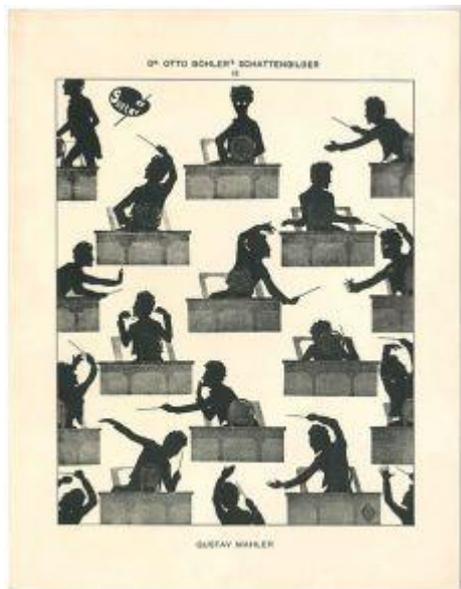


The Fragmented Self – in miniature

What music is in your bones? If you're my age, it might be Dylan, or Pink Floyd, or Tamla Motown. If you're a bit younger, maybe the Clash or Morrissey. But, as a nerdish teenager, I turned my back on rock and pop, and so the music that's not just in my bones, but in my very DNA, or so it feels, is that of Gustav Mahler.



It's not that I'd call Mahler my 'favourite' composer—I go back more often to the bottomless wells of Bach and Beethoven. But he may be the most 'necessary' composer, so embedded is his music in my psyché. So every now and then, I just have to hear some of his music. Needless to say I have dozens of recordings of the symphonies, but, living in the Highlands, there aren't that many opportunities to hear them live. In fact, in twenty years, I can remember only three, all at Eden Court: two from the RSNO—a lyrical, poetic Fourth under Stephane Denève, and a rip-roaring Fifth from the great Marin Alsop—and one, a couple of years ago, from the Netherlands Youth Orchestra. Sadly, thanks to truly abysmal publicity, the players on that occasion outnumbered the audience, but when the fabulous young musicians raised the roof in the finale, we happy few did our best to match them with a standing ovation.

Strictly speaking, there was a fourth performance, though in an unusual form: back in the 90s the SCO brought Schoenberg's reduction of the song-symphony 'Das Lied von der Erde' to Eden Court, and remarkably effective it proved to be. So when I saw a concert promoted as '**Mahler in Miniature**' I was both intrigued, and grateful for any chance to hear one of the symphonies played in concert.

The three concerts under this title, in Dornoch, Strathpeffer and Nairn, were the initiative of a young Inverness-born conductor, Tomas Leakey, who has put together a group of local musicians—a mix of professional and amateur—as the Inverness Mahler Players. That's quite a combination—a fledgling conductor, with a newly formed ensemble, attempting to convince us of the viability of performing

Mahler's hour-long Fourth Symphony with just 14 instrumentalists (two of them percussionists!). I headed for Strathpeffer Pavilion with an uneasy mix of anticipation and nervousness.

Tomas is nothing if not bold, and had put together a taxingly ambitious programme, kicking off with Martinu's delightful Nonet, a cheery piece, that in its rhythmic trickery probably presents almost as many challenges as the Mahler. A few uncertain moments apart, this was a charming experience, and was followed by a genuinely lovely account of Debussy's 'Faun' in the reduced version by Schoenberg pupil Erwin Stein. So far so good. But these were only the foothills...

What unfolded after the interval was quite magical. By the beginning of the slow movement of Mahler's Fourth Symphony I'd pretty well forgotten that this was a reduced version, and when we reached the climax, when the gates of Heaven are thrown open, I'd tears in my eyes. Best of all, Tomas had engaged a wonderful young soprano, Emily Mitchell, for the all important solo part in the last movement. If I say that she reminded me of a young Lucia Popp, I can give no higher praise.

Mahler is all about transitions. These huge movements, often lasting 15 minutes and more, are a mosaic of tempo, rhythmic, and harmonic changes, often within a very few bars of each other. Underplay these, and the music can sound bland and strait-jacketed. Make too much of them and...well, only Leonard Bernstein could get away with that. I'm no conductor, but I don't imagine these challenges are much diminished by performing with a reduced chamber ensemble, and then you have to add the new difficulty of balancing such an odd mix, with single strings, one horn, one each of woodwind, a piano and a harmonium, and not forgetting those two crucial percussionists. Tomas Leakey, for all his youth and inexperience, is clearly a highly capable musician, and a talent to watch. He managed those transitions, and balance problems, to the manner born, and shaped the whole arc of the symphony with a quiet and unassertive assurance. He also drew from his players, many familiar from other local ensembles, playing of huge concentration and commitment. It's invidious to single out an individual musician, but that one horn player, given the prominence of her instrument in both the full and reduced scores, was truly heroic.

The arrangement used is a recent one, and is part of a series of such Mahler reductions by the German conductor **Klaus Simon**. Other performances, around the world, of this version have been highly praised and I can understand why: it's been carried out with enormous imagination and insight and reveals (as one writer put it) an X-ray of the symphony, making it easier to hear how it has been put together. I was amazed at how great an emotional impact it made, and started to think of comparisons in other art forms: Mahler with fourteen players would be like, say, 'Hamlet' with three actors—Oh, hang on, I've seen that, back in the late 70s on the Edinburgh Fringe, with Pocket Theatre of Cumbria. Fun, but a fragment only of the original. Mahler in Miniature is much more like the real thing.

So did this experience help me to understand why Mahler's music has penetrated me so deeply? It certainly proved that it's not just about the sheer aural and visual spectacle of the huge forces that the

symphonies are originally scored for. Perhaps the key lies in those all-important transitions. Within the immense architectural framework of each symphony, Mahler shifts mood and expression with the speed of thought. And those moods and expressions, as many commentators have pointed out, run the full gamut from schmaltz to transcendence.

Mahler was not only a contemporary of Freud in Vienna (something played on brilliantly in **Frank Tallis's** series of novels), but he actually consulted Freud on one occasion, near the end of his life. Mahler was therefore one of the first artists to portray the fragmented self, capable simultaneously of the highest ideals and the most mundane physical reactions. Listening to Mahler's music, for me, is like listening to a depiction of what it means to *beme*—or any other human being, in all our confused imperfections. He holds, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature, ('Hamlet' again), whether in full strength or 'lite' versions.