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**“CLASSICALITY” IN GUSTAV MAHLER’S SYMPHONIES**  
**Master Thesis at Florida State University**

The thesis “*Classicality*” in *Gustav Mahler’s Symphonies* was defended at Florida State University on 22 March 2004. This study explores Mahler’s incorporation of general or specific references to musical Classicism and early Romanticism in his symphonic works. It also establishes the proper terminology for such references, which emerges as a problem in the research of this topic. Since the terms “classical,” “conventional,” or “neo-classical” that have mostly been used in literature are not adequate,<sup>1</sup> I took into consideration the terminology used at the beginning of the twentieth century. One of the terms is *eine neue Klassizität* that Thomas Mann offered in 1911 for the art opposed to Wagnerism. He characterized this *neue Klassizität* as “something that appears logical, structural, and clear.”<sup>2</sup> This description is similar to the characterization of *nouveau classicisme*, used in France. In order to arrive at a term roughly equivalent to Mann’s, this thesis therefore proposed the term “classicality” for references to conventions from the past in the music of Post-Romanticism.<sup>3</sup>

This work articulates different types of conventions recognized in Mahler’s symphonies: the conventional symphonic cycle, traditional forms, periodic phrase structures, the dance character with an intermezzo function in inner movements, diatonic harmony, simple homophonic texture, and reduction of the orchestral forces. It identifies the nature of Mahler’s references to the past as subtle or profound deformations of the conventions. Another task of this work is to reveal possible functions and meanings of the conventional elements and their transformations.

The main methodology applied in the research is analytical observation; however, since Mahler’s music language consisted of more than what can be understood through analysis, the conclusions also draw on other facts, such as programmatic inspiration, biographical data, the ideas that the composer

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “Classic models” or “Classic tradition” are not adequate, because this would refer to the specific time period of musical Classicism, which is not the intention of this work. Moreover, the broader term “convention” does not have the necessary degree of specificity. If the twentieth-century term “neo-classicism” were borrowed, it would raise a problem of historic inconsistency. Since “neo-classicism” also implies some other aesthetic issues, such as objective ideology, it could be confusing if the term “neo-classicism” were used to define Mahler’s relation to tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Mann, “Auseinandersetzung mit Richard Wagner,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (3 August 1911), 477.

<sup>3</sup> A more direct transliteration of the term *neue Klassizität* would be “new classicity,” but this would be too clumsy; therefore, a simpler term, “classicality,” will be used, as it carries the desired meaning but avoids any resemblance to the pejorative term “classicism.”

communicated with friends and colleagues, or on the comparison of Mahler’s symphonies to the related song cycles. The analytical approach differs from example to example. The most extensive analysis is applied to the First and Fourth Symphonies, since they have an interesting combination of conventions, and their transformations. Examples of further transformed “classicality” are shown by extracts from the Second (II mov), Sixth (I mov) and Seventh (II mov) symphonies. They show Mahler’s belief that “‘symphony’ means constructing a world with all the technical means at one’s disposal” and that “the eternally new and changing content determines its own form.” The last example in the thesis is focused on a treatment of the fugue inserted into the sonata form in the Eighth symphony.

The investigation of Mahler’s “classicality” does not reveal a unifying principle applied in the all works. Every work was created with its own individual impulse, resulting in a distinct union of tradition and modernity, although we can recognize some similar patterns in this union. For example, the common deformation of the sonata form that resulted from Mahler’s interpretation of ready-made designs is a strikingly brief first part of the form, as in the First, Third, Fourth, Sixth, and Seventh Symphonies. Another deformation is seen in the withdrawal of the recapitulation from the surface of perception. The complement to these characteristics is the expansion of the development. Such lengthy development enriched with the principle of constant variation gains supremacy, but it no longer functions as a dynamic antithesis to the static parts. In this way, the important principle of the sonata form is modified.

Since classicality of Mahler’s works belongs to the widely felt need to rely on tradition or to comment on it, the research of this thesis included a comparison of his style with other neo-classical trends. The study examines Mahler’s technique of quotations and reminiscences of pre-existing music and sounds in order to identify possible similarities or dissimilarities between his works and the ideology of neo-classicism. This comparison has been, however, intentionally restricted to a digression in this work.

Cultural and sociopolitical insight into the period of *fin-de-siècle* in Europe has also been valuable in resolving the issues of Mahler’s relation to tradition. Emphasis was placed on cultural conditions in Vienna, because this city had both a direct and indirect influence on Mahler. Vienna encompassed both past and future in a manner unequalled by any other European city of the period, and these contradictory but mutually fulfilling elements found an artistic counterpart in Mahler’s music aesthetics. This work pointed out how Mahler’s music acknowledged the paradoxes and contradictions of the time. It showed that reliance on and extreme deviation from Viennese classical models, organicism and heterogeneity, as well as tonal coherence in a multi-tonal work, are part of Mahler’s symphonic rhetoric, suggesting a kind of integration of cultural and social paradoxes.

The thesis also offers insight into the cultural environment through a political angle. It showed how the highly complex phenomenon of Austrian Liberalism and the paradoxical conservatism of the Liberals’ cultural practices affected the development of ideas and arts in the second part of the nineteenth century. A

strong symbol of Liberal culture was the Ringstrasse, the focus of urban reconstruction, which included a complex of public buildings and private apartments in a broad belt around the old city. It was based on a variety of historical styles. Other elements that Liberals valued highly and supported in arts were rationalism and individual intellect. In music they connected these qualities with tonality and the techniques of musical logic.

This work opens many questions, without necessarily intending to answer all of them. It shows that the status of “classicality” in Romanticism is a broad, yet not fully explored area of musicology and theory. Mahler’s symphonies functioned as good examples for this research since they articulate a dialogue with traditions and show the vitality of conventions at the *fin de siècle*, when the very basis of tradition in arts was under strong attack.