

The Choral Arts Society of Washington  
Norman Scribner, Artistic Director

## Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

### Symphony No. 8

#### Program Notes

By Wayne D. Shirley

Mahler's Eighth Symphony, written in 1906 and first performed in 1910, is one of two symphonies in the standard repertory which is choral throughout. (The other, the Vaughan Williams *Sea Symphony*, received its premiere exactly one month after the Mahler Eighth.) Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, as everyone in this audience knows, is the great model for a symphony with some choral involvement; Mahler himself had used chorus in individual movements of two of his previous symphonies, the Second and the Third. But the Eighth is the first symphony in which choral/vocal texture is the norm. There are purely orchestral sections – most notably the opening of the second movement – but these are exceptional moments in a primarily choral/vocal work.

It is tempting, especially for a chorister, to see the Eighth as a completely exceptional work. But in fact it and its predecessor the (purely orchestral) Seventh Symphony form an island between the tragic works of the turn of the century – the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, the *Kindertotenlieder* – and the final works, also essentially tragic, *Das Lied von der Erde* and the Ninth. Neither the Seventh nor the Eighth is a tragic work: if you insist in dividing works of art into comic and tragic you can see them as comic in the sense of the *Divine Comedy*, *The Tempest*, and *The Magic Flute* (rather than in the sense of *Don Juan*, *The Comedy of Errors*, or *Così*). Mahler himself saw the Eighth not as comedy but as liturgy; he called it his Mass.

The Eighth Symphony is in two movements. The first, lasting just under a half hour, is a setting of the Latin hymn for Pentecost "Veni, creator spiritus." Those familiar with Mahler will find that it resembles others of his opening movements: intense, packed with events, invoking the spirit of sonata form without always following that form's mechanics. The second movement, lasting just under an hour, is a setting of the final scene of Goethe's *Faust*.

It is a convention of writing on the Mahler Eighth to say that the second movement, as expansive as the first is intense, "combines the functions of slow movement, scherzo, and finale," a statement that will serve if you don't expect to hear a clear division between scherzo and finale. The division between slow movement and scherzo – a scherzo of rejoicing, not a joke – is clear enough: the entry of the women's chorus, the "chorus of angels, hovering in the heights, bearing the immortal part of Faust." And this generalization will help the new listener through what is most difficult for the person first coming in contact with the Eighth: the change from the first movement, intense and packed to the point of sensory overload, to the second, where events move more slowly (though the music itself is often delightfully animated) and which for its first few minutes seems utterly motionless. Some critics see this change as a loss of creative energy; in reality it is the change from invocation (all voices abstract) to drama (every voice, solo or chorus, in character).

The hymn "Veni, creator spiritus" dates back to at least the tenth century. Lutherans (and Bach fans) know it in translation as "Komm, Gott Schöpfer, heiliger Geist"; it appears in English-language hymnals as "Come Holy Ghost, Eternal God." It is a prayer to the Holy Ghost to illuminate our souls; in Mahler's setting it is, by extension, a prayer to bestow on the artist the creative power to realize his or her vision. The prayer can be taken as general – this movement is often used to open new concert halls, invoking by implication the blessing of the Holy Spirit on the years of performances to follow. For Mahler it may also have been a prayer for the

power and insight to set the final scene of *Faust*, the most profound German-language exploration of the mystery of human redemption. (To performers it often seems a prayer for the strength and insight to perform the second movement worthily.) At the end of the first movement the extra brass gives out the music which the angelic chorus will sing when they first enter in the second movement: the vision has been granted.

Those who know the Faust legend only from Berlioz or Marlowe think of Faust as being dragged off to Hell at the end; those who know it from Gounod or from Part I of Goethe know the ambiguous ending where Marguerite/Gretchen ascends to Heaven while Faust remains on earth. But in the final scene of the second part of Goethe's *Faust* – and therefore in the Mahler Eighth – the immortal part of the philosopher ascends to Heaven: the angels explain "Whoever strives without ceasing / That person we can save." Faust himself does not sing in the Mahler Eighth: his immortal part has not yet shed its mortality.

Mahler does not set all of the final scene of *Faust*, and he often makes small changes in the sections he does set. One change may be useful to note: Goethe's original is much clearer on the identity of the children's choir than is the text as cut by Mahler. They're "Mitternachtsgeborne" – children who died at birth – who according to Goethe are "lost to earth and won for heaven." They are radically innocent but also know nothing of life: Faust can be their teacher.

The second movement of the Mahler Eighth takes place not in Heaven (nor "in Hell," as a distinguished conductor once assured the Choral Arts Society) but in a desert community of anchorites – the place on earth closest to God's grace. It is the anchorites – baritone Pater Ecstasticus, deep bass Pater Profundis – who meditate on the presence of God; it is in the skies above the desert scene, rather than in Heaven itself, where the immortal part of Faust is readied for ascension.

Many Mahler slow movements – think of the last movement of the Third – begin as though they were to be for strings alone and gradually add other orchestral instruments until the full orchestra is playing. It is best to think of the long meditative section which starts the second movement of the Eighth as a choral-orchestral version of this model – orchestra alone for the first nine minutes, then adding scene – setting chorus and finally soloists – rather than as orchestral introduction and choral scene.

Suddenly the meditations of the anchorites are interrupted by a host of angels appearing in the air, bearing Faust's soul and singing a song of triumph. The younger angels sing proudly of how they vanquished the foe; the more mature angels grumble that it's still unpleasant bearing aloft a soul which has its residue on earth. (Their complaint is set to the music which served for the text "Infirma nostri corporis" in the first movement.) Only Eternal Love, say the angels, can separate the soul from its dross: the Eternal Love as represented by the Mater Gloriosa, Mary Queen of Heaven. She is invoked by tenor Doctor Marianus ("the man learned in the lore of Mary"), gently supported by the chorus: at the end of his solo she appears, accompanied by her "magical" instruments – harps, piano, celesta, harmonium, later mandolin. Save for one majestic thrum of the harps at the start of Doctor Marianus' solo, these instruments have not yet been heard in the symphony. Mater Gloriosa sings, in fact, only two lines, and those later in the piece (the singer of the role does not sing in the first movement): but the "magical" instruments are the audible representation of her presence.

Four penitent women in particular intercede for Faust before the Mater Gloriosa. Three are from the early years of Christianity: the woman who washes Jesus' feet with her tears, the Samaritan woman at the well, and the penitent Mary of Egypt. They pray in general for the pardon of a good soul "which forgot itself only once." The fourth penitent is the Gretchen of Part I of *Faust*, loved and then abandoned by the hero: her prayer is mixed with rejoicing at the return of the man she loves. (In fact the beginning of her prayer paraphrases her agonized prayer to the Virgin in Part I.) In one of the most radiant passages in the symphony she describes the rebirth of the soul and asks to be the one to teach Faust his new state of being. In her one actual speech the Mater Gloriosa invites Gretchen to ascend to the higher heavens: "When he senses you, he will follow." The

symphony ends with the "Chorus Mysticus," perhaps the most famous lines in German literature. Mahler's setting starts with a whisper and rises to the most intense of choral fortissimos.

A word about the very ending. We tend to expect that the final choral utterance of a choral symphony will be the climax and that what is played after the chorus ends is postlude. Not so here. The final, fortissimo utterance of the Chorus Mysticus – Eternal Feminine and all – opens for us the gates of Heaven: but the music which comes from Heaven itself, where words cannot reach, is the final orchestral peroration with the extra brass. Its musical material is the opening "Veni, creator" motive (as the extra brass in the first movement had intoned the most important motive of the second movement): we have finally ascended to the throne of the Creator Spirit.