

# My New Music

## Dream Song for Orchestra

Edward Gregson, who celebrates his 65th birthday later this year, writes on his new orchestral work to be premiered by the BBC Philharmonic under Gianandrea Noseda at Bridgewater Hall, Manchester on March 27.

### Grappling with Mahler

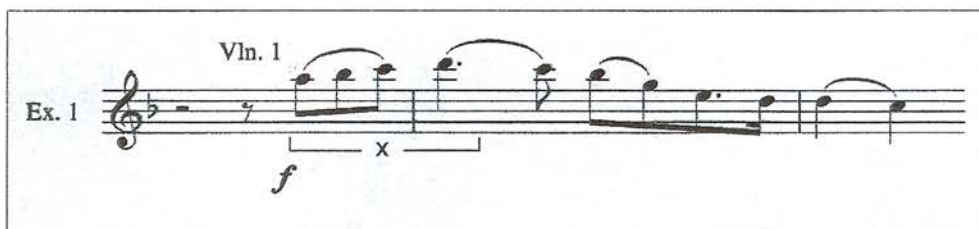
When I was asked by the BBC if I would be interested in writing a new 20 minute work to preface a performance of Mahler's Sixth Symphony at the 'Mahler in Manchester Festival', which runs from January to June of this year, I must admit that I had to think at least twice before I said 'yes'. Taking Mahler on is no easy task!

I came to Mahler's music rather late (I was a first year undergraduate student in London at the time), but when I did I found it completely overwhelming. In time, and with maturity, my opinions about his music have changed somewhat. I now appreciate the later symphonies more than I did then and, conversely, find some of the 'longueurs' of the early symphonies a little frustrating. Nevertheless, I know of no more uplifting moments in music than the final two movements of Mahler 2, which I heard only again the other evening in the Manchester Festival. You could say that the final pages are a little 'over the top', or you could, as I do, give in their overwhelming affirmation of the triumph of the human spirit.

In any case, I still find Mahler's musical world to be a powerful and emotionally compelling one. Indeed, in his finest symphonies – and the Sixth is certainly one of these – he manages to embrace memorable melodic ideas, impressive contrapuntal control, adventurous harmony and vividly original orchestration, within a tightly organised structure, to produce what are undoubtedly some of the greatest and most popular symphonies of the twentieth century – no mean feat for works that last anything from just under an hour to close on two! The fact is that he speaks with a universal voice which still has as much impact in today's world as it must have had in his own.

The commission brief for all the composers involved in this project was to write a work which reflected their relationship in some way with the particular symphony

with which they were being paired. My own approach in tackling the Sixth has been to 'invade' Mahler's world of musical ideas; indeed, the title of my work, *Dream Song*, is intended to portray a half-remembered landscape of themes and motives, fragmented (or deconstructed) as if in a dream, with the all-pervading presence of the opening phrase (more often than not, only the first four notes – see 'x' in the following music example) of the so-called 'Alma' theme from the first movement, which I use as a kind of leitmotif, giving the work a thematic coherence of sorts.



Of course, in a mere 20 minutes it is impossible to re-create the large-scale contrasting emotional turmoil of a work like the Sixth Symphony, but I have tried to create a parallel musical world, albeit in contracted form, encompassing it within an arch-shaped one movement structure – slow, fast, slow – beginning loudly and ending quietly, with the Scherzo and Trio mirroring that of Mahler's, but perhaps being even more menacing than his.

The Sixth Symphony is Mahler's most 'classical' symphony, both in form and content, beautifully proportioned (which is certainly not true of a number of the other symphonies) in its four movement lay-out, and with the first movement providing a strong symphonic argument through conventional thematic contrast. In another link with the past, he even repeats the exposition. The second and third movements, like most of the inner movements of his symphonies, provide (depending on the chosen performing order, about which there is much debate) essential musical

contrast by means of a 3/8 Scherzo and Trio, and a 'song' movement of poetic beauty. However, the Scherzo is hardly a tension-releasing movement; indeed, Hans Redlich refers to it as a 'sinister Hofmanesque puppet-show' and that it 'owes something to the tactics of the *Mephisto* movement in Liszt's *Faust* symphony'. No light relief here then!

However, it is the extended final movement which provides the real climactic drama (as in his own Second Symphony or Beethoven's 9th, but without the vocal elements). As Michael Kennedy has commented, 'all that has gone before is but the preface to this clinching essay in tragedy'. Here Mahler's imagination really takes flight and follows, as Alma recounts in her memoirs, the fate-ridden path of his imaginary hero (himself?) through extraordinary

creative originality. The 'fate' element is dramatically emphasised (both visually and aurally) with three hammer blows to which his hero eventually succumbs. Here it must be said that not all conductors insert the third hammer blow, perhaps as much through superstition as musical judgement? No wonder then that the original title given by Mahler to the symphony was the 'Tragic' and that this was his most personal utterance in symphonic form.

The opening of this final movement is the starting point for my work, both in its harmonic uncertainty and vivid orchestration. The Sixth is in the key of A minor – indeed in two of the four movements he uses devices such as repeated pedal As to underpin this – with the slow movement in the contrasted key of E flat major (a tritone away from the home key). Furthermore, unlike many of his mature symphonies where he uses the so-called device of progressive tonality, his Sixth begins and ends in A minor. *Dream Song* begins and ends on the dominant of that key, E major,

thus preparing the ear for the onslaught of the pounding bass A's that will start the Mahler in the second half of the concert. In a parallel gesture to Mahler's tonal scheme my middle section Scherzo and Trio begins with pounding B flats (a tritone away from E major).

In terms of tonality some sections of my work are stable - eg the Trio section of the Scherzo, the two 'dream-like' sections, and the *Liebeslied* near the end, whilst others are unstable. The opening gesture, although 'on' E, is a ten-note chord consisting of alternating major and minor triads, whilst the ending is bitter-sweet, with an underlying E major harmony 'distorted' by the final utterances of the four-note 'Alma' theme on muted violins, rising to a high B flat with which the work ends ambiguously but not, I hope, pessimistically.

The device, or building block, of using triadic harmony in my work (not a usual one for me) derives of course from the Mahler. One of the ideas I refer to frequently is his 'fate motif' - a major triad 'resolving' on to a minor one. Somewhat significantly, I have 'transposed' this into a more optimistic minor to major 'resolution'.

I have also used other fragmented quotations from the symphony; for example, the upwardly soaring violin passage and the theme which grows out of it (solo tuba) from the opening of the final movement, as well as two short motives from the Scherzo: the rising arpeggio figure associated with the woodwind, and the falling minor thirds dance-like motive. These are not used as acts of 'homage' but rather as reference points. Similarly, when Mahler marks his Trio with the description *alväterisch* (*in an olden style*), I employ the same gesture in that my music is similarly 'pastoral' in style; but instead of the distant cowbells Mahler uses in other parts of the symphony to summon up his idyllic memories of walking in the Austrian Alps I



Edward Gregson

employ more urban-referenced steel pans, as if to underline the notion that art can sometimes mirror life.

However, the emotional core of *Dream Song* is to be found in its final section, a *Liebeslied*, or Love Song - a resolution of sorts of the earlier tensions in the work. Now the music truly invades the late-Romantic musical world of Mahler, both melodically and harmonically, with the 'song' turning out to be my own version of the Alma theme (musical analyst's answers on a postcard please!) and the melody for which the work has been searching throughout its rather brief journey.

Alma recounts in her memoirs the day that Mahler came down from his composing hut after drafting the first movement of the Sixth, telling her that he had tried to express her in a theme. 'Whether I've succeeded, I don't know; but you'll have to put up with it.' Although this is a typically abrupt remark by Mahler (if indeed we can rely on Alma's memory), and perhaps masks his underlying emotions, the symphony does in essence sum up the

struggle between life and death, love and anguish, as well as the many other contradictions which were so evident in his personality. Alma's comment that the Sixth was Mahler's most 'personal' work is probably true, and she certainly lies at the heart of it.

Grappling with Mahler has been a challenging experience, but a most rewarding one.

One of the additional bonuses for me in undertaking this commission has been to have the opportunity once again to write for the BBC Philharmonic, an orchestra whose players I so admire, and for a conductor, Gianandrea Noseda, who is not only a great Mahlerian, but also someone who cares passionately about today's music. I am looking forward to working with them on *Dream Song*. Indeed, the manner in which they, the Hallé and Manchester Camerata, are

working together in the current Mahler symphonic cycle demonstrates once again that Manchester is a city where some of the most innovative and challenging musical events happen. I am proud to be part of this exciting journey!

**The recently-issued Chandos CD of three Concertos by Edward Gregson will be reviewed in the next issue**

Three days before *Dream Song* receives its first performance, Edward Gregson has a new work for recorder and piano for the young British recorder player Christopher Orton. Entitled *Aztec Dances* it will be premiered at the Manchester Midday Concerts. Chandos is also recording Vol 3 of Gregson's concertos in March with the BBCCO under Bramwell Tovey. The disc will include the Cello Concerto, played by Guy Johnson, and his Trombone Concerto with Ian Bousfield as the soloist.