

Santa Fe CHAMBER MUSIC FESTIVAL

51ST SEASON

Sunday & Monday
6 p.m.

AUGUST 4 & 5

St. Francis Auditorium in the
New Mexico Museum of Art

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM by Eric Bromberger

GUSTAV MAHLER (1860–1911)
arr. Arnold Schoenberg/Rainer Riehn
(1874–1951)/(1941–2015)
Das Lied von der Erde (The Song of the Earth)
(1908–09; arr. 1921/1983)

In 1907, Mahler's world shattered around him. After serving for 10 brilliant years as the director of the Vienna Staatsoper—the most powerful position in the musical world but one that had brought him enmity, intrigue, and bitter criticism—Mahler resigned. On a family vacation that June, his four-year-old daughter, Maria, contracted scarlet fever and, after two agonizing weeks, died surrounded by her family. Mahler's young wife collapsed, and the doctor who was brought in to care for her also examined the composer and made a deadly discovery: Mahler had a serious heart lesion, a symptom of heart disease that would almost surely prove fatal. In the space of a few weeks, Mahler lost nearly everything: his position, one of his daughters, and his future.

At this moment of annihilation, Mahler struggled to regain a hold on life. To the young conductor Bruno Walter, he wrote: "Let me tell you . . . that I found myself face to face with nothingness, and now at the end of my life I am having to learn from the beginning how to walk and stand up."

Looking for consolation, Mahler turned to a book he'd been given called *The Chinese Flute*, an anthology of 83 eighth-century Chinese poems freely rendered in German by Hans

Bethge (1876–1946). Mahler was entranced by these poems and by their fusion of a sharp pleasure in life with a keen sense of loss and farewell, so he began to sketch songs based on some of them.

Mahler's doctors had warned him that if he didn't slow down the frantic pace of his life and conserve his strength, he would surely die. But Mahler plunged ahead with his work, assuming the directorship of The Metropolitan Opera in January 1908 and conducting that season and then returning to Europe to guest-conduct orchestras in Germany, Austria, and France. His wife, Alma, found the family a vacation house in Toblach, high in the Dolomites in northeastern Italy, and there, during the summer of 1908, in a high mountain valley thick with forests and ringed by rocky peaks, Mahler returned to his cycle of songs on ancient Chinese texts. He worked very fast: The cycle of six songs, scored for two singers and a huge orchestra and lasting nearly an hour, was completely sketched by September 1, a few weeks before he left for New York to begin his second season at The Met.

Mahler wasn't sure what to call his new work. At first, he thought of calling it "The Jade Flute," a title derived from Bethge's anthology, and then he considered a title that sprang directly from his own experience: "The Song of the Earth's Sorrow." Finally, he chose a more neutral—and more encompassing—title: *Das Lied von der Erde (The Song of the Earth)*. Several themes run through this cycle of six songs: mortality and the imminence of annihilating death; the beauty of

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the earth, which will bloom on forever no matter what happens to individual men and women; the sensual pleasures—however fleeting—of life on that earth; and a mood of bittersweet farewell, which climaxes in the long, final song.

Das Lied von der Erde opens with a drinking song, but this is a bitter one: “The Drinking Song of Earth’s Sorrow.” The music leaps to life with powerful horn fanfares, but these are instantly answered with jeering laughter, and the tone for the first song is set. The singer exclaims what will be a central theme: The earth will live on forever, but each man’s moment is very brief. This is a strophic song, and it has a bitter refrain that’s repeated three times: “Dunkel ist das Leben, ist der Tod” (“Dark is life, dark is death”). The song drives to its climax as the singer is confronted by a disturbing image of mortality—an ape crawling over tombstones in the moonlight—and the opening fanfares return to propel the song to its emphatic close on a blast of dark sound.

The second song, “Der Einsame im Herbst” (“The Lonely Man in Autumn”), introduces a second theme—loneliness—and the lean textures of the orchestra’s haunting prelude (lonely winds above a bare string line) mirror this musically. The song is full of images of loneliness and death—mists over a lake, petals falling from a flower, a guttering lamp—before swelling to an appeal for love and human contact. The orchestra’s postlude draws the song to a quiet close.

The next three songs are briefer and more relaxed. “Von der Jugend” (“Of Youth”) sings of sensual pleasures. Young men sit in a sunny pavilion drinking, talking, laughing, and writing verse; beneath them, the pond inverts the image of their pavilion on its still surface. This song is full of pentatonic melodies, and Mahler employs the delicate ring of a triangle. “Von der Schönheit” (“Of Beauty”) is a sort of companion piece to the previous song, which is now told from the point of view of young women. The women gather blossoms in the golden sunlight by a pond and talk happily; suddenly, a group of young men ride up, their horses’ hooves trampling the flowers as they pass, and the poem closes with a flash of passion. This is one of the finest songs in the cycle, moving from the delicacy of the young women’s music to the swagger of the young

men as they thunder past, and on to the breathless response of one of the women, which is cut off in mid-air. The delicacy of the opening returns, and the song glides to its elegant and graceful conclusion.

The fifth song, “Der Trunkene im Frühling” (“The Drunkard in Spring”), is a sort of comic counterpart to the grim opening song. It’s another drinking song, but here the drinker finds happiness (rather than bitter philosophy) in the glass and chooses to stay drunk rather than think. The sound of the chirping bird draws him back to the glass one more time, and the song drives to a ringing close.

Out of this sunny sound, Mahler launches the concluding song, “Der Abschied” (“The Farewell”), which is as long as the first five songs combined. It’s a superb transition: We move from a shining A-Major chord at the close of the fifth song to the deep, tolling sound of C Minor at the beginning of “Der Abschied,” and instantly we’re back in the cold mists that blew through the second song. This song, which combines two poems, brings together the themes of loneliness, beauty, and farewell. It’s also a “symphonic” movement in the best sense of that word: At the very beginning, Mahler introduces bits of themes—an oboe solo, a falling motif in a pair of clarinets, and others—and these evolve across the half-hour span of “Der Abschied,” which includes a long symphonic interlude—almost a funeral march—at its center. Images of loneliness, travel, and farewell pervade this climactic song, which, in its content, often feels reminiscent of Schubert’s songs about lonely and unfulfilled travelers. At its close, Mahler adds a few lines of his own—“The beloved earth everywhere blossoms and greens anew in springtime. Everywhere and forever distant places brighten blue . . . forever . . . forever. . .”—and “Der Abschied” fades into silence on the word *ewig* (“forever”) and on silvery brushes of the celeste.

Das Lied von der Erde is Mahler’s masterpiece. Although “face to face with nothingness,” he did, indeed, find a way “to walk and stand up.” Certainly he was aware that he’d written music of overwhelming impact—when he showed Bruno Walter the score, he asked: “Can this be endured at all?”

Mahler himself never heard a note of *Das Lied*. He died of heart failure in May 1911, three years after he finished composing the work and less than two months before he would have turned 51. Walter led the first performance six months later, in November 1911, in Munich.

A NOTE ON THIS EDITION: The version of *Das Lied von der Erde* being performed at this evening's concert is in large part the creation of Arnold Schoenberg. In February 1919, in Vienna, Schoenberg founded the Society for Private Musical Performances, which supported new music. Ticket prices were based on audience members' means; the press (and music critics) were excluded; and many orchestral works were performed either in versions for piano four-hands or for piano and chamber ensemble. The Society gave 117 concerts before it disbanded due to financial hardships following World War I.

Schoenberg was a passionate admirer of Mahler (who, in turn, had respected Schoenberg's music and supported him financially), and in the spring of 1921, 10 years after Mahler's death, Schoenberg made an arrangement of Mahler's *Songs of a Wayfarer* for a Society performance. That fall, he began an arrangement of *Das Lied von der Erde* for an ensemble of 13 players: flute (doubling piccolo), oboe (English horn), clarinet (E-flat and bass clarinet), bassoon, horn, string quartet, bass, piano/celeste, harmonium, and percussion. Schoenberg mainly completed the first movement before the Society collapsed, and then he set the work aside; the composer, conductor, and critic Rainer Riehn completed this arrangement in 1983 using Schoenberg's orchestration and approach.

Schoenberg decided to arrange *Das Lied* because he wanted the work to be performed. An arrangement for chamber ensemble loses the opulence and sonic impact of Mahler's original version, of course, but it brings a clarification of textures and a more effective balance between the singers and the orchestra, which prevents the vocal line from becoming submerged beneath the weight of a huge orchestra.

ERIC BROMBERGER earned his doctorate in American literature at UCLA and for 10 years taught literature and writing courses at Bates College and San Diego State University. Then he quit teaching to devote himself to his first love, music. Bromberger, a violinist, writes program notes for the San Diego Symphony, the La Jolla Music Society, San Francisco Performances, the University of Chicago Presents, Washington Performing Arts at The Kennedy Center, and many other organizations. He was a pre-concert lecturer for the Los Angeles Philharmonic for more than 20 seasons.

Due to unforeseen circumstances, horn player **Nathaniel Silberschlag** is unable to perform at the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival this summer. We look forward to welcoming him in a future season. We're grateful to **Philip Myers** for stepping in and performing at our August 4 & 5 concerts.

About the artist:

Philip Myers joined the New York Philharmonic as principal French horn in January 1980, and he retired from the orchestra in 2017. He made his solo debut during his first month with the Philharmonic in the world premiere of William Schuman's *Three Colloquies* for Horn and Orchestra, and he appeared as a soloist annually during his 37-year tenure. Myers began his orchestral career in 1971 with a three-year term as principal horn of the Atlantic Symphony Orchestra in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and he went on to serve as third horn for the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and principal horn for the Minnesota Orchestra. He earned two degrees from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, and he's currently working on a book about the performance of horn parts in Beethoven's nine symphonies. Myers plays Engelbert Schmid French horns.

