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Tempo in Mahler as Recollected by Natalie Bauer-Lechner

Nancy M. Raabe

Mahler was highly critical of the approach of other conductors in respect to liberties with tempo. "You wouldn't believe how low the musical and artistic standards of these conductors are," he complained to his longtime friend and confidante Natalie Bauer-Lechner.¹

Mostly, they are merely concerned with hammering the beat into the players . . . That is why they make such dreadful mistakes with the tempi, because they haven't a glimmering of the lively and varied content of the music.²

Bauer-Lechner relates how one evening in 1898 Mahler demonstrated

. . . how the tempi are distorted in all manner of works — operas, symphonies, and oratorios. He gave us the most striking examples — from Mozart and Wagner, and from *Fidelio* — of how the composer is everywhere forced into the Procrustean bed of insipid interpretation. Through this . . . his work is distorted all out of recognition. "The worst of it," said Mahler, "is that this sort of

* The extracting of details concerning performance from biographies and oral histories represents an important avenue of research that invites further endeavor. Ed.

1. Quoted in Natalie Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, trans. Dika Newlin and edited by Peter Franklin, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 91.

2. Bauer-Lechner, 112-13.

rendering, because it is superficial, becomes a tradition. And then, if someone comes along and fans the nearly-extinguished spark in the work to a living flame again, he is shouted down as a heretic and an innovator.³

As an object of the last, Mahler spoke from first-hand experience. In refusing to indulge in performance conventions he considered "slovenly," his renditions of familiar masterworks continually raised eyebrows among critics and audiences alike. And Bauer-Lechner tells how, in a concert with the Vienna Philharmonic, Mahler performed Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony "as it has perhaps never been played before. His slow tempo in the second movement caused general astonishment . . ."⁴

We should therefore not be surprised to find this consuming concern for tempo incorporated into Mahler's own compositions. A glance at any of his scores, generously endowed with tempo indications and directions for making the transition from one tempo to another, suggests just how important to him the matter was. A similar fastidiousness pervaded his approach to the notation of all musical elements. But whereas he was able to indicate his intentions regarding pitch, rhythm, dynamics, phrasing, and articulation with near-precision, tempo, he rightly observed, was more elusive.

All the most important things — the tempo, the total conception and structuring of a work — are almost impossible to pin down. For here we are concerned with something living and flowing that can never be the same even twice in succession. That is why metronome markings are inadequate and almost worthless; for unless the work is vulgarly ground out in barrel-organ style, the tempo will already have changed by the end of the second bar. *Therefore, the right interrelationships of all the sections of the piece are much more important than the initial tempo.* Whether the overall tempo is a degree faster or slower often depends on the mood of the conductor; it may well vary slightly without detriment to the work.⁵ What matters is that

3. Bauer-Lechner, 111-12.

4. Bauer-Lechner, 143.

5. Bauer-Lechner, 46. She also provides a telling illustration of the flexibility of overall tempo that Mahler allowed himself in a separate account. "When timing the movements of his Third Symphony in the summer [after its composition]," she recalled, "Mahler discovered to his amazement that he took one movement ('Die Nacht,' I believe) a few minutes slower on one occasion than on another — he, the composer!" (*Ibid.*) We might, however, wonder whether "a few minutes" is an exaggeration on her part. The average performance of this movement lasts only about 9 1/2 minutes; could Mahler's tempo have varied by as much as 33% on different occasions?

the whole should be alive, and, within the bounds of this freedom, be built up with irrevocable inevitability. [Italics added]

At the same time, he knew well the tendency toward elaboration and exaggeration common among many performers. "What a long time it takes," he remarked to Bauer-Lechner, "what an accumulation of experience and maturity is necessary, before one can perform things quite simply, just as they stand, without adding anything or wanting to read anything in that is not there!"⁶

Expecting the worst, he developed certain devious tricks: desiring a slight slowing of the tempo he would write *Nicht eilen* (do not hurry), or for a subtle speeding up *Nicht schleppen* (do not drag). Nonetheless, he was continually frustrated. "One would almost be tempted to write in no tempi and no expression marks," he said in exasperation, "and leave it to the performer to understand and articulate the music in his own way."⁷

In spite of all these precautions, misguided performance conventions infested Mahler's own works before his very eyes. Of a private performance for Mahler of the piano eight-hand version of the Second Symphony Bauer-Lechner reported,

Although all the performers were highly capable — they are all enthusiastic about the work, and heard it last year under Mahler himself — the performance was painful to him . . . *the tempi were wrong*, and the expression and phrasing were so often incorrect *that everything dissolved into chaos*. "And that [said Mahler] was directed and rehearsed by someone who will imagine and claim that he inherits the 'tradition' straight from me! From this, you may learn the truth about every so-called 'tradition': there is no such thing! Everything is left to the whim of the individual . . ."⁸ [Italics added]

Mahler dryly echoed the same sentiments in response to Ludwig Thuille's account of a performance of the Second in Munich: "Yes, our friends the conductors have an unfortunate habit of 'getting things wrong.'"⁹

6. Bauer-Lechner, 111-12.

7. Bauer-Lechner, 175. Evidently temptation rarely got the better of him, for he generally added many more tempo indications than he deleted in preparing a work for publication. Consider the Eighth Symphony's first movement: of the 45 tempo indications in the first edition, 25 — well over half — do not appear in his autograph manuscript, while only three that *are* in the manuscript were withheld from publication.

8. Bauer-Lechner, 141.

9. Knud Martner, ed. *Gustav Mahler: Selected Letters*, 1979, p. 247.