

Robert Schumann

b. June 8, 1810; Zwickau

d. July 29, 1856; Eendenich

Concerto for Cello and Orchestra in A minor, Opus 129

Essentially written between October 10th and 24th, 1850, the cello concerto found its first performance in Leipzig on June 9, 1860, with Ludwig Ebert as soloist. In addition to the solo instrument, this 26-minute score uses pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns and trumpets, timpani and strings.

During the late summer of 1850, Robert and Clara Schumann moved from Dresden to Dusseldorf, where Robert assumed his new duties as director of the local *gesangverein*. The excitement and opportunities of this Rhineland post stimulated Schumann's creativity; within a few months he was working on the *Rhenish* Symphony, an overture to Schiller's *The Bride of Messina*, and a host of vocal works. Drawn like so many romantic composers to the elegantly melancholy sonority of the cello, he penned his A-minor *Cello Concerto* between October 10th and 24th, 1850. As with the rest of his concerti, the work for cello was not designed for mere virtuosic display, but rather for pure musical expression. Technical difficulties are abundant, but they are of a type arising from an unfolding of musical materials.

There are a number of problems involved in the creation of a cello concerto, not the least of which is striking an effective balance between the solo instrument and the orchestra. Having written this concerto in a burst of inspiration, Schumann subsequently anguished over its details. During this difficult period, Clara tried to reassure him about the work's merit. The growth of the composition was reflected in Clara's diary; on November 16th, she wrote: "Robert is now working on something, I do not know what, for he has said nothing to me about it. The month before he composed a concerto for violoncello that pleased me very much. It appears to me to be written in true violoncello style." About a year later, she wrote the following: "I have played Robert's Violoncello Concerto again and thus procured for myself a truly musical and happy hour. The romantic quality, the flight, the freshness, and the humor, and also the highly interesting interweaving of cello and orchestra are, indeed, wholly ravishing, and what euphony and deep sentiment are in all the melodic passages!"

Despite Clara's enthusiasm, Robert remained uncertain about the work as a whole. He made various revisions over the next two years; the work was not published until August of 1854. The composer never heard a public performance of the concerto, for the first official performance took place at the Leipzig Conservatory on June 9, 1860, with Ludwig Ebert as soloist. Since that premiere performance at a celebration for the fiftieth anniversary of Schumann's birth, the concerto has come to be recognized as one of the finest expressions of romanticism through the voice of the solo cello. It has a certain personal quality that undoubtedly arises from the composer's rarely mentioned acquaintance with the instrument. After he damaged his right hand while employing a mechanical device to improve his prowess as a pianist, Schumann wrote to his mother (November, 1832): "I am for my part completely resigned.... In Zwickau I will take up the violoncello again (for which only the left hand is needed) which besides is very useful for symphonic compositions...."

In three conjoined movements, the concerto is launched by a few prefatory wind chords. Noting the rhythmic similarity between the soloist's first theme and that of Schumann's Piano Concerto, Alfred Nieman finds that "The passionate, downward sweep, after the upward-rising tension of the first two bars, gives the long sentence a sustained eloquence which, towards the end, almost approaches the declamatory character of speech. The second subject is full of Romantic imagery; the 'longing' minor sevenths, the appoggiaturas, and the suspensions were to become the common language of Wagner, and even early Schoenberg." After development and recapitulation, the soloist leads the way in a transition that subsides directly into the second movement. Filled with a sense of contemplative melancholy, this tender *romanza* yields all too soon to the playful finale. The cellist introduces both main themes and leads the way through

development. The accompanied cadenza occurs just before the closing coda (this novel placement was later utilized by Elgar in his violin concerto).

A revealing portrait of Schumann's compositional strengths and weaknesses (when compared, for example, to works of Beethoven), this concerto has endured its share of controversy. Recognizing that his work was something other than a traditional concerto, Schumann described it as "a Concert Piece for cello with orchestral accompaniment." More concerned with music than with formal considerations, Pablo Casals once stated flatly: "It is one of the finest works one can hear--from beginning to end the music is sublime."

Gustav Mahler

b. July 7, 1860; Kalischt, Bohemia

d. May 18, 1911; Vienna

Symphony No. 5 in C# minor

Completed during the summer of 1902, the Fifth Symphony was first performed under Mahler's baton in Cologne on October 18, 1904. This vast 70-minute work requires four flutes, (two doubling piccolo), three oboes (one doubling English horn), three clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), six horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, four percussionists, harp and strings.

Prominent among the creative pinnacles of the late-romantic era, Mahler's symphonies are both masterworks of their genre and mirrors of the composer-conductor's complex nature. Essentially infected by self-doubt, Mahler struggled obsessively to find meaning in life through creativity. He rose to international fame as a conductor through the world of opera, while spending his summer seasons secluded in fevered composition. At the ultimate expense of his health, Mahler wrote nine symphonies (a tenth was left unfinished at his death), which fall into three general groups. The first four were subjective, song-oriented and programmatic in nature. The Fifth through Eighth were more objective, philosophical, and avowedly non-programmatic. Remote from the pains of human struggle, his last two major works, the Ninth Symphony and *Das Lied von der Erde*, seem to bid a sad farewell to life.

One of the most consistent elements throughout Mahler's creative life was his compositional use of folk and folk-like material. Abraham Skulsky commented: "Every possible element of Viennese folk music can be found in his works, the waltz, the Laendler, the popular song, even the military march. These folk elements are used as basic materials, and are emphasized by Mahler's characteristically sharp and clear sonorities. The scope of his employment of folk materials sets him apart from the Viennese composers who merely explore the waltz, and his handling of the materials distinguished his music from the national music of other composers, in which the folk element is developed in traditional and conventional language."

As a musical figure, Mahler was characterized by Leonard Bernstein as a giant with "his left foot...firmly planted in the rich, beloved nineteenth-century, and his right, rather less firmly, seeking solid ground in the twentieth." Bernstein went on to say: "All of Mahler's testing, experiments, incursions were made in terms of the past. His breaking-up of rhythms, his post-Wagnerian stretching of tonality to its very snapping point (but not beyond it!), his probings into a new thinness of texture, into bare linear motion, into transparent chamber music-like orchestral manipulation --all these adumbrated what was to become twentieth-century common practice; but they all emanated from those nineteenth-century notes he loved so well."

Having completed his Fourth Symphony, Mahler resolved to leave his song-oriented approach and, during the summer of 1901, wrote a large scherzo with French horn obbligato that would ultimately be the centerpiece of his *Symphony No. 5*. About the same time that he was resuming his duties as music director at the Vienna Opera, Mahler met and fell in love with Alma Schindler (1879-1964). To the surprise of their friends, the pair married without fanfare on March 9, 1902. After the opera season, they went to spend their first summer together at Mahler's rustic retreat in

Maiernigg on the Woerthersee; Alma was left to her own devices as Mahler worked non-stop on the completion of his new symphony.

The original version of the *Symphony No. 5* was introduced under the composer's baton in Cologne on October 18, 1904. Although its premiere was less than flawless, the new work received a nickname, *The Giant*, because of the symphony's enormous orchestration. Ever the perfectionist, Mahler continued to revise it for every subsequent performance until the end of his life. A majority of the original revisions consisted of reducing the percussion passages, which reportedly overwhelmed the melodic aspects of the work at its premiere performance.

At this point in his life, Mahler was distinctly disenchanted with the romantic program annotators who insisted on attaching some fanciful "meaning" to his compositions; of course, this did not deter the most dedicated purveyors of flowery prose. It is significant that one of Mahler's closest friends and associates, Bruno Walter, wrote: "Nothing in any of my conversations with Mahler and not a single note point to the influence of extra-musical thoughts or emotions upon the composition of the Fifth. It is music--passionate, wild, pathetic, buoyant, solemn, tender, full of all the sentiments of which the human heart is capable-- but still 'only' music, and no metaphysical questioning, not even from very far off, interferes with its purely musical course."

Mahler did not ultimately refer to this symphony as being in C# minor; although this is the key center of its first movement, the work shifts to D major by the end. The tonal plan that Mahler was pursuing was a sort of "leading-tone" effect in which the darkness of the opening pivots on the central *Scherzo* to the light of the final movements. Mahler's plan of the symphony is somewhat ambiguous, for there are five movements divided into *Parts I, II* and *III*. This division suggests that the composer viewed the work as a gigantic three-movement work in which the opening *Trauermarsch* functioned as an introduction to the *Sturmisch bewegt*, and the now well-known *Adagietto* formed a serene preface to the *Rondo-Finale*.

Stressing the significance of this symphony among Mahler's works, Bruno Walter proclaimed: "In the Fifth, the world has now a masterpiece which shows its creator at the summit of his life, of his power, and of his ability."