
Mahler 5

some thoughts

D. Falck

Composed 1902, premiered 1904. Arguably Mahler's first pure-orchestral work, moving away from his prior focus on vocal music and on towards a more ambitious, contrapuntal conception of the symphony.

Structure:

PART I

1. Trauermarsch (*funeral march*)
2. Stürmisch bewegt, mit größter Vehemenz
(*moving stormily, with the greatest vehemence*)

PART II

3. Scherzo

PART III

4. Adagietto
5. Rondo-Finale

Themes: contrasting life against death; divine perfection against the noise (at times beautiful, at times unbearable) of everyday life. The pursuit of an elusive higher meaning – never attainable, always drowned out by existence itself. But can we settle for existence and through it find our meaning after all?

Mahler explores life from all angles in turn, searching for something higher, something better. He comes close to finding it at times, but fails in frustration. And finally, after looking inwards, he finds it in the small earthly pleasures of the world around him.

For each movement I pick out a few landmark structural moments on the left and thematic moments on the right. Timestamps reference the 1996-released recording by Herbert von Karajan with the Berlin Philharmonic.

PART I

Mahler looks around at the world, starting with a wistful nostalgia but soon breaking into turmoil and frustration as he searches for meaning. We see hints of it, of divine perfection, but they fall through our fingers.

1. Trauermarsch (*funeral march*)

A conflicted meditation on the current state of things. Sonata form.

Exposition

Introductory subject – 0:00
First subject – 1:13
Introductory subject (repeat) – 2:10
First subject (repeat) – 3:05
New second subject – 4:12

A brass fanfare soon settles into a lilting, suave funeral march. There are hints of beauty but an overwhelming nostalgia.

Development

New development theme – 5:24
Extended development

Suddenly, Mahler erupts into a wild frenzy. Frustration; anger; confusion. Why are we here? What is the point?

↓
Introductory subject – 6:52
↓

Recapitulation

First subject – 7:44
Second subject – 8:49

We return to the opening melancholy.

Coda

New theme – 9:46
Another new theme – 10:17
Reprise of introductory subject – 11:34

Some slight optimism, perhaps; a hint of beauty. It is joined by the horns—but the trumpet fanfare startles us out of this delusion and the music dies away, hopeless and surrendered.

2. Stürmisch bewegt, mit größter Vehemenz (*moving stormily, with the greatest vehemence*)

A less settled pairing with the first movement. Loose sonata form.

Exposition

First subject group – 0:09
Second subject – 1:32
(based on subject from first movement)

A tormented chaos. A flurry of dissonance and soaring rage gives way to an adaptation of the funeral march theme, now with much more urgency.

Development

Development of first subject – 3:38
Development of second subject – 4:30
Extended development
First emergence of brass chorale – 8:38

Suddenly, a striking trumpet call offers a brief glimpse of the divine—but a glimpse only, and we collapse back into the chaos of the opening.

Recapitulation

First subject group – 8:47
Second subject – 9:22
Development
Failed climax (brass chorale) – 12:06

The reprise of the subject now carries a new sustained frustration.

The frustration builds with a new intensity, but at once it transforms into a spine-tingling brass chorale—the continuation of the trumpet call we heard, now extended to an exhilarating climax. Have we finally found peace? No. The climax is short-lived and soon implodes, leaving emptiness. We hear echoes of the dissonance of the first subject as the music dies.

Coda

Reprise of first subject – 13:30
Music dissipates – 14:08

PART II

Mahler pauses to consider the beauty of culture and society itself. In a magnificent Scherzo, he passes from city waltzes to country ländlers, from lyrical to jubilant. He examines the darkness within all this, before ending as unexpectedly as he began.

3. Scherzo

Structurally a cross between sonata form and scherzo-trio-scherzo.

SCHERZO	Theme 1 – an Austrian ländler – 0:00 Theme 2 – faster – 0:43 Varied fun – 1:17 Horn pronouncement – 2:17	Country dances – the ‘noisy bustle’ of life.
TRIO 1	A Viennese waltz – 2:26	Tender and lyrical; elegance.
SCHERZO	Theme 1 (ländler) – 3:25 Fugue on theme 2 – 3:54 More fun Another horn pronouncement – 4:40	
TRIO 2	Rolling theme in woodwind – 4:40 Mixing with other themes	
Development (SCHERZO)	Extended horn pronouncement mixed with slow version of waltz – 5:06 Extended dev of waltz and ländler themes – 7:00	After much fun and development we stop for introspection. A lengthy, haunting passage explores the darker side of the dancing themes.
Recapitulation	TRIO 1 (waltz) emerges, + dev – 10:24 SCHERZO + dev – 11:30 TRIO 2, mixed with trio 1 + dev – 13:36 Brief reminder of SCHERZO – 14:18	
Coda	Start of coda – from waltz – 14:23 Extended horn pronouncement section – 15:01 Chaotic ending – 17:19	Everything is tied together into a rushing frenzy that ends the movement abruptly, without closure.

PART III

Mahler looks inwards before finally focusing on the earthly everyday,
where meaning is at last found.

4. Adagietto

A tender, pained elegy to love and the internal wonders of life.

A – 0:00

B – 4:27

A' – 7:55

5. Rondo-Finale

A return to the simple everyday pleasures of life, which transform themselves into the meaning we've been searching for. Sonata rondo form (roughly ABACABA).

Introduction	All motifs are introduced – 0:00	In a remarkable opening, the motivic basis of every theme in the movement is stated in the space of 12 bars.
Exposition	A – 0:41 B (faster, contrapuntal) – 1:16 A – 2:46 Transition (B) – 3:21	A down-to-earth first theme is paired with a highly contrapuntal second theme.
Development	C – 3:48 Development B – 6:42 C – 7:10 Extended retransition (B) – 8:13	An extended development section—through which more waltzes and songs emerge—leads to a triumphant recapitulation of the first theme, which seems now to take on an entirely new form. Joy builds, and we hear snippets of the brass chorale to come.
Recapitulation	A – 9:32 B – 10:20	The reprise of the second theme builds and builds, but subsides before it can climax.
Coda	Exploration (C) – 11:20 Chorale apotheosis (A) – 13:55	At last emerges again the jubilant brass chorale glimpsed in Part I, which we see now is a transformation of the first theme from this movement. It at last climaxes and we have found meaning at last.