Mahler’s Choral Symphonies: Philosophical And Technical Elements Of Choral Usage

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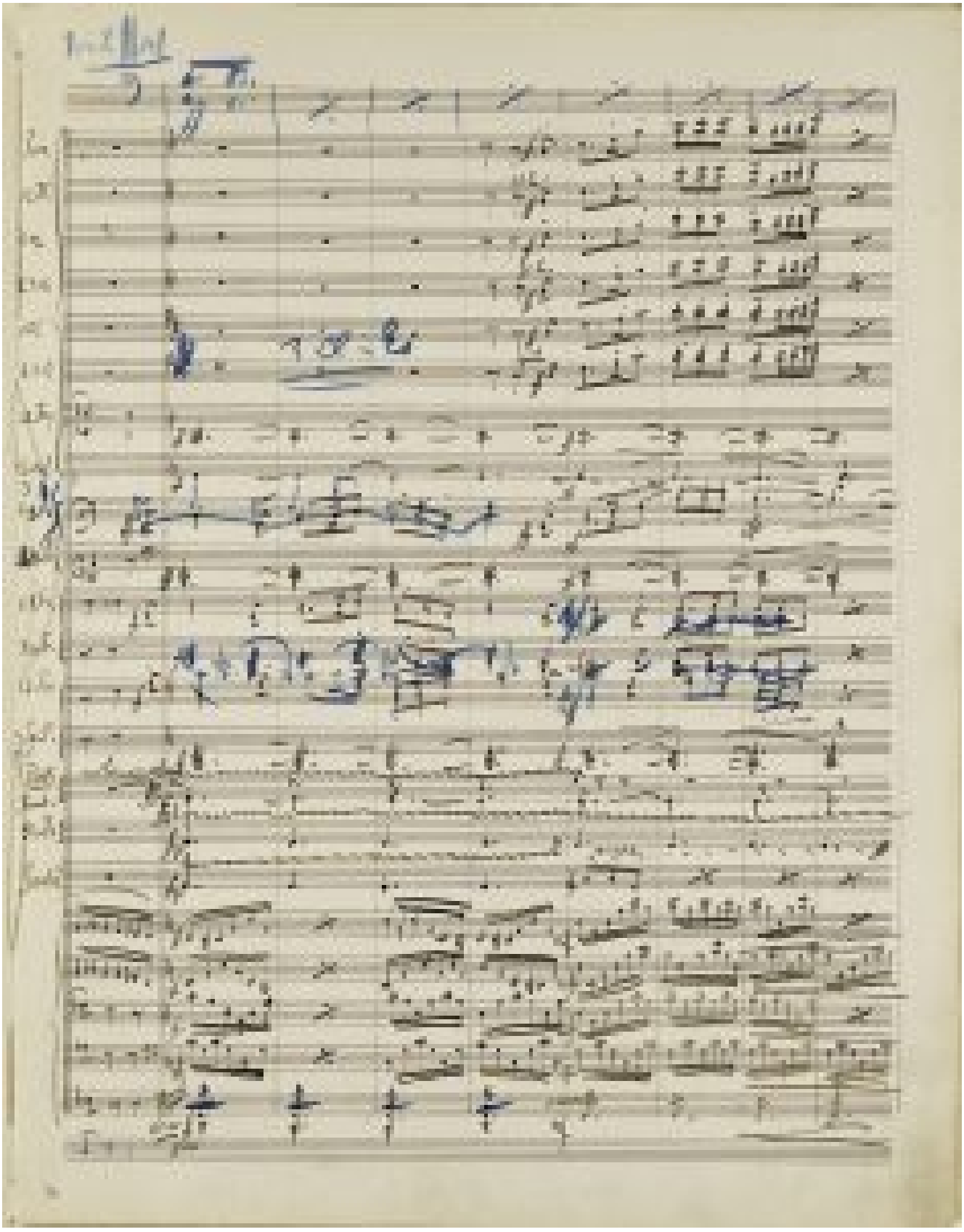
1. **Introduction**

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) is regarded as a master of instrumental technique and orchestration, but his choral music, notably his symphonies, is what occupies a preeminent place among his compositions. With the passage of time, Mahler’s reputation as a great conductor has given way to his accomplishments as a superb composer. Nowadays Mahler is seen as the end of a selective line of outstanding Austro-Germanic symphonic composers. In addition to his nine symphonies, five of which feature chorus and/or vocal soloists, Mahler’s highly regarded works consist of a secular cantata and fifty songs (including orchestrated ones). Despite the conspicuous presence of the voice in Mahler’s works, scholars have, statistically[1], not devoted as much attention to his choral writing as to his instrumental skills.

Sources on Mahler abound, with plenty of studies available.The only problem, as mentioned before, is the matter of emphasis: Only a few are directly, totally, or specifically related to his treatment of the chorus. The most specific ones are recent studies in the form of articles or dissertations. Except for one webpage, all the sources I have found have a scholarly tone, and a reasonable number of them have appeared in relatively recent times, the workof both Americanand European scholars, and either review his entire life or emphasize something other than the chorus. For this reason, my work aims to dissect these studies in search of specific related

details. Other relevantsources are personal accounts such as letters, recollections, pictures, and program notes related to Mahler and his closest companions. And of course, Mahler’s own music in the form of scoresand recordings are of primary importance for any research.

Given the fact that Mahler’s choral music is still relegated to a secondary place, I have strived to identify sources dealing with treatment and examination of the chorus in Mahler’s Symphonies No. 2 (1895), No. 3 (1902), and No. 8 (1909), the three symphonies with choral settings. Emphasis has been placed on musical/philosophical matters and technical elements of choral usage because Mahler’s psyche and philosophy of life cannot be separated from his music.



Manuscript of Mahler’s Symphonies No. 2 (1895)

2. **Mahler’s Philosophical and Literary Background**

To better understand the music of Mahler,it is essential to shed light on his life philosophy. From the several personal accounts[2] to his own programs for his symphonies[3], by way of the great literary thinkers associated with him, it seems that metaphysical and eschatological questions were intrinsic parts of Mahler's life as well as his music-making process. Constantin Floros argues along these lines when he states:

> *Gustav Mahler is one of those artists whose art and personality cannot be separated. His symphonic writing, paradoxical as this might seem, expresses his worldview; it has a literary and philosophical background. His religious and philosophical thinking cannot be separated from his work.[4]*

This path suggested by Floros may help us see Mahler's psyche and its translation into music as a gateway to understanding his choral music.

Literature and people related to it played important roles in the frame work of Mahler's musical output. Corroborating Floros, David Holbrook argues, "we have nothing in literature as profoundly concerned with fundamental problems of existence as Mahler's works."[5] Steven Johnson goes into much detail about the philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844- 1900) and the composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883),three people who "left their fingerprints" on Mahler's music. For example, Johnson highlights the duality of thought expressed in Mahler's Third Symphony, rooted first in Schopenhauer's *World as Wílland Idea* (1818)[6] and, second, in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872).[7] According to Holbrook,"Mahler would have encountered a similar duality in Wagner's essay on Beethoven, which Mahler once claimed was the best writing on music."[8]Johnson thus suggests that Wagner's call for reawakening of the German spirit through Beethoven's music was the most influential event for the young Mahler.[9]

Another crucial literary figure for the development of Mahler's philosophical/literary thinking was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Mahler revered Goethe deeply and was attracted to the final scene of Goethe's *Faust,* Part II because of its connection with metaphysical themes.[10]Mahler had read a biography of Goetheand, during the time the Eighth Symphony was being written, his wife wrote, "Goethe and apples are the two things he cannot live without."[11] Clearly,Goethe exerted a powerful influence on Mahler's thinking.

Johann Wolfgang (von) Goethe (28 August 1749 – 22 March 1832)

3. **Philosophizing with Music**

Mahler’s concern with the meaning of life is the most powerful

driving force inhissymphonies.Writingmusicwashismodeofphilosophizing,hissearch for answerstothefundamentalquestionsofhumanity:Whatarewe?Whereareweg oing? What is the meaning of life? What exists after we die? The programs he wrote for his symphonies are nothing but an effort to ensure that listeners would understand the spiritual content of his music and appreciate his personal journey towards answering primordial questions aboutlife.

Mahler's metaphysical preoccupations reflect turn-of-the-century sociological anguish, or so-called *fin de siecle* existentialism, along with the disintegration of the Austrian empire. For instance, Franklin refers to many unusual features that push beyond conventional musical concerns – such as different timbres, huge orchestral forces, extreme dynamic levels, spatial distribution of instruments, allusion to forces of nature, and identifiable forms of popular music. All of these unconventional musical traits question and criticize the cultural assumptions made during Mahler's time.[12]

Another evident aspect of Mahler's fascination with metaphysics was his sense of spirituality as a result of his Jewish heritage combined with his later conversion to Christianity (1897). Alma Mahler observed that "his religious songs, the Second Symphony, the Eighth Symphony, and all the chorales in the symphonies are rooted in his own personality-and not brought in from outside! He never denied his Jewish origin . . . he was Christian-Jew."[13] This intermingling of literary, sociological, internal, and religious effects will come to have a physical presence in Mahler's music.

3.1 **Communicating Philosophical Matters in Music**

Even more important than appreciating the metaphysical motivations behind Mahler's music is encountering hints of

such concerns musically translated into reality. For Mahler the”symphony is constructing a world with all the technical means at one’s disposal.[14] Nietzsche’s argument possibly led Mahler to value simple folk songs as the most essential musical mirror of the world available.

Mahler’s apparent use of popular forms as musical reflections on the world also allows him to transform them to communicate personal traits such as irony. Henry Lea defends that Mahler’s irony is Freudian in the sense that his music is highly associative in revealing unsuspected depth.[15] Mahler uses popular forms to send out a message beyond the functional purpose of folk art. His stylized marches, dances, and folksongs have their communal purpose (bringing people together)transfigured into a larger universal statement about the human condition.[16] For example, Mahler’s chorus is an individualized voice in the way that constant shifts in harmony and rhythm, sophisticated orchestration, and the emotional quality of the music contrast with the piety of the text.[17] Mahler thus establishes his irony musically when he uses a collective form to express exactly the opposite of its communal spirit.

Closely linked to irony is Mahler’s sense of humor, which also permeates his music. It is important to note the elevated standard of Mahler’s sense of humor. As he states, “humor should be called on to express only the highest thoughts that cannot be expressed any other way.”[18] His humor is present both in the text and in the musical expression of the words without ever compromising the serious subject matter of his symphonies as a whole.[19] For example, the words of Jesus in the text of the Third Symphony’s fifth movement are made irreverent by Mahler’s instructions *“grob”* [coarse], a sudden *forte* dynamic, and a return to F major, which Abbate argues represents the failure of transcendence.[20] And the boys’ chorus, sounding like bells, also has a humorous effect after the tension of the previous movement.

3.2 **Text and Poetic Ideas**

It has been previously suggested that Mahler has a humanistic agenda in his works, especially in the symphonies. Beethoven set the precedents for choral music, and thus for words conveying a message to humanity. In the same spirit, Mahler takes a step towards continuing this tradition.

The texts in Mahler's choral symphonies reflect his poetic aesthetics along with his metaphysical concerns. The words in the Second Symphony unfold with a blend of Christianity and pan-Germanic mythology.[21] The last movement is a dramatic depiction of the Apocalypse, which serves as a foil to the chorale about resurrection. The text is a mixture of the Bible and Mahler's own words. In the Third Symphony, Mahler's words proclaim a "Nietzschean-Shopenhauerian" celebration of the will *to* over come mortality.[22] The Eighth Symphony's text includes theological concepts such as grace, love, and illumination. The first part is an medieval Latin hymn; the second is the Second Part of Goethe's *Faust.**[23]*** This apparent contradiction only highlights Mahler's solid literary background and the idea of introducing text as one more source for reaching out to humanity with the composer's idiosyncratic spiritual message. There has been much dispute about Mahler's true philosophical intentions. One side favors Christianity, the others arguing for pagan overtones, or even religious syncretism.[24] Whatever side his music may lean towards – if in fact it does -, music for Mahler seems to be his tool for seeking spiritual truth, so the text cannot be ignored in that pursuit.

4. **Technical Elements of Choral Usage**

Mahler considered the human voice to be a source of sound, a distinctive timbre among the orchestral instruments. Regarding

the Eighth Symphony, Mahler describes the human voice this way: “Here…voices are also used as instruments: the first movement is strictly symphonic in form but all of it is sung. . . a ‘pure’ symphony in which the most beautiful instrument in the world is given its true place.”[25] Roman argues that the use of the human voice is part of Mahler’s musical evolution, from essentially homophonic orchestral accompaniment to “poly-melodicity” in that the voice is assigned an identical role as the instruments in works like the Eighth Symphony.[26] For instance, in Part II m. 102 of the Eighth Symphony, the almost monotone chordal passage of the tenors and basses reinforces the harmonic instrumental background of the double basses, harp, and harmonium, where melodic material is split contrapuntally between the voices and instruments.[27]

Floras goes deeper with this discussion and argues that, because the themes are equally distributed between the voices and instruments, the music can also be semantically deciphered by way of the text.[28] In addition, the vocal themes are “dealt with instrumentally in the way that they are repeated, transposed, varied, inverted, augmented, combined with each other, and given new coloring.”[29]Thus Mahler did in fact approach the voice as an instrument in his symphonic construction.

Although treated as an instrument, the voice also has a distinct musical role in Mahler’s choral music. First, the human timbre is used to portray poetic images suggested by the text. For instance, the distribution of timbres in the Resurrection Chorale of the Second Symphony suggests music coming gradually closer from a far distance, the call of the angel for dead bodies to rise from the dust, exactly as communicated by the text.[30] Another example is in the fifth movement of the Third Symphony, “Was mir die Engel erzählen” [What the Angels Tel1 Me], where the timbre is distinctly bright, corresponding to the concept

of *musíccoelestís.**[31]* Mahler scored the movement for alto solo, boys' voices, and women's voices, including four tuned bells,[32] all of them light and bright timbres that reinforce the textual concept of the musical passage.

Timbre also helps Mahler embody philosophical ideas such as enlightenment and love, which serve as the main core of the Eighth Symphony. Flora suggests that, at the coda, one of the themes *(Accende)* is specially emphasized because it is sung by boys.[33] And Mahler makes a distinction between the human voices, as well. For instance, in the Second Symphony, Mahler considers coloristic and timbral differences when using the voices of women and boys. The boys sing in unison while the women's chorus is richly voiced. Moreover, faster sections are voiced in three parts, and four voices are set for slower tempi.[34] This timbral differentiation thus serves as a powerful tool for Mahler's depiction of ideas.

Range and *tessítura* are other aspects of the human voice that Mahler dealt with, in this case, keeping in mind the great singers of his time and drawing on his experience as an opera conductor.[35] The vocal range used in his works is extensive, that is, Mahler exceeds the practical limits of the average well-trained voice (from a major 13th to two octaves).[36]The more extreme ranges are found in the Second Symphony, but the ranges in the Eighth Symphony are rather comfortable, possibly due to the use of multiple choral forces. Moreover, the *tessitura* lies in the extreme upper end of the vocal range.[37] The middle register (altos and tenors) has brightness, and clarity, an idea taken from Mahler's orchestration, where the voices are stretched to the limits of their vocal range.[38] Seeing the voice as a mere source of sound may be reflected in the wide range demanded of the chorus in Mahler's symphonies.

Mahler's choral music reveals a balance between chordal homophony and complex contrapuntal techniques. In addition to *tessitura,* Mahler's perception and use of the human voice as a

source of sound is also reflected texturally. Roman explains how choral parts are treated instrumentally in Mahler’ssymphonies:

> *These parts and passages are characterized by a general angularity, including unresolved leaps of an octave as well as consecutive leaps; by parallel intervals and chords; and by a variety of functions that are identical with traditional “filling” roles on certain orchestral instruments.[39]*

It is noticeable that Beethoven’s vocal writing in his Ninth Symphony and his treatment of the vocal soloists as instruments strongly influenced Mahler’s own textural procedures.[40] Except for the extreme range, Mahler is not an innovator texturally. He still works within the traditional boundaries of choral vocal usage. In the Second Symphony, the orchestra plays the role of homophonic accompaniment in the choral movement. In the Third Symphony, there is a balance between orchestral passages that are voice-supporting and those that are independent and polyphonic. Finally, in the Eighth Symphony, there is alternation between voice-supporting and contrapuntal orchestration but no clear division.[41]

It is relevant to point out that, although the choral writing is not idiomatically vocal due to the leaps and jumps in many passages, the texture is usually homophonic, and the polyphony, when found in the vocal parts, is used as a dramatic device. Roman, for example, explains this dramatic use of choral polyphony when he argues that, “the imitative entries of the five-part chorus in the Second Symphony, rising

from *ppp*to *ff* within about twenty measures, succeed in building up a momentum that imbues the ensuing choral coda with breathtaking majesty and power."[42] Thus, for Mahler, homophony seems to be the basic structure underlying the choral inflections, with the exception of the dramatic momentum created in his use of polyphony.

The predominance of chordal homophony is motivated by Mahler's demand fortextual clarity. And text here means poetry, as dear to Mahler as music.[43] Nothing surpasses his own words when expressing his drive to convey the text as clearly as possible: "My two symphonies [the Second and Third] contain the inner aspects of my whole life, truth, and poetry in music,"[44] and "in my symphony [the Eighth] the human voice is, afterall, the bearer of the whole poetic idea."[45] With this in mind, two special textural procedures emphasized by Roman with regard to clarity may be worthy of note here: First, the choral passages, in unison or octaves, for conveying the text and increasing textural variety, and second, the antiphonal passages used for interplay between full and partial use of the choruses.[46] Homophony is thus the natural textural procedure to use when highlighting delivery of the text in Mahler's symphonies.

Part of the conservative treatment of the chorus reflects equilibrium between the choir and orchestra, and between the voices, as well. Notice Mahler's instructions in the finale of the Second Symphony, where the lower basses have a B-flat below the staff. In this particular example, Roman argues that, instead of considerations of feasibility in the bass parts, Mahler has a precisely calculated concern with balance, "crucial to the effect of the initial entry of the 'Resurrection' chorale:"

> *The basses [must not sing] an octave higher,lest the effect intended by the composer should not materialize;it is not*

absolutely crucial that these low notes be heard, rather, this manner of notation is [meant] to prevent the low basses from "taking", so to speak, the higher B flat, and thus reinforcing the highernote.[47]

In addition, there are rare doublings between the chorus and orchestra in a strict technical sense. In fact, except for the climactic passages, the orchestral fabric is transparent and sparse.[48] Overall, it may fairly be said that balance between the choral and instrumental forces is maintained by Mahler in all the choral movements of his symphonies.

Enrico Caruso's caricature of Mahler, who served as music director of the New York Philharmonic from 1909 to 1911, reproduced in *The New York Times*, January 8, 1909.

Gustav Mahler, music director of the New York Philharmonic, on the streets of Manhattan in 1910.

The legendary singer Enrico Caruso was also known for his caricatures of friends and colleagues whom he encountered during his travels. This included one of former-Music Director G. Mahler, drawn around the time of Mahler's tenure at the helm of the Phil.

5. **Conclusion**

Study of the vocal realm in Mahler's music, particularly in a choral setting, merits serious interest for several reasons. First, statistically, the voice plays a role in nearly all of Mahler's compositions. Second, as a conductor at opera venues, Mahler had the opportunity, and needed, to gain knowledge of the voice. Third, Mahler's emotional affinity and familiarity with the voiceis evident to anyone who knows his songs. Last, Mahler's interest in the human voice is not restricted to a"period"but instead resonates through out his entire productive output as a composer. Despite these reasons, Mahler's choral work still lacks scholarly attention,with only marginal reference to this rather large aspect of the composer's music. Roman suggests this may be due to the fact that Mahler did not write any work considered to be an independent composition in that medium.[49] Instead, the chorus appears in larger-scale conceptions such as a song cycle, a cantata, or a symphony. Be that as it may, Mahler's choral music is still on hold for scholarly work, and it is hoped that the material of my research will encourage further scholarly literature in the future.

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[1]Zoltan Roman, “The Chorus in Mahler’s Music,” *The Music Review* XLIII/1 (February, 1982), 32.

[2]Jack Dietherin “Mahler Juvenilia,” *Chordand Discord, III*/1(1969), 68, interprets the last line of Mahler’s sketch/poem this way: “If I cannot find meaning in my life, I am confounded, I am faced with nothing but my nothingness.”

[3]In the program for the Symphony No. 2, Mahler clearly states his concerns about matters of life and death, in this case a rather optimistic vision since it culminates in resurrection; see Donald Mitchell. *Gustav Mahler: The Wunderhorn Years, Vol. II* (University of California Press, 1995), 183.

[4]Constantin Floros,*Gustav Mahler: The Symphoníes* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1997), 54.

[5]David Holbrook, *Gustav Mahler and the Courage to Be* (London: Vision Press, 1975), 12.

[6]See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Wíll and Idea* (London: Routledge and Kegan , 1957).

[7]See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

[8]David Holbrook, *The Courage to Be,* 8 (provides information about Wagner’s essay).

[9]Steven Philip Johnson, *Thematic and Tonal Process in Mahler’ s Third Symphony,* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1989), 9.

[10]Constantin Floros, *The Symphonies,* 226.

[11]Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters* (London: Cox & Wyman, 1973),103.

[12]Peter Franklin, "Mahler, Gustav," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians,* 2nd ed., 29 vols., ed. Stanley Sadie, (New York: Macmillan, 2001) XV, 615.

[13]Alma Mahler, *Memories and Letters,* 101.

[14]Peter Franklin, *Mahler: Symphony No. 3* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 37.

[15]Henry A. Lea, *Gustav Mahler: Man on the Margin* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1985), 49.

[16]Henry Lea, *Man on the Margin,* 96.

[17]*Ibid,* 100.

[18]Constantin Floros, *The Symphonies,* 104.

[19]Elizabeth Abbate, *Myth, Symbol, and Meaning in Mahler's Early Symphonies* (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1996), 189.

[20]Elizabeth Abbate, *Myth, Symbol, and Meaning in Mahler's Early Symphonies* (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1996), 191.

[21]Specifically, the "Edda": a Northern myth that contains an account of the end of the world. Heimdall, born from the union of Odin and nine giantesses simultaneously, is appointed guardian of the rainbow bridge, connecting earth and heaven. He had a trumpet to call all creatures to battle against his enemies, and its last blast announces the arrival of the final battle. Some of these elements are recognized in Mahler's music, (See Abbate, *Myth, Symbol, and Meaning,* 90-91).

[22]Elizabeth Abbate, *Myth, Symbol, and Meaning,* 72. Other scholars share this point of view whereas Floros rejects it,

instead adopting Schopenhauer ‘s concept of will. For Abbate, Mahler’s optimistic musical intentions, and the intellectual content of the Third Symphony, oppose the cynical worldview of Nietzsche.

[23]For a detailed study of the text, see Donald Mitchell, *Gustav Mahler: Songs and Symphonies of Lífe and Death,* Vol. III (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

[24]The authors that defend these ideas are, respectively: Donald Mitchell and Henry A. Lea; Herta Blaukopf and Natalie Bauer-Lechner; and Constantin Floros and Elizabeth Abbate.

[25]Donald Mitchell, *Symphonies of Life and Death,* 519.

[26]Zoltan Roman, “The Chorus in Mahler’s Music,” 39.

[27]*Ibid.,* 39.

[28]Constantin Floros, *The Symphonies,* 68.

[29]Constantin Floros, *The Symphonies,* 223.

[30]Constantin Floros, *The Symphonies,* 77 .

[31]The text for this section is the poem *Armer Kinder Bettlerlied* (“Poor Children’s Beggar Song”). It refers to the “sweet” singing of the angels and the “heavenly joy that has no end,” the story of Peter’s guilt and his absolution through Jesus (see *Ibíd.,*104).

[32]*Ibid.,* 104*.*

[33]Constantin Floros, *The Symphonies,* 226.

[34]Metcher Alexander, *Representatíve Nineteenth Century Choral Symphonies* (M .M. thesis, North Texas State University, 1971), 176.

[35]Metcher Alexander, *Representatíve Nineteenth Century Choral Symphonies* (M .M. thesis, North Texas State University,

1971), 148.

[36]*lbid .,* 189.

[37]An exception is the conservative *tessitura* for the boys, which Alexander claims never fails to stand out for its distinctive sonority within the musical texture (see Metcher Alexander 19th *Century Choral Symphonies,* 189).

[38]All of this information is found in detail in Roman's article along with tables of comparative statistics for vocal participation and vocal range in all the choral symphonies and *Das Klagende Lied.*

[39]Zoltan Roman, "The Chorus in Mahler's Music," 39.

[40]The unsettling *tessitura* in the tenor and alto solos compromises the tone quality and balance of the vocal quartet vis-à-vis the massive sound of the orchestra in the climactic momentum of the Nineth Symphony. Their role is to fill out the harmony, a feature later used by Mahler in his symphonies.

[41]Zoltan Roman, "The Chorus in Mahler's Music," 40.

[42]*Ibíd.,* 41.

[43]Herta Blaukopf and Kurt Blaukopf in *Mahler: Hís Life, Work, and World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 31, point out that Mahler showed equal talent for both music and literature.

[44]Natalie Bauer-Lechner, *Recollectíons of Gustav Mahler,* ed. Dika Newlin, trans. Peter Franklin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 75.

[45]Mitchell,*Symphoníes of Life and Death,* 519.

[46]*Ibíd.,* 41.

[47]Donald Mitchell, *Symphonies of Life and Death,* 38.

[48]Zoltan Roman , “The Chorus in Mahler’s Music,” 42.

[49]*Ibid.*,31.