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*'Looking out for the Horizon'.  
The music of Gustav Mahler  
in the light of the theory  
of the aesthetic of reception  
by Hans Robert Jauss*

**ABSTRACT:** The theory of the aesthetic of reception proposed by Jauss in the field of literature can be applied to research into the reception of the music of Gustav Mahler. In creating his symphonies 'with every means of accessible technique', the composer achieved what might be described as a reinterpretation of the conception of selected genres. In this way he disturbed the traditional 'horizon of expectations' of the potential audience, and significantly distanced himself from it. The most important consequence of this was the lack of understanding of his music by a section of his contemporary audience. Mahler justified the rightness of his own creative intuition with the famous sentence 'my time will come'. In her article the author presents the fundamental theses of Jauss's aesthetic of reception relating to his understanding of the 'horizon of expectations'. She also indicates the manner in which Mahler distanced himself from that 'horizon', and how in individual symphonies he contributed to the expansion and reinterpretation of conceptions of genres which had previously been based on knowledge shared by the composer and the listener.

**KEYWORDS:** Hans Robert Jauss, Gustav Mahler, musical reception, horizon of expectations, genre, symphony

Guido Adler, a close friend of Gustav Mahler, calculated that, before his death in 1911, the composer's symphonies had been performed in Europe, Russia and America more than 260 times (the Fourth Symphony was played most often – 61 times).<sup>1</sup> Generally, these presentations aroused strong public interest but ended with ambivalent reactions from listeners that ranged from enthusiasm to consternation and even to highly ironic critiques. Putting aside the prevalent anti-semitic and conservative inclinations of the press, the reasons for this rather cold reception of Mahler's music had, at their root, a lack of understanding of his new concept of the symphony. Mahler's idea of a symphony, which he believed should be, 'like the world', built 'with every means of accessible technique', broke traditional rules of the genre and mixed two different orders, 'high' and 'low' styles of music.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Carr, *Mahler: A Biography* (Woodstock-New York: Overlook Press, 1998), 221–224.

To understand why Mahler's symphonies were fated to meet with a lack of comprehension it is helpful to use Hans Robert Jauss's theory of 'the aesthetics of reception', a theory often used in literature. It is through this prism that I will address the thesis of this paper.

## 1. The main theses of Jauss's theory

The German philosopher Hans Robert Jauss (1921–1997) first presented his theory of the aesthetics of reception in 1967 in Constance, in a speech he gave at the opening of the newly-founded university. The theory, later called 'Jauss's theory of aesthetics of reception', was formulated while discussing the importance of the historical background of a literary text. It announced a radical reform in German literary studies.<sup>2</sup> As time went on, other areas of cultural studies profited by the use of this theory.

The new, fundamental contribution of Jauss's theory to the study of the assimilation of artistic content is in assessing the role of the reader of a literary text. As he admitted many years later, Jauss saw the role of the reader as more multi-dimensional than the role of the writer.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, Jauss promoted perspective reading, open to the world of the reader,<sup>4</sup> and he proposed a breaking away from the concept of a positivistic paradigm with its tendency to explain literary works as a purely causal sequence, and the assumption that what follows is not known.<sup>5</sup> In this new arrangement, the reader is not only 'an element of passive dependence', but also an active factor that will determine, to some extent, the content and evaluation of a literary utterance.<sup>6</sup>

Jauss proposed the notion of a 'horizon of expectations', referring to the same concept introduced in the field of sociology of knowledge by the Hungarian-born German sociologist Karl Mannheim<sup>7</sup> (1893–1947) in his work *Man and Society* in 1940. The 'horizon of expectations' introduced by Jauss refers to the literary experience of the reader. This experience establishes a convergence or divergence between the pre-knowledge about a given work and the earlier experiences associated with it, and the current [later] experience.

In Jauss's words:

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<sup>2</sup> See Kazimierz Bartoszyński, *Posłowie* [Afterwords], in: Hans Robert Jauss, *Historia literatury jako prowokacja* [History of Literature as a Provocation], transl. Małgorzata Łukasiewicz (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich, 1999), 218.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 223.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 223.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 220.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 224.

<sup>7</sup> See Karl Mannheim, *Man and Society in Age of Reconstruction: Studies in Modern Social Structure*, (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner&Co., 1940).

A literary work, even if it seems new, does not appear as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its readers to a very definite type of reception by textual strategies, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of the familiar, stirs particular emotions in the reader and with its 'beginning' arouses expectations for the 'middle and end', which can then be continued intact, changed, re-oriented or even ironically fulfilled in the course of reading according to certain rules of the genre or type of text.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, 'the new text evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts, which are then varied, corrected, changed or just reproduced. Variation and correction determine the scope, alteration and reproduction of the borders and structure of the genre'.<sup>9</sup>

The same is true in music. There are indications, pointers and clues, whether about the composer, his life, the genre of the piece, or its title, which prepare the listener for the reception of the work. They prepare him emotionally, recalling past experiences (e.g. familiar music), and thus they arouse expectations (according to the 'norms of genre or kinds of text' which have been observed hitherto). Novelty – that which is currently being perceived – can only be experienced on the basis of pre-knowledge; it becomes interpretable in the context of experience. Jauss wrote:

The psychological process in the assimilation of a text on the primary horizon of aesthetic experience is by no means only a random succession of merely subjective impressions, but the carrying out of certain directions in a process of directed perception which can be comprehended from the motivations which constitute it and the signals which set it off and which can be described linguistically.<sup>10</sup>

'The new is not only an aesthetic category',<sup>11</sup> stressed Jauss, adding, 'It cannot be explained completely by the factors of innovation, surprise, surpassing, rearrangement and alienation, to which the formalist theory assigned utmost importance'.<sup>12</sup> Jauss also answered the question how to make objective the recipient's 'horizon of expectations'. He proposed to assess three basic factors. For our consideration, concentrating on music perception and on formulating the categories of the 'horizon of expectations' of the listener, two of these seem to be useful.<sup>13</sup> These are: 'the familiar standards or the inherent poetics of the genre'<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 23.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Hans Robert Jauss and Elizabeth Benzinger, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory", *New Literary History* 1 (1970/2), 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>13</sup> The third is "the contrast between fiction and reality, between the poetic and the practical function of language", *ibid.*, 14.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

and 'the implicit relationships to familiar works of the literary-historical context'<sup>15</sup> [to this, we may add the musical-historical context].

Perspective reading promoted by Jauss means not accepting the already-established 'stereotype of reception' and then simply verifying it if necessary. Instead, he proposes that reception should be a real process conditioned by 'expectations', based on constant correction and modification, thus becoming a 'dialogue with the text', an interpretive reception of the text. Jauss added that the expectations 'may be fulfilled or disappointed, frustrated or subverted by surprise, affirmed or refuted'.<sup>16</sup> Written into the text is a strategy to balance the 'aesthetic of identity' and 'aesthetic of innovation or surprise'. The problem is that the notion of the 'horizon of expectations' has been given a naïvely one-sided interpretation in evaluating works by Jauss himself. He regarded as of higher value those works that go beyond the 'horizon of expectations'. Furthermore, he believed that every audience would choose such works. However, as we know, this is true only in the case of groups of recipients with an innovatory orientation, and does not apply to audiences which are more conservative.

## 2. Mahler's music in the context of the symphonic genre

The above remarks seem to be a convenient starting point for considering Mahler's music. When the composer lived and composed, the symphony belonged to a musical genre in which rules were codified according to specific norms that were sanctioned by convention. It was tantamount to obligatoriness that the composer follow these conventions.<sup>17</sup>

As Mark Evan Bonds and Stephen Walsh (the authors of the article 'Symphony') state in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*:

Because of the symphony's aesthetic prestige, and because of the sheer technical demands of writing one, this genre was almost universally acknowledged as a touchstone of compositional prowess as early as the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was widely felt that a composer could not (or at least should not) step forward with a work in

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> A genre – as Jim Samson writes in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* is "a class, type or category, sanctioned by convention. Since conventional definitions derive (inductively) from concrete particulars, such as musical works or musical practices, and are therefore subject to change, a genre is probably closer to an "ideal type" (in Max Weber's sense) than to a Platonic "ideal form". See: Jim Samson, "Genre", in: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, John Tyrrell (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2002), vol. 9, 657.

this genre until he had shown sufficient mastery of smaller, less demanding forms of composition.<sup>18</sup>

But, simultaneously:

The symphony was seen as a means of achieving fame but not fortune, for in spite of its prestige the genre as a whole remained economically unprofitable for composers and publishers alike. Symphonies were difficult to compose, demanding to perform and expensive to publish. Printed scores, moreover, had little appeal beyond a relatively small market of affluent connoisseurs.<sup>19</sup>

The symphony and its predecessor, the sonata, also had different aims:

Until the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the sonata was essentially a domestic genre, to be performed either for the pleasure of the performer alone or at most for a small circle of friends. The symphony, by contrast, had to fill increasingly larger spaces and appeal to a diverse audience, particularly from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards.<sup>20</sup>

Symphonies should have resounded in big concert halls, and the orchestral idiom typical of the genre should have been achieved as a result of the multi-voiced collaboration of all instrumental parts and their distinctively different voices. The symphony should not be and is not the result merely of a 'simple orchestration' of the sonata form. Beginning with the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 'the number of performance venues for symphonies began to increase exponentially'<sup>21</sup> but the number of written symphonies diminished. The dynamic of the dissemination of symphonies also declined. The canonic repertoire, concentrating on the late symphonies of Haydn and Mozart, resulted in an increase in the number and definition of civic orchestras. New series of concerts were organized in various German cities.

The assessment of the canonic repertoire had also another impact on listeners' preferences: new works were accepted with greater difficulty. This phenomenon accounts for the critical reception of Mahler's music. His attempts from 1898 to 1901, as conductor and artistic director of the Vienna Philharmonic, to introduce new compositions, including his own symphonies, into the repertoire, met with strong resistance both from the orchestra and from its audience. They were accustomed to the traditional repertoire of the 'Three Masters' of classical music: Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven.<sup>22</sup> Canadian musicologist Zoltan Roman directs attention to the fact that 'symphonic music after Beethoven had been increasingly characterized by a contest between the architectonic type and the dynamic forces inherent in

<sup>18</sup> Mark Evan Bons, Stephen Walsh, "Symphony", in: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 18: (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2002), vol. 24, 834.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Kirk Ditzler, "Tradition ist "Schlamperei": Gustav Mahler and the Vienna Court", *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 29 (1998/1), 21.

the material. The growing ascendancy of variational relationship caused the ‘type’ to become less important than the ‘form’ generated by the thematic material<sup>23</sup>.

Mahler was conscious of an ongoing evolution of the idea of symphony, as illustrated by the words of composer Max Marschalk in the spring of 1896:

Now we are [...] at the great crossroads which forever separate [...] the mutually exclusive paths of symphonic and dramatic music. – Just compare a Beethoven symphony with Wagner’s tone structures, and you will perceive the essential differences. – [...] Wagner made the *expressive means* of symphonic music his own, just as now the symphonist [...] will gain ground again in his resources.<sup>24</sup>

In the context of the development of the genre of symphony Mahler is often quoted as saying ‘symphony must be like the world’. This might be an echo of the long-held tradition which understood the symphony as ‘the most cosmic’ of all instrumental genres. It is also the logical achievement of the desires of many composers to overcome the borders of the symphonic genre. Mahler was fully aware of his own exceptional contribution to the genre of symphony, and the very famous quotation above comes from a remark Mahler made to his friend, viola-player Natalia Bauer-Lechner in 1895, while writing the Third Symphony. The full sense of this utterance is revealed in the context of these sentences:

That I call it a symphony is, in the literal sense, unfounded, for it does not keep to the inherited form in any respect. But symphony means to me simply to erect a universe with all resources of the available technique. The ever-new and changing content itself determines its own form.<sup>25</sup>

Paradoxically enough, the public did not welcome Mahler’s propositions. Let us consider why.

### 3. Reinterpreting or removing the borders of the genre?

Four of Mahler’s ten symphonies were written according to the conventional style of a four-movement symphony: the First, the Fourth, the Sixth and the Ninth. But each, in some way, disturbed the genre’s conventions. Three (four, when we

<sup>23</sup> Zoltan Roman, “Song and Symphony (I). Lieder und Gesänge”, vol.1: “Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen and the First Symphony: Compositional Patterns for the Future”, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Mahler*, ed. Jeremy Barham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 82–83.

<sup>24</sup> *Gustav Mahler Briefe*, ed. Herta Blaukopf (Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 1996), 172, after: Roman, “Song and Symphony”, 83.

<sup>25</sup> *Recollections of Gustav Mahler by Natalie Bauer-Lechner*, ed. Peter Franklin, trans. Dika Newlin (London: Faber Music, 1980), 35, after Roman, “Song and Symphony”, 83.

count the unfinished Symphony No. 10) contain five-movements: Symphonies No. 2, No. 5 and No. 7. The Third Symphony is written in six parts, and the Eighth Symphony was composed as a mere two-movement work. Symphonies Nos. 2, 3, 4 and No. 8 are vocal symphonies, the first three drawing texts from the collection of folk songs *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* by Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano. Four symphonies – No. 1, No. 5, No. 6 and No. 7 – are instrumental works.

The First Symphony (1888), though in four movements, did not receive public or critical acceptance until many years after its 1889 premiere. Mahler scholar Zoltan Roman stressed that the many analyses of the first movement of this symphony proved only that it is an exceptionally problematic piece of music: 'Not only are the traditional boundaries of 'exposition', 'development' and 'recapitulation' blurred here, but also the architectonic conventions of academic sonata form are subjected to far-reaching reinterpretation and modification'.<sup>26</sup> Although in 1896 Mahler dubbed the symphony *Titan*, which should have explained its content and complexity, the public still failed to understand the composer's intent.<sup>27</sup> Even in 1898, after the Dresden performance, one critic called the First 'the dullest [symphonic] work the new epoch has produced'.<sup>28</sup>

The Second Symphony (1894), according to Mahler himself, grew 'directly out of the First',<sup>29</sup> and that is the reason for 'emphasizing an evolutionary, rather than self-contained, narrative structure',<sup>30</sup> a structure 'for which traditional formal demarcations were of limited relevance'.<sup>31</sup> Austrian musicologist Peter Revers reminds us that 'from his First Symphony onwards, Mahler developed a unique musical logic, based on evolving development and a parataxis of concise motivic-thematic building blocks, that largely replaced the dialectical principle of sonata form'.<sup>32</sup> Mahler himself told Natalie Bauer-Lechner that composing was like 'playing with bricks, continually making new buildings from the same old stones'.<sup>33</sup> Mahler drew rules for composing symphonies, in part, from the musical experiences of his childhood and juvenile years.

In the Second Symphony (1894) the listeners' attention is caught by the first movement, *Allegro maestoso*, which, while similar to classical sonata form, in fact

<sup>26</sup> Roman, "Song and Symphony", 85.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>28</sup> Henry-Louis de La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*, vol. 2: *Vienna: The Years of Challenge (1897–1904)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 140.

<sup>29</sup> *Selected Letters of Gustav Mahler*, ed. Knud Martner, trans. Eithne Wilkins, Ernst Kaiser, Bill Hopkins (London: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1979), 180, after: Peter Revers, "Song and Song-Symphony (I). Des Knaben Wunderhorn and the Second, Third and Fourth Symphonies: Music of Heaven and Earth", in: *The Cambridge Companion to Mahler*, 93.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>33</sup> *Recollections of Gustav Mahler by Natalie Bauer-Lechner*, 131, after: Revers, "Song and Song-Symphony", 93.

is an example of changeable moods, a formal structure that is difficult to categorize. Even according to Mahler himself this movement was so abundant in meaning and in expressive weight that the composer demanded, marked in the score, a pause of five minutes before the beginning of the second movement. Even today, this score marking is rarely obeyed.

Symphony No. 3 (1896) was written in six movements, with titles explaining the programme content of the music. In this composition Mahler united two opposite poles of poetry and of expression, making use of both the 'Midnight song' from *Also sprach Zarathustra* ('O Mensch! Gib acht!' – fourth movement) by Friedrich Nietzsche and of the joyful *Es sungen drei Engel* from the collection *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (fifth movement) by Arnim and Brentano. The third movement is frequently associated with the 'grotesque', the category deriving principally from 'the movement's crucial aporia between the inarticulate, instinctual realm of aporia animals (set in the familiar sound-world of a children's song) and the posthorn dream world. Both seem familiar but scarcely compatible. They contain characteristic images which allude to the real world (children's song, military signal, posthorn), but do not constitute a logical dramaturgical structure',<sup>34</sup> according to Revers.

The final movement of the Third Symphony – *Adagio* is also astonishing, full of noble beauty and impassioned feelings. In this movement, the entire composition finds its climax. The symphony was a success in Krefeld's performance in 1902, but its presentation in Vienna was critically scorned, one critic writing: 'Anyone who has committed such a deed deserves a couple of years in prison'.<sup>35</sup>

Mahler's Fourth Symphony was performed more often during composer's life than his other symphonies, probably because of its 'classical' character and the values connected with the 'classical' type: four movements; performance time (about an hour); scoring (for a fairly small orchestra, modest when compared with Mahler's other works); its cheerful and light character; tonality (G Major) engendering equable, classical charm. The symphony, however, is oriented toward its final movement, a child's vision of heaven created in the song from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. This final song for a solo soprano was written in 1892, and in a certain sense breaks down the entire musical narration: the symphony is an example of a 'broken' form structure. Mahler commented to Bauer-Lechner that 'he only wanted to write a symphonic Humoresque',<sup>36</sup> but – according to Revers – 'The 'Humoresque' genre was important more as the starting point for a specific compositional procedure'.<sup>37</sup>

Mahler's ideas were influenced by the 'concept of humour' by Jean Paul and Schumann, for whom 'humour constituted an expressive category inextricable from

<sup>34</sup> Revers, "Song and Song-Symphony", 99–100.

<sup>35</sup> Henry-Louis de La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*, vol. 3: *Vienna: Triumph and Disillusion (1904–1907)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 68–69.

<sup>36</sup> *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, 131, after: Revers, "Song and Song-Symphony", 103.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.



the compositional process'.<sup>38</sup> Within the musical humour's stylistic means are: quotations, reminiscences, allusions, stubborn repetitions of empty figures, rhythmic-metric disorder, structural ambiguities, deformation of phrases and periodic structures.<sup>39</sup> Revers suggests that, in his Fourth, Mahler 'anticipates a chamber-music conception of symphonic texture (particularly in the second movement)',<sup>40</sup> recalls 'Mozartian instrumentation and combines heterogeneous elements to some extent announcing neo-classical tendencies'.<sup>41</sup> The solo violinist, according to Mahler's instruction: 'has to have two instruments at their disposal, one of which is to be tuned a tone higher, the other at normal pitch'<sup>42</sup> (*wie eine Fidel = like a fiddle* indication). The use of *scordatura* tuning suggested a folk-inspired idiom, but also conveys 'symbolic meanings', especially 'as an evocation of the authentic street culture of the fiddle',<sup>43</sup> suggests Revers. Finally, the radical contrast between the third and the final movements of the Fourth Symphony, perceived as a contrast between two sound-worlds (serious art symphony contrasting with the world of a child and with heavenly life – '*Das himmlische Leben*') is a conscious rupture with the *per aspera ad astra* aesthetic, typical for finale-orientated symphonies' constructions which usually form a unique culmination.<sup>44</sup>

Symphony No. 5 (1902), in spite of its five-movement structure, is regarded as the most conventional of Mahler's symphonies, especially when we take into account the composer's direction to treat the whole of the music as three parts: the first two movements as Part I, the long scherzo as Part II and the last two movements as Part III. The musical material of the four movements comes in the fifth movement. The final movement is scored as rondo – typical in symphonic form of the classical era. But even this symphony does not lack specific features: the opening movement is written as a funeral march and the fourth movement includes the famous *Adagietto* for strings and harp. And this light-hearted *Adagietto* to some extent disrupts the vivid but rather dark narration of the symphony. According to Stephen E. Hefling, this symphony reinterprets the archetypal Beethovenian finale-orientated model of symphony, and even the initial ascent from C sharp minor to scherzo in D major is 'unquestionably a structural and symbolic progression towards brightness'.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>39</sup> Bernhard R. Appel, "Humoreske", in: *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Sachteil, ed. Ludwig Finscher, vol. 4 (Kassel: Bärenreiter Verlag 1996), 455, after: Revers, "Song and Song-Symphony", 103.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 105–106.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen E. Hefling, "Song and Symphony (II). From Wunderhorn to Rückert and the Middle-period Symphonies: Vocal and Instrumental Works for a New Century", in: *The Cambridge Companion to Mahler*, 116.

The Symphony No. 6 “Tragic” (1904) can also be classified as a conventional representation of the symphonic genre. It was written as a conscious reference to tradition because its first three movements are relatively traditional in structure and in character (sonata allegro form, andante moderato, scherzo with trios). The order of the middle movements is still under discussion by musicologists; they wonder whether the *Andante* should follow *Scherzo* or precede it. Stephen E. Hefling writes:

The Sixth’s movement order – *Scherzo* before *Andante* or vice versa – is a complex issue. [...] Mahler’s autograph score reveals he originally intended the scherzo to precede the slow movement. But immediately following the public dress rehearsal (Essen, 27 May 1906), terrified by what he had unleashed, Mahler suffered a severe panic attack. He then reversed the inner movements for the première, thereby mitigating the stark contrast between the *Andante* and *Finale*. And he deleted the *Finale*’s third symbolic hammer blow.<sup>46</sup>

The last movement of this symphony is also often discussed as having more than one meaning because of its extended sonata form with drastic changes of mood and tempo.

Though Mahler was convinced that the presentation of the Sixth should have resulted in success, its reception was dominated by sarcastic commentaries about the composer’s use of unconventional percussion effects and about the large number of brass instruments (8 horns in F, 6 trumpets in B-flat, C, and F, 4 trombones, tuba). Heinrich Reinhardt – one of Vienna’s critics – dismissed the symphony as: ‘Brass, lots of brass, incredibly much brass! Even more brass, nothing but brass!’<sup>47</sup>

The Seventh Symphony (1905) – writes American musicologist Stephen Hefling, ‘defies all expectations; therein lies the measure of its success’.<sup>48</sup> Hefling adds that the Seventh no longer is ‘the Cinderella among Mahler’s symphonies’,<sup>49</sup> it remains ‘his most perplexing work’.<sup>50</sup> It is abundant in disjunctions and paradoxes, starting ‘from the grouping of movements to the details of each. The seeming lack of overall relation or progression among the five movements (*Langsam. Allegro risoluto ma non troppo* – *Nachtmusik I* – *Scherzo* – *Nachtmusik II* – *Rondo-Finale*), and its uproariously ‘cheerful’ conclusion are a world apart from the Sixth’s tight construction and black conclusion’<sup>51</sup>.

The Eighth Symphony (1906), the *Symphony of a Thousand*, written in two movements, was the one unalloyed performance triumph within Mahler’s lifetime. ‘The Munich première on 12 September [1910] which had been fought for against countless organizational problems turned out to be a supreme triumph for Mahler

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>47</sup> La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*, vol. 3, 536.

<sup>48</sup> Hefling, “Song and Symphony”, 124.

<sup>49</sup> Deryck Cooke, *Gustav Mahler. An Introduction to His Music* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 88.

<sup>50</sup> Hefling, “Song and Symphony”, 124.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 124.

as conductor and as composer'.<sup>52</sup> This one among the large-scale choral works in the classical concert repertoire completely fulfilled the listeners' and critics' expectations. Its unequivocal expressive message united in one symphony two completely opposite texts: Latin text of a 9<sup>th</sup>-century Christian hymn for Pentecost, *Veni creator spiritus* ('Come, Creator Spirit'), and fragments of the closing scene of *Faust* by Goethe. In a single piece of music Mahler confronted the Christian vision of the world with the concept of existence inspired by pantheism. The texts were written in different languages, and came from different historical epochs more than a thousand years apart. They influenced the structure of the composition, replacing the traditional four-movement symphony with two strongly contrasting parts. *The Eighth* is the only example of Mahler's music in which 'well-known signs from every-day life', such as birdsongs, military marches and Austrian folksongs, are almost completely absent.

In 1906, while composing the Eighth Symphony, Mahler wrote: 'Just imagine the universe beginning to ring and resound. There are no longer human voices, but planets and suns circling above'.<sup>53</sup> Beginning in October 1909, Mahler called the Eighth Symphony 'his most important work'.<sup>54</sup> In the summer of 1910 he spoke of it as his 'greatest achievement'.<sup>55</sup>

The Ninth Symphony (1910), the last he completed, was written in a traditional four-movement formal structure. Its unusual feature is that the first and last movements are slow rather than fast (*Andante comodo* and *Adagio*), and the second and third movements are written in fast tempo. One of the middle movements is a scherzo in *Ländler* character; the other is a *Rondo-Burleske*.

The Tenth Symphony (begun in July 1910) was planned as a five-movement piece (with initial *Adagio* and two scherzos). 'Only the first and second movements, and thirty bars of the third movement exist in orchestral draft. In total, including preliminary short score and sketch pages, 174 pages are known to exist, of which all but two have been published'.<sup>56</sup> As Jörg Rothkamm writes, 'the Ninth, together with *Das Lied von der Erde* and the sketches for the Tenth, could be seen as a 'farewell' trilogy, particularly since all three works mark a clear break with the preceding Eighth Symphony and embody Mahler's late style'.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Christian Wildhagen, "The "Greatest" and the "Most Personal": the Eighth Symphony and *Das Lied von der Erde*", in: *The Cambridge Companion to Mahler*, 130; Christian Wildhagen, *Die Achte Symphonie von Gustav Mahler. Konzeption einer universalen Symphonik* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000), 108–148.

<sup>53</sup> *Selected Letters of Gustav Mahler*, 294, after: Wildhagen, *Die Achte Symphonie*, 128.

<sup>54</sup> Mahler said that in October 1909, two months after finishing his Ninth Symphony – see: *Ein Glück ohne Ruh! Die Briefe Gustav Mahlers an Alma*, ed. Henry-Louis de La Grange, Günther Weiss (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1995), 348. After: Wildhagen, *Die Achte Symphonie*, 128.

<sup>55</sup> Mahler said these words in the Summer 1910. See: *Ein Glück ohne Ruh!*, 424, after: Wildhagen, *Die Achte Symphonie*, 128.

<sup>56</sup> Jörg Rothkamm, "The Last Works", in: *The Cambridge Companion to Mahler*, 150.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

Mahler's innovatory treatment of the symphonic genre was not limited by historical prescriptions, as has been briefly outlined in this paper. Let us now list some general features typical of Mahler's symphonies. One may easily note the flow of one movement in slow tempo moving away from the main symphonic discourse (the famous Mahlerian *Adagios*). The slow movements often function as:

- a) the opening to the entire symphony (as introductions to the first movements): Symphony Nos. 1, 2 and No. 7;
- b) a distinct first movement of a symphony: Symphony No. 5 (funeral march) and Symphony No. 9 (*Andante comodo*);
- c) distinctive final movements, planned on a large scale: Symphony No. 3 (*Adagio*) and No. 9 (*Adagio*) and also *Das Lied von der Erde* (1907–1908).

The change of mood and tempi within the particular movements of some symphonies is astonishing. Mahler uses, and at the same time overcomes, the components of the 'traditional' symphony.

Famous Mahler scholar Vera Micznik proposes the next interpretation procedure which we will explore. When analyzing the second movement of the Ninth Symphony, and after asking some questions about the roots of the three genres used therein: *Ländler*, waltz and minuet, Micznik suggests that Mahler treated the genres' designations fluidly. Micznik writes: 'The multiple modifications of the tempo/genre associations of the same thematic materials throughout the stages of composition seem to suggest that Mahler had a very flexible conception of genre, or, at least, that his musical ideas did not always coincide with one stable generic label'.<sup>58</sup>

What is even more meaningful, Mahler always seemed to use 'genre designations as a means of indicating tempo, and not the generic affiliations of the materials (e.g., *Im Tempo eines gemächlichen Ländlers, Im Tempo eines deutschen Walzers*, etc.)'.<sup>59</sup> Micznik adds, 'That is, he does not consistently attach thematic materials to a particular generic affiliation: in his revisions, he may change the tempo/genre associations of various sections, but without modifying the actual musical content'.<sup>60</sup> For the composer, it was not the genre but the procedures which were made possible by using the genre that were important. Mahler seemed to prefer generating ambiguity about the genre to stabilizing the formal structure by employing the conventional rules.

Furthermore, Micznik is persuasive when she argues that Mahler reveals clearly his attitude to the notion of genre in his Ninth Symphony. She writes, 'In none of the previous symphonies has he used four different genre allusions within the same movement, both bluntly juxtaposed and fused, and in few earlier symphonies has he been so naturalistic in his insistence on the rough, coarse, distorted qualities

<sup>58</sup> Vera Micznik, "Mahler and "The Power of Genre", *The Journal of Musicology* 12 (1994/2), 129.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

of his allusions'.<sup>61</sup> In his earlier symphonies Mahler tended to use one or at most two generic implications within one movement, so his musical attitude was more 'correct' and closer to the tradition of genres.

Another procedure which overturns the generic conventions is his scoring of symphonies for huge orchestras, often exceeding the size of the post-romantic orchestras and introducing atypical instruments into their framework, in order to achieve new, original sounds.

Finally, in his symphonic music Mahler tries to juxtapose the two idioms representing 'low' art and 'high' art. He introduces within the context of professional 'high music' idioms representative of widely varying and traditionally separate social groups: peasant, urban, bourgeois salon, the academe. What is more, Mahler exaggerated the connotations inherent in 'street music' through specific orchestration of the themes (for example by using trombones, bass clarinet, bass tuba or double bass). In consequence, some fragments of his symphonic music are of a grotesque character. This mixture of idioms within the context of the 'high art' style represented by symphonies can be seen as an example of Mahler's exploration of the genre 'in diametrically opposed ways'.<sup>62</sup> Micznik adds: 'It is precisely the constant negation and affirmation of genre associations, manifested as the coexistence of discontinuous juxtapositions with continuous discourse, that give this movement its novelty'.<sup>63</sup>

#### 4. Final remarks

Mahler scholars traditionally discuss his tendency to refer to codified genres, such as marches, *Ländlers* and waltzes. They interpret these procedures as autobiographical features of his music, treating Mahler's incorporation of music from his childhood as an existential episode. This identification by 'schemas' seems insufficient, providing only superficial interpretation. It becomes more markedly true when we take into account that the newest musicological tendencies give the key role to the 'genre' perceived as a generator of the meaning in musical pieces. In theoretical treatises scholars pay attention to the fact that the concept of 'genre' assumes general 'common knowledge' shared by the composer and his public. Such 'common knowledge' includes not only the clearly musical recognition of the characteristics of a genre, but also assumes knowledge of the wider spectrum of attributes encoded in musical representation, which are not musical in their origin (i.e. function, occasion, social class).

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 149,

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 146.

A Franco-Bulgarian philosopher, literary critic and theorist of culture Tzvetan Todorov wrote in 1976, commenting on French literary texts: 'genres exist as an institution, in that they function as 'horizons of expectations' for readers and as 'models for writing' for authors'.<sup>64</sup> The 'institutionalized genre', especially in postmodern times, as has been noted by Vera Micznik, is no longer 'a theoretical construct inherently fixed in the work, nor a rigid scheme which conforms with given hypotheses, but a flexible feature of interpretation developed through the continuous corrections of an ideal 'schema' in the process of understanding. Whether genre is indicated in the score, through a title, or is not known, listeners constantly compare and challenge their generic expectations with their own readings'.<sup>65</sup>

Through the perspective of Jauss's 'theory of the horizon of expectations', today we perceive Mahler's message as a kind of modern manifesto with ideological and aesthetical aspects. Mahler's gestures as incorporated in his symphonic works meant a break with the conventional understanding of what is generic, as well as the understanding of what is 'beauty'. It meant an affirmation of new aesthetical and formal ideals, according to which not only subtle melodies and conventional forms, but also 'ugly', 'rough' and 'vulgar' idioms should be accepted within the canon of a genre. Mahler's music is rooted in the past, but it shakes the established, time-honoured values, creating a 'new aesthetic beauty of modernism'. That beauty came to be fully appreciated only with the arrival of the postmodern era.

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<sup>64</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); second essay: "The Origins of Genres" (16–19), first printed in *New Literary History* 8 (1976), 159–170.

<sup>65</sup> Micznik, "Mahler and "The Power of Genre", 124.

