

BEETHOVEN VS. MAHLER
A BRIEF MUSING ON MAHLER'S "RETOUCHES" TO BEETHOVEN'S NINTH

For the ASO Chorus

by Jeffrey Baxter

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"Beethoven for the Hard-of-Hearing" is how I have often jokingly described the Mahler orchestration of the Beethoven Ninth Symphony. It's not really true, and Mahler is not the first to "retouch" Beethoven's Symphonies. Even Robert Shaw had his hand on the orchestration (though not as radically as Mahler), by doing such things as filling out the direction of a melodic line (or harmonic note out of range) in the horns – with the idea that the composer was more interested in the integrity of a line than the limitations of an early 19th century instrument.

Below is an excerpt from ASO Program Annotator Ken Meltzer's notes for our upcoming September 2011 concerts, with some background on Mahler's *Retuschen* [retouches] of the Beethoven:

Gustav Mahler and the Beethoven Ninth

Like Richard Wagner, composer Gustav Mahler both revered Beethoven's Ninth, and conducted the work on numerous occasions. But also like Wagner, Mahler perceived difficulties inherent in Beethoven's original orchestration. Both Wagner and Mahler believed that the limitations of the instruments of Beethoven's time compromised their ability to do justice to the composer's melodic intentions. Again according to Wagner and Mahler, the onset of the Beethoven's deafness only served to exacerbate this dilemma.

In his essay, *The Rendering of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony* (1873), Wagner discussed at great length his proposed solutions to these challenges. In an explanatory pamphlet distributed before a February, 1900, concert with the Vienna Philharmonic, Mahler cited Wagner's essay, and insisted: "the conductor of today's concert has followed precisely the same course, without, as far as the essential is concerned, trespassing beyond the limits set by Wagner."

Mahler's "retouches" of Beethoven's instrumentation involved the doubling of the piccolos, flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns and trumpets, and (in the first movement only) timpani. Mahler added a tuba as reinforcement to the lower-voiced instruments. Mahler also expanded the number of strings typical in Beethoven's time.

It seems almost nothing Gustav Mahler did was free of controversy. Mahler insisted he "was consistently and solely concerned with carrying out Beethoven's wishes even in seemingly insignificant details, and with ensuring that nothing the master intended should be sacrificed or drowned in a general confusion of sound." Nevertheless, many critics were scandalized by what they viewed as a heretical approach to a towering masterwork. With these performances, we are in the fortunate position of being able to judge for ourselves.

It is, as mentioned above, in the doubling of the timpani in Beethoven's first movement where I feel Mahler adds his greatest and most dramatic touch. -Specifically, in that movement's structural Recapitulation at measure 301, notable for Beethoven's use of a sustained drum roll by the timpani. Here Mahler adds a second timpanist (along with his additional wailing, doubled winds and beloved E-flat clarinet) to punctuate the unison descending phrase of the main theme (played by the enlarged string section). It was already a thunderous, heart-stopping moment in Beethoven's hand, but is taken to another level in Mahler's.

One other interesting (and typically Mahlerian) detail is the indication to begin the *Alla Marcia* section of the final movement (the "Turkish" march of ms. 331) offstage. It is similar to the effect Mahler evoked in the many offstage bands he utilized in his own Symphonies (namely the 2nd and 3rd).

One only wishes that Mahler had left us an indication (new metronome markings?) of how he as a conductor handled the overlapping tempi of sections in the finale of Beethoven's Ninth, such as:

1. the chorus' last two quarters of "Alle *Men-schen*" at ms. 832 in the old, fast tempo that coincides with the new, slower tempo of the solo-quartet's "cadenza" (a prominent feature in the first movement of Mahler's own 3rd Symphony), and
2. the famous final *Maestoso* of ms. 916 ("Toch----ter aus E-ly-si-um") and its relation to the ensuing *Prestissimo*.

I am thrilled to be hearing these Mahler "retouches" onstage with you, live, for the first time in Symphony Hall. Will they be too over-the-top? Do they enhance or detract from Beethoven's original intent?

Is it wrong for one to admit that he equally enjoys the wildly differing Beethoven-interpretations of conductors like John Eliot Gardiner and Leopold Stokowski? -And by extension, is it contradictory for someone like me to be a fan of both Ton Koopman (a "historically informed" approach) and Virgil Fox (a "Phantom of the Opera" approach) when it comes to Bach's organ music? I believe not, and here's why:

With music like that of a Beethoven or a Bach one is dealing with powerhouses of creative thought. So masterful is their combination of spirit (inspiration) and craft (perspiration) – where the head-and-heart worlds of opposites are so uniquely reconciled – that their works can sustain multiple approaches, viewpoints and even tinkering-with.

-And in the case of the Beethoven Ninth and Robert Shaw and Gustav Mahler, it is interesting to note that between 1886 and 1910 Gustav Mahler conducted this Beethoven Symphony ten times. I daresay Robert Shaw must have conducted or prepared the piece as much as four to five times that of Mahler, often with the ASO and its Chorus as the lucky participants onstage. That, combined with the many wonderful experiences with the piece we have shared in the past decade, has made the Ninth our "calling card," if you will.

What great excitement it is for us to come to this piece again, each time with new and fresh approaches from various conductors. What a joy knowing that some of you will be singing this for the first time, and some for what seems like the hundredth. What.... *Freude!*