

Gustav Mahler: After Nine

by Daniel Goode

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Two young composers influenced by Mahler's 9th Symphony were performed: by the Argento Chamber Ensemble, playing Matthew Ricketts's *After Nine: Fantasia on Mahler*; and by the JACK Quartet, playing Taylor Brook's *Arrhythmia*—as a prelude to the Argento's September 15th performance of the Mahler Symphony No. 9 (see my *Thumb Nail Review #39*.)

The latter of the two scarcely seemed serious. The composer wrote: "What does Mahler have to do with a string quartet written in 2012? It may be the result of an 'anything goes' attitude on my part." Yes, anything goes; and anything went... He claims the "melodic quotations promote a clear connection to Mahler's symphony..." I couldn't hear them, though maybe the recurring *mi-re-do* stood in for that (if you remember that the first movement is mostly *mi-re*, and very little *do* till the the last note). In any case the JACK Quartet hacked through the piece with great vigor, though it seemed to very little artistic effect from the composer.

The Ricketts piece was a sensitive timbral study that moved from pitch level to pitch level, staying, expanding, then moving on. I'm thinking that there is newish style of creating tonal puddles based on this format. Each puddle gives way to the next. Then the piece ends. In Mr. Ricketts's case, the penultimate moment was a passionate, but quickly disappearing climactic moment, re-orchestrated, from the Mahler first movement. It couldn't stay long, or it would have been Mahler. Just a swipe at it.

I'm ambivalent about putting these two young composers with short pieces before the gigantic Mahler symphony. A little unfair. At the end of the evening my head was filled to overflowing with "ear worms" from its four movements. Usually it's days, if not weeks for these ear worms to subside. Not much room for anything else. These things rise up from the unconscious, or someplace in there, just to the level of singability, but of course can't be sung, because the

underlying pulsing harmony can only be thought. I'm not sure I like this ear worm thing, but I know I can't control it. It has to die down at its own rate, and something else must replace it.

Now a little poem on varied repetition: Iterative, re-iterative, iteravia, via, vi.... Another meaning to repetition in music is this continuous varied-repetition of long, well-formed melodic sentences. (One of my mentors in composition idly mentioned, the great length of a musical sentence in Mahler, which surprised me coming from a indomitable modernist.) Well-formed, by the way, includes ellipses, contractions, interruptions as part of a whole sentence, not some abstract symmetrical balancing.

Did Mahler have ("suffer" from) ear worms? How would we know? The simplicity of the melodic phrases—the parts of his long melodies — seems to force him into a paroxysm of increasing intensities of varied repetitions in the melodies and their orchestral counterpoints. Because of the simplicity of the original, and the obsessional nature of the composer? Were his putative ear worms vernacular borrowings or originals that sound inspired by vernacularities? Whatever you think about this, you have to create a special category of the archetype Repetition to account for Mahler's underlying insistence on a musical gesture—call them themes, melodies, motives, or sentences. It's not like Bruckner's or Wagner's iterative-ness. Nor Terry Riley's nor Steve Reich's, nor my own. Something special! It digs into you. It's another kind of trance. I can imagine hating it because you believe that restraint is an essential part of art. But the only restraint necessary is that required by the instruments playing, and, historically, this has changed, partly because of Mahler's composing. And every new generation of composers.

(Just to correct: the Argento string section: was 4,4,3,2,1)

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