Nathaniel Schuster
Dr. Judith Mabary
MUSIC 3085

ALMA'S BETRAYAL AND MAHLER'S UNFINISHED SYMPHONY NO. 10

In September 1910 the fifty-year-old Gustav Mahler presided over the sole artistic triumph of his compositional career. With nearly one thousand musicians amassed under his baton, Mahler premiered his vivacious Symphony No. 8 in Munich. Far from what he predicted would be a "catastrophic Barnum and Bailey show" (Nice), the Eighth electrified the audience who had gathered in the recently constructed Neue Musik-Festhalle. Although critic, composer, and performer alike heralded Mahler as a visionary and hero, the maestro's appearance betrayed a sense of foreboding. Terribly pale and "yellow as old ivory," Mahler seemed to have been, in the words of Swiss critic William Ritter, "marked out by death" (La Grange 4: 972).

Two months prior to the debut of the Eighth, Mahler undertook the composition of his final work, his tenth symphony. Unfortunately, he did not live to finish the score, dying from streptococcal endocarditis in May 1911. In addition to a defective valve, Mahler's heart had been metaphorically overwrought before contracting the fatal bacterium. The summer of 1910 had proven especially turbulent for the composer. Learning of his wife Alma's infidelity with the young architect Walter Gropius hurled Mahler into a state of perpetual tumult, prompting the symphonist to imbue his burgeoning composition with intense grief. As his most autobiographical work, Mahler's Symphony No. 10 reflects the composer's despair and attempts to reconcile with Alma while assimilating Expressionist tendencies into his late Romantic style.

Mahler married the twenty-two-year-old Alma Schindler in March 1902. The nineteen-year age disparity created problems immediately. Mahler's family perceived Alma as flirtatious, capricious, and too fond of charming young suitors (La Grange 2: 442). Yet Mahler had himself made life difficult for Alma, forcing her to abandon musical studies in favor of domestic duties (*Keeping Score*). Any marital affection engendered by the couple's two children, Maria Anna

and Anna, became strained by Maria's premature death from a combination of scarlet fever and diphtheria in the summer of 1907. Alma suspected that Mahler blamed her for their daughter's death, which caused husband and wife to become, at least periodically, "strangers to each other, estranged by suffering" (La Grange 4: 90).

Mahler's correspondence with Alma also suggests marital problems, more than a year before the summer of 1910. In a letter dated June 1909 from Toblach, Austria (today in Italy), Mahler enjoined Alma to cast off her loneliness and enjoy the company of their surviving daughter (Beaumont 325). During his 1910 season with the New York Philharmonic, Mahler's anxiety was compounded when he learned of Alma's infatuation with the Russian pianist and conductor Ossip Gabrilovich. Gabrilovich had become acquainted with Alma in 1908 through their mutual association with European musical circles, and first declared his love for her in Paris the same year. Although Alma contended the pseudo-affair never exceeded an exchange of kisses, Mahler was deeply hurt (352). Alma's preexisting nervous condition also worsened following the couple's departure from New York, and she was consigned to the spas of Tobelbad near Graz, Austria for six weeks. Mahler's letters from this period reveal a growing concern over his wife's reluctance to write him in return. A particularly discerning letter dated 21 June 1910 contains the following statement: "Are you concealing something from me? I keep sensing something between the lines" (364). Mahler was right to be apprehensive; through her physician, Alma had met and befriended the young architect Walter Gropius on June 4 (La Grange 4: 838). In their few weeks together, they had fallen in love and begun the pivotal affair.

Remarks by Mahler to the influential publisher Emil Hertzka, Director of Universal Editions in Vienna, indicate he started the Tenth Symphony at Toblach around 7 July 1910, his final birthday (La Grange 4: 832). The musicologist Steven Coburn argues the Adagio was the

first movement to be sketched (18). Although he was oblivious to Alma's affair at the time, Mahler nonetheless opens the first movement in a melancholic manner. Recalling the solemn conclusion of his ninth symphony, a lonely viola line emerges in a desolate world. Constantin Floros, an expert on the music of Mahler and Wagner, asserts this theme originated from the mournful shepherd's tune in the third act of *Tristan und Isolde* (302). Having conducted excerpts from *Tristan* as recently as 16 January 1910 with the New York Philharmonic, Mahler doubtless had the score fresh in mind (La Grange 4: 642). More importantly, though not so easily proven, he may have had a more personal intention for the melody: Much like the shepherd bemoaning the absence of Isolde, the forlorn viola theme could likewise symbolize Mahler's loneliness at being separated from Alma. Inevitably, the violas give way to the second theme. Characterized by a poignant interplay between the violins and horns, this theme suggests reluctant imploration and delicate desire, punctuated momentarily in measures 26 and 27 by agonizing calls from the flutes and second violins (see fig. 1). The closing theme discards the solemnity of the second, opting instead for playful trills and pizzicatos. It seems Mahler has forsaken anguish for lighthearted delusion. The humor cannot last, however; the repeat of the exposition perverts this theme, and the sharp jeering of the oboe and clarinet silences Mahler's cheerful demeanor. In the

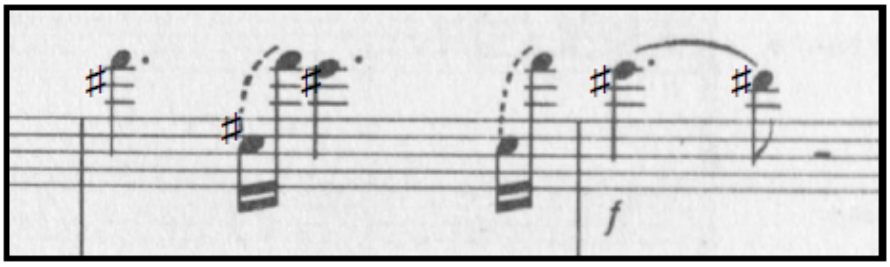


Fig. 1. Distinguished by dramatic leaps in pitch, measures 26 and 27 for flutes and second violins in the Adagio suggest unmitigated yearning. Mahler may have used these musical exclamations to protest his prolonged separation from Alma. Similar phrases punctuate the remainder of the first movement. Deryck Cooke, *Gustav Mahler: A Performing Version of the Draft for the Tenth Symphony* (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1966) 2. Print.

spirit of the perverted idée fixe from Berlioz's final movement of the *Symphonie fantastique* ("Songe d'une Nuit de Sabbat"), Mahler (perhaps unintentionally) evokes the image of a lover scorned.

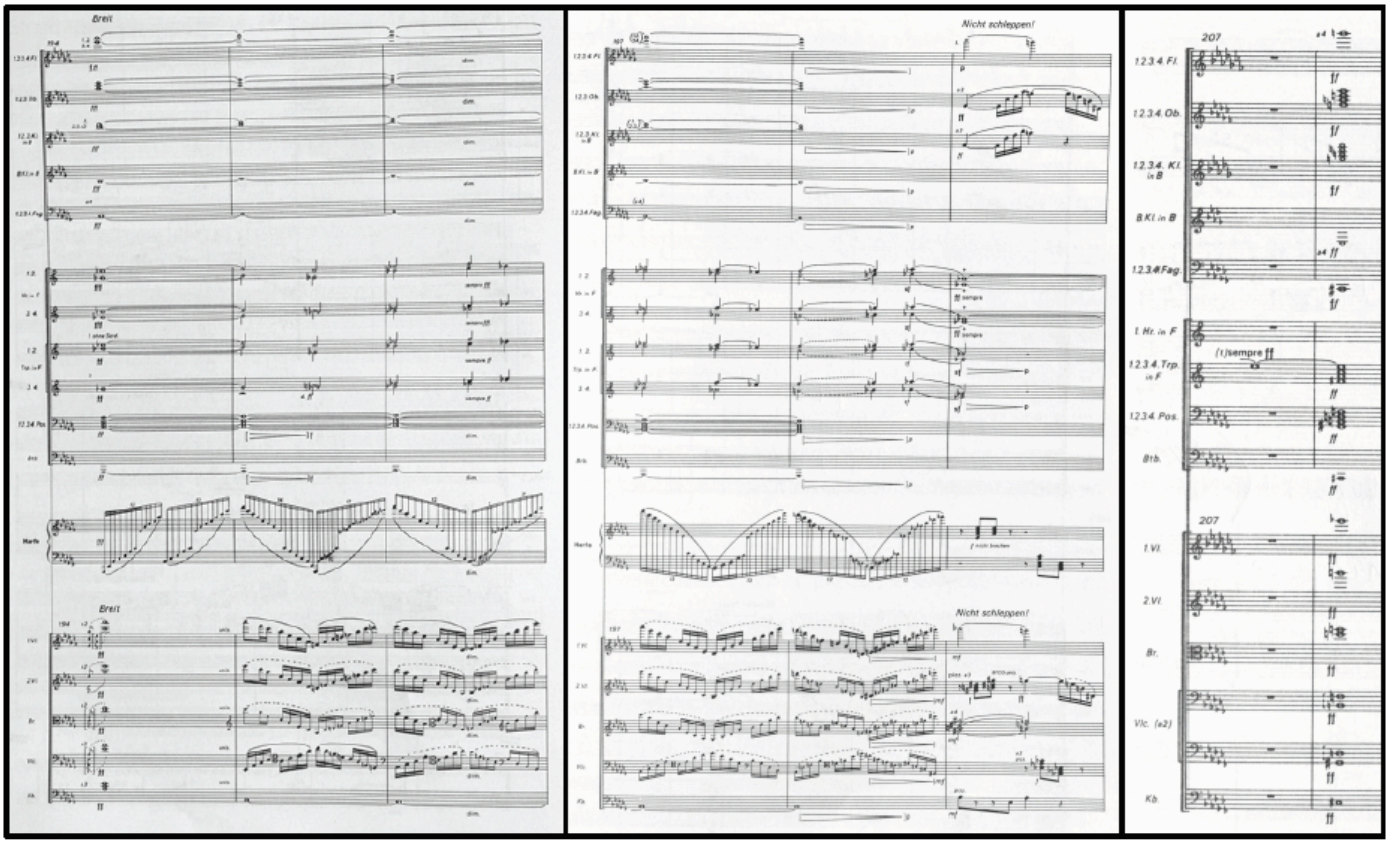
Alma had every intention of concealing the affair from Mahler. She returned to Toblach on 16 July, the date deduced from that of her first letter to Gropius, mailed two days later from the local post office (La Grange 4: 839). Alma even arranged for a poste restante address from which she mailed her own letters and received ones from her young suitor. Nevertheless, the ruse collapsed on the morning of 29 July (840). Deliberately addressing his letter to "Herr Direktor Mahler," Gropius alerted the composer to his desire for Alma. Visibly shaken, Mahler confronted his wife, who later recounted the moment as follows:

> What then happened was difficult to describe! At last I could tell him everything: how I had longed for years, longed for his love, and how he, wrapped up in his "mission," had simply overlooked me. For the first time in his life he felt that there is such a thing as an inner obligation towards the person one has chosen as one's life partner. He suddenly felt guilty. (841)

Ashamed and distraught, Mahler personally retrieved Gropius, then in Toblach, and brought him before Alma. Mahler immediately confined himself to his room, leaving the lovers to hesitant conversation. Fearing for her husband, Alma ended the meeting after a few minutes. She discovered Mahler pacing with a Bible in hand. He said, "Whatever you decide, you will be doing the right thing" (Beaumont 374). Despite the seeming acquiescence in this remark, Mahler became riddled with the fear of losing his wife.

Mahler's strong reluctance to relinquish Alma manifests itself in the climax of the Adagio, which he composed after he learned of the affair (Coburn 17). As previously mentioned,

three themes characterize the first movement, with the second theme firmly anchored in the symphony's home key of F-sharp major. The alliance among the three themes becomes increasingly uncertain as the movement advances, culminating in its destruction with the appearance of a fearful, organ-like A-flat minor brass chorale in measure 194 ("Gustav Mahler"). This chorale recedes only to be replaced by a far more haunting nine-note dissonant chord, with a stabbing E sustained by a solo trumpet (see figs. 2a, b, and c). Mahler may have referenced this very passage in a poem written on 27 August 1910: "In one single chord my hesitant notions / Converge with the power of searing emotions" (Beaumont 381). With these poetic lines he denotes a suspension of the imploration, desire, and delusion that previously characterized the



(a) (b) (c)

Figs. 2a and b. An impassioned brass chorale erupts in measure 194 of the Adagio. Utilizing the full force of the modern orchestra, Mahler readies his audience for the sinister nine-none "cry of pain" (c), which exceeds the chorale in intensity and stands as the defining moment of the first movement (Cooke 20-23).

movement. The nine-note "cry of pain" articulates the inevitable conclusion of the marital crisis, its resolution as yet uncertain: Would Alma reconcile with her husband or would she reject him?

Burdened by Alma's accusation that he had for years neglected his marital obligations, Mahler committed himself to atoning for his previous sins. His various acts of contrition manifest themselves musically in the third movement of the Tenth, appropriately titled "Purgatorio." Lasting a scant four minutes, it is the shortest symphonic movement Mahler ever composed. Despite its breadth (or lack thereof), the music of "Purgatorio" provides an abundance of clues about the state of the composer's psyche. The fast sixteenth-note whirring of the strings and abundance of trills suggest a sense of constant toil. According to Floros, Mahler understood Purgatory to be "not only the 'purification' in the sense of the Catholic dogma of faith, but above all a condition full of suffering and torture" (309). As such, the toil depicted musically in the third movement acts as a metaphorical cleansing of Mahler's soul, the purification required for his recovery of Alma. More interestingly, "Purgatorio" bears a remarkable resemblance to one of the composer's *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* songs, "Das irdische Leben." This lied and the symphonic movement are in the same 2/4 meter; in both, the strings are muted and both end hauntingly. Additionally, a sense of unease permeates both pieces. Considering the subject matter of "Das irdische Leben," this resemblance may not be coincidental. The poem concerns a famished child begging his mother for food. Alas, the mother never delivers the requisite nourishment, and the child perishes. La Grange suspects that for Mahler the indifferent mother represents Alma, whereas the child pleading for attention is the composer himself ("Purgatory or Catharsis?" 163). La Grange's analogy is strengthened by the fact that Freud, whom Mahler consulted at the end of August 1910, perceived the composer as identifying Alma with his mother (Coburn 9). The significance of the likeness between

"Purgatorio" and "Das irdische Leben" suddenly seems much clearer: Without Alma's nourishing affection, Mahler will surely perish.

Any attempt to derive definitive meanings from the music of "Purgatorio" alone will be fruitless. Mahler never commented on the similarities between the third movement and "Das irdische Leben," and any conclusion drawn solely from a particular musical feature (e.g. whirring of the strings) should be considered highly suspect. Fortunately, as per his modus operandi, Mahler left a number of comments in the margin of his manuscript. His emotive remarks, in the words of La Grange, reflect a "frenzied despair, all the more dramatic since their vehemence is so far removed from the bitter-sweet irony of the music" (4: 847). The following appear in the preliminary sketch of the movement:

> "Tod! Verk!"
>
> "Erbarmen!"
>
> (Have pity)
>
> "O Gott! O Gott! Warum hast du mich verlassen?"
>
> (Oh God! Oh God! Why have you forsaken me?)
>
> "Dein Wille geschehe!"
>
> (Thy will be done)

Mahler's imploration has all the earmarks of a suicide note. He begs a seemingly indifferent God to have mercy on his soul, an entreaty doubtless oft repeated by those enduring purification in Purgatory. That being said, he is surely not exclusively beseeching an omnipotent deity; rather, Mahler's pleas are directed as much (if not more so) towards Alma. The implication of equating Alma with God is quite plain: Just as the sinner must be cleansed prior to reaching Heaven, Mahler must suffer so he can be reunited with Alma. In fact, by writing, "Thy will be done,"

Mahler echoes his earlier acquiescence to Alma's decision to remain or abandon him ("Whatever you decide, you will be doing the right thing"). The significance of the abbreviated comment "Tod! Verk!" remains uncertain. The statement has generated a great deal of confusion due to the vast number of German words that "verk" might represent. Fortunately, a second preliminary sketch page of "Purgatorio" was recently discovered in the Moldenhauer Archive at the Library of Congress. In this draft, "Todesverkündigung" appears instead of the abbreviation. For Coburn, "Tod! Verk!" can now be interpreted as an obvious reference to Wagner's "Todesverkündigung" in Act 2, Scene 4 of *Die Walküre* (8). In this scene, Brünnhilde foretells of Siegmund's imminent death and orders him to accompany her to Valhalla. Loath to abandon his lover Sieglinde, even for certain glory, Siegmund convinces Brünnhilde to defend him in the forthcoming battle with Hunding. In the words of Coburn, "By regarding Siegmund's renunciation of Walhall as a sacrificial (or purgatorial) act in order to retain his beloved, it can be seen as a parallel with Mahler's own situation" (8-9).

Musicologists continue to debate the exact order in which Mahler composed the five movements of his tenth symphony. Preeminent Mahler scholars, La Grange foremost among them, believe the third movement was the first music Mahler created after he learned of his wife's affair ("Purgatory or Catharsis?" 162-63). Floros appears to corroborate this sentiment, proclaiming that the "deep sighs, exclamations, and intimate entries appearing in the manuscript on the opening pages … and between the notes indicate that Mahler went through a serious crisis" (307) as he composed the movement. The fact that the manuscripts of the first and second movements are bereft of such entries further justifies the assertion that Mahler at least started "Purgatorio" before addressing other sections. The chronology of composition has twofold significance: First, the movement Mahler composed upon learning of Alma's infidelity should

provide the strongest musical clues about the state of his psyche. As they appear in "Purgatorio," these clues have already been discussed. Second, any parallels between the music Mahler composed first after his discovery of the affair and movements started or completed thereafter have particular relevance; namely, because "Purgatorio" represents Mahler's purification and his estrangement from Alma, any connection between the third movement and subsequent movements may suggest a continuation of the marital crisis. Most importantly, had Mahler concluded the symphony with "Purgatorio" in mind, it would not be unreasonable to believe that he thought the reattainment of Alma's love was impossible.

Mahler composed the fourth movement of his tenth symphony as a scherzo in E minor. Despite being ominously titled "Der Teufel tanzt es mit mir" ("The Devil is dancing with me"), the movement initially lacks any indication of a marriage in peril. It seems Mahler struggled in terms of positioning some of his movements, with the fourth being a particularly difficult case to resolve. His remarks on the folder of the manuscript indicate that he vacillated between placing the movement at the beginning of the Tenth, in second place, or at the end; however, he ultimately crossed out "2. Satz," "Finale," "1. Scherzo," and again, "Finale" in favor of "IV" (Floros 310). Mahler's uncertainty explains the cause of the initial lack of sorrow or dread in the movement: He probably learned of Alma's infidelity after composing much of the music of the Scherzo, but doubtless finished the movement in crisis, as his wildest explosion of despair, appearing on its title page, indicates:

> "Wahnsinn, fass mich an, Verfluchten!
> vernichte mich
> dass ich vergesse, dass ich bin!
> dass ich aufhöre, zu sein

dass ich ver…"

(Madness, seize me, the accursed!

Destroy me

Let me forget that I exist!

So that I cease to be

So that I…)

Mahler's abbreviations again cause musicologists angst, as "ver" could be a plethora of words. Floros reasonably submits "verende" or "verrecke" as candidates, as they mean "perish" and "perish like a beast," respectively (310). Regardless, Mahler's lament paints a grim portrait of the composer's increasingly fragile emotional state. His desire to obliterate all former memories and "cease to be" manifests itself musically in measure 432, marked "Molto pesante" (see fig. 3). Spearheaded by trumpets, this particularly dissonant passage shatters the exuberance of the second trio, and the cheerful scherzo degenerates into a *danse macabre*. The severely reduced instrumental forces move hesitantly into the distance. Over the muffled, concluding drum stroke appears the enigmatic inscription, "Du allein weisst was es bedeutet" ("You alone know what this means"). Alma later identified this remark as a reminiscence of the depressing day in February 1908 when a New York fireman's funeral rites took place under their windows on Central Park West. By referencing the grave procession, Mahler likely hoped to evoke a deeply

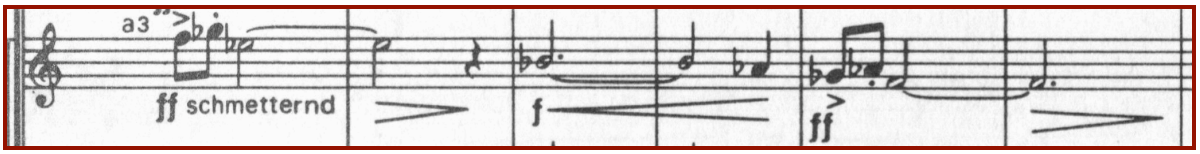


Fig. 3. Marked "schmetternd" ("devastating"), this harrowing trumpet line abolishes the merriment that previously characterized the Scherzo. The disparate moods in the fourth movement may be the result of a discontinuous compositional process. Mahler likely resumed writing the Scherzo after learning of Alma's infidelity, thus explaining the unanticipated eruption of cynicism in measure 432 (Cooke 111).

felt shared experience that was representative of a greater emotional bond between him and Alma (Coburn 12). More tragically, the drum stroke suggests Mahler to be subjecting himself to a metaphorical death sentence. Anticipating the demise of his marriage, he somberly bids adieu to his wife on the final page of the movement: "Ach! Ach! Ach! Leb' wol mein Seitenspiel!" ("Oh! Oh! Oh! Farewell, my Lyre").

The fourth movement transitions seamlessly into the Finale. A forlorn tuba line ascends from the abyss only to be silenced by the same drum stroke that concluded the fourth. The introduction proceeds to quote literally two of the four musical sighs from the middle section of "Purgatorio," namely, the two insertions that Mahler associated with death and with pleas of mercy (Floros 315). Any attempt by the orchestra to begin an idea is mercilessly crushed by the nihilistic thud of the funerary drum. Finally, a delicate flute solo played over harp and strings shifts the score from D minor to D major. But alas, tuba and drum devastate the fledgling optimism, and the two "Purgatorio" quotes are restated. Unexpectedly, the orchestra accelerates into a new section consisting of motivic material from the "Purgatorio," with a euphoric melody contributed by the strings. These themes are pitted against one another until a piercing trumpet line heralds the return of the nine-note "cry of pain" from the first movement. This chord yet again begs the essential uncertainty, best articulated by Mahler himself in a note written to Alma that August: "I ask whether I may still hope for salvation, or whether I am to be damned" (Beaumont 375). Mahler dedicates the remainder of the Tenth to answering this crucial query. Avoiding any recapitulation of the Finale's anguished opening themes, Mahler weaves an unceasing lyrical melody in his last great attempt to transcend death. The expressive climax of the movement begins at measure 352, where the violins ascend to unprecedented dramatic

heights (see fig. 4). Thereafter, the extremely affectionate coda fades to pianissimo. Here, Mahler utters his last testament of undying love for Alma:

> "Für dich leben!
>
> Für dich sterben!
>
> Almschi!"
>
> (To live for you!
>
> To die for you!
>
> My little Alma!)

A swift flaring up in the strings seems to extinguish the metaphorical flame of life and love, giving way to the serene conclusion of the Tenth Symphony in its home key of F-sharp major. Mahler's final journey has ended.

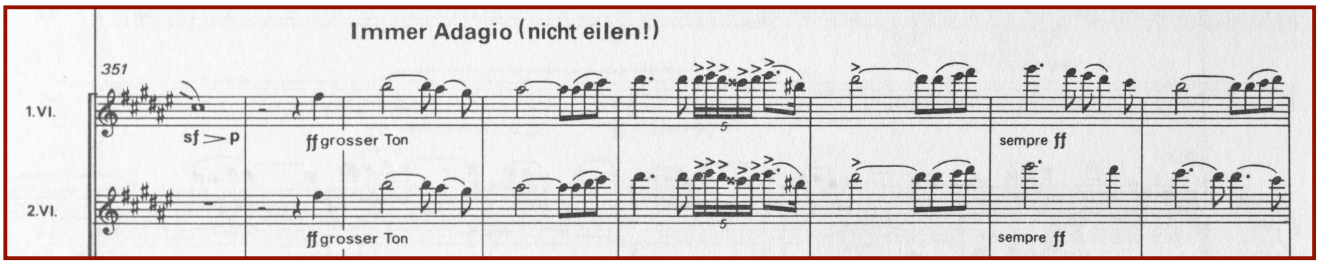


Fig. 4. The expressive climax of the Finale begins at measure 352. Performed exclusively by the strings, with the melody in the violins, this especially lyrical passage signals the imminent conclusion of the Tenth Symphony (Cooke 159).

The composer's inscriptions in the manuscript of the Finale reaffirm his commitment to Alma and their marriage. He provides no written statement, however, that might anticipate either the loss or reattainment of his beloved "Almschi." As such, Mahler's expectations can only be gleaned from a speculative investigation of his music. Coburn has dedicated a significant portion of his scholarship to discerning the autobiographical features of the Tenth Symphony. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of his work concerns the relevance of tonality in the Finale. The

manuscript of the last movement shows that Mahler originally intended to end the symphony in the key of B-flat major; only later did he compose a virtually identical conclusion in F-sharp major (see fig. 5a). For Coburn, this seemingly minor adjustment has profound implications. He notes the structural and tonal resemblance of measures 92 to 95 of the third movement (see fig. 5b) to the original ending of the Finale. He also emphasizes the consequence of Mahler deliberately quoting a passage from "Purgatorio" to conclude the Tenth: "By combining this resolution with Alma's name, Mahler indicated that the ultimate goal or resolution of this cell, if not of the entire symphony, is in fact Alma, or more precisely, her love for him" (13). Coburn believes that had the B-flat conclusion been retained, Mahler would be indicating that he considered reconciliation with Alma impossible; rejected, the composer would live out his remaining days in a "Purgatorial state of expiation" (13). By instead concluding the Tenth in F-sharp major, Mahler distanced himself from Purgatory; hence, he likely anticipated an imminent reunification with his wife.

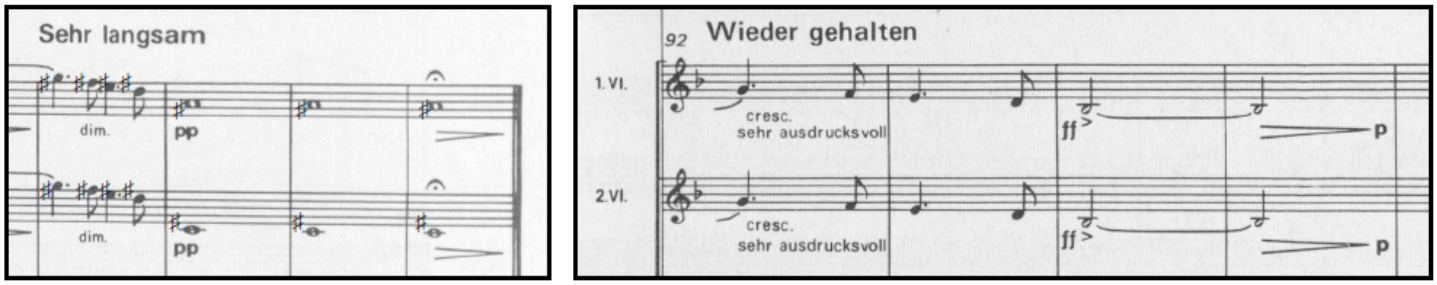


Fig. 5. Coburn ascribes particular relevance to measures 92 through 95 of the "Purgatorio." Noting the similarities between the ending of the Finale (a) and a violin cell from the third movement (b), he contends that the retention of the original B-flat conclusion would indicate Mahler anticipated the demise of his marriage. Instead, Mahler changed the fifth movement to end in F-sharp major. This alteration distanced the Finale from the bleak "Purgatorio," thereby suggesting Mahler anticipated to be reunified with Alma (Cooke 164, 70).

Taking Coburn's supposition concerning the finale of the Tenth Symphony as fact, Mahler proved correct in his conviction that Alma would not abandon him. Following eight weeks of anguish and despair, the composer's final letters to her sound of "bliss without repose" (Beaumont 390). Despite reassuring her husband that her love was not altogether dead, and that she would remain with him, come what may, Alma later disclosed a particularly cruel confession in her memoir:

> I knew that my marriage was no marriage and that my own life was utterly unfulfilled. I concealed all this from him, and although he knew it as well as I did, we played out the comedy to the end, to spare his feelings. (Franklin 191)

Not surprisingly, she continued to correspond with Gropius, each successive letter speaking with increasing openness of erotic feelings and desires. Together, they arranged a number of trysts throughout Europe, being so bold as to even meet in Munich as Mahler rehearsed for the debut of his eighth symphony. As Alma suspected, Mahler was probably not oblivious to her treachery; nonetheless, it seems he permitted the lovers to continue their affair, so long as they behaved discretely. Yet the scenario may very well have been detrimental to his art. Contrary to his habit, Mahler did not return to the manuscript of the Tenth during the winter of 1910. Consumed by a "kind of fear [which] kept him from busying himself with it" (Floros 300), he failed to finish his final work, dying on 18 May 1911, coincidentally Gropius's birthday.

As the last of the great Romantic symphonists, Mahler may have delighted in knowing the efforts musicologists would undertake to piece together his Symphony No. 10, looking for answers in the traumatic circumstances under which it was conceived. Or perhaps he would have simply rebuked these impertinent scholars, who seek to illuminate the secrets hidden in the darkest recesses of a wounded heart.

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