" has not, I believe, been fully recognized.¹

It will be useful first to take a small apparent detour and examine the closely related "Lob des hohen Verstandes" – like "Ablösung im Sommer" a humorous song on the theme of cuckoo and nightingale. In the summer of

1895 Mahler composed what are now the second through sixth movements of the Third Symphony, as well as the song “Das himmlische Leben,” which was intended to be the seventh but was dropped and later used in the Fourth Symphony. During the busy Hamburg season of 95-6 Mahler worked, whenever he could steal an hour or two, on the sketches for the first movement – an outrageous 35-minute monster bearing the title “Pan awakens. Summer marches in (Procession of Bacchus).” This march was intended to introduce the entire Nietzschean or pseudo-Nietzschean dream of the Third Symphony. When Mahler arrived at his summer home in Steinbach in June 1896, he discovered to his chagrin that the sketches for the new movement had been left behind in Hamburg. What was he to do now, while waiting for them to arrive by post? The answer was to compose another *Wunderhorn*-song that had both obvious and hidden affiliations with the major project on temporary hold. “Lob des hohen Verstandes” appears to be a gentle and good-natured satire on Mahler’s critics; indeed, the original title was “Lob der Kritik.” This is the story: in the traditional singing contest between cuckoo and nightingale objectivity is seriously compromised by allowing the cuckoo to appoint a donkey as judge or umpire. The donkey, with his large but indiscriminating ears, obviously prefers the triadic intervals and simple rhythms of the cuckoo to the sophisticated melismatic patterns of the nightingale and awards first prize to the former. All this is accomplished in the music with colorful birdcalls and hilarious offbeat braying by the self-satisfied umpire. The entire effect is delightful, and it is hard to imagine a better introduction to Mahler’s world for newcomers, especially those who may have been repelled by an encounter with the large and difficult wordless symphonies.

All well and good; but it’s hard to avoid a number of nagging questions. In the first place, anyone who knows Mahler’s artistic personality as a composer is likely to feel uneasy about such a glib dismissal of asinine aesthetics. Did not Mahler himself insist on intruding elements of vulgarity into the most sublime passages of his music? Just a week or so after the composition of “Lob des hohen Verstandes” Mahler wrote to Bruno Walter (Schlesinger) apropos of the Third Symphony:

Unfortunately, the whole work is again infected [“angekränkt” – the standard translation of “sicklied o’er” in *Hamlet*] by my notorious sense of humor, “and there are plenty of opportunities for me to indulge my propensity for making an ungodly racket.” Sometimes the musicians play “without paying the least attention to each other, and my essentially chaotic and brutal nature reveals itself in naked form.” That you can always count on me for a good dose of triviality is well known; this time, though, it goes

way beyond the allowable limits. “Sometimes you think you’re in a tavern or stable.” – So please come as soon as you can and come prepared for battle! You may have cleaned up your aesthetic taste in Berlin; but don’t worry, you can ruin it again here. (Mahler, Letter # 200, 220-221, my translation.)

The remarks about the composer’s alleged brutality and vulgar animality are clearly quoted from an outraged critic, and the anti-Semitic critics of the 1890’s generally did claim to valorize nightingales over cuckoos. Shall we argue that this is a dispute about metaphorical ornithology: who is the real nightingale and who is the real cuckoo? I do not think so – Mahler seems to have been genuinely attached to cuckoos; the cuckoo/nightingale problem had already been treated once in “Ablösung im Sommer,” and there are several other cuckoos in other works. So is Mahler laughing *at* or *with* the donkey?

And then we have the fascinating question of the literary background of “Lied des hohen Verstandes” (or, as the poem is called in *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, “Wettstreit des Kukuks mit der Nachtigall”). There is clearly an important connection between the folk poem and another ancient singing contest that found its canonical form in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: that between Pan and Apollo. (Other versions of the myth prefer the satyr Marsyas as Apollo’s competitor – no great difference for the present argument.) The story runs as follows: the god Pan, imagining his performance on the pipe of many reeds to be far more attractive than that of Apollo on the lyre, proposes a contest to be umpired by the mountain-god Timolus. The arrangements are made, and Timolus decides in favor of Apollo, whose beauty and majesty are fully reflected in his musical performance. Unfortunately King Midas, not the most prudent of mortals, happens to be present and dissents vigorously from the verdict: he prefers the rustic piping to the heavenly lyricism. For this impertinence Apollo punishes him by awarding him the ears of a jackass. Midas hopes to conceal this catastrophe by affecting a turban; but alas, his barber must necessarily know of it and fails to keep the secret; he digs a deep hole in the riverbank and whispers the truth into the ground. Later, in a marvelous piece of poetic circularity, reeds emerge at the site; and whenever the gentle breezes blow, one can hear the hollow whispering: Midas has asses’ ears.

Now arguably the mythical background adduced here is too much baggage for a two-and-a-half minute song to carry by itself. But this objection falters when “Lob des hohen Verstandes” is situated in the context of summer 1896: after all, Mahler is then working on a vast symphonic movement called “Pan awakens,” which includes a triumphal march of Dionysus; and the Nietzschean scheme of the entire symphony, ultimately derived from *The Birth of Tragedy*, requires us to understand

2 I would never want to claim that Mahler was entirely clear about (or even cared about) the difference between Pan and Dionysus. We would do just as well to take Marsyas as the competitor of Apollo: satyrs can be associated with Dionysus (and so can Midas, since it was Dionysus who, in recompense for a service rendered, bestowed upon Midas the celebrated gift of gold). Quite possibly our myth has garbled the story of yet another gift of Dionysus, rather than punishment of Apollo.

the other five movements (composed the previous summer – including “Ablösung im Sommer”) as an Apollonian dream-world that emerges from the Bacchic frenzy.² Clearly the aesthetic controversy between Pan (or Dionysus) and Apollo is far less trivial than the one between cuckoo and nightingale, understood ingenuously. Nevertheless, I do not believe that the considerations presented here suffice to overthrow the standard and obvious interpretation of “Lob des hohen Verstandes” – no indeed; if only because these considerations are not *represented in the music*. All we can say for sure is that the work, as a satire on Mahler’s critics, is an uncommonly gentle and generous satire: who could withhold sympathy from such a delightfully stupid ass? But the case of “Ablösung im Sommer” is very different; here the argument is brilliantly represented in the music – the argument *is* the song.

Let us begin with the text that Mahler set to music:

Kukuk hat sich zu Tode gefallen
an einer grünen Weiden!
Kukuk ist tot! hat sich zu Tod’ gefallen!
Wer soll uns denn den Sommer lang
Die Zeit und Weil’ vertreiben?

Ei! Das soll tun Frau Nachtigall!
Die sitzt auf grünem Zweige!
Die kleine, feine Nachtigall,
die liebe, süße Nachtigall!
Sie singt und springt, ist all’zeit froh,
wenn andre Vögel schweigen!

Wir warten auf Frau Nachtigall;
die wohnt im grünen Hage,
und wenn der Kukuk zu Ende ist,
dann fängt sie an zu schlagen!

As usual Mahler has tinkered a bit with the exact wording of the original poem in *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and introduced some repetitions; but much more significantly, the entire final stanza is an addition by the composer – the poem formerly ended with “andere Vögel schweigen.” As a consequence, the original AB scheme, cuckoo → nightingale, has been deformed into the basis of an ABA song, cuckoo → nightingale → cuckoo, in which the nightingale has been reduced to a “contrasting middle section.” What sense does that make? Why should the installation of the nightingale as the summer singer end with a defiant call of the cuckoo, as our song does? Has the composer ordained a memorial service for the springtime bird? Is he reminding us that the seasons are cyclical? Then again, what is the point of the second-to-last line: “wenn der Kukuk zu Ende ist”? – has not cuckoo been dead since line one? Of course that “wenn” could mean “whenever” and be construed as introducing the present tense of a general observation. But it must be dawning upon us that Mahler’s cuckoo is not quite as dead as he could be; reports of his demise have been greatly exaggerated.

The real proof is in the musical pudding. Let us look closely at the “contrasting middle section” with the nightingale’s interlude in the major mode. In fact, this is nothing but a cleaned-up version of the cuckoo’s funeral music, although Mahler has done everything imaginable to disguise the blatantly obvious fact. Compare “Wer soll uns denn den Sommer lang / die Zeit und Weil’ vertreiben?” with “Ei! Das soll tun Frau Nachtigall! / Die sitzt auf grünem Zweige!” (See the passages marked 1-3 in the music). The nightingale tune is a nearly identical stepwise descent, with the following changes of appearance: the mode is major; the major-second trill of “schweigen” (5) is borrowed from the minor-second trill of “Weiden” (4); the figuration is ornately melismatic, as is typical of instrumental nightingales (although its accompaniment features a cuckoo-derivative, 6-8); the banal block chords have been eliminated; the upbeat has been inverted to convey a quite illusory sense of *ascent* rather than descent; and perhaps most deviously, the vulgar offbeat accents have been suppressed – they, after all, only serve to emphasize the descending “appoggiaturas” of the cuckoo, and (this is a truly delicious thought!) they remind us of the vulgar offbeats of a donkey who is offstage but very much present in spirit (“Kukuk” being nothing but the translation of “Ija” into Ornitho-Vulgarian, a closely related language).

And so it becomes clear that “Ablösung im Sommer,” written not later than 1890, gives almost a textbook definition – *avant la lettre* – of the psychoanalytic undoing of repression. What could be a more fitting image of sublimation than the song of this nightingale? – the same old

3 See Jens Malte Fischer, "Gustav Mahler und das 'Judentum in der Musik,'"

libidinal content transformed into a socially acceptable performance by means of symbols that displace and condense the offensive material. The composer thus emerges as an analyst who can rationally expose the sublimating mechanisms to guarantee that they work in a healthy manner. Moving from the psychosocial to the cultural domain, we may interpret "Ablösung im Sommer" as a veiled argument *pro domo sua* for the essential coherence of Mahler's complicated artistic personality: on the one hand, he was a widely admired and influential conductor of the "sublime" music of *Parsifal* (briefly quoted at the end of the Third Symphony); on the other hand, he was a highly provocative composer who incorporated elements of the military march, the peasant wedding dance, and the hunter's funeral dirge into symphonies of mordant stylistic heterogeneity. Of course the anti-Semitic critics of the 1890's, who inexplicitly but unmistakably supply the background for the letter to Bruno Walter quoted above, saw the "division" in Mahler as a simple question of ineradicable Jewish vulgarity versus vain aspirations to German high-art spirituality. What a mistake! "Ablösung im Sommer" – and its pivotal employment in the Third Symphony – demonstrate Mahler to be an absolute master of the entire range of spiritual and cultural modalities from a sort of folksy and maudlin Austrian Catholicism to the austere and elevated counterpoint of the late Beethoven string quartets – and to Wagner. Not just a technical master of these modalities – also a profound analyst of their hidden underground connections. Nobody who understands "Ablösung im Sommer" could ever speak glibly of a putative "Jewish self-hatred" in Mahler's personal or artistic make-up; the song is a stunning document of power and pride.³

With these last remarks I have anticipated the main conclusions of my reading of the Third Symphony. Let me go back and summarize the argument. To begin with, all the considerations adduced above in the discussion of “Lob des hohen Verstandes” – Mahler’s obvious love and defense of cuckoos, his promotion of cuckoo music through a contextual association with Pan or Dionysus, his elevation of the contest between cuckoo and nightingale to an equal, or nearly equal, contest between different aspects of divinity – all these may be attached to our reading of “Ablösung im Sommer.” Both the embedding of the song into an explicitly Nietzschean project and the actual musical structure of the song prove that we are not guilty of overinterpretation. What then is the function of the (wordless) “Ablösung” for the Third Symphony? We recall that Mahler’s various schemes for the six movements of the work involve a progression from the brute forces of nature (I) to the flowers of the meadow (II) to the animals in the forest (III) to the voice of midnight or man (IV) to the voices of church bells or angels (V) and ultimately to love or God or God’s love (VI). “Ablösung im Sommer” supplies most of the musical material for III, which expands the song into a brilliant rondo-like fantasy featuring woodwinds and brass and including the famous “posthorn” solo as a contrasting element. Movement III is the middle of the symphony and its metaphysical pivot; more precisely, III and IV are the middle of the symphony and function together. This point is hard to formulate exactly, but we can say that III and IV effect the transition from the world of nature to the moral world of humanity, and they do so in stages: the “low” bird (the cuckoo, essentially wordless because of his association with Pan, the flute player) gives way to the “high” bird (the nightingale, on the threshold of verbal articulateness because of her melodiousness and her association with Apollo, the lyre player, whose mouth is free for the nonmetaphorical singing of real words; the “high” bird gives way to the Romantic posthorn, whose parlando style and literary associations almost make us hallucinate the text of a poem by Eichendorff; and the posthorn gives way to a human contralto (like the posthorn, supported by French horns) who sings the actual words of the “Mitternacht” poem by Nietzsche. The function of “Ablösung im Sommer” – including the text that is not there – is to remind us that the question of high and low is endlessly problematical and that philosophical maturity requires us to recognize the common energies that flow through all of the world’s manifestations, from the ridiculous to the sublime to the ridiculous. Consider movement V: many critics have been puzzled or put off by Mahler’s reversion, after the Nietzsche movement, to a naïve-

sounding poem from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* on the theme of Saint Peter's absolution from sin – set like a carol for contralto, boys' and women's choruses, bells and glockenspiel, etcetera. Are we moving upwards or downwards in the metaphysical scheme of the symphony? The clear answer is: yes. Christianity reveals its sublime mysteries in a "low" style – already Saint Augustine had a problem here. And then the next movement (VI) begins with Beethoven's Quartet Opus 135. How shall we read these discontinuities? "Ablösung im Sommer" tells us how.

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SUMMARY

The third movement of Gustav Mahler's Third Symphony is a purely instrumental scherzando arrangement of the composer's earlier song for voice and piano "Ablösung im Sommer," which thematizes the singing styles of cuckoo and nightingale. Standard interpretations of the symphony read the movement as little more than an "animal fantasy" – halfway between the elemental forces of nature and the moral world of humanity. A full reading of the song, attending to its text and literary background, reveals it to be a profound meditation on the general question of "high" and "low" styles – and thus a pivotal moment in the symphony's vast metaphysical argument.

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Ablösung im Sommer

Aus „Des Knaben Wunderhorn“

Mit Humor

1

p Ku - kuk hat sich zu To - de ge - fal - len,

To - de ge - fal - len an ei - ner grü - nen Wei - den! Wei - den! Wei - den!

Ku - kuk ist tod! Ku - kuk ist tod! hat sich zu Tod' ge - fal - len!

2

possiertlich Wer soll uns denn den Sommer lang die Zeit und Weil' ver - tre - ben?

6

p *p* *mf*

Figure 1 Gustav Mahler – Ablösung im Sommer

The musical score is written for voice and piano. It consists of three systems of music. The first system shows the vocal melody with lyrics "Ku - kuk! Ku - kuk! Wer" and a piano accompaniment with a repeating eighth-note pattern. The second system continues the vocal melody with lyrics "soll uns denn den Som-mer lang die Zeit und Weil' ver - trei - ben?" and features a piano accompaniment with a more complex, flowing pattern. The third system includes a measure rest of 3 measures, followed by the vocal melody with lyrics "Ei! Das soll thun Frau Nach - ti - gall! Die sitzt auf grü - nem". This is followed by a measure rest of 8 measures, then the vocal melody with lyrics "Zwei - ge! Die klei - ne, fei - ne Nachti - gall, die lie - be, sü - sse Nachti - gall! Sie". The piano accompaniment throughout the piece is characterized by a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, often with a crescendo or decrescendo marking.

Ku - kuk! Ku - kuk! Wer

soll uns denn den Som-mer lang die Zeit und Weil' ver - trei - ben?

3 *p* Ei! Das soll thun Frau Nach - ti - gall! Die sitzt auf grü - nem

8 ^{*)} [7] Zwei - ge! Die klei - ne, fei - ne Nachti - gall, die lie - be, sü - sse Nachti - gall! Sie

*) Von [bis] kann die Gesangsstimme eventuell nach Bedürfniss des Sängers weggelassen werden.

singt und springt, ist all-zeit froh, wenn an-dre Vö-gel schwei-gen!

Wir war-ten auf Frau Nach-ti-gall, die wohnt im grü-nen

Ha-ge, und wenn der Ku-kuk zu En-de ist, dann fängt sie an zu schla-gen!

Figure 1 Gustav Mahler – Ablösung im Sommer