THE SENSE OF ENDING IN MAHLER'S *DAS LIED VON DER ERDE*

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ABSTRACT
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The Sense of Ending in Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*
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The final moments of *Das Lied von der Erde* have consistently been regarded as one of the most enigmatic endings in the history of Western music. The lack of musical resolution of the last movement offers a view into eternity that strikes a potent blow to our rational conception of human experience. An understanding of Mahler's relationship to *fin-de-siècle* society and his interaction with previous expressions of musical endings, especially those of Beethoven's Ninth and Wagner's *Tristan*, helps to shed some light on the ending of *Das Lied*. Mahler expresses his *Weltanschauung* through the tension that emanates from *Das Lied*. The unsettling result of this tension however, is not resolution or triumph, but an eternal (*ewig*), never-ending dialectic struggle between the psyche and the exterior world.

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INTRODUCTION

It is now well past mid-night & society dictates that I should stop playing the Abschied. Otherwise I might possibly have gone on repeating the last record indefinitely – for 'ewig' keit of course. It is cruel, you know, that music should be so beautiful. It has the beauty of loneliness, & of pain: of strength & freedom. The beauty of disappointment & never-satisfied love. The cruel beauty of nature, and everlasting beauty of monotony.
And the essentially 'pretty' colours of the normal orchestral palette are used to paint this extraordinary picture of loveliness. And there is nothing morbid about it. The same harmonic progressions that Wagner used to colour his essentially morbid love-scenes (his 'Liebes' is naturally followed by 'Tod') are used here to paint a serenity literally supernaturaL. I cannot understand it – it passes over me like a tidal wave – and that matters not a jot either, because it goes on for ever, even if it is never performed again – that final chord is printed on the atmosphere.
                                                                  - Benjamin Britten to Henry Boys, June 1937[1]

The ending of *Das Lied von der Erde,* which so overwhelmed Benjamin Britten, has consistently been regarded as one of the most enigmatic in the history of Western music. Volumes have been written about the form, harmony, melody, and text of "Der Abschied," the last movement of *Das Lied*, in order to attempt an explanation of its meaning. The final lingering sounds resonate with human emotion, but do they speak of hopelessness and death, confidence and triumph, or acceptance and resignation; or has Britten come to the correct conclusion that their serene beauty encompasses all of these human attributes? The musical dissolution of the final movement, this "extraordinary picture of loveliness," offers a view into eternity that strikes a potent blow to our rational conception of human experience. We are unsettled by the glimpse of eternity in *Das Lied*, its lack of the resolution and certainty that we have come to associate with nineteenth-century symphonic endings.

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[1] Benjamin Britten to Henry Boys, June 1937, *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten, 1913-1976*, ed. Donald Mitchell, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 493.

Why do we attach so much meaning to the end of this piece of music? *Das Lied* does

not present a literal argument about society with which we can agree or dissent. It does,

however, serve as a reflection of human thought, and this (somewhat cloudy) mirror can, in

turn, affect our perception of life. Mahler is not the first musician to be accused of reflecting

human life in art. Indeed, as Vera Micznik has summarized a long history of thought:

humanity possesses a "natural impulse to impose a certain kind of order upon the perception

and representation of the world," and "since music is one of the cultural expressions of life, it

makes sense to assume that music too might share with other cultural manifestations some

basic characteristics by means of which people fashion their experiences."[2] It is only logical

that we ascribe personal and cultural relevance to pieces of art, treating them as reflections of

our own destiny.

We are obsessed with ending (infinitely aware that we are finite) and yet can not

rationalize a world that ends (or perhaps ultimately that we do either). The way in which

composers construct endings (or better – how *we* read musical endings) relates directly to our

personal sense of ending, which in turn reveals a certain cultural understanding of humanity.[3]

In this sense, music, and the composers who create it, can help us make sense of our lives

(and deaths) with the materials of their craft. Mahler makes this quite clear in a letter to

Bruno Walter in 1906:

> That our music involves the "purely human" (everything that belongs thereto, thus
> also the "intellectual") cannot be denied. It depends, as in all art, on the pure means
> of the expression, etc. If one wants to make music one must not want to paint, to
> write poetry, or to describe. *But what one makes into music is still only the whole
> (thus feeling, thinking, breathing, suffering) man.*[emphasis mine] There is indeed

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[2] Vera Micznik, "Music and Narrative Revisited: Degrees of Narrativity in Beethoven and Mahler," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 126/2 (2001), 193.

[3] Many of these ideas come from Joseph Kermode's assessment of the role of endings in literature. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

nothing further to object to about a "program" (even if it is not the highest step of the ladder)—but a composer must express himself in it and not a writer, philosopher, or painter (all of which are contained in a composer).[4]

If the whole of humanity is tied inextricably—in Mahler's mind—to the fabric of music, is it then rash to explain the ending of "Der Abschied" solely in terms of the very personal traumas and experiences of Gustav Mahler's life, as numerous authors have suggested?[5] Or could *Das Lied* rather be a reflection, through Mahler, of the broader questions raging in the cultural milieu of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna: disillusion with politics, fragmentation of artistic support, and questions about the supremacy of human rationality? Mahler, as a musician in Vienna, was highly invested in *fin-de-siècle* culture, and it is dangerous to ignore the society for which *Das Lied* was created and whose collective experience was not perhaps all that different from Mahler's own.[6] A fuller understanding of the social influences on Mahler's life will help promote a broader appreciation of the complex ending of *Das Lied* by decoding some of its seemingly inexplicable qualities. Comparison of *Das Lied* with the intricate structure of the social and cultural milieu of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, in which Mahler was immersed, may lead to new insights into the construction of an ending.

Music was synonymous with culture in the Vienna of 1900, and the music of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) and Richard Wagner (1813-1883) in particular, saturated the very fabric of *fin-de-siècle* society. Poets and artists sketched the heroic life of Beethoven in

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[4] Mahler, letter to Bruno Walter, 1906, quoted in William McGrath, *Dionysian Art and Populist Politics in Austria* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 125.

[5] Beginning with the monographs of Guido Adler and Paul Bekker through the present New Grove article, explanations of the ending of *Das Lied* have been couched in terms of the biological and psychological aspects of farewell and dying present at the end of Mahler's life.

[6] In the midst of describing the composition of *Das Lied* to Bruno Walter, Mahler relates that "I have been granted a time that was good." Letter 378, 1908, in *Selected letters of Gustav Mahler*, trans. Eithne Wilkins, Ernst Kaiser, and Bill Hopkins, Rev. ed. (Boston: Faber, 1979).

their works as a contrast of struggle and triumph.[7] Politicians and philosophers relied on

Wagner as the basis for their thought.[8] Critics, whether of art or politics, compared

contemporaries to the towering figures of Beethoven and Wagner.[9] The profound impact of

both Beethoven and Wagner on Mahler's thought and musical technique is therefore not

extraordinary. The manner, however, in which he shapes their influence to create his own

voice is unique and further helps us interpret his reflection of human reality. Just as Mahler's

individual place in society, as an artist, public figure, and a Jew is reflected in his

Weltanschauung, these musical influences, which are inextricably woven together with his

place as an artist of his time, provide a context and framework for his musical work. The

intertwining of Mahler's relationship to other aspects of *fin-de-siècle* culture and the relation

of *Das Lied* to previous expressions of musical endings will provide, what Carl Schorske

refers to as, the warp and woof in the fabric of cultural history.[10]

Mahler lived in a tumultuous period of Austrian history. By 1900, liberal politics had

been overthrown by a disparate radicalism. Confidence in the late nineteenth-century social

order eroded with political aspirations of Pan-Germans, anti-Semites, socialists, and

underrepresented minorities such as the Slavic nationalists. Political crisis mounted due to

the lack of identity with a unified ruling power. The progressive shift that the liberal

government had set into motion in the late nineteenth century began to spiral out of control.

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[7] See, for example, David Dennis, "Beethoven at Large: Reception in Literature, the Arts, Philosophy, and Politics" in The Cambridge Companion to Beethoven (New York: Cambridge University, 2000), 292-305.

[8] Especially "German Art and Politics," "What is German," and "Modern." See Walter Frisch, German Modernism: Music and the Arts (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 7-35.

[9] See, for example, Annegret Fauser and Manuela Schwartz, eds. *Von Wagner zum Wagnérisme: Musik, Literatur, Kunst, Politik*, Deutsche-französische Kulturbibliothek 12 (Leipzig: Universtät Leipzig, 1999).

[10] Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), xxii.

The resulting chaos left many Austrians with a weakening confidence in humanity. With the centuries-old Austrian social and political order on the verge of collapse, members of the post-liberal society that emerged began to look inward for confidence and order instead of searching for a rational social and political order. This inward resolve led to an exaltation of psychological man as an asylum from the exterior modern world.

Groups of artists, writers, and composers, similarly began to respond to the political instability and the resulting social chaos around them by turning their focus inward, toward the security of the human spirit, which was perceived as creating a balance with the uncontrollable physical world. This resulted in an art of dialectic tension: two positions held in a tender balance, which could be disrupted by pressure from either side. One such group of artists, the Secession, banded together to search for an internalized balance to the chaos of the exterior world. In order to proclaim its aims, the Secession designed and built a large exhibition space over the door of which was inscribed "To the age its art. To art its freedom."[11]

By 1900, Gustav Klimt, the recognized leader of the Secession, was engaged decisively in a search for a reality in which humanity could find respite. Not unlike Sigmund Freud and, as we will see, Gustav Mahler, Klimt's search became an inward journey. His explorations of the world involved delving deeply into the psyche of modern humanity. In his art, the boundaries between the physical and metaphysical, interior and exterior, psyche and flesh began to dissolve and become indeterminate. Perhaps one of the best expressions of this loss of clearly defined boundaries, immanently appropriate to our discussion, is the

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[11] Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, 219.

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fourteenth exhibition of the Secession (April-June 1902) entirely devoted to the celebration

of Beethoven and his setting of Schiller's "Ode to Joy" in the Ninth Symphony.

The entire exhibition was designed to provide a suitable foil for a contemporary

statue of Beethoven by Leipzig artist Max Klinger. The interior of the Secession building

was transformed into a temple to Beethoven for the event by the architect Josef Hoffman. He

created a central 'holy of holies,' which was entered only after passing through several ante-

chambers. At the center of this inner sanctum sat Klinger's *Beethoven Denkmal* [Beethoven

monument], enthroned on a dais.[12] "Having been prepared by every available means for

reverence [Andacht], one arrives before [the statue] in a kind of hypnosis," commented the

Neue Freie Presse.[13] Klinger embodied Beethoven as the savior of humanity. As Jan

Brachmann describes it, "Beethoven appears as 'the new Adam', as 'the new Human', and

thus with the attributes of the Christian messiah."[14] Klinger weds Christian imagery with

Greek mythology, effectively making Beethoven into a god.[15]

Klimt extends the messianic allusions in his own contribution to the exhibit, three

frieze panels that illustrate the power of art, and the artist, over adversity. They were

intended to express symbolically Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, man's liberation from

darkness and ascent toward happiness. Schorske describes the panels as Klimt's "fullest

statement of the ideal of art as refuge from modern life….wholly abstracted from that life's

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[12] Henry-Louis de La Grange, *Vienna: The Years of Challenge (1897-1904),* vol. 2 of *Gustav Mahler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 509-10.

[13] Schorske, 255.

[14] Jan Brachmann, *Ins Ungewisse hinauf…Johannes Brahms und Max Klinger im Zweispalt von Kunst und Kommunikation* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1999), 101.

[15] Richard Dehmel (1863-1920) describes Klinger's *Beethoven Denkmal* as the modernists' "new Zeus," and narrates the encounter between Christian (Jesus) and Greek (Zeus) cultures as a marriage. Dehmel, "Jesus and Psyche – Phantasie bei Klinger," *Aber die Liebe*, vol. 2 of *Gesammelte Werke* (Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, 1907), 23-30.

historical concreteness…a fulfillment through regression."[16] Although outwardly an homage

to Beethoven, Klimt's inspiration for the solitary knight that leads humanity to the final

victory was Gustav Mahler.[17] Mahler, in turn, was asked to open the exhibition with a

performance of Beethoven's music. He proposed a concert of Beethoven's Ninth, in keeping

with Klimt's frieze, by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and the Opera chorus. When a

controversy erupted over the orchestra's monetary demands, Mahler vetoed the concert, and

contented himself with a reduced performance, by arranging a portion of the final movement

for brass.[18]

The performance of Beethoven's Ninth, in addition to the applied and decorative arts

that surrounded Klinger's *Beethoven*, combined forces to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in

exaltation of art and artist. As the Secession announced in its exhibition catalogue, the

unified space of painting and sculpture was designed to facilitate a *Raumidee* [single idea

within a space]. This total communication of the arts, was described as a necessary attribute

of and a duty to *Monumentalkunst* [monumental art], producing the highest and best that

humanity could offer all time: *Tempelkunst*, a church of art, from which the visitor departs a

believer.[19] Parallels with Wagner's idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* are abundant, and in fact, the

Secession described the exhibition as *Gesamtwirken*.

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[16] Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, 263.

[17] Klimt authorized the reproduction of the knight in a book that paid homage to Mahler on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday. "Klimt implicitly acknowledged that he had taken his inspiration for the knight's face from Mahler," La Grange, *Vienna: The Years of Challenge*, 511.

[18] La Grange, *Vienna: The Years of Challenge*, 513.

[19] *XIV. Kunstausstellung der Vereinigung bildender Künstler Österreichs – Secession, April bis Juni 1902*; reproduced and discussed in Rainer Cadenbach, *Mythos Beethoven: Ausstellungskatalog* (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1986), 13-27.

If the shadow cast by Beethoven in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna was considerable, the influence exerted by Wagner was overwhelming. Enthusiasm for the writings and music of Wagner reached a fevered pitch by the turn of the twentieth century. The Modernist movement was highly influenced by his compositional techniques, and no composer, despite fundamental differences in approach, was truly able to ignore the Wagnerian tradition. Mahler was no exception. His compositional technique was deeply influenced by Wagner's music dramas, specifically *Tristan und Isolde*. As conductor of the Vienna Hofoper, Mahler directed no fewer than 37 performances of *Tristan*,[20] and it was with that work that he made his Metropolitan opera debut on 1 January 1908.[21]

Wagner prescribed the role of the artist in creating a redemptive atmosphere in which humanity could recognize its own endeavors. It is this obligation, to recreate the beautiful world within, that resonated with Mahler and bore fruit in the composition of *Das Lied*. Wagner's conception of composition informed Mahler's own ideas on the subject, as the following paragraph demonstrates. In his essay entitled *Beethoven*, Wagner describes what a composer must do:

> The tendency expressed in the conception must therefore belong to the idea of the world, which the artist seizes and clarifies in works of art. Since we assumed however with certainty that in the music the idea of the world is obvious, so the

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[20] Mahler conducted the Vienna Hofoper between 1 May 1897 and 31 December 1907. La Grange, *Vienna: Triumph and Dissolution (1904-1907)*, vol. 3 of *Gustav Mahler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 695.

[21] He performed it a total of seven times in New York before the summer of 1908. Gerald Fitzgerald, ed., *Annals of the Metropolitan Opera: The Complete Chronicle of Performances and Artists*, vol. 1 (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1989), 160-64.

inspired musician is contained within this idea, and that which he expresses is not his own opinion of the world, but the world itself, in all its changing moods of pain and joy, well-being and woe.[22]

Clearly Mahler's own formulation of what constitutes a symphony relates directly to Wagner's prescriptions for a composer: "Think of such a great work, in which indeed the whole world is reflected—one is, as it were, only an instrument on which the universe plays."[23]

Mahler idolized Wagner, even becoming a vegetarian when Wagner's polemic about eating meat was printed in 1879. He placed Wagner on a pedestal as the redeeming savior of humanity through his music and ideas. In a conversation with Natalie Bauer-Lechner, Mahler depicts Wagner in Christological terms:

> How amazing that a light like his ever penetrated the world!...But then he was born at the right moment, at the precise juncture of time when the world was waiting for what he had to say and to offer…Those who are born after such great spirits as Beethoven and Wagner, the epigones, have no easy task. For the harvest is already gathered in, and there remain only a few solitary ears of corn to glean.[24]

Although Mahler venerated Wagner's music and writings, he was attacked by critics bearing a different Wagnerian banner, one of anti-semitism. Mahler's Jewish background, the very thing that his hero Wagner described as unnatural, proved to be a barb in the mouths of his critics.

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[22] "Die in der Konzeption sich ausdrückende Stimmung muss daher der Idee der Welt selbst angehören, welche der Künstler ersasst und im Kunstwerke verdeutlicht. Da wir nun aber mit Bestimmtheit annahmen, dass in der Musik sich selbst die Idee der Welt offenbare, so ist der konzipirende Musiker vor allem in dieser Idee mit enthalten, und was er ausspricht, ist nicht seine Ansicht von der Welt, sondern die Welt selbst, in welcher Schmerz und Freude, Wohl und Wehe wechseln." Wagner, "Beethoven," in *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen von Richard Wagner*, vol. 9 (Leipzig: C. F. W. Siegel's musikalienhandlung, 1900), 100.

[23] "Nun aber denke Dir ein so großes Werk, in welchem sich in der Tat die ganze Welt spiegelt—man ist sozusagen selbst nur ein Instrument, auf dem das Universum spielt." Mahler to Anna Bahr-Mildenburg, 18 July 1896, *Briefe: 1879-1911*, ed. Alma Marie Mahler (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1978), 163.

[24] Natalie Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler* (1923), trans. Dika Newlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 38.

Mahler was relentlessly hounded in the press for an unseemly, unnatural, or non-genuine aura critics attached to his music. One reviewer went so far as to write that "sensitive listeners are most disagreeably moved…[when he] takes the speech of our genuine German masters into his mouth and comports himself as though he were one of them."[25] Mahler recognized this shadow, from which he could not escape, supposedly remarking that he was "thrice homeless, as a native of Bohemia in Austria, as an Austrian among Germans and as a Jew throughout the world. Everywhere an intruder, never welcomed."[26]

Although Mahler was aware of and hurt by the critics, it did not deter him from composing. Viennese artistic society, which he perceived as antagonistic to his artistic work, treated him as an outsider.[27] His lack of acceptance eventually led to his resignation from the Vienna Opera, in addition to a continuing sense of alienation. Mahler's confidence in human rationality waned and developed into a distrust of what had become a disintegrating society. His struggle for peace and acceptance was turned inward, creating a tension between the external world and the realm of the psyche. Mahler's frustrated search for belonging and the resulting dialectic between interior and exterior forces imparts additional light on the musical ending of *Das Lied*.

"Der Abschied" presents the problem of the individual in his relationship to nature (the exterior world). The world that surrounds the individual is not reconciled with the inner psyche of the individual, but rather left in a dynamic tension—a dialectic balance in which

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[25] Rudolf Louis, *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten* (22 November 1911), trans. by Stephen Hefling. Hefling, "Aspects of Mahler's Late Style," in *Mahler and his World*, ed. Karen Painter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 64.

[26] Mahler, trans. in Jonathan Carr, *Mahler: A Biography* (New York: Overlook Press, 1998), 9-10.

[27] In addition to the critics, Mahler notes the constant strife with the Vienna Opera Orchestra in letters during his last months as its conductor.

the will of the individual is not engulfed by the exterior world. The parallels are obvious between Mahler and the persona of "Der Abschied," a struggle to retain the self against the overwhelming presence of Beethoven, Wagner, and a political and social fabric that was antagonistic to change and to his Jewish identity. What is more remarkable in the ending of "Der Abschied" is the manner in which the individual continues his inward struggle. The unsettling result of the entire effort is not resolution or triumph, but an eternal (*ewig*), never-ending struggle between the psyche and the exterior world.

CHAPTER I

THE ENDING OF *DAS LIED*

> *It's easy to have a "world view" if you only view what is pleasant*
> *and you don't deign to glance at the rest.*
>   - Arnold Schoenberg, *Harmonielehre* (1911)[1]

        Mahler assumed neither an easy *Weltanschauung* nor one without anxiety. He absorbed too much of the world around him to ignore the fundamental tensions in society. These tensions between the exterior world and the inner psyche, which were so prevalent in *fin-de-siècle* Viennese thought, found their most striking musical expression in *Das Lied von der Erde* (1908). The entire work is built around contradictions and juxtapositions. *Das Lied* relies on a tenuous balance between order and chaos, held in equilibrium by every musical means. This dialectic exchange between the earth (the exterior world) and the travelers (the human psyche), although alluded to throughout *Das Lied*, is expressed most directly in the final movement, "Der Abschied." The accumulated tension, which we anticipate being resolved in the final movement, remains in a dynamic stasis, and if we are to believe the text, continues unresolved for all eternity.

        Mahler uses every compositional device at his disposal to communicate unresolved tension. He translates the constant struggle between the inner psyche and the external world into a musical dialectic, which saturates the musical fabric. Structure, melody, harmony, orchestration, and text, all foreshadow the possibility of a final dénouement, but *Das Lied*

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[1] Arnold Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony*, trans. Roy E. Carter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

does not end. Rather, it continues as it began, a reflection of a discordant world. Theodor W. Adorno comments on this world in his monograph on Mahler:

> The irreconcilability of the inward and the outward can no longer be harmonized spiritually, as in the classical age. This induces in Mahler's music the unhappy consciousness that that age believed overcome. The historical hour no longer allows it to see human destiny as reconcilable in the existing conditions with the institutional powers that force human beings…into conditions contrary to them in which they can nowhere find themselves.[2]

By the conclusion of "Der Abschied," Mahler has conveyed the "unhappy consciousness" of *fin-de-siècle* Viennese thought. A longing for inner peace and harmony coexists with the chaos of the exterior world.

Indeed, the music of *Das Lied* is saturated with the dialectical conflict between these interior and exterior worlds. Mahler highlights this tension by concluding the work without decisive resolution. In the final moments of "Der Abschied," as the voice recedes into eternity, as the entire musical fabric is fading away, all that remains is an unresolved sonority. It is a sound that points beyond itself. That final sonority is what disturbs us: it does not resolve the tensions of the previous movements, but rather leaves it intact, metaphorically parallelling a view of the world with which Mahler was familiar. Mahler's *Weltanschauung* is apparent in *Das Lied*, and we can account for how it reflects *fin-de-siècle* thought. The unanswered question that remains, however, is how did Mahler shape the musical fabric to exude this dialectic. How did Mahler realize the tension in his *Weltanschauung* musically?

In order for the end of "Der Abschied" to be effective—to be understood—tension must develop, and an allusion to a possible reconciliation of opposites proposed. Every

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[2] Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy* (1971), trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 16.

aspect of the music in *Das Lied* contributes to the credibility of the ending. The overall

musical structure of *Das Lied* provides the framework within which other musical elements

can be used to heighten the sense of tension, which provides the key to the ending. One

signal element of the musical structure in *Das Lied* is the technique of foreshadowing.

Mahler alludes to the stasis of existence through a manipulation of musical time. The

musical means by which he accomplishes this include the suspension of regular metrical

pulse through the use of heterophony and misplaced accents, the use of *unendliche Melodie*

in the construction of a musical prose, and the use of static harmonies and ostinato patterns.

Through these channels of dissolution or disruption the external world of chaos and

disillusion enters the sonic world. Ambiguity of musical momentum is also the result of a

transparent orchestral sonority, extreme ranges of pitch and color in voices and instruments,

and a cessation of forward tonal progression.

  The text of *Das Lied* encapsulates the dramatic tension unfolded in the music. The

story of farewell in "Der Abschied"—which is a retreat from the world of chaos—presents

the tangible: an attempt of the psyche to exclude the exterior world. Neither music nor text,

however, is developed as the primary agent in this work. The text is sometimes exploited for

sonority, as an instrument, instead of relating a specific meaning. In a similar manner, music

often rises above pure sonority to intrude upon the realm of semiotic meaning. Mahler

shifted the traditional process of composing a song. In the case of *Das Lied* the text is not the

foundation of the musical setting, but rather serves to confirm the world of sound. By first

exploring this world of sound through Mahler's compositional techniques, and then

examining the relationship to the text, we can create a lens through which we more

accurately view the plot of *Das Lied.*

Musical Structure

The overall organization of *Das Lied* presents the first major clue that this is not a simple excursus in the genre of orchestral song. Indeed, many critics of the time complained of the confusion between symphony and song in the structure of *Das Lied*.[3] The interpretation of a lied as a symphonic process was not a confusion of form to Mahler, but—as we have seen before—an encapsulation of his world. The macro structure of *Das Lied* demonstrates the peculiarities and paradoxes apparent in the world. Alternation between tenor and bass voices, allusions in the texts to death and the chaos of life, juxtapositions between movements of fast and slow, high and low, loud and soft, and contrasts in orchestral color all allude to a tension within the musical structure. Such musical tension, which is not necessarily unique to *Das Lied*, seeks for resolution. It is the absence of resolution, which Mahler does not provide at the end of "Der Abschied," that forces us to reconsider the previous construction. Only a radical understanding of musical structure will produce an organizational scheme that is not characterized by tension and release. In *Das Lied*, however, contradictions are not resolved, but rather foreshadow the lack of resolution that the ending embodies. Allusion becomes one of the foundational tools Mahler employs to create a cohesive structure, and thereby a convincing argument.

Mahler's *Das Lied* is based on seven portions of text from Hans Bethge's *Die chinesische Flöte* (Leipzig, 1907). Bethge worked chiefly from a German anthology by Hans Heilmann based on two French translations of the original Chinese poetry. Mahler uses single poems as the basis for the first five movements of *Das Lied* and combines two poems,

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[3] For a brief summary of the labeling problems associated with *Das Lied*, see Hermann Danuser, *Gustav Mahler und seine Zeit* (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1991), 204-12.

to which he made extensive textual alterations, for the final movement, "Der Abschied."[4] The movements serve as an alternating view of life and death, ranging from a dark drinking song to youth and springtime. The final movement serves as a summary and conclusion to the previous five movements, and is their approximate equal in length.

The first movement of *Das Lied*, "Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde," provides several examples of musical and textual foreshadowing. The text of the third stanza in "Das Trinklied" begins, "Das Firmament blaut ewig, und die Erde wird lange fest steh'n und *auf-blüh'n im Lenz*."[5] Juxtaposed immediately with these lines, the poem returns to a contemplation of death: "Du *aber*, Mensch, wie lang lebst denn du?[emphasis mine]"[6] This sudden contrast in mood prefigures the simultaneous juxtaposition of these alternate realities in the final movement. After the third strophe of "Das Trinklied," however, Mahler develops the subject of death only occasionally in the remainder of the work, leading the listener into a false sense of confidence that earthly life will prevail triumphant at the conclusion of the piece.

In the final strophe of "Der Abschied" the text similarly focuses on the rebirth of the earth in spring: "Die liebe Erde allüberall *blüht auf im Lenz* und grünt aufs neu!"[7] Although there are clear parallels between these two passages (highlighted with italics), the tension of death in the first movement seems to have been removed in the last movement. In the final strophe of "Der Abschied" there is no return to the contemplation of death, but the chaos of

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[4] Donald Mitchell, *Gustav Mahler, Songs and Symphonies of Life and Death: Interpretations and Annotations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 328-37.

[5] The heavens are ever blue, and the earth will long stand firm and blossom forth in spring.

[6] *But*, you man, how long will you live?

[7] The beloved earth everywhere blossoms forth in spring and greens up new.

the world is not stilled. It has been transformed into a musical metaphor. The texts of life

are parallel, describing the spring (rebirth or transfiguration) of the earth. Some of the same

words and phrases also lead to a shared understanding. The text, "auf-blüh'n im Lenz,"

which so clearly ties the two passages together, was Mahler's own creation.[8] This addition to

the original text strengthens the foreshadowing that occurs, and also creates the possibility of

musical parallels between the two movements.

The vocal line of the third strophe of "Das Trinklied," (beginning 2 before [31],

Example 1a), is also motivically related to the last few lines of "Der Abschied" (beginning 1

before [58], Example 1b).[9] The music employs a three-step descending motive setting the

words "das Firmament" and in the later movement "die liebe Erde." Both passages begin

slowly and softly, almost whispering. The sighing motive of *ewig* and *Erde* (marked with

brackets) musically connects these two sections (See Examples 1a, b, and c). The brief

allusion to eternity in "Das Trinklied" becomes an extended metaphor for the external world

in "Der Abschied," which repeats *ewig* eight times, all of which are Mahler's additions.[10]

Longing for eternity transforms into a musical metaphor through the use of delayed

resolutions. One gesture (shown in Example 1a) in particular saturates "Der Abschied" with

longing. By developing this gesture of delayed resolution, Mahler prepares the music for a

transformation into non-resolution at the end of "Der Abschied." What

Example 1a: "Das Trinklied," 2 before [31]; 1b: "Der Abschied," 1 before [58];

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[8] For a parallel comparison of Hans Bethge's text with Mahler's alterations see Arthur Wenk, "The Composer as Poet in *Das Lied von der Erde*," *19th Century Music* 1 (1977): 44-47.

[9] I have adopted the common practice in writing about Mahler's music to refer to a number of measures, in Arabic numerals, before or after an orchestral rehearsal number, which is given in brackets. Most of the orchestral scores that have been published, including *Das Lied*, do not use measure numbers, but rather rely solely on rehearsal numbers.

[10] Wenk, "The Composer as Poet," 44-47.

1c: "Der Abschied," [61][11]

a — Das Fir - - ma - ment _____ blaut e - wig,

b — Die lie - - be Er - - - - - - - de

c — e - - - - wig, e - - - - - - - wig

encapsulates longing in this gesture is the proximity of tension and the unexpected delay of release. Each instance of its use generally contains a large crescendo and ritardando of a held note (usually under a fermata), which resolves on the following downbeat in a new tempo, at a contrasting dynamic, and generally at a higher pitch level. Often this resolution is delayed by the addition of a glissando or grace note, which aurally postpones the sounding of the downbeat. The first example occurs in the orchestra at [29] and again seven bars later at [30]. The voice joins into the gesture at 5 before [34] (Example 2). After numerous other instances,[12] Mahler uses this gesture to introduce eternity in the final section of "Der Abschied" (Example 3). These gestures of postponed resolution prefigure the lack of resolution in the final section of "Der Abschied." The motives of *ewig* in the final bars of the movement descend and remain unresolved. The heightening of tension, which is released (although delayed) in the gestures just mentioned, is not dispersed by gestures of release in the concluding portion of the movement, even though a gradual decrescendo ensues.

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[11] All examples from *Das Lied* have been sketched from Gustav Mahler, *Das Lied von der Erde*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1988).

[12] See, for example, [34], 2 after [35], 3 after [45], 2 before [54], and [58].

Example 2: "Der Abschied," 5 before [34]

Similarly, the tempo marking of the final measures ("Nicht eilen") reinforces this sense of dissipation or gradual fading instead of resolution.

Example 3: "Der Abschied," 1 before [61]

The Disruption of Musical Time

In addition to foreshadowing the unresolved tension between the external world and the psyche, Mahler's treatment of musical time forecasts the dynamic stasis that ends "Der Abschied." The struggle between the psyche and the world manifests an irreconcilable tension. One of the primary influences on Wagner and, through Wagner's appropriation, Mahler as well was Arthur Schopenhauer, who describes the logical outcome of this battle in his *World as Will and Idea*:

> Then all at once the peace which we were always seeking, but which always fled from us on the former path of the desires comes to us of its own accord, and it is well with us. . . . We are for the moment set free from the miserable striving of the will; we keep the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing; the wheel of Ixion stands still.[13]

For Mahler, this moment of peace does not come. The expected stilling of Ixion's wheel, in which "everything is resolved in peace and being," describes the final movement of Symphony No. 3, but it is not applicable to the end of *Das Lied*.[14] It is this very sense of frustrated resolution that makes the ending of *Das Lied* so powerful. The stasis that depicts tension rather than peace is represented by a disruption of musical time. Mahler stills the progress of time through the use of heterophony, the confusion of regular metrical pulse, and the construction of *unendliche Melodie*, the Wagnerian technique of cadence evasion, of constantly varied melodic lines that elude regular phrase divisions, and of textures that weave seamlessly from instrument to instrument. The development of *unendliche Melodie* produces a musical prose that evades regularity. Describing the rhythmic dissolution of "Der

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[13] Arthur Schopenhauer, *Schopenhauer Selections*, ed. De Witt Parker (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1956). Translated in William McGrath, *Dionysian Art and Populist Politics in Austria* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 155.

[14] Natalie Bauer-Lechner, *Erinnerungen an Gustav Mahler* (Leipzig, 1923), 50. Translated in McGrath, *Dionysian Art*, 155.

Abschied" in a conversation with Bruno Walter (the conductor scheduled to premiere the work), Mahler jested, "have you any idea how one is supposed to conduct this? I haven't!"[15]
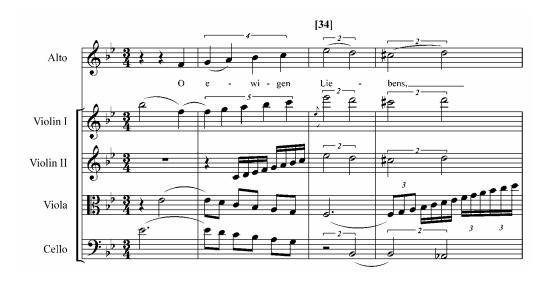
The last strophe of "Der Abschied," demonstrates Mahler's use of heterophony and metrical dissolution. The voice and strings state fundamentally the same melody, although it is presented in two different forms. This melody is supported by harps, one playing triplets in a $\frac{3}{4}$ pattern and one rolling four chords per measure. This combination of varying rhythmic units contributes to a sense of metric ambiguity. An earlier passage, the last line of the first half of "Der Abschied," demonstrates this technique to an even greater degree (Example 4). Here once again the strings play a similar melody to the voice, however the notes and rhythms are not always in line. The word *ewigen*, for example, is sung on an ascending quadruplet, the first violins present the same melody in the final four notes of a quintuplet, and the second violins reduce the melody to the final four sixteenth notes of an eight-note scale. Obvious rhythmic incongruence upsets the sense of metrical regularity, adding to the sense of metrical dissolution.

In an analogous manner, Mahler continuously transforms melodies to disrupt a sense of metrical regularity. The improvisatory character of the oboe melody two measures after [7] is representative of the freely woven melodic lines throughout "Der Abschied" (Example 5). As Donald Mitchell has pointed out, the melody appears to be anti-metrical, owing its irregularity to continually changing metrical groupings. No measure of the melody contains the same rhythmic grouping as any other.[16] Similarly, he argues that the violin melody beginning four measures before [12] (Example 6) is "very close to the idea of

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[15] Bruno Walter, *Gustav Mahler* (Vienna, 1936), trans. James Galston (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1937), 59.

[16] Mitchell, *Songs and Symphonies*, 373.

Example 4: "Der Abschied," 2 before [34]

Example 5: "Der Abschied," 2 after [7]

Example 6: "Der Abschied," four measures before [12]

continuous melody in the Wagnerian manner."[17] The use of this type of free-spun melody in *Das Lied* functions to disrupt rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic expectations and thereby contributes to the dissolution of metrical regularity. Adorno compares the relation of this phenomenon in Mahler's music to a verbal narrative, arguing that as the statement proceeds it continually becomes slightly different. This constant development and variation, characterized as musical prose, is yet another manifestation of the assault against resolution in *Das Lied*.[18]

     A third technique that contributes to a sense of musical stasis is Mahler's use of ostinatos and pedal tones. The first 54 bars of "Der Abschied" is underscored (almost exclusively) with a low C pedal tone. An ostinato of alternating thirds in the harp, clarinet, and viola grounds the following 32 bars. The pedal tone is transposed to A by [18] and remains there until [23]. The movement returns to C at its conclusion, but it proceeds without the clear bass pedal that was present in the preceding sections (until the final three bars). The musical stasis projected by ositinati and pedal tones is further highlighted by structures with no clear harmonic progression, which are often elided melodically and rhythmically, furthering the rift between expectations and the actual musical presentation.

Orchestral Sonority

     The suspension of rhythmic pulse, highlighted by heterophonic writing, the disruption of regular rhythmic groupings, the incorporation of continuous melodies, and the use of static harmony, is supported by an orchestration verging on the symbolic. Mahler's skill in

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[17] Mitchell, *Songs and Symphonies*, 376

[18] Adorno, *Mahler*, 88.

orchestration, however, allows the music to extend beyond the realm of pictoral writing to the evocation of moods and emotional responses. This orchestration incorporates the technique described as *Klangfarbenmelodie*, an idea often associated with the music of Wagner.[19] In this technique, words and ideas are still expressed musically (in a manner similar to *Figurenlehre* in the Baroque) such as the chirping of the *Vögel* immediately after [18] in the oboes and flutes, but the technique also extends much deeper into the musical fabric. Instruments and voices are exploited for their range and color, combined to elicit accord or disjunction, and juxtaposed to display contrasting emotional representations.[20]

The light and ethereal texture and orchestration of the final movement of *Das Lied* evokes the eternal, the interior and exterior world that continues forever. The final measures of the piece, beginning five measures before [65], demonstrate the sonority of weightless *Ewigkeit* (Example 7). The arpeggios of harps contribute to the other-worldly feel of the passage.[21] The rapid motion of the harp arpeggios is contrasted with the subdued and still lines of the other instruments, and the slowly sinking melody of the voice. Is Mahler reminding us that the psyche is not free and unfettered, but rather turning within, in an effort to attain tranquility?

Mahler differentiates the emotional content of "Der Abschied" from the previous movements by a contrast in orchestration. The alternation of voice types throughout *Das*

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[19] This term comes from Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre* (1911), and was linked to the idea that tone colors could take on a structural role.

[20] See Jürgen Maehder, "Die Poetisierung der Klangfarben in Dichtung und Musik der Deutschen Romantik," in *Aurora: Jahrbuch der Eichendorff-Gesellschaft* 38 (1978): 9-31.

[21] Comparisons with Wagner's treatment of the orchestra, which this description elicits, will be expanded in the next chapter.

Example 7: "Der Abschied," 5 before [65]

Lied concludes in "Der Abschied" with the alto (possibly assigned to a baritone). The

extended tessitura of the alto in the final movement, in fact the largest of the entire work, is

highlighted by long passages where Mahler exploits extremes of range that give the voice an uncharacteristic quality. The discontinuity within the vocal range of "Der Abschied" is echoed in the contrast of instrumental tessituras and rhythms in the final bars of the movement. The resolution of tension, what appears to be a homogenization of orchestral timbre, is thwarted by the addition of a celesta (for the first time in the piece!) in the final phrases of the movement. The high-pitched, sharp sounds of the celesta's arpeggios are jarring and leave no doubt that resolution, or even complete dissolution, is no longer possible. Is Mahler describing a heavenward longing that is starkly contrasted with earthly grounded reality?

Mahler exploits low registers in "Der Abschied" that set it apart from the other movements of *Das Lied*. Unlike all of the previous five movements, which begin without any bass instrumentation, "Der Abschied" commences with instruments in an extremely low tessitura. All of the instruments in the first two bars are playing C, which is just a pedal tone in the horns (a full octave below their normal range). The addition of plucked notes in the harps, cellos, and string basses, the *sfpp* in the contrabassoon, and a tamtam creates an uncharacteristic sound that becomes almost pitchless. The conclusion of the movement has similar characteristics with the low-pitched C-major chord in the trombones, and all of the strings playing in a low tessitura. The striking difference at the end of "Der Abschied" is the extreme contrast of the celesta, which plays a C-major chord at the top of its range, adding a bright tinkle to the subdued atmosphere of the end.

Static harmony also contributes to the suspended feeling of "Der Abschied." Kofi Agawu effectively argues that by incorporating aspects of the whole-tone scale at the end of "Der Abschied," Mahler has neutralized the sense of tonal orientation, thus making it

more ambiguous.[22] It is through this ambiguity that tonality contributes to the dissolution of regular accent. The modal transference that occurs throughout *Das Lied*, and especially in "Der Abschied," also contributes to a sense of suspension. A major and A minor are mixed together in the first movement in the same manner as A minor, C minor, and C major are combined in the last. Agawu argues that "contrasting images such as life and death . . . are translated into musical images in which opposites such as major and minor . . . are exploited."[23] The final chord of the piece, he argues, is a microcosm of this modal mixture and ambiguity. "The added-sixth chord may be explained as a fusion of the triads of A minor and C major."[24] Another way to view this final sonority is the combination of two motives developed earlier in the work. The rising notes of *Sehnsucht* (Example 8) combine with the falling motive of *ewig* (Example 3) to depict the unresolved tension between internal peace and external eternity.[25] The combination of these two motives at the end of "Der Abschied" (Example 9) results in the mixture of A minor and C major, and aurally represents the eternal longing, *gänzlich ersterbend* [dying away completely].

Example 8: "Der Abschied," [14]

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[22] Kofi Agawu, "Mahler's Tonal Strategies: A Study of the Song Cycles," *Journal of Musicological Research* 6 (1986): 31.

[23] Agawu, "Mahler's Tonal Strategies," 33-34.

[24] Agawu, "Mahler's Tonal Strategies," 19.

[25] Hermann Danuser suggests viewing the final section of "Der Abschied" as a combination of the voice's *ewig* motive combined with a retrograde variant of a basic motive which permeates the entire work, A-G-E. He also suggests that a vertical alignment of this basic motive is the basis for the final sonority of the piece. "Musical Manifestations of the End in Wagner and in Post-Wagnerian *Weltanschauungsmusik*," *19th Century Music* 18 (1994): 81.

Example 9: "Der Abschied," [64]

Juxtapositions in the harmonic development of "Der Abschied" also contribute to the heightening of tension in the orchestral sonority. Mahler shifts quickly between major and minor modes, incorporates harmonic movements chromatically and by thirds, and introduces harmonic polyphony in which accompanimental patterns are in the opposite mode from the predominant melody. The beginning of "Der Abschied" produces an unsettling effect not

only because of the low tessitura of the instruments, but also because no mode is implied.
The first pitch sounded in all instruments is a C. Neither major nor minor can be deduced
until the third bar introduces the horns with an E flat. In addition, the sighing motive
introduced in the horns alternates modes within the space of two measures (Example 10). A
similar passage occurs in the orchestral introduction to the second part of "Der Abschied"
beginning at [36].

Example 10: "Der Abschied," 3 before [2]

Additional harmonic juxtapositions include the use of third relationships and upward
chromatic shifts that intensify, and yet undermine, the already expressive tonality. The two
recitatives in the first half of "Der Abschied" are grounded in C minor [3] and A minor [22]
respectively. The strophe of text which succeeds the second recitative at [27] modulates up a
half step to B-flat major. By the final strophe of text in the second half of the movement [55]
the harmony has modulated up another half step to C major. With only an occasional
glimpse to C minor, the movement ends in C major with the addition of an A. The tension
between the two modes that began the movement concludes the movement with one vertical
sonority. The tension between the minor and major modes also finds expression in
counterpoint. A sense of harmonic polyphony occurs when the accompaniment tends toward
the mode opposite from the primary melodic line.

Harmonic shifts and juxtapositions, like the dramatic changes in orchestral color, are often tied to the underlying structure of the movement and the narrative of the text. Contrasting images of leaving and remaining, life and death, and internal and external emotion are tied closely to the musical fabric. Therefore, the conclusion of "Der Abschied," which does not provide resolution between these contrasting musical elements, elaborates a semantic meaning in addition to structural ambiguity.

The Fusion of Text and Music

Mahler ascribed to the need for organic unity between text and music. He asserted that "the text actually constitutes only a suggestion of the more profound content which is to be brought out, of the treasure which is to be raised."[26] Carl Dalhaus, writing about Wagner, characterizes this relationship to form:

> The interlocking or intercutting in the relationship of the text and the music is not accident, let alone incompetence, but a typically Wagnerian concept of form. The music is no more subordinate to the structure of the text, a mere illustration of it, than the text is a vehicle for the music, an excuse for its development.[27]

Nowhere is the organic unity between word and tone, text and music, more apparent in the oeuvre of Mahler than in *Das Lied.* Two examples present themselves immediately as symptomatic of this organic fusion. On the one hand, the text is sometimes used for its timbral quality and exploited for pure sonority, and, on the other, music often rises above pure sonority to intrude upon the realm of disclosure.

There are clear parallels in "Der Abschied" with this expansion of textual usage. Mahler takes advantage of the "ü" vowel in the final lines of the poetry (all of which he

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[26] Bauer-Lechner, *Erinnerungen*, 30. Translated in McGrath, *Dionysian Art*, 125.

[27] Carl Dalhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas* (1971), trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 56.

added to the original poems) in order to imbue the final transfiguration with depth and emotion. In addition to repeating such words as "allüberall," Mahler also gives extended rhythmical values to the syllables containing the mixed vowel, almost completely undermining an understanding of their meaning. The final lines of the text appear below with Mahler's additions in bold.

> **Die liebe Erde allüberall**
> **Blüht auf im Lenz und grünt aufs neu!**
> **Allüberall und ewig, ewig blauen licht die Fernen,**
> ewig, ewig, . . .[repeated until swallowed by silence][28]

We are supposed to become lost in the longing of eternity, unfettered by death, and transfigured into the realm of nature and life. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, a contemporary of Mahler, describes the nature of this technique when describing recent French poetry:

> The creative individual, surrounded by all too restricted forms of expression, as though by walls, casts himself into language itself and tries to find in it the drunkenness of inspiration, and through it opens up new entries into life in accordance with those senses of meaning which are freed from the control of conscious understanding.[29]

Mahler explores new entries into meaning by retouching several parts of the text in "Der Abschied." Not only does Mahler insert additional lines at the end of the prose, but in the second half of the text, after the long funeral march, the bearer of the draught of departure also becomes confused with the narrator through the use of third person "er." Confusion of the personas in a song of farewell leads to questions of who or what is leaving whom and who or what is remaining. It also recalls other juxtapositions throughout the musical fabric that point to the tension between interior and exterior worlds.

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[28] The beloved earth everywhere blossoms forth in spring and greens up new! Everywhere and forever, forever the distances brighten blue, forever, forever, . . .

[29] Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Prosa*, vol. 4 of *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1966), 489-90. Translated in Robert P. Morgan, "Ives and Mahler: Mutual Responses at the End of an Era," *19th Century Music* 2 (1978): 80.

In contrast to the role that words sometimes take in *Das Lied*, music often rises above background sonority in order to take a more active role in the *dénouement* of the story. Mahler uses music to express the verbally ineffable. "Sometimes—and not merely in the recitative—Mahler's music has so completely mimed the gesture of speech that it sounds as if it were speaking literally."[30] We have already seen how the musical combination of the *Sehnsucht* and *ewig* motives at the end of "Der Abschied" pronounces the *dénouement*. Mahler brings to bear all of his compositional resources—the use of musical foreshadowing, the dissolution of musical time, and the description, verbal and sonorous, of the eternal dialectic—to convinces us of its reality. For Benjamin Britten this indeed was the "beauty of disappointment and never-satisfied love. The cruel beauty of nature, and everlasting beauty of monotony" that goes on forever.[31]

Das Lied presents a questioning confidence in humanity, which results in an interiorization, an exaltation of the psychological. Adorno begins to get at the problem by commenting,

> His successful final movements are those that ignore the radiant path *ad astra…Das Lied von der Erde* and the Ninth Symphony circumvent the difficulty with sublime instinct by no more feigning homeostasis than they enact a positive outcome free of conflict, but by looking questioningly into uncertainty. The end here is that no end is any longer possible, that music cannot be hypostatized as a unity of actually present meaning.[32]

I would argue that, while recognizing the music's ambiguity, Adorno misses the meaning that can be read in the end of *Das Lied*. Neither an outcome free of conflict, nor a

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[30] Adorno, *Mahler*, 22.

[31] Britten to Henry Boys, June 1937, *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten, 1913-1976*, ed. Donald Mitchell, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), I:493.

[32] Adorno, *Mahler*, 138.

questioning look, the end of *Das Lied* can be interpreted as a statement of existence. This existence is multivalent and dialectic rather than finite and fixed.

Mahler succeeds in translating an inner struggle with the eternal world into music of the highest caliber. But why would he go to such extraordinary lengths to highlight the unresolved dialectic at the end of *Das Lied*? As we will see in the next chapter, the music that enveloped *fin-de-siècle* Vienna exuded positive assertions that were no longer tenable in the society in which Mahler lived. The triumphant human rationality, depicted in the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, or even the transforming power of human emotion, encapsulated in *Liebestod* of Wagner's *Tristan*, no longer were normative in Viennese thought and culture. A new representation of the world was necessary if the tensions in *fin-de-siècle* life were to be understood, even if this 'world view' were to raise the ire of a nostalgic society.

CHAPTER II

PRECEDENTS

Mahler's compositional technique resonates with the influences of Beethoven and

Wagner. In *Das Lied*, Mahler interacts with two particular works of the German canon:

Beethoven's Ninth and Wagner's *Tristan*. These two pieces not only represented important

strains of philosophical thought in the *fin-de-siècle* mind, but they were also ubiquitous in the

musical life of that generation. They were iconic symphonic works which held the

imagination of composers and public alike. In addition to being pinnacles of the German

symphonic tradition they were intimately related to the development of a German

Weltanschauung. By allusion and contrast to these two pillars of musical repertoire Mahler

was able to create a musical argument that a *fin-de-siècle* audience could grasp, even if it was

one that they might ultimately reject. It is therefore important to understand those musical

aspects with which Mahler interacted in order to begin to comprehend the complexities at the

end of *Das Lied*. Perhaps the best way to describe Mahler's interaction with the music of

Beethoven and Wagner is to cast it as an effort to misread them in light of a new aesthetic,

his own very personal conception of the world.[1]

Although Mahler's constant interaction with the Ninth and *Tristan* informs the

manner in which he approaches the compositional task of *Das Lied*, he does not adopt the

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[1] I borrow this notion from Harold Bloom and Mark Evan Bonds's application of this theory to music. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Bonds, *After Beethoven: Imperatives of Originality in the Symphony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

philosophical stance of either work, but rather transforms their musical language in order to musically situate his own *Weltanschauung*. The transformation of what he viewed as positive humanism and transformative emotion into confident non-resolution is presented musically by a rejection of the outcomes of the Ninth and *Tristan*. By borrowing musical material in order to better situate his own argument, Mahler creates space and comprehensibility for his own creation. He adapts three compositional conceits that were central to the construction of the Ninth and *Tristan*: musical foreshadowing as an element of structure, the disruption of musical time, and the fusion of text and music. The use of these similar compositional devices emphasizes the affinity between the Ninth, *Tristan*, and *Das Lied*, while their transformation in *Das Lied* highlights Mahler's unique perspective.

Mahler adapted the musical techniques explored in the construction of the Ninth and *Tristan* because he was attempting to do what Beethoven and Wagner had already accomplished: the representation of the world in music. The interpretation of life, which *Das Lied* intimately attempted, found expression not only in the performance of these two works, but also in what Mahler believed to be the best essay on music, Wagner's philosophical exegesis of Beethoven, and in particular, Beethoven's Ninth.

In his "Beethoven" essay, Wagner lays out several principles that were highly influential on Mahler's understanding of music. First, he positions Beethoven as the locus classicus for the representation of the entire world in music by claiming (with Schopenhauer) that "music is an idea of the world, in which its nature is presented directly . . ." He then moves immediately to the case of Beethoven:

> In the same forms, in which the music should show itself only as a pleasing art, he [Beethoven] announced the true speech of the internal world of tones. Thus he at all times resembles a man possessed; for to him applies that which Schopenhauer has

said of the musician in general: he speaks the highest wisdom in a language that his reason does not understand.[2]

Here we see a direct correlation to Mahler's understanding of music's expressive ability. For him it became an idea of the world itself. Regardless of the fact that Wagner was securing his own position by tracing elements of his own philosophy to the music of Beethoven, his interpretation had a fundamental impact on Mahler. Indeed, Mahler's performance and understanding of Beethoven's Ninth were continuations of Wagner's interpretation.

Wagner develops this idea further by commenting on the composer's difficulties in representing their inner vision:

> he [the musician] is controlled, as it were, by the urgings to impart an understandable vision of his internal dream . . . in this approximation it affects however, as an extreme moment of its announcement, only the conceptions of *time* . . . by the *rhythmic* arrangement of his tones the musician steps into a contact with the descriptive plastic world . . . [emphasis mine][3]

Composers must make concessions in order to represent their ideas to others, but it is this "compact" with the external world of representation that receives the most contemplation in the works we are considering. For it is here, in their wrestling with time and musical structure, that Beethoven, Wagner, and Mahler begin to express the ineffable. It is here that individual expressions of the World begin to take form. All three composers disrupt the progression of musical time in some manner. All three recall previous constructions in order

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[2] "denn seine Musik selbst ist eine Idee der Welt, in welcher diese ihr Wesen unmittelbar darstellt . . .," In denselben Formen, in welchen die Musik sich nur noch als gefällige Kunst zeigen sollte, hatte er die Wahrsagung der innersten Tonweltschau zu verkündigen. So gleicht er zu jeder Zeit einem wahrhaft Besessenen; denn von ihm gilt, was Schopenhauer vom Musiker überhaupt sagt: dieser spreche die höchste Weisheit aus in einer Sprache, die seine Vernunft nicht verstehe. Wagner, "Beethoven," in *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen von Richard Wagner*, vol. 9 (Leipzig: C. F. W. Siegel's musikalienhandlung, 1900), 72, 83.

[3] Da er in der Verwendung der hier zwischenliegenden überreichen Abstufungen gleichsam von dem Drange nach einer verständlichen Mittheilung des innersten Traumbildes bestimmt wird . . . In dieser Unnäherung berührt er aber, als äusserstes Moment seiner Mittheilung, nur die Vorstellungen der Zeit . . . durch die rhythmische Anordnung seiner Töne tritt somit der Musiker in eine Berührung mit der anschaulichen plastichen Welt . . . Wagner, "Beethoven," 75.

to call them into doubt and present a transformed vision. All three allude to possible

resolution in the presentation of material. All three, that is, wrestle with the "limit" imposed

upon them, and this is noticeably present in their individual formulations of musical structure

and time.

Musical Foreshadowing

Mahler drew on Wagner's dramaturgical form—encompassing the inner action of the

love-death dialectic—to create his own *Weltanschauungsmusik* in *Das Lied*. One aspect of

this form is the employment of musical foreshadowing to create a convincing resolution or

transfiguration to this dialectic. Friedrich Nietzsche explains Isolde's transfiguration through

the metaphor of Dionysus and Apollo:

> The tragic myth is to be understood only as a transformation of the wisdom of
> Dionysus into images through the artistic means of Apollo. The myth pushes the
> world of phenomena up against its limits where it negates itself and seeks to flee back
> into the womb of the one true reality, where it then seems to intone its metaphysical
> swansong with Isolde.[4]

This struggle between love and death that informs all of the action in *Tristan* is resolved at

the end of Act III in Isolde's transfiguration. Hermann Danuser argues that her

transfiguration is

> at once the "redemption" [Erlösung] of human striving and final stilling of all longing
> in death, and the "resolution" [Auflösung] of dissonant harmonic tensions in the
> consonance of a tonic-major chord. In point of fact, in Wagner's *Tristan*, the epoch-
> making chromaticism that at the beginning of the work establishes a dissonant tension
> almost never resolved—the musical metaphor for the lovers' longing—is taken up
> once again in the conclusion and brought to a major-mode resolution.[5]

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[4] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 118.

[5] Danuser, "Musical Manifestations of the End in Wagner and in Post-Wagnerian *Weltanschauungsmusik*," *19th Century Music* 18 (1994): 72.

The famous love duet of Act II serves as musical and textual foreshadowing of Isolde's transfiguration. The lovers "yearningly desired death in love [sehnend verlangter Liebestod]" is realized in Tristan's eventual death and Isolde's transfiguration. Musical figures in Isolde's transfiguration are also reminiscent of motives presented in the Act II love duet, tying our memory and understanding of the two moments into a single idea. The two sections are also connected through use of the same tonality. Again, Danuser describes the allusion between the two sections as necessary for the dialectic of love and death to work:

> The B-major tonality of Isolde's *Liebestod*, one of the most famous constructions of an end in music history, alludes to the tonality of the "Liebes-Lust" passage in the act II duet—a compositional technique by which Wagner makes musically manifest the unity of love and death, while at the same time giving aesthetic realization to the textual, verbal intention. By dying at the side of Tristan's corpse, Isolde restores the lovers' mythic unity.[6]

Allusions and musical foreshadowing are also comprehensible throughout Beethoven's Ninth.

With the first sounds of the finale, Beethoven alludes to all three of the previous movements, juxtaposing the two keys (B-flat major and D minor) around which the symphony centers in one chaotic clash. In a single instant he reestablishes chaos, while at the same time preparing its transformation at the end of the movement. One is reminded immediately of the jarring sounds of chaos in the first bars of "Der Abschied." Richard Taruskin argues along with Maynard Solomon, that the reminiscences and anticipations of musical material "unite all of the movements into a single expressive whole. Most

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[6] Danuser, "Musical Manifestations," 71.

particularly, these thematic forecasts prefigure the 'Ode to Joy' melody in the finale, and turn the whole symphony (it is possible to argue) into a single quest for 'Elysium'.[7]

Similarly, allusions to the past eventually transform into hope for the future. An anticipation foreshadowing the joy to come is heard first in bar 77. By the full entrance of the "Freude" theme in the cellos (bar 92) a possible resolution to the chaos of the preceding material comes into focus. Elysium is not that easily gained, however, as the rest of the movement's unfolding clearly accentuates. Allusions to previous movements—perhaps the return of the chaotic world—occur again at the beginning of the final section (bar 655). But, after this final reassessment of previous material, Beethoven presents the unequivocal resolution which was anticipated earlier in the movement. Or does he? Is unequivocal resolution possible after such extensive chaos? Do the final moments of the Ninth still retain their impact? As Solomon argues, order "is discovered or restored, but without permanently assuaging the fear of disintegration."[8] Scott Burnham alludes to this when he speaks of Beethoven's heroic period: "Beethoven's telos is not just an end, but an end accomplished."[9] In other words, the ending influences the way in which the story is told, a full understanding of the story requires knowledge of the outcome. Beethoven tests the limits of form by creating such a lengthy and convoluted journey to resolution. Solomon suggests that by complicating the ending Beethoven attempted to present a realization commensurate with profound questions. In other words, "a worthwhile ending deserves to be postponed, kept in

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[7] Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 680.

[8] Maynard Solomon, "The Sense of an Ending: The Ninth Symphony," in *Late Beethoven: Music, Thought, Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 218.

[9] Scott Burnham, *Beethoven Hero*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 122.

abeyance until the right moment. . . . the construction of barriers as a necessary precondition to locating a portal, . . . finding corridors that emerge into the light."[10]

In *Das Lied*, Mahler presents a world in which the resolution of Beethoven's Ninth is too overwhelming, even if it appears questioning. At the conclusion of "Der Abschied" there is no place for triumphant resolution. Opposing ideas converge unsettled. Static tension replaces even tentative conclusion, and we are left with a picture of dialectical opposition, a concurrence of the chaos of reality and the harmony of the world within.

The Disruption of Musical Time

The foreshadowing of resolution in *Tristan*, the Ninth, and ultimately *Das Lied*, is situated in the midst of tension. Another of the ways in which tension is presented in these works is through the disruption of musical time. The disturbance of forward progression in these instances becomes a musical stasis that depicts tension rather than peace. For Mahler this treatment forecasts the dynamic tension that ends "Der Abschied." Similarly for Wagner, stasis is necessary for transfiguration, but the disruption of time becomes a dissolution, a peaceful and resolved symbiosis. For Beethoven, however, it is a disruption that, by contrast, heightens the decisiveness of resolution. Solomon refers to these instances of fixation as "time-stopping moments, . . . beyond the frontiers of ordinary experience."[11]

The dissolution of musical time is crucial to the musical transfiguration of Isolde. Wagner accomplishes this in *Tristan* by creating a harmonically static and ethereal sound in the last section of Isolde's transfiguration. A suspension of the pulse through the

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[10] Solomon, "Intimations of the Sacred," in *Late Beethoven*, 203-4.

[11] Solomon, "Intimations of the Sacred," 207.

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combination of varying rhythmic units also contributes to a sense of metric ambiguity. As

Roger Scruton has noted: "It is no exaggeration to say that Wagner's treatment of rhythm in

Tristan has the same subversive effect as his treatment of melody and harmony."[12] The

orchestral texture is extremely light in the final pages of *Tristan*, with the arpeggios of the

harp allowing Isolde's voice to float delicately in the air. Wagner also cultivates *unendliche*

Melodie throughout the final act, which further intensifies the metrical confusion. Donald

Mitchell argues that

> the uniquely free cor anglais solo in *Tristan* (Act III) – one of the most remarkable
> asymmetrical and quasi-oriental inspirations from the second half of the nineteenth
> century – was clearly the source of Mahler's own innovative free woodwind melody.
> . . . We might well conclude, and correctly so, that the free solo woodwind writing in
> which *Der Abschied* is peculiarly rich is indebted to Wagner's precedent.[13]

The musical combination of all of these techniques produces a stasis that depicts the

dissolution of death into love.

Beethoven employs musical stasis to heighten the sense of resolution which the return

to active musical progression engenders. Robert Winter marks this use of stasis at the apex

of the entire movement (mm. 647-654): "a serene sense of both eternity and expectation, first

the orchestra, and then the chorus, hover at the edge of the stars. Time seems to have been

suspended indefinitely."[14] The suspension of time is immediately ended with the return of

both "Seid umschlungen" and "Freude" themes in bar 655. The compatibility of these two

themes, this simultaneously retrospective and forward-looking glance, not only transforms

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[12] Roger Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's* Tristan and Isolde (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 92.

[13] Mitchell, *Gustav Mahler: Songs and Symphonies of Life and Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 489 n. 126.

[14] Robert Winter, quoted in David Levy, *Beethoven: The Ninth Symphony* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 113.

stasis into action, but by this very act begins the resolution and triumph of "Freude." As

David Levy remarks, "the soloists express in childlike round their happiness that the 'magic'

of joy has succeeded in reconciling and reuniting 'all that custom has strictly divided'," and

the chorus joins in the happiness, effecting the transition to "all mankind."[15]

The Fusion of Text and Music

For all three composers, the union of text and music provides not only a verbal prose

that reinforces their musical constructions, but also an expanded orchestral palette that

further confuses the delineation between the realms of world and music by its very

humanness. Wagner places the transfiguration of chaos into the arms of text. But, even for

Wagner, the 'world idea' is born out in the music first. The text is merely a confirmation of

the process, an addition to the resources of a philosopher of tones. He argues that the Ninth

represents the first attempt at this solution: "It was reserved for Beethoven's genius to

employ this mixture [voices and orchestra] purely in the sense of an orchestra of increased

resources."[16]

Mahler ascribed to this need for organic unity between text and music, which Wagner

believed to be necessary as part of a reunification of the arts. Wagner argued that music

could express the emotional content of a given text, and Mahler furthered this line of thought

asserting that "the text actually constitutes only a suggestion of the more profound content

which is to be brought out, of the treasure which is to be raised."[17] The interconnection

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[15] Levy, *Beethoven*, 116.

[16] "Beethoven's Genius war es vorbehalten, den aus diesen Mischungen sich bildenden Kunstkomplex rein in Sinne eines Orchesters von gesteigerter Faehigkeit zu verwenden." Wagner, "Beethoven," 103.

[17] Bauer-Lechner, *Erinnerungen*, 30. Translated in McGrath, *Dionysian Art*, 125.

between text and music is a characteristically Wagnerian concept of formal unity, and

nowhere is the organic unity between word and tone, text and music, more apparent in the

oeuvre of Wagner than in *Tristan.*

Significant portions of the text in *Tristan* are exploited for their sound and not merely

for their meaning. This is not to imply that the words have no meaning and are nonsensical,

but rather that they were chosen, and incorporated, for their sonority. Passages in the highly

charged love duet of Act II and portions of Isolde's transfiguration in Act III present texts

"where the contribution the words make to the composition and character of the sound far

outweighs in importance the contribution made by their sense."[18] A clear example of this

process can be seen in Isolde's text near the end of her transfiguration:

> Heller schallend, mich umwallend,
> sind es Wellen sanfter Lüfte?
> Sind es Wolken wonniger Düfte?
> Wie sie schwellen, mich umrauschen,
> soll ich atmen, soll ich lauschen?
> Soll ich schlürfen, untertauchen,
> süß in Düften mich verhauchen?[19]

Inner action, which does not necessarily need to be expressed with verbal precision, is

articulated through the use of text as sonority.

In contrast to the role words sometimes take in *Tristan*, music often rises above

background sonority in order to take a more active role in the *dénouement* of the story. This

has been repeatedly discussed in the literature on Wagner's use of *leitmotiv*. It was also

mentioned above in the relation of the music of Tristan and Isolde's love duet in Act II with

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[18] Mitchell, *Songs and Symphonies*, 346. Also, see Dieter Borchmeyer, *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[19] Sounding more clearly, flowing around me - Are these waves of soft breezes? Are these clouds of delightful fragrances? How they swell, how they murmur around me, shall I breathe, shall I listen? Shall I drink, immerse? In their sweet smell breathe my last?

the music of Isolde's transfiguration in Act III. One more point can be made in this regard.

The open structure of the love duet, caused by the heart-wrenching use of a deceptive

cadence when Brangaene screams at the arrival of King Mark, is finally closed at the end of

Isolde's transfiguration. As Joseph Kerman describes,

> this world is now transfigured, *verklärt*, into the consuming, serene mystic acceptance, the union in death. At last the continual surging, shifting, renewing, interrupting, and aspiring ceases, and the long-avoided cadence comes with unparalleled weight in B major.[20]

This is one of the clearest examples of the power given to music by Wagner, a power to

express the inexpressible.

Beethoven introduces voices to the Ninth not because instrumental music was

inadequate, but, in Wagner's view, as an expansion of his orchestral palette. Voices, and

their accompanying text, serve to confirm and support the instrumental narrative. Wagner

voices this idea by arguing that

> this action allows us to consider the purposeful will of its creator; we meet its expression directly as he stops the recurring despair that overwhelms each appeasement, how, with the anguished cry of one awaking from a nightmare, he shouts the actual spoken word, whose ideal sense is no different than: "Humanity is, nevertheless, good!"[21]

The denouement of the narrative is not accomplished by voices alone, however. The

expansion of Beethoven's orchestral palette serves to confirm the trajectory of the story with

text.

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[20] Joseph Kerman, "Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*: Opera as Symphonic Poem," in *Tristan and Isolde: A Casebook*, ed. Joan Tasker Grimbert (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), 374.

[21] Unverkennbar waltet aber andererseits gerade in diesem Werke der überlegt ordnende Wille seine Schöpfers; wir begegnen seinem Ausdrucke unmittelbar, als er dem Rafen der, nach jeder Beschwichtigung immer wiederkehrenden Verzweiflung, wie mit dem Angstrufe des aus furchtbarem Traume Erwachenden das wirklich gesprochene Wort zuruft, dessen idealer Sinn kein anderer ist, als "der Mensch ist doch gut!" Wagner, "Beethoven," 100.

One example of this mixture occurs in the use of recitative. Allusions to the eventual denouement of the movement occur in the unaccompanied instrumental recitative in bar 77. Beethoven states the theme, which will later be given text, with all of the accompanying implications of the recitative genre, including a forward drive to the plot. Toward the end of the movement he introduces a new theme in a similar manner, this time with unison men's voices (bar 595). The transfer of themes between orchestral and vocal timbres demonstrates their conceptions as narrative ploys regardless of textual association. Instruments and voices enact an unfolding of the story. Burnham's assessment of Beethoven's heroic style is also applicable to the final movement of the Ninth. "The sense of ending," he observes, "is both rhetorically narrated and phenomenologically enacted: we feel both an oratorical peroration and the culmination of our own journey with the piece."[22] In this relationship between text and music, Beethoven unfolds "endless implications, continuing to frustrate every attempt— including his own—permanently to fix or limit its meanings.[23]

The crux of problem for Mahler was how to represent musically the tension of his *fin-de-siècle* world. This problem becomes most apparent in the ending of "Der Abschied." Although there are musical precedents in the works of Beethoven and Wagner, with whom Mahler was intimately involved; their musical solutions did not express the unending dialectic that *Das Lied* conveys. In order for Mahler to convincingly conclude a piece of music without resolution he prepared the listener by interacting with music that was everywhere in *fin-de-siècle* society, namely the music of Beethoven and Wagner. What

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[22] Burnham, *Beethoven*, 149.

[23] Solomon, "The Sense of an Ending," 221.

Beethoven and Wagner provided were multifaceted options for dealing with the problems of

ending. For all three composers, these options convey meanings that we, the listeners,

ascribe to the music, and, as if looking in a pale reflection, to our own lives.

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