

Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 5: An Interview with Karl Pituch

By Richard Chenoweth

The Symphony No. 5 was written between 1901 and 1903 by Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) mostly during his summers at his villa in Maiernigg, a lakeside village in Austria. While resting from his demanding conducting schedule, Mahler sought refuge in a special "composing hut" that he had built on the property, where, from 1901-1907, he composed his 5th through 8th symphonies. Written for a large orchestra, including 6 horn parts plus a special obbligato solo horn part in the third movement, the work received its premiere in Cologne (Köln) on October 18, 1904.

Considered to be the first work in a second major style period, the Symphony No. 5 departs from Mahler's earlier works in several ways. His earlier symphonies reflected his roots as an opera conductor, in that they relied heavily on song, either through the use of both vocal soloists and chorus, or through the quotation of motives from his own previously-composed vocal settings of poetry. The Symphony No. 5 instead is written as a piece of absolute music, with no specific sub-text other than the comments made about the symphony by Mahler and others. It also uses a non-typical form, in that it is divided into five movements: movements I and II are linked thematically, movement III stands alone and movements IV and V are also linked. Movement IV may perhaps be the best known to the general public, as this movement, the *Adagietto*, is sometimes performed alone. It was also popularized as part of the movie sound-track of the 1971 film *Death in Venice* by director Luchino Visconti, and has been characterized by some as a love song to Mahler's new bride, Alma, whom he had met and married the previous year.

The symphony underwent several revisions by Mahler, and the third revision is the one that is now most commonly performed.

The 5th Symphony is at the top of the list for most horn-players as a "must-play", due to its extensive solo and section *sol*i horn passages, its drama and intensity and its size and scope. Mahler was a master of orchestration, and, apart from the sinister funeral march that opens the symphony played by a solo trumpet, devotes most of the remainder of the solo brass writing in this symphony to the horn.

Hornist **Karl Pituch**, Principal Horn of the Detroit Symphony, shares his thought about performing this symphony with readers of *The Horn Call*.

RC: You mentioned that you have performed this piece many times, with different orchestras. Can you comment on those performances? What do you remember about them? What set them apart? Did anything unusual happen during the performances that might make one stand out?

KP: I have been fortunate to have played this with five different orchestras. One of those occasions was when I had the opportunity to play this piece on the one hundred year

anniversary of its premiere, when I was playing principal horn with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra on their European tour in 2004. We played it in Cologne, which is where it was first performed. Later, on the same tour in Frankfurt, right before the big horn call the third movement, there was a medical emergency in the audience. It was going very well, so I was hoping that we would not have to stop and start the movement over again. It was very good practice for keeping your concentration! Fortunately it was not serious enough that we needed to stop.

I was also asked to play this with the Colorado Festival Orchestra, when their founding Music Director, Giora Bernstein, conducted his last concert with the orchestra. He requested that I play the third movement obbligato part sitting in front of the orchestra, by the bass section, then move to the back of the hall for the solo horn calls in that movement. The first night, everything went really well. So I came to the next day's concert feeling very confident. But on this night, when I walked to the back of the hall, I realized that I had not placed the music on the stand! I had to decide whether to try to play from memory, or walk back on the stage, get my music and try to make it to the back of the hall on time. I knew the horn part well enough but was not entirely sure if I knew the correct number of rests. Luckily, I made the quick dash to retrieve the music and made it in time to play, though I was a bit winded!

RC: Do you have an over-arching concept about the piece, in terms of programmatic elements? What is the mood that you are trying to create while you are playing each movement?

KP: The first two movements deal with death. Mahler was obsessed with thoughts about death and dying, grief, and the wild and intense nature of the music reflects his mood. In contrast, the third movement is a dance, a Ländler, and is very happy. I try to enjoy listening to the music of the fourth movement, which is tacet for all the winds, brass and percussion, and sometimes succeed. It also gives us plenty of time to empty the slides and get ready-focused and concentrated- for the last movement, which is also very happy and festive.

RC: How do you suggest arranging the players of the horn section during Movement II No. 3 Scherzo)-the obbligato movement- both in terms of who plays what part and how do you placed during this movement? Do you sit or stand?

KP: That really depends on the section. In the past, I have asked the third player to move to the first horn part, and the assistant then move to the third part. (Horns 5 and 6 do not play this movement, though we let them play the last 40 bars or so of this movement here in Detroit.) Also, as in my current situation here in Detroit, I ask the assistant to play the first part and everyone else just stays on their part, so there is less moving around. I generally do not offer to stand, although I will do so if asked. I try not to do anything else to separate myself from the section, although there are exceptions, such as the performance with the Colorado Festival Orchestra.

RC: There are so many wonderful moments for the horn in this piece. What suggestions do you have for specific passages in this symphony?

KP: In the first movement, the passage that begins at measure 60

Ex. 1, Mvt. I, m. 60-83

Solo *Wie im Anfang.*

pp *p* *f* *p* *f*

f cresc. *ff* *ff* *ff* *f*

f *f veloce* *f*

ff

This should be played in the same style as the trumpet played the opening call, with special attention to the dynamics. It is also essential to know what all of the musical terms mean! Mahler gives so many directions; you really need to know them. Also, he is very particular about his dynamic markings, so we must heed these as well. In measures 67, 68 and 78, shake the trills, unless you have a very loud lip trill. This effect calls for a louder sound than the “normal” lip trill, so make a lot of noise with this effect. Practice the passage starting in measure 72 and onwards; since the whole section is playing, lead the section, and play with a good fortissimo sound here. This opening page helps me determine the sound of the hall I’m in and also helps me feel comfortable in the various dynamics I will need for the rest of the piece.

Ex. 2, Mvt. I, m. 189-193

offen

ff *precipitato*

This passage, starting at measure 189, is found on a lot of auditions. It is a big moment for the horn section. It should be played moving forward – marked “*precipitato*”. Don’t get behind, and again, lead the section in the style that you want. It should be heavy, but don’t drag.

Ex. 3, Mvt. I, m. 337-352

stark hervortretend.

The musical score for Ex. 3, Mvt. I, m. 337-352, is presented in three staves. The top staff (treble clef) begins with a dynamic of *f* and a *cresc.* marking, followed by a *ff* dynamic and a *molto cresc.* marking. The middle staff (bass clef) starts with *ff* and *f* dynamics. The bottom staff (treble clef) begins with *ff* and includes a 'III.' marking. The music features quarter-note triplets and wide slurs across all staves.

I love this solo. It is one of the main melodies at this point and should sound big. Play it in a very sustained fashion, and move the quarter-note triplets forward. Play with a big tone, but don’t sacrifice the singing quality of the sound or the tempo. When the third horn joins in measure 349, they should blend into the fortissimo sound of the first horn.

In movement two, play with an intense sound through-out the first 70 measures, with an especially big sound on the sforzandos in measures 32 – 35 to emphasize the wide dramatic slurs. These wide slurs repeat again later in the movement and need intensity. Regarding the stopped horn passages, if written above third-space C, I try to find a fingering on the Bb horn. It is much more secure and speaks quicker. Throughout this movement there are lots of duets and octave passages that require attention.

Ex. 4, Mvt. III, m. 3-26

Kräftig, nicht zu schnell
 in F (obligato.) poco rit. a tempo

When you are performing this symphony, you have to know this third movement really well. It is one of the highlights of the orchestral horn repertoire, so play the solo parts in this movement like you are playing a concerto. Make it sound easy, in the character of a dance. The first measure of this solo is part of a ritard in the orchestra, and the tempo starts in measure 4. Be sure to stress beat one, showing the dance character of the Ländler. Beat two can be lightly and easily stressed, but not as much as the first beat. Observe the marking “keck” in measure 15: it means to play bold or cheeky. In measure 25 to 26, play with a crescendo to the last note of the phrase (marked forte in some editions), although occasionally a conductor will ask you to play this passage with a diminuendo. Be prepared to play it either way. You should not get “stuck” playing things the same way. Our previous music director, Neemi Jarvi, would often choose completely different tempos from night to night, or change phrasing on a whim. While it does keep things interesting, you have to be prepared enough to react to whatever is going on.

Ex. 5, Mvt. III, m. 277-307

This is the big horn call. It really helps me to be sitting with the section for this. The obligato horn enters softly as the rest of the section is playing fortissimo. The obligato sound must emerge from the section sound. It is very effective writing. And, it is very important to observe all of the details. A common mistake is to make too much of a ritard too soon, getting slower and thus losing the quality of the sound and intensity of the dynamics. The ritard is over 4 bars – up until the fermata. I suggest playing the low d in measure 280 on the Bb horn, either 1-2 or 3, as otherwise it has a tendency to sound flat. You can make a rather quick diminuendo in measure 281, as you are joined by the other horns, and can even drop out after a quick diminuendo, although you should not do this in an audition! In measure 286, the bell is raised, which, even though the dynamic changes to only forte, causes a dramatic change in the sound. The term “gewöhnlich” in measure 296 means the bell is returned to its usual place (bell down). The accented notes are within a slur and there is not too big of a crescendo in this phrase. In measure 301, there is an indication of a sudden “bells up”. I always raise the bell after the fermata and before the pickup to 301. And in measures 306 and 307, note the difference in articulation between the accents and the tenuto marks. There should be a generous diminuendo and ritard. You should try to play this passage as softly as comfortable, but you need to know your limits as well on that particular day.

Ex. 6, Mvt. III, m. 699-761

The musical score for Ex. 6, Mvt. III, m. 699-761 is written in 3/4 time and consists of five staves. The notation includes various dynamics, articulations, and tempo markings. Key features include:

- Staff 1:** Starts with *pp* and *molto rit.*. Includes *Schalltr. auf!*, *langsam*, *molto cresc.*, *ff*, *sempre*, *langsam*, *verklingend.*, *Tempo I (subito)* (marked with a 3), and *Schalltr. auf! a tempo*.
- Staff 2:** Starts with *ppp* and *lange*. Includes *rit.*, *a tempo (schnell.)* (marked with a 4), *langsam*, *gewöhnlich.*, and *f*.
- Staff 3:** Starts with *dim.* and *a tempo*. Includes *rit.*, *a tempo*, *f*, *a tempo*, *Schalltr. auf!*, and *ff*.
- Staff 4:** Starts with *pp* and *rit.*. Includes *gewöhnlich.*, *a tempo moderato* (marked with a 5), *molto rit.*, *pp*, and *f*.
- Staff 5:** Starts with *f* and *rit.*. Includes *a tempo (mässig.)*, *rit.*, *gewöhnlich.*, *mf*, *dim.*, *p*, and *pp*.

This passage has a similar start to the one at measure 277. Start this with your bell already raised, not over the four measures. A major difference here is that there is no doubling of the pitch in measure 704 on the fermata, as there was in the earlier similar passage. Again, starting in measure 708, play with the bell raised, and avoid the tendency to play a ritard until it is printed in measure 713. Also note that there is NO diminuendo in this phrase! It must have an intense sound throughout until the orchestra enters in measure 715. Hang on! It helps to not have a ritard. Through-out the rest of this solo passage, follow the indications in the part. Measure 756 is doubled in the cellos, and it is very possible to be a bit fatigued at this point in the movement.

Fortunately, you have the fourth movement to recover!

Ex. 7, Mvt. V, m. 1-30

In movement five, it is important to have formulated a character for this solo before you play. Keep your ideal horn sound in mind and keep that intention during the last few moments of the fourth movement. The previous movement ends in a beautiful, quiet F major. About 10 bars before the end, the violins have a high A, forte. I like to play an E at the bottom of the staff very lightly at this point to secure the pitch in my ear. Then just hear the F major ending and think of the third of the chord. You are now rested and ready. This is not a movement for a wall-flower! Play with assertive dynamics through-out. Give the first note a good zing. And on this first

fermata, hold until the first violins enter: wait to stop until you hear them. The written E that starts in measure four seems to last forever, especially with all of the tempo variations in those bars that are played by the oboe. Just keep singing your sound throughout the long note. At the allegro, play it the way it is marked, with a real forte followed by a diminuendo, not a forte-piano. Later in this movement at big number 16, there is a beautiful counter-melody that should be brought out. I like to shorten the slurred eighth notes to give it good character. Really enjoy this solo!

RC: Do you have any final thoughts about this piece?

KP: Fifty years ago, it was unusual to hear a Mahler Symphony. Now almost every orchestra plays them. It really should be a joy to prepare and play these challenging works. Even though I went through many details for the preparation of the piece, when you perform, don't try to play a perfect performance. Remember all the characters and the beauty in the music. Mahler creates so many moods, from the deepest despair to joy, excitement and elation. People come to hear live music to be moved emotionally and not necessarily to hear a "perfect" rendition. So take risks, make some music and enjoy your playing.

Karl Pituch was named Principal Horn of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in 2000.

Before joining the DSO, Pituch was Associate Principal Horn with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Principal Horn with the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra, the Jacksonville Symphony and the Colorado Music Festival Orchestra. He served as a guest Principal Horn for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, the Chautauqua Festival Orchestra and the Grand Teton Festival Orchestra. Pituch can be heard on many recordings with the Detroit, Dallas, San Francisco and Honolulu Symphony Orchestras. He can also be heard as soloist in the John Williams horn concerto, recorded live with the Detroit Symphony and is available as a download only.

Pituch was the grand prize winner at the 1989 American Solo Horn Competition and has been a finalist at many other solo competitions. As a soloist, Pituch has performed with orchestras in Japan, Hawaii, Colorado, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Ohio, Florida and Michigan. He has been a frequent guest artist at numerous horn conferences and serves as a board member and judge in the American Horn Competition. An active chamber musician, Pituch was a member of the Spring Wind Quintet for 11 years and participated in chamber music festivals in Marlboro, Vermont; Crested Butte, Colorado; Kapalua, Maui; Kazusa, Japan and Freden, Germany (with the American Horn Quartet).

Pituch is currently the horn instructor at Wayne State University. He has taught at the University of Hawaii and has given master classes across the U. S. He is a co-founder, along with Denise Tryon, of Audition Mode, an annual horn seminar specializing in audition preparation. Pituch earned his degree from the University of Toledo where he studied with Mary Kihlsinger. He also studied with Froydis Wekre and Dale Clevenger.

