

## *Quiet Places*

**Martha C. Horst**

For *Quiet Places*, I challenged myself to compose music where there was little to no traditional build-up – either dynamically or formally. The first movement features a repeating isorhythmic melodic line played by the strings; each pitch of the line is accompanied by either rapidly shifting, imitative patterns, or tranquil textures featuring little movement. For most of the second movement, the strings provide a hazy, tranquil backdrop. Although this movement features a small build-up in harmonic tension, it is primarily comprised of woodwind solos. The third movement features a repeating chord progression that also forms an isorhythm. The percussion parts at the end of this movement imitate the sounds of a place of worship. The title of the work connects the contemplative nature of the music of the entire work with places where such contemplation may occur. *Quiet Places* is the second of three works commissioned for the Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra during my 2019-20 season as Composer-in-Residence.

~Martha C Horst, Composer-in-Residence

## *Absolute Ocean*

**Augusta Read Thomas**

*Absolute Ocean* (2008,) a song-cycle for soprano and orchestra setting beautiful texts by E. E. Cummings, celebrates the vitality and colors of the human voice and of the many instruments of the orchestra. At times dramatic and bold, though often spare and atmospheric in texture, the orchestration allows for the vocal soloist to remain in the foreground without having to fight the orchestra to be heard. The ringing, resonance of the harp, imaginative percussion sounds, and celesta inspire and allure the surrounding orchestral materials.

Augusta Read Thomas said of the work, “I care about craft, clarity, and passion. My works are organic and, at every level, concerned with transformations and connections. The carefully sculpted musical materials of *Absolute Ocean* are agile and energized, and their flexibility allows a way to braid harmonic, rhythmic, and contrapuntal elements that are constantly transformed — at times whimsical and light, at times jazzy, at times layered and reverberating”

“The work unfolds a labyrinth of musical interrelationships and connections that showcase the solo soprano and the musicians of the IPO in a virtuosic display of rhythmic agility, counterpoint, skill, energy, dynamic range, clarity, and majesty. Throughout the kaleidoscopic journey, the work passes through many lively and colorful episodes and never loses its sense of poetry, dance, caprice, and effervescence.”

In a recent article, the Huffington Post said of Thomas' work, "This is music that is always in motion as if coming perpetually out of a magician's hat. It leads but doesn't direct, and is playful and subtle, dancing on light feet. It is music that conjures."

*Absolute Ocean* was commissioned by the Houston Symphony Orchestra to be paired with Mahler Symphony No. 4, which is done perfectly. The world premiere in 2008 was led by Music Director Hans Graf, showcased Paula Page, the orchestra's principal harpist, and featured soprano Twyla Robinson.

~Notes by Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra

## Symphony No. 4 **Gustav Mahler**

It is said that Brahms wrote his *Symphony No. 4* so that he could place his chaconne variations finale, which he felt his great achievement, in its proper symphonic setting. (When it was previewed on piano for friends, they suggested that the finale be detached and played as a separate movement. As we know, Brahms [respectfully?] declined.) Similarly, Mahler had a finale to a symphony. He just had to figure out *which* symphony and then how he would compose and organize the movements leading to it.

The finale is the song that Mahler titled “The Heavenly Life,” which he wrote for piano and soprano in 1892 and immediately orchestrated the next month. It was one of several settings Mahler composed from the collection of German folk poetry, *The Youth’s Magic Horn*, which was collected/edited by von Arnim and Brentano in 1802 and 1805. Originally Mahler had planned on using “The Heavenly Life” as the ending of his *Symphony No. 3* of 1896 under the appellation “What the Child tells Me.” *Symphony No. 3* is a work of huge proportions in six movements lasting about 100 minutes; the first movement alone lasts over 30 minutes. And as Mahler soon realized, the magnificent “Adagio” (“What Love tells Me”) sixth movement was its perfect ending.

A reader might ask, “Why all this attention to heaven in a composer of Jewish roots?.” Like many issues with Mahler, it is not straight forward. Mahler was born in Kalischt (Kaliště), halfway between Prague in Bohemia and Brno in Moravia to German-speaking, Ashkenazic Jewish parents. Mahler’s parents were not observant Jews. His father, Bernhard, after moving the family to Iglau, Bohemia shortly after Gustav’s birth, worked his way into the middle class from a coachman to an owner of an inn, which was a distillery and tavern. Gustav likely heard some Jewish music as entertainment at the inn. He certainly heard many local folk music songs/dances and street music and traveling troops. Of extreme relevance, he heard military music from the nearby fort, including marches and trumpet calls.

Mahler, whose musical talent was obvious at a young age, attended the Vienna Conservatory by age 15 through the efforts of his father. In one sentence, we will elide the multiple deaths (seven) of his siblings (he had 13) from illness and suicide, the physical abuse of his mother by his father, and the episode where he tried to save a maid in a house where he was boarding as a pre-teen only to be rudely rebuffed when it turned out that this “attack” was apparently a welcome sexual encounter. Late in life, Mahler consulted with Freud but more about his marital woes than his emotionally wrought childhood.

Mahler was determined to be a composer, but he did not win a prize with his early cantata, “Song of Lamentation.” (Brahms was on the jury.) However, Mahler, after graduating, was discovered to be--without any formal training--a gifted opera conductor who had inherited his

father's ambition and probably a good deal of his brutal directness in getting the results he wanted.

Brahms, the same person who rejected Mahler's cantata, loved his conducting of *Don Giovanni*, which he heard in Budapest. Brahms has been forced to go and stationed himself at the back of a box, intending to take a nap—a guy that round and short-necked likely had sleep apnea. However, the interpretation entranced him, and Brahms was subsequently quite helpful in Mahler's getting the Vienna Court Opera post, placing Mahler at the pinnacle of European music. There was one major issue; Mahler had to convert to Catholicism to overcome the anti-Semitism of Vienna. Mahler famously declared that he was "thrice homeless, as a native of Bohemia among Austrians, as an Austrian among Germans, and as a Jew throughout the world."

Mahler's theology was personal and philosophical. Through his friendship with Siegfried Lipiner, a poet and dramatist who Nietzsche called "a veritable genius," Mahler became acquainted with the writings of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Fechner. Tellingly, Mahler demurred when it was suggested that he compose a mass to solidify his Catholic credentials, stating that he couldn't compose a Credo ("I believe") section. All of Mahler's works seemingly have an eschatological concern. But consider the *Symphony No. 2 "Resurrection,"* *Symphony No. 4* with its "Heavenly Life" and the monumental *Symphony No. 8*, where Mahler sets a Catholic hymn ("Come Creator Spirit") and combines this with the *Final Scene from Faust*, where Faust is forgiven and ascends to heaven. These works leave no doubt as to their "eternal" concerns.

Later in life, Mahler became acquainted with German translations of Chinese poetry, some of which he set as his symphonic *Song of the Earth*. The Asian philosophical approach is to leave-taking and acceptance of death figure greatly in that magnificent work.

The *Symphony No. 4 in G major* was composed in 1889-90 and premiered under Mahler's direction in Munich on November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1901. It is in the classical four movements and features the smallest orchestra, by far, that Mahler ever used in a symphony. To begin with, there are only triple woodwinds except for a distinctive four flutes. But the wind players double a lot, including piccolo, bass clarinet, E-flat (high) clarinet, and English horn (a more alto oboe). There are four horns (not seven or eight) and no trombones or tuba. (Though for the great, heavens-opening climax in the third movement, Mahler told his companion Natalie Bauer-Lechner that he would have liked to have had low brass.) Of course, there is a soprano soloist in the finale.

As the great annotator (also conductor and composer) Sir Donald Tovey put it, Mahler uses many instruments from the "kitchen" (i.e., percussion). Somehow, Mahler has always found a role for the tam-tam (a large, unpitched, gong-like hanging instrument) in his symphonies which is of relevance because Tchaikovsky not only used the tam-tam famously in his "*Pathétique*" *Symphony* but also in his *Symphony No. 2 "Little Russian"* which the Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra will perform later this season.

The *Symphony* opens (“Bedächtigt”—Thoughtful) with sleigh bells pulsing quietly with flitting flutes—the first anticipation of the finale, which features an almost madcap use of them. (Are these jester’s bells or the happy remembrance of a sleigh in the distance?) A flowing melody (“Recht gemächlich”—Quite leisurely) in the violins full of Viennese *gemütlichkeit* begins the exposition. This soon transitions to the second theme, a very happy, broad lyric cello melody, perhaps more rustic in feeling, with three long, repeated notes at the beginning. The movement is punctuated with rapid rising and falling string figures, which also rapidly crescendo and decrescendo. The melodic figures jump across instrumental choirs in strikingly abrupt contrasts, which nevertheless maintain the line while accompanied with sometimes fluid, sometimes “coarse” counterpoint. Tovey, analyzing the work, praised Mahler’s great compositional “facility” with an overt expression of a fellow composer’s admiration if not envy.

The sleigh bells work perfectly as markers for the structure of the movement as an important aid because Mahler is distinctly unconventionally conventional here. The second time they are heard, it seems as though there will be a repeat of the exposition or even a false repeat introducing the development (like Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup>). But in fact, it’s a partial, quasi-rondo-like repeat and sleigh bells shortly return to usher in the true development. There is a wonderful passage where those four flutes, which Mahler surprisingly required, play in unison, which is both an elaboration of the three notes of the second theme but also an earthly “prequel” of the heavenly beginning phrase of the vocal soloist in the finale.

Soon, the toy-shop-like modesty of the opening builds to a startlingly forceful climax which veers from major to minor with trumpet calls that anticipate the funeral march of Mahler’s 5<sup>th</sup> *Symphony*—a brief moment of the “trouble in paradise” that Mozart had frequently conjured. And then we hear the sleigh bells in all this. Yes, the recapitulation has started amid this chaos. There’s a pause, and the jaunty opening theme resumes in its insouciant innocence. It’s as if someone had killed an intruder at the door and then returned to the breakfast table, “as I was saying, dear...”

Of course, the sleigh bells mark off the robustly ending coda. But before the ending “codetta,” there is a meditative, climbing passage in the violins that is a true feeling of the paradise to come.

The second movement has an indication “In gemächlicher Bewegung” (Unhurried) but when Mahler conducted the *Symphony* in Amsterdam in 1904 (twice on the same program!!), he also used the terms “Scherzo” and “Totentanze” (Dance of Death) in the program for this movement.

There are many cultural and musical connections between the devil and the fiddle (see illustration). These dates are as early as the “Devil’s Trill” violin sonata by Tartini of the 1740s and as the 20<sup>th</sup> century as “The Devil’s Triumphal March” in Stravinsky’s *Soldier’s Tale* of 1918. Of most relevance to Mahler might be the popular 1874 tone poem of Saint-Saëns, *Danse Macabre*, which not only has the devil playing the violin, but the violin is “mistuned” for hellish effect. (The IPO has conveniently programmed *Dance Macabre* for later in this season.) In his movement, Mahler also calls for a mistuned violin solo—all strings a whole step higher--to give a more shrill effect. You will see the concertmaster using two different violins for her

performance. The movement is in five parts. After a short, piercing introduction with horn and woodwinds, the solo fiddle plays its melody. There are punctuations of very high, single, harp notes, which might be shafts of light and love amid the devilry. The totentanze passages alternate with pleasant rustic dance sections, which lovingly anticipate the heaven of the finale. The last section includes both infernal and celestial elements in a truce-like summary.



Mahler told Natalie Bauer-Lechner that when he wrote the third movement “Ruhevol, Poco adagio” (Restful, a bit slow), he referred to St. Ursula’s smile but also the face of his mother, “... sad, yet laughing as though through tears. For she, too, had suffered endlessly, but always had resolved everything in love and forgiveness.” This movement is organized as a set of double variations similar to the great Adagio from Beethoven’s *9<sup>th</sup> Symphony*. The opening is a gentle rising theme in the cellos and violas with a plucked bass line that paces and pauses. The second iteration/variation is accompanied by a counter melody in the second violins, which descends in lovely ending suspensions that might recall those that end the Christmas carol “Lo, how a rose er’ blooming.” The contrasting theme is a plaintive, minor-key melody introduced by the oboe. Yet, the opening baseline also goes forward as a connecting strand. The variations get more rapid in note value and tempo, including a zany, manic episode. The most dramatic passage of the *Symphony* breaks in with a startling modulation, and the heavens burst open with great fanfares anticipating the finale. These fortissimo strains settle into a luscious, gentle restful passage. And the Finale starts directly.

This is a grim piece where a child pleads with his mother to feed him bread, but the harvest comes in too late, and he dies. Tonight, we hear the finale, “The Heavenly Life,” which in my imagination is this same boy, perhaps in a mother’s dream, reporting back to her what heaven is like. The song opens like a mountain air with rustic piping by the clarinet and a warbling opening phrase by the soloist.

As you can imagine, there is plenty in heaven to eat. Lamb, oxen, and fish are slaughtered or caught—Mahler is rather graphic with the whining oboe representing the poor lamb, the plunging bass clarinet representing the struggling ox, and the shimmering strings the rushing fish. Not to worry about the fiber content for heavenly regularity. There are asparagus, beans, apples, pears, and grapes—whole plates full. And of course, bread.

There is merry dancing and skipping--jumping and singing. Those madcap, first-movement sleigh bells come into play in an early orchestral interlude. Yet while Mahler captures all this innocent joy (the singer is instructed in the score to sing without any parody), Mahler's purpose is clear at the end when he describes the music of heaven. Here is "the food for the soul" as conductor Benjamin Zander puts it. There is nothing like it on earth. While there is a harp, it is not gliding cordially but strumming blissfully with the murmuring English horn like a mother's crooning.

-Dr. Charles Amenta, Board Member and Chair of the IPO Artistic Committee