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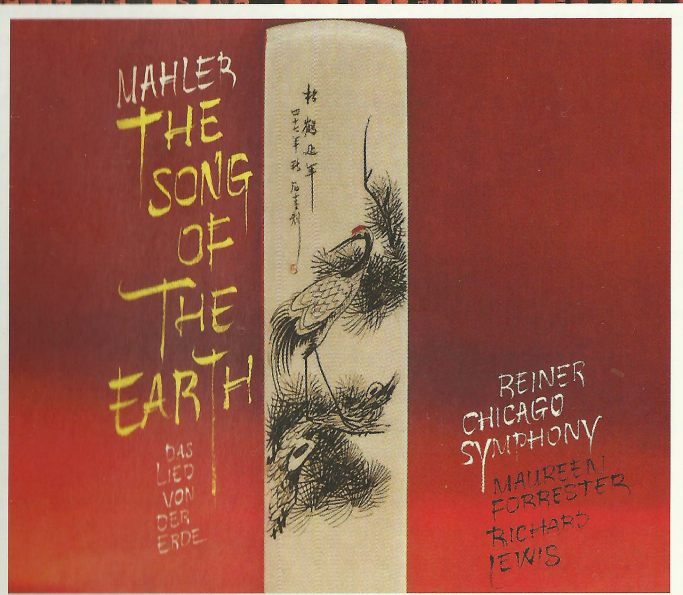
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GUSTAV MAHLER (1860-1911)

Das Lied von der Erde / The Song of the Earth

(Text from H. Bethge, *Die chinesische Flöte*, after Li-Tai-Po)

- 1 Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde /
The Drinking Song of Earth's Sorrow 8:36
- 2 Der Einsame im Herbst / Autumn Loneliness 10:11
- 3 Von der Jugend / Of Youth 3:22
- 4 Von der Schönheit / Of Beauty 6:43
- 5 Der Trunkene im Frühling / Wine in Spring 4:29
- 6 Der Abschied / The Farewell 29:48

(Recorded November 9, 1959, Orchestra Hall, Chicago)



Maureen Forrester, *contralto*
Richard Lewis, *tenor*
Chicago Symphony Orchestra
Fritz Reiner, *conductor*

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In observing 1960 as the centennial of Gustav Mahler's birth, the music world commemorated the emergence of a giant. The violent storms of dissension that long beclouded his music largely subsided, though much acrimony remains. There are those honest skeptics for whom Mahler's peculiarities of form and material are still a roadblock. But, more and more, conductors have refreshed themselves and their orchestras at his spring. In every concert center of the world today Mahler is unquestionably a classic. No self-respecting orchestra can afford to ignore him, and each season increasing numbers of listeners discover spiritual and artistic invigoration in his music.

There is something more, however.... By a curious paradox, as Mahler recedes in time from us, the anguished testament that is his music takes on a timelier relevance. It is as if in Mahler, better

than in any other composer of his time, the modern temper of self-searching disquiet is most pitilessly exposed. Prophetically, Mahler's music reflects the stresses and strains of the Freudian diagnosis that is so pertinent to our age of anxiety. Reflected here, if you will, is the psychological dilemma of our time – the ruthless probing of self, the conflicting drives and harsh insecurities, the craving for some long-lost innocence of childhood or Nature. Mahler is the most subjective and uninhibited of composers. To his symphonies he confided the tensions and obsessions that raged in him. He conceals nothing from our ears – his nightmarish torments, his refuge in momentary illusions of joy, his shrill defiance of Providence, even his abrupt lapses into the deceptively child-like simplicities and sepulchral mockeries that infuriate those who refuse to accept him on his terms.

To his work, and to his family, Mahler gave himself as unreservedly as he did to his music. Into the cultural life of Vienna he brought a nobility of ideals and a concentrated rigor of discipline that enriched concert hall and opera house alike. Over half a century ago, in the space of two short seasons, he left his indelible mark of achievement on the operatic and symphonic life of New York as well. To his wife Alma, Mahler brought the adoration of a passionate nature. In his children he found unfathomable solace of spirit. But over his happiness brooded a tragic obsession with death and disease – a fatalistic dread of the morrow. His sense of foreboding terrified his wife. Repeatedly, she chided him for tempting Providence in the ominous hammerblows of Fate that crash down in the Finale of the Sixth Symphony. By some ruthless sixth sense, Mahler foresaw the savage destiny lying in wait for him. It struck

only too soon. A vicious anti-Mahler cabal, scheming tirelessly for years, at last ousted him from his place of eminence in Vienna in 1907. That same summer his beloved older child died suddenly of diphtheria. *That made two of the prophetic hammerblows.* A family physician, called in a few days later to attend to Mahler's prostrated wife, by chance examined Mahler too, and spotted the heart condition that doomed him to an early death in 1911. The third hammerblow had fallen.

From that brutal summer on, a resigned fatalism dominated Mahler's music. The last three symphonies, the Ninth, the unfinished Tenth and *The Song of the Earth* thus become his farewell to life – the final statement of a profound thirst for life defeated by an obsessive imminence of death. If renewal and rebirth are recurring themes of *Das Lied von der Erde*, death and dissolution are its ultimate burden.

Into this song-symphony Mahler poured all the poignant transience of life and beauty that consumed him. This, one may venture, is the swan song of the great Viennese school that began with Mozart and Haydn, reached its apogée in Beethoven and culminated in Bruckner and Mahler. It is the death knell of an era and the final litany of the shattered illusion that had been romanticism. Into it went the spiritual groping and irrevocable drift, the withdrawal from the world to the bosom of Nature, the nostalgic review of the transitory joys of the flesh that pervaded the romantic twilight. With *The Song of the Earth* Mahler becomes a prophet of doom – of himself, of a way of thought, indeed of his whole world. It may not be extravagant to find in this massive scroll premonitions of the disintegration that came three short years after Mahler's death with the outbreak of World War I

in Europe. Mahler speaks to us directly in more ways than one. Life, he found, could spring all sorts of surprises, comic, tragic, preposterously irrelevant. One moved in a flash from the trivial to the devastating, from exaltation to banality, from tragedy to farce, from the sublimest happiness to utter desolation – from complacent peace to barbarous war.

Mahler could not live in the moment and for the moment. Behind the smiling façade lurked potential enmity; beyond it, eventual decay and obliteration. If there is final resignation in *The Song of the Earth*, it is that of surrender to the impenetrable mystery of eternity. A last farewell is made to life, love, spring, earth, and the symphony closes in a mood of tranquil acceptance. There is a quieting of grief and regret, a longing only for respite and repose. Finality is accepted with brave, stoic calm. It was the way Mahler himself died in Vienna

on May 18, 1911 – with a last serenity of spirit and two names on his lips – “Alma” and “Mozart.” To a man whose life had been one of monumental irony and frustration there was reserved still another paradox in death. He was never to hear *The Song of the Earth*, the crowning masterpiece that in a few short years was to establish him securely in the international repertory.

Fatalist that he was, Mahler never gave *Das Lied von der Erde* a symphonic number. Actually, in order of composition, it was his Ninth Symphony. But Beethoven had not lived to write his Tenth, and Bruckner had died in the midst of his Ninth. A superstition persisted that a composer was on shaky ground after completing eight symphonies. In Alma's words, Mahler thus thought of “giving God the slip.” Having composed *Das Lied*, he refrained from numbering it, and moved on to the Ninth. Once that

was finished, he gleefully reported to Alma that in reality he had now completed his Tenth. After thus outflanking destiny, he tackled the Tenth – really the Eleventh – only to die amid its last embers of creative genius. From Alma's reminiscences comes this pertinent glimpse of Mahler during the summer of 1908, a scant year after the death of his child, Alma's collapse, the severance of his ties with Vienna, and the jolting diagnosis of valvular disease of the heart:

“This summer was the saddest we had ever spent or were to spend together. Every excursion, every attempt at distraction, was a failure. Grief and anxiety pursued us wherever we went. Work was his one resource. He slaved at *Das Lied von der Erde*.”

Like so much of Mahler's symphonic music, *Das Lied* began with the reading of poetry. Few composers have responded to poetic stimulus with Mahler's readiness

of spirit and openness of heart. The lyrical and the symphonic were twin patterns of his musical thought, several of his symphonies oscillating between both forms or combining in an unprecedented new synthesis. In this case, Mahler came upon the specific poems in a book of translations from the Chinese by Hans Bethge, entitled *Die chinesische Flöte* (The Chinese Flute). Among them were verses by perhaps the greatest of Chinese poets, Li-Tai-Po – the Omar Khayyam of the Far East. Mahler was at once captivated by their exquisite imagery and mellow wisdom, even more by their sunset preoccupation with the evanescence of life. For here, in poetry of remote eighth-century China, he found the perfect reflection of the state of his soul. On the one hand, an unquenchable delight in the beauties of Nature, allied to a profound craving for life; on the other, a compulsive foreboding

of surcease and loss. Let us drink while we may, for darkness and woe await us. In the six poems he chose Mahler found material for a colossal panel of man's precarious sojourn on earth. First, the frenzied escape in drink and an open defiance of fate and life's vanities. Then the tired wanderer's autumnal lament, the fever gone, the fire dimmed. Next, in two vivid vignettes, the vanished glories of youth and rapture, relived in imaginative retrospect. Then once more the stupor of drink and the hovering sense of ashen futility. Finally, the somber farewell, and the deathly calm. These poetic soliloquies of tenor and contralto are among the greatest songs ever written. They achieve, in their range and intensity of contrasting mood, a unique power of expressive truth. Upon them Mahler the lyricist lavished his extraordinary gift for melodic relevance and communication. And what a

magnificent texture of orchestra envelopes them! There the symphonist that was Mahler attains grandeur of purpose and execution with a command of limitless resource.

Das Lied von der Erde is a living substance compounded of nerve and heart and mind. Realism streaks through it with almost terrifying vividness. At times meditative and childlike, at others anguished and tumultuous, always human and searching, the orchestra is both commentator and protagonist. From it speaks Mahler in an inspired stream of consciousness beside which many a celebrated work of fiction of the Freudian persuasion is so much inarticulate mumbling. *The Song of the Earth* is compelling self-revelation, the searing document of a spiritual crisis that is both personal and epochal. Mahler's intellectual honesty and great warmth of temperament give it a depth and

sincerity embracing all humanity. But one is never allowed to forget that a supreme craftsman who was also a phenomenal conductor is at work in this score. Bar after bar shows the faultless, unwavering hand of a master anatomist for whom the orchestra was a living organism. Only a composer of his gifts and his profound turmoil of spirit could make the earth sing.

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One of the first stereo recordings of Mahler's epic, haunting symphony in song, this brilliant performance by Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra appears for **the first time in the Living Stereo series on CD.**

GUSTAV MAHLER (1860-1911)

1-6 **Das Lied von der Erde /
The Song of the Earth**

Maureen Forrester, *contralto*

Richard Lewis, *tenor*

Chicago Symphony Orchestra

Fritz Reiner, *conductor*

(Recorded in 1959)

Produced by Richard Mohr
Recording Engineer:
Lewis Layton
Remastered at Soundmirror, Inc.

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TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 63:12

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LIVING STEREO

MAHLER

DAS LIED VON DER ERDE

Chicago Symphony Orchestra

Fritz Reiner



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