

Romantic Song: Assignment Four

Write an essay commenting on harmony, motive, thematic development, orchestration (and anything else you can think of) in Mahler's *Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgeh'n*.

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) was a great admirer of Wagner, and when he came to write his *Kindertotenlieder* in 1901-1904 he created chromatic harmony indicative of post-Wagnerian trends. He was haunted by superstition and myth; for example, he believed he would die after writing his ninth symphony because Beethoven did, and postponed writing it, calling it *Das Lied von der Erde* in an effort to avoid the 'curse' as he saw it. When he wrote his *Kindertotenlieder*, his wife actively discouraged him from the undertaking as she was under the superstition, influenced by her husband, that life imitates art. Surely enough, soon after the completion of the cycle, Mahler's children drowned in an unexplained accident. His wife never forgave him, as she blamed him for tempting fate and writing the cycle.

The text is by Friedrich Rückert, and tells of the pain over the death of the singer's child. The first song, *Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgeh'n*, is sung during sunrise the morning after the child's death. The text is eight lines long, arranged in four equal stanzas of rhyming couplets. It jumps constantly between light and dark, happiness and misery, in the text; in the first stanza, the first line is the positive and the second line the negative. We begin with the 'Sonn' so hell aufgeh'n', the sun which shines so brightly, contrasted with the 'Unglück' unhappiness of the child's death. This continues throughout the poem, with contrasts such as 'Unglück' and 'die Sonne', coupled with 'allein' and 'allgemein' in lines three and four. The poet is clear that this is a private pain that he does not want to share, perhaps even burden the rest of the world with. The fifth and sixth lines are much more positive; the poet does not want to sink into darkness and despair: 'Du musst nicht die Nacht in dir verschränken', the pointed use of 'Du' as if he is giving advice to you, the addressee. He wants the darkness within to be 'ins ew'ge Licht versenken', drowned in everlasting light, demonstrating clearly this connection with pain to

darkness and joy with light. The final stanza shows us that he thinks his pain and suffering is insignificant compared to the rest of the world and its overwhelming joy; 'Ein Lämplein verlosch in meinem Zelt'. The use of a small light, indicated by use of the diminutive, as a metaphor for his misery, declares that he considers his situation unimportant compared to the 'Freudenlicht der Welt', the joyous light of the world. The little light could also represent the fact that the child was the light of the poet's life, or even the life of the child that has been put out.

The structure of the song is A from bar 1-29, A2 from the upbeat to bar 30-40, B from the upbeat to bar 41-63, A3 from the upbeat to bar 64-77, and a coda from 77 beat four to the end. It is in D minor, although it is very chromatic; extensive use of chromaticism is employed, but there is no definite modulation to any other key. The poet's arrangement of the text is maintained, i.e. there are four stanzas of two lines each. The song opens with an oboe solo, marked *klagend*, meaning lamenting, that recurs at the beginning of each section excepting the coda, and is accompanied by a solo horn. The texture is transparent, seen by the lack of instruments. Horn, bassoon and oboe accompany the voice, which enters in bar four, adding harp, strings and bass clarinet at bars 10-11. The instruments chosen are mainly low instruments, dragging the mood down and overwhelming the singer as she fights against despair. There is a distinct change in texture as the strings enter; we transition from sustained wind lines to quaver accompaniment. The strings are muted, *con sordino*, and the voice is marked *mit verhaltener Stimme*, with a measured/restrained voice, adding to the dulled, dragged down effect. Mahler has altered the text at bars 11-12; he repeats the words 'kein Unglück', emphasising the irony of the happy sun, as if no unhappiness occurs, which of course it has in the death of the child.

Section A2, at the upbeat to bar 22, begins with the same oboe solo as section A did, and the structure is very similar, but with thicker orchestration building up the texture. The flute and Bb clarinet have contrapuntal crotchet lines, and the French Horn has a sustained note through to the harp and strings entry at

bar 32. The vocal line here is slightly less elaborate than it was in A, and the rising chromatic line of 32-34 augments the idea of the sun rising and its link to happiness. This is reiterated by the fact that 'die Sonne' is repeated in bars 32-33. The string parts have adopted a rising chromatic line, with the viola doubling the voice and the orchestration thickening up through the section with the addition of Violin II.

The link between the end of the voice and the beginning of the next section is shorter this time; it is only four bars long, whereas the previous link was six bars. It is marked *sehr ausdrucksvoll*, very expressive, and is dominated by the French Horn playing a variation of the last phrase we heard from the voice accompanied by wind, harp and 'cello.

We are lead back the oboe solo at bar 40, but this time something different happens; the oboe solo is transposed down a semitone, and it takes a different path, is joined by flute, clarinet, bassoon and horn. There is extensive use of crescendi and diminuendi, and the dynamic range extends for the first time into *forte* and *sforzando*. The horn parts in bars 44-47 are the beginning of the vocal line in double octaves, giving a unifying effect by linking new material back to previous sections. The strings join in bar 52 without mutes, aiding the building up to the word 'ewig' in the vocal line on the highest note the voice reaches in the piece, Eb. The dynamic cuts back down to *pianissimo* at bar 56 before the orchestral climax of the piece beginning at bar 59 with sweeping quaver arpeggios from bass instruments, chromatic lines from the upper strings and punctuating little figures from the upper wind. This section uses different material because the text demands special treatment as it is a very important part of the poem; it tell us that we cannot submit to depression and darkness and must cling to the light. This is reflected in the orchestral accompaniment in that the singer could be swamped by the tempestuous climax at 59 but instead survives it.

The oboe solo begins section A3, but is transposed up a third and significantly different, but the general shape is similar. After the *etwas bewegter*, more movement, of the climax, we begin *zurückkehrend zum Tempo I*, return to

tempo 1, but do not reach it until bar 73. The vocal line is the same here, and the orchestration is similar to that of A2, although slightly thicker, with the addition of horn at bar 70 and Violin I at bar 73 doubling the vocal line. Mahler makes a slight change to the text at bar 74-75; he repeats the word 'Heil!', meaning hail/praise, to emphasise the importance of praising the positive and shunning the negative. This is also achieved by the repetition of 'dem Freudenlicht der Welt' at bar 79.

The small section at the end of the song is a coda that is linked to A3 by the repetition of text in the vocal line. The strings drop out from the top down, leaving only pizzicato 'cello and double bass. The clarinets use a small chromatic figure in bar 81 that was previously seen in bar 26 and is followed by a bass clarinet part identical to what followed in bars 27-28. The harp returns and drops out for the final bar, leaving only the camp. (is this campanetta, i.e. glockenspiel? Looked it up but that was all I could find and did not want to write it in case I am wrong because it does not look like a glockenspiel part!) for the final chord.

In conclusion, this song contains many good examples of Mahler's use of harmony, motive and orchestration. He uses a definite structure to divide it into sections and also to emphasise the more important parts of the text, such as the third stanza. The re-use of material, such as the mournful oboe solo and the simple vocal line, give a feeling of unity and create the mood that Mahler wants. Orchestration is used to great effect, such as the oboe solo already mentioned, and in layering, i.e. building up and taking away, achieving dynamic changes by use of instruments instead of dynamics. The use of different textures between instruments, such as chromatic counterpoint in the wind contrasting with quaver accompaniment in the strings, gives variety in the sparse transparent landscape. This bareness adds to the desolation that the composer is trying to convey; while the singer/poet is trying to be positive and embrace the good, the composer is aware that this is highly ironic and the speaker must be absolutely devastated. The thing that makes this song so special is the use of very little to create such a wave of emotion, because, quite

fittingly, it is what has been taken away, what is no longer there, that is creating these overwhelming feelings of despair and misery.

1589 words.

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