

Gustav Mahler

Das Lied von der Erde (The Song of the Earth)

59
min

Born: Kalischt, Austria, Jul 7, 1860
Died: Vienna, Austria, May 18, 1911
Composed: 1907–1908

For Mahler, 1907 proved to be a year of fateful developments. First, he resigned from his position as Music Director of the Vienna Court Opera. He had finally had his fill of the disputes, major and minor, that he had been waging with the company's managers and performers (as well as the ultra-conservative press) virtually since he had taken up the job 10 years earlier. Second, Maria, the elder of his two daughters, died of scarlet fever and diphtheria at the age of four-and-a-half. Third, doctors diagnosed a serious and progressive heart condition. They advised that it would not only necessitate a severe limitation of his typically strenuous physical activities, but would also result in a drastic shortening of his life expectancy.

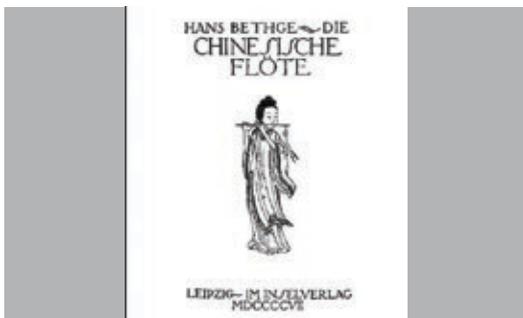
The resulting life of compromise—the thing his lofty artistic standards made him despise above all—added yet another layer of despair to his agonized state of mind. By fortunate coincidence, a friend had recently given him *The Chinese Flute*, Hans Bethge's German paraphrases of Chinese poems that date back

to the eighth century. In their melancholy wisdom, Mahler found the ideal embodiment of his emotions. With additions and revisions of his own, six of them became the text for *The Song of the Earth*. He confided to his friend, conductor Bruno Walter, that it was "the most personal thing he had ever written."

The work is a burning, uplifting ode to life. "The Drinking Song of Earth's Sorrow" draws the listener instantly in, offering a vibrant toast to life through a balance of stirring declamation and nostalgia. "The Solitary One in Autumn" is quiet, chilly, and mournful. Three briefer, lighter pieces follow. "Of Youth" presents a warm, cheerful surface, reflecting past innocence. The mature, cynical Mahler recognizes this as wishful thinking. "Of Beauty", too, remains frustratingly transitory, as the following song indicates so wistfully. Seeking escape in drink and self-deception is the subject of the superficially jovial fifth song, "The Drunkard in Spring".

The expansive final song, "The Farewell", is Mahler's supreme achievement in vocal music. The two lengthy stanzas, telling of two friends who meet for the last time, are separated by a funeral march for orchestra alone. After a final, rapturous ode to the earth and to life, the music rises disembodied above human cares, dissolving into silence to the other-worldly rippling of the celesta and the mezzo's fading, repeated, "forever..."

Program note by Don Anderson



Title page of Hans Bethge's *Die Chinesische Flöte*, with design by E.R. Weiss, 1907.