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MSO **LIVE**



MAHLER Symphony No. 6

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra • Mark Wigglesworth conductor



# MSO LIVE

GUSTAV MAHLER 1860-1911  
Symphony No. 6 in A minor

## CD1

- |          |   |       |
|----------|---|-------|
| <b>1</b> | I. Allegro energico, ma non troppo. Heftig, aber markig<br>[Heavy, but pithy] | 24'23 |
| <b>2</b> | II. Scherzo: Wuchtig [Weighty]  | 12'27 |
| <b>3</b> | III. Andante moderato   | 15'02 |

## CD2

- |          |   |       |
|----------|---|-------|
| <b>1</b> | IV. Finale. Allegro moderato – Allegro energico | 30'04 |
|----------|---|-------|

Total Playing Time 82'14

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra  
Mark Wigglesworth *conductor*

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ON 15 AND 17 JULY 2006

Mahler was worried. His Sixth Symphony had just received its first performance at the Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein's festival in the German city of Essen, and his friend and colleague Richard Strauss had made the offhand remark that the work was 'overscored'. Strauss's remark may have been facetious; it was after all at around this time that his *Salome* was premiered, and *Salome's* orchestration sounded to Giacomo Puccini like a 'badly mixed Russian salad'. But, according to the young conductor Klaus Pringsheim (who witnessed the exchange), Mahler kept coming back to Strauss's comment. He 'asked without envy, without bitterness, almost humbly, reverently, what might be the reason why everything came so easily to the other composer and so painfully to himself; and one felt the antithesis between the blond conqueror and the dark, fate-burdened man.'

In his monograph on Mahler, the influential Marxist writer Theodor Adorno caricatured Strauss as a 'blond Siegfried, a balanced harmonious individual who is supposed, singing like a bird, to shower as much happiness on his listeners as is falsely ascribed to him'. By contrast, Adorno argued, Mahler's music reflects the increasing impotence of the individual in late bourgeois society. Mahler's theme is 'brokenness'; his use of folk music, high Romantic *Angst*, bird calls, cowbells and military marches are all ultimately ironic reminders of the fragmentation of society and the self. For

Adorno, Mahler's best music dramatises the discontinuity of the world.

Unlike Strauss, Mahler was suspicious of music which needed the explanatory prop of a 'program', but this is not to say that Mahler's music is not at some level about non-musical ideas. In many ways Mahler's Sixth Symphony is comparable to Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*: Mahler himself conceded that the work has a 'hero' who faces an inexorable fate – but the crucial difference is that Mahler's music acknowledges the fear of inevitable oblivion. Mahler's Fifth Symphony trod a familiar Beethovenian path from darkness to light, dramatising the overcoming of various obstacles before final victory. The Sixth, by contrast, offers no such comfort. The hero may love and fight and occasionally triumph but we are all in the end 'snared in an evil time'.

So the answer to Mahler's own question about why everything came so much more easily to Strauss might be that in Mahler's music there is much more at stake. According to the composer's widow Alma, 'none of his works moved him so deeply at its first hearing as this.' In her memoirs, Alma Mahler tells of how, after the dress rehearsal of the Sixth, she went backstage to find 'Mahler walking up and down in the artists' room, sobbing, wringing his hands, unable to control himself...'

Alma Mahler's accounts of her life have been described as unreliable and occasionally

mendacious. Her description of the scene, for instance, continues with the appearance of – who else? – Strauss, who 'came noisily in, noticing nothing. "Mahler, I say, you've got to conduct some dead march or other before the Sixth – their Mayor has died on them – so vulgar this sort of thing – But what's the matter?" and out he went as noisily as he came, quite unmoved...'. (A marginal note Strauss wrote in his copy of her book amounts to a perplexed denial of the story.) Nevertheless Mahler's emotions at having composed such a work as this must have been intense. As composer and writer Andrew Ford has noted, in the Sixth Symphony 'it is as though Mahler has deliberately destroyed his own world, and if Alma Mahler's story...is perhaps a little exaggerated, it's not actually implausible.'

Mahler's first four symphonies mine his many song-settings of folk poetry from the collection *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and three of them contain significant vocal elements. His three central symphonies are all works of 'absolute' as against programmatic music. Nevertheless, his Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Symphonies derive some of their thematic material from two sets of songs to poetry by Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866), the song-cycle *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs on the Death of Children) and five songs (which do not constitute a cycle) which include the masterpieces *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* (I Have Lost Touch with the World)

and *Um Mitternacht* (At Midnight). (Alma describes the *Kindertotenlieder* and Sixth Symphony as premonitions of the death of their daughter and the onset of Mahler's heart condition.)

For all its epic scale the Sixth is the work, as Mahler put it, of 'an old fashioned composer' in that it is cast in a traditional four-movement design. From the outset, though, its tone – which led to the occasional use, even in Mahler's time, of the nickname *Tragic* – is unambiguous. A fully scored A major chord, underpinned by an obsessive rhythmic motif from the timpani, fades and, as it fades, changes to the minor mode. This is music which will end in darkness. The movement begins as a march, though, as scholar Michael Kennedy points out, it is not the triumphant approach of spring as in the Third Symphony, or the doom-laden funeral march of the Fifth. It is, as Kennedy puts it, 'modern music [that] marches in with this sinister tramping start'. The movement's starkly contrasting second subject is a lyrical tune which rises and falls largely by step. Alma describes how on their summer vacation in 1902, when Mahler began work on the piece, 'after he had drafted the first movement, he came down from [his study] to tell me he had tried to express me in a theme. "Whether I've succeeded, I don't know; but you'll have to put up with it!" Its contour and mood certainly relate to any number of Romantic love-themes. Mahler's treatment of

it, too, reminds one of Berlioz's use of the Beloved's *idée fixe* in the *Symphonie fantastique*: it is always slightly varied on each appearance. In any event, the yearning lyricism provides a perfect foil for the implacable march with which the movement begins – 'change and conflict are the secret of effective music,' as Mahler said. Another unique aspect of this work is the celebrated evocation of alpine scenery first heard toward the end of the movement. This striking sound world was said by Mahler to represent the 'last earthly sounds heard from the valley below by the departing spirit on the mountain top'. Perhaps anticipating bafflement from future performers he noted that 'the cowbells should be played with discretion – so as to produce a realistic impression of a grazing herd of cattle, coming from a distance, alternately singly or in groups, in sounds of high and low pitch.' Apparently unaware of the contradiction he went on to say, 'Special emphasis is laid on the fact that this technical remark admits of no programmatic interpretation.'

Mahler never quite resolved the issue of the order of the two central movements. Originally the *Scherzo* followed the first movement, but Mahler tried it out with the *Andante* second and *Scherzo* third before swapping them back. The *Scherzo* too has an insistent rhythm to begin with (which may have prompted Mahler to delay it). There is much Mahlerian irony in this movement, both in the dry clattering of the

xylophone and in what Kennedy calls the 'delicate pastiche Haydn'. The oboe conjures up an innocent, rustic world, and the metrical changes – described by Mahler as *altväterlich* (literally 'old-fatherly') – may recall a Bohemian folksong. As a caution against over-interpreting, it should be noted that the *Scherzo* has been interpreted as 'diabolical' and 'catastrophic' on one hand, where Alma's reminiscences insist that it depicts the 'tottering' of their children at play before the intrusion of tragedy at the end of the movement.

The *Andante* represents a complete contrast with both the *Scherzo* and the *Finale*, and its thematic reference to the *Kindertotenlieder* may give some credence to the theory that the *Scherzo* dealt with Mahler's family life. But the tone is hardly tragic. Rather, with its horn calls and reminiscence of the cowbells it is poignant and romantic, a relaxation of the tension before the turbulence of the *Finale*.

The *Finale* is one of Mahler's largest and most complex structures, and it bears the weight of the symphony as a whole, recalling material from earlier in the work. Its introductory section contains much of the material that will be developed as the movement unfolds, particularly the impassioned melody heard first high in the violins. The movement depicts a nightmarish world, where the *Allegro energico* builds intense excitement and momentum, straining towards

climactic release, only to be brutally interrupted on three occasions. Mahler originally included a sickening thud 'like an axe-stroke' at each of these points, but later omitted the third out of superstition. Adorno wrote that in Mahler 'happiness flourishes on the brink of catastrophe,' and that the immense climaxes of the Sixth's *Finale* 'bear their downfall within themselves.' Mahler himself said that the movement describes 'the hero on whom fall three blows of fate, the last of which fells him as a tree is felled'. The piece ends in dissolution: drum rolls, fragmentary motifs, a baleful and comfortless A minor.

**Gordon Kerry**



**Mark Wigglesworth**

Born in Sussex, England, Mark Wigglesworth studied conducting at the Royal Academy of Music in London and won the Kondrashin Conducting Competition in Amsterdam in 1989. Since then he has worked with many of Europe's leading orchestras, including the Berlin, Oslo and Royal Stockholm Philharmonic orchestras, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Santa Cecilia Orchestra of Rome and the Orchestra of La Scala Milan. He has also appeared with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, and at the Salzburg Festival, the BBC Proms, the Hollywood Bowl and the 1995 Mahler Festival

in Amsterdam. In 2000 he led the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in the closing concert of the Olympic Arts Festival.

Since making his North American debut in 1992 he has worked with the Cleveland Orchestra, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Montreal Symphony Orchestra. He regularly conducts the Minnesota Orchestra and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, and has an ongoing relationship with the New World Symphony.

Mark Wigglesworth led his first opera production in 1991, conducting *Così fan tutte* for Opera Factory in London. Since then he has conducted *Peter Grimes*, *La bohème* and *The Marriage of Figaro* at the Glyndebourne Festival; *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, *Falstaff* and *Così fan tutte* for English National Opera; *The Rake's Progress*, *Elektra* and *Tristan and Isolde* with Welsh National Opera; *Peter Grimes* at the Netherlands Opera and *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg* at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. In 2005, he made his Metropolitan Opera debut conducting *The Marriage of Figaro*.

Mark Wigglesworth is currently in the process of recording a complete Shostakovich symphony cycle with the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic for BIS. In 2008 he becomes Music Director of the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels. He is a frequent guest with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra.

## Melbourne Symphony Orchestra

With a reputation for excellence, versatility and innovation, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra is Australia's oldest orchestra, celebrating its centenary throughout 2007.

This fine, internationally-acclaimed Australian orchestra is renowned for its performances of the great symphonic masterworks with leading international soloists and conductors including Mariss Jansons, Jessye Norman, Jennifer Larmore, Bryn Terfel, Maxim Vengerov, John Williams, Osmo Vänskä, Paavo Järvi, Yan Pascal Tortelier, Donald Runnicles, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, Barbara Bonney, Yvonne Kenny, Sir Charles Mackerras, Marcello Viotti, Simone Young, Lang Lang, Nigel Kennedy, Jeffrey Tate and Midori. The Melbourne Symphony Orchestra has also enjoyed hugely successful performances with the Three Tenors, Frank Sinatra, Kiri Te Kanawa, Elton John, John Farnham, Dionne Warwick, Andrea Bocelli, Harry Connick, Jr., k.d. lang, Stevie Nicks, Ben Folds and rock legends KISS and Meat Loaf, as well as performing in the 2006 Commonwealth Games opening ceremony.

In 2005, Oleg Caetani took up the baton as the MSO's Chief Conductor and Artistic Director for a four-year appointment. In 2007 Caetani led the Orchestra on its second European tour, to Spain, Paris, Berlin and Milan. In recent years the MSO has received widespread international recognition

in tours to Europe (2000), China (2002), St Petersburg, Russia (2003) and Japan (2005).

Each year the Orchestra performs to more than 250,000 people in Melbourne and regional Victoria, at events ranging from the annual series of Sidney Myer Free Concerts in the Sidney Myer Music Bowl to the series of Classic Kids concerts for young children. The MSO reaches an even larger audience across Australia through its regular concert broadcasts on ABC Classic FM.

Some performances are presented on ABC TV, and the documentary *To Russia with Love*, about the Orchestra's St Petersburg tour, was one of the flagship programs in ABC TV's *Sunday Afternoon* series in 2005.

Recent recordings include major CD releases on the Chandos and ABC Classics labels. The MSO's Chandos recording of Alexandre Tansman's Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Symphonies with Oleg Caetani recently received a *Diapason d'Or* award. In 2005 the Orchestra launched the new live-in-concert CD series, MSO LIVE through ABC Classics. In addition, members of the Orchestra have featured on numerous film soundtracks including those for such major motion pictures as *Babe*, *IQ*, *Hotel Sorrento*, *Six Degrees of Separation*, *Babe II – Pig in the City* and *The Dish*. The MSO has also recorded music for a number of computer and console-based games based on films such as *Jurassic Park* and *The Polar Express*.

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#### **For the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra**

**Chief Conductor and Artistic Director** Oleg Caetani

**Chairman** Elizabeth Proust

**Managing Director** Trevor Green

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