



## DAS LIED VON DER ERDE

1907 was a wretched year for Gustav Mahler.

Barely two days after the tragic death of his four-year-old daughter, a heart condition was diagnosed that was to kill him four years later. That same year he decided to resign from the Vienna Court Opera after vile anti-Semitic attacks in the press. Mahler underwent an existential crisis and became aware of his own mortality. As a result, he felt a growing inner need to sum up his entire oeuvre in a universal statement about life and death. In search of suitable texts, Mahler stumbled upon *Die chinesische Floßte*, an anthology of traditional Chinese lyric poetry newly translated by Hans Bethge. He set seven of the poems from this collection in full, and also added a few lines of his own. His intention clearly went further than the composition of a song cycle. Taken together, the poems form the starting point for a symphony with one overarching message: Mahler's personal farewell to the world.

From the first note of 'Trinklied von Jammer der Erde', Mahler pulls out all the stops in his orchestration to reinforce the lamentation of a drunkard, sung by the tenor. Why does nature revive in eternal cycles, while a human life does not last even a paltry hundred years? The swirling waltz reaches a climax when the tippler conjures up the delusional image of a screeching ape. But, above all, the gloomy conclusion of each stanza of the poem lingers like a mantra: 'Dunkel ist das Leben, ist der Tod'.

After this impetuous opening, the piece sinks into the weary melancholy of 'Der Einsame im Herbst'. A fragile interplay between violin and oboe gives musical expression to the bleak chill. The alto mourns the absence of love as she gazes at withering lotus flowers. The orchestra draws strikingly sparse, stylized lines, as in Chinese prints.

The tenor reappears in 'Von der Jugend', a cheerful chinoiserie in which pentatonic melodies portray a carefree scene. A few young people enjoy themselves in a porcelain pavilion in the middle of a pond. Our attention is diverted to the reflection of their image in the water. Is this reality or illusion?

'Von der Schönheit' bathes in the same sunny atmosphere. Girls are sitting by a river picking lotus flowers, when young fellows on horseback gallop wildly past. The sensual orchestral palette of the beginning unexpectedly turns into boisterous march music.

In the fifth movement the drunken sot turns up again. 'Der Trunkene im Frühling' is now past despair and plunges himself into his wine. A little bird twitters that spring has come, but he does not care.

Thudding hammer blows on double bassoon and tam-tam pierce marrow and bone at the beginning of 'Der Abschied'. The scherzando style of the previous three songs turns to bitter earnest. A gloomy recitative, in which alto voice and flute evoke the chilly autumnal images from the second song, slowly gives way to an exalted ode to a world 'drunk with love and life' and a desperate lament that the end is inevitable. When the harp depicts a babbling brook, we hear for the first time the idyllic call of the earth. The flute will later tread the tender paths to immortality with rising pentatonic motifs. The tragedy reaches its apotheosis when the orchestra strikes up an archetypically Mahlerian funeral march. Once we glimpse this guiding thread that runs throughout his output, the denouement is near.

When, after a long delay, a friend arrives, it seems as if Mahler is addressing us personally: 'I go into the mountains, seeking peace.' The crushing tragedy of farewell gives way to resignation, the essence of humanity merges into the eternal blue light of the earth.

This new transcription by Reinbert de Leeuw builds on a tradition established by Arnold Schoenberg in 1918. His 'Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen' (Society for private musical performances) provided an excellent platform for new music. In Viennese concert halls, the avant-garde was often neglected by musicians and ridiculed by critics. The Verein therefore engaged the leading performers to give meticulously rehearsed concerts for a select audience on a weekly basis. The press was not welcome, and applause or booing was forbidden. In addition to piano and chamber music, orchestral works were also played in arrangements for string quintet, wind instruments, piano and harmonium.

This version of Das Lied von der Erde is scored for similar forces. Nevertheless, Reinbert retained some instruments that are crucial to the identity of the work. For example, the morbid color of double bassoon is indispensable at the beginning of 'Der Abschied', and only the ethereal timbre of the harp is appropriate for embodying idyll or eternity. Reinbert was of course aware of the loss of volume and spaciousness in this version, but he also saw advantages. Because of the light instrumentation, the pianissimo so often marked by Mahler in the vocal parts is given a chance of realisation, and the symbolism of the delicate Chinese poetry comes even more vividly to life. But

the orchestra can also blossom freely and enjoy a highly communicative form of chamber music.

After our premiere of *Das Lied von der Erde* at the Festival de Saintes, Reinbert convinced us to record the work at short notice. We could not guess what the real reason for his hurry was, even though we had noticed that his old body had become uncooperative recently. During the recording he was more inspired than ever, seeming to identify fully with the message of the work.

When Reinbert announced his own farewell to life a few weeks after the sessions, we were deeply moved. At the same time, it became crystal clear why he had thrown himself into Mahler's music like a madman over the last few months. With the end in sight, he was convinced that with this very last recording he could contribute something essential to the interpretation of *Das Lied von der Erde*. Right up to the moment of his death, the piece never let him go . . .

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