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Mahler's Heavenly Retreats Transcript

Date: Wednesday, 9 July 2008 - 12:00AM



Mahler's Heavenly
Retreats: Encounters
with the master's
'Composing House'
by
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MAHLER'S HEAVENLY RETREATS: ENCOUNTERS WITH THE MASTER'S 'COMPOSING HOUSES'

Keith James Clarke

Preface

It is a great pleasure for me to give this evening's presentation at Gresham College. It will be followed by a performance of Mahler's mighty Eighth Symphony and this work will again be repeated tomorrow evening in St Paul's Cathedral. This symphony forms the centre piece of another hugely successful City of London Festival. The concerts will be given by The London Symphony Orchestra and conducted by Valery Gergiev - and form part of a complete cycle of Mahler concerts that began in 2007. As an architect I hesitate to suggest that Wren's dome will be lifted by the immensity of Mahler's music. But there is little doubt that this evening's performance will be a highlight in London's music calendar. The massive orchestral forces comprising mixed chorus and boys' choir, orchestra and soloists determine that the number of venues capable of accommodating a performance of this work are few in number and all this adds to the magnitude (and excitement) of this event.

My take on Mahler's artistic output is distinctively different from others who too have been inspired by his work. I am neither a musicologist nor a historian. Rather, I seek to make use of my understanding of buildings and their surroundings to consider key environmental, aural, visual, spatial and architectural factors that impacted on Mahler's life and music. My viewpoint is supported by the creation of site information of key locations where Mahler composed his works. This material seeks to define a deeper way of thinking about Mahler - and the forces that influenced him. My investigation embraces music and architecture but this approach needs to be considered in more detail. To begin with I shall explain how this paper is organized.

Mahler's Heavenly Retreats

First I shall explain what prompted this investigation - an enquiry that began following a concert I witnessed way back in 1974. Following a

description of this study I shall consider study details (including outcomes) and list the three sites where Mahler composed his music during the summers between 1883 and 1910. In particular, I shall focus on Mahler's Forest House at Maiernigg near Klagenfurt in southern Austria (his second place for composition and where he created his Eighth Symphony) and this will be followed by a look at associations between this 'place' and the music he composed here.

Personal Viewpoint

During my studies in Architecture I was first introduced to the music of Gustav Mahler. My uncle took a special interest in my musical education, (he was also responsible for my love of cricket), and he suggested that I should borrow his recording of Mahler's Second Symphony. I had developed a flavour for this music when I witnessed my first live concert of this work. It was performed at The Fairfield Hall, London again by the London Symphony Orchestra but this time conducted by James Levine. It was a 'jaw dropping' experience. This intensely emotional awakening led me to listen to other Mahler compositions and to find out more about his life. At that time I was caught out by my student colleagues whilst walking around my University. A pile of architecture books included one or two on Mahler - prompting my colleagues to ask about Mahler's architectural credentials and which buildings he had designed!

Nature of Investigation

My investigation had begun. I was inspired by the idea that buildings, places and spaces have a determining influence upon our lives and my enquiry was informed by a comment by Sir Winston Churchill, made during a Parliamentary speech in 1943. He said, 'We shape buildings, thereafter buildings shape us'. The Romans also acknowledged the part played by buildings (and the spaces between buildings) in human life. They too emphasized the importance of the character of 'place'. In particular they felt

that the contextual, geographical and cultural factors - in fact the visual environment in its totality influence our lives. They recognised that in each person's life there was one place that was special - superior to any other, a kind of spiritual-home and called this concept the *genius loci*- the unique spirit of place. This notion has also been explored by numerous writers. They include architect Chris Day who, in his book *Architecture and Environmental Design as a Healing Art* states that, 'We spend so much time in or near buildings that it is true to say that most of our experience is affected by architecture'. This idea is reinforced by geographer D W Meinig. He states that, 'our individual lives are necessarily affected in a myriad of ways by the particular localities in which we live, that it is simply inconceivable that anyone could be the same person in a different place'. Clearly these environmental factors play their part - but how was Mahler's life and music fashioned by important places in his life?

A Brief Summary Mahler's Life and Times

Mahler's talent for music was identified early on - the first photograph of him shows his hand resting on a score. Following his first concert at the age of 10 he later went on to study music in Vienna where he was unsuccessful in securing first prize in composition. This 'failure' led him to embark on a career as a performing musician but it was not long before he had established himself as a conductor of opera and orchestral music at Leipzig, Hamburg, Budapest and most notable of all: Vienna. It was the art of composition that captured Mahler's imagination. His busy schedule dictated that he should allocate his summer periods to composition and to this end he decided to arrange for the construction of three Huts, Studios, Composing Houses (as I prefer to call them) where he would create his music.

Aim and Study Details

In this study *Mahler's Heavenly Retreats* I have focussed on the three huts where Mahler composed. After a challenging conducting schedule Mahler relished the prospect of a full summer where he could place himself in beautiful environments and where, with the support of servants, family and friends, he could relax and spend long periods working in his private space. I have identified the location of these special places and considered the architectural characteristics of each building. I have considered other artists who too have reaped the benefits of a private studio including other composers whose music has been inspired by special places in their life. So too have I carried out building-in-use studies, traced their history, and considered why these special retreats were important to Mahler. This has involved the recording of sounds he heard - birdsong, cow-bells and water lapping the shore beside his Composing House. A series of graphical drawings recapture the environment that Mahler experienced first hand and all this material has been used to consider the contribution that 'place' has made to Mahler's musical output.

Single Space Buildings

The huts provided privacy and protected Mahler from a variable and volatile climate (the third hut sits within the boundary of Italy and is located in a mountainous region). But their influence was more important than this. The buildings, their context and the beauty of their surroundings comprising mountain, forest and lake - inspired Mahler. Family and friends noticed that he became more communicative and relaxed in these special environments and this had personal and artistic benefits. Yet Mahler's huts were simple - 'single space' buildings ' and it was this that has led some critics to underestimate their value. We need to recognise that small, single-space buildings represent 'enclosures' at their most elemental - their most reductive. After all caves, Bedouin tents, igloos, tepees, wigwams, and tree houses have nurtured human civilisations from the earliest of times.

Mahler's three Composing Houses

Mahler's first Composing House, a simple masonry-walled cottage beneath a tiled roof, is located in upper Austria some 40km east of Salzburg and it was here that he produced the later stages of his Second and the Third Symphony in its entirety. Mahler's second hut - his Forest House - is where he created Symphonies four to eight and is located in southern Austria a short walk from Klagenfurt. His third and final studio is some 120km due west and sits beneath towering mountains of the south Tyrol and a short walk from Dobbiaco (formally Toblach). It was here that Mahler produced his Song of the Earth, Ninth and unfinished Tenth. But it's his second hut in southern Austria that will be examined further - it was here that Mahler produced his mighty Eighth Symphony during an inspired period of composition where he worked at a feverish pitch during the summer of 1906.

Mahler's Forest House

Mahler commissioned local architect Alfred Theuer to design his villa, 'Villa Mahler' and his composing space - his Forest House where he would spend the summers of 1901 to 1907. He took possession of his villa where he lived with his wife Alma and his

two daughters but it was the completion of his Forest House months earlier that filled him with expectation. Never was Mahler happier than when he was fulfilling his summer ritual - an early swim followed by a walk up a steep hill to begin composition in his hut, breakfast delivered by his servant and the prospect of sustained periods of unbroken concentration - all crowned with afternoon walks and relaxation. Mahler was very productive here producing (on average) a major work each summer and it was here too where he spent some of the happiest periods of his life.

The Forest House comprises of a masonry wall beneath a pitched roof. The glazing to the three windows is of particular interest. Close examination reveals the tiny pores formed during the manufacturing process - it is a feature of hand blown glass circa 1900. But whilst this simple building provided a near perfect place for Mahler to work, it is the building's surroundings that are of particular interest. The site for this development is stunningly beautiful with excellent views over the lake which forms the frontage to the villa, the locality renowned for relaxation and summer activities. (This troubled Mahler when he first visited this place, he feared he would be disturbed by intruders during his periods of work but also during his recreational activities which included cycling, hiking and swimming.) But whilst the region enjoys many benefits the immediate surroundings to the Forest House consists of a private world, a dense forest, a true retreat - where one can walk within sight of Mahler's sanctuary and not even notice its existence. This special atmosphere, slightly scary and separate from the rest of humanity, provided a very distinctive summer retreat for Mahler. One is reminded of the words of Gaston Bachelard in his book: *The Poetics of Space* where he writes lyrically about the character of private places that are sited up a steep slope. He points out that a building, elevated at high level, 'connects with the natural world, like a bird building a nest that too has the act of creation in mind'. He also recognises that, 'we do not have to be long in the woods to experience the always rather anxious impression of going deeper and deeper into a limitless world'.

Music and its Association with Place

Mahler was sensitive to sights and sounds and constantly complained of distractions. But this sensitivity to his environment inspired him in his creative work and, as he went about his daily routine, his environment triggered musical ideas. For instance the rowing action of the oars during a journey across the lake inspired Mahler with the, 'rhythm, character and style', for the opening of his Seventh Symphony. My personal experience of this environment, sketching, filming and surveying these special places leads me to suggest that the private character of this site, its introspective nature encouraged him to reflect upon his life - his joys and tragedies. Seven of his brothers and sisters did not live to reach adulthood and his eldest daughter Maria died here during 1907. As Mahler internalised and revisited the feelings of his past, feelings prompted by this introspective environment, he channelled these emotions into the slow sections of the Sixth, Seventh and Eighth Symphonies. So too was Mahler inspired by the entrance to his Forest House. The threshold - the dividing line between inside and out is a key part of any building - a point where the boundary of personal space ends and the external world begins. The 'dynamic' between these two worlds inspired Mahler - prompting the start of the Eighth Symphony - the work that will be performed this evening.

Final Thoughts

The reader may wish to reflect on the ideas expressed in this paper as the vast canvass of Mahler's music unfolds. Despite the scale of the symphony there are periods where the musical palette is used sparingly - producing a string quartet-like sound. As I listen to the intensity of this music I sometimes recall an idea expressed by Bachelard when he referred to the value of personal spaces. He said, 'From simple little buildings come wondrous things'.

On another occasion it will be a special pleasure to explore the other two sites where Mahler composed, the one at Steinbach in upper Austria and the other site beside an alpine village in south Tyrol. That is for the future - for the present I would like to share a comment made to me as I stood beside Mahler's grave on the outskirts of Vienna several years ago. An elderly lady brushed by me as I stood at the grave. She stopped, paused and then approached me saying, 'Mahler - the greatest symphonist... *the greatest symphonist!*'. There is always a danger in dealing in superlatives, but based on the huge support for Mahler's music these days; there are music lovers who would agree with her!

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