Conflict and Alienation in Mahler's First: A Critical Analysis

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This article focuses on critically reviewing the current state of analysis of Gustav Mahler's First Symphony, with reference to score analysis of the work. This article presents the argument that the most coherent interpretation of the symphony can be drawn through analysing it specifically in relation to Adorno's theories on alienation, conflict, disintegration and truth in Mahler's symphonies. Many music historians have claimed that this symphony is most coherently interpreted as conveying the narrative of an heroic protagonist triumphing over adversity – this article argues, however, that the opposite of such a narrative is portrayed by the music of this symphony.

Mahler's symphonies have been extensively analysed in terms of their profound psychological impact, specifically, in relation to expressions of violent or disturbing ideas such as child death, decay, isolation and alienation. However, for all the existing analyses of Mahler's symphonies, there is surprisingly little analysis of violence, despair and psychological prompting in his First Symphony. Historical and contemporary analysis of the First does not, across various academic texts, reach consistent conclusions. Often analyses suggest this is an uncharacteristic work for Mahler. Sometimes, it is suggested that the key interest of analysis for this symphony lies in viewing it as a template for later works.[1] This study will examine some of the potential reasons why various analyses reach inconsistent conclusions, and have ascribed traits to the First that seem uncharacteristic in relation to Mahler's other symphonies. More importantly, this article concludes that the First instead exemplifies some of the musical characteristics which have been considered definitive of Mahler's symphonic writing since Theodor Adorno wrote *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy* ('*AMP* henceforth): musical expressions of violence and alienation.

For the purposes of this article, the idea of violence being expressed through music refers

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[1] N. Cardus, *Gustav Mahler: His Mind and his Music* (London, 1965), 53-54.

to Adorno's ideas on the capacity Mahler's music has to 'enrage those who have made their peace with the world by reminding them of what they must exorcise.'[2] In other words, Mahler can remind an audience of what is wrong in the world, whether they expect to be reminded or not. His music regularly subverts classical expectations, often expressing powerfully distressing ideas, such as child death and alienation. This article explores the means by which he does this in the First. Central to this analysis has been Adorno's *AMP*, a book described as crucially shaping the critical understanding of Mahler's music since it was published.[3] Adorno's writing on Mahler expresses central ideas in this analysis of the music: the idea of 'terror' in the Finale of the First[4], and the use of irony in his musical storytelling[5]. This article utilises many of Adorno's ideas on Mahler's use of motifs, tone and the orchestra, and applies them specifically to analysis of the First.

'THROUGH ADVERTSITY TO THE STARS'

Beethoven has been credited with defining the form of the modern symphony.[6] Beethoven's 'personal motto' was, reportedly, '*per aspera ad astra*' ('through adversity to the stars').[7] This has become a recurring idea in score analysis: the description of the symphony in terms of a '*per aspera ad astra* narrative. Essentially, through the use of dominant and subsidiary themes, sonata forms within the movements, and return to the tonic key by the final movement, the music supposedly represents triumph over adversity. Constantin Floros asserts that this 'motto' is fundamental to analysis of the First, describing the 'idea of transcendence and overcoming suffering' as the 'basis' for the symphony.[8] Due to a determination to fit the '*per aspera ad astra*' narrative onto analysis of almost any symphony since Beethoven, there has been a common bias amongst music historians to interpret some kind of message about triumph over

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[2] T. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy* (Chicago, 1992), 5.

[3] J. Johnson, 'The Breaking of the Voice' (2011) 8 *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, 179.

[4] T. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy* (Chicago, 1992), 118.

[5] Ibid, p.96.

[6] C. Dahlhaus, Nineteenth-Century Music (California: 1989), 265, and A. David, Beethoven's Influence on *Modern Musical Thought* (2007),
http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1010&context=ugrs, 4.

[7] J. Holly, *A Presentation on the Life and Music of Ludwig van Beethoven* (2013),
http://www.slideshare.net/jpholly/beethoven-27224139, 9.

[8] C. Floros, *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies* (Cambridge, 1993), 141.

adversity in whatever symphony is in question, if remotely possible. Arguably, this bias is partly responsible for the inconsistent conclusions repeatedly drawn about Mahler's First.

This article presents an interpretation of Mahler's First as shaped and dominated by ideas of violence, conflict and fear: contrary to regular descriptions of the ending as 'triumphant'[9], it ends on an ironic and aggressive note.

DEVELOPMENT OF MOTIFS

A central point in the argument for an interpretation of the First as a violent and ironic piece is to focus on Mahler's use of motifs within the symphony. They have already been analysed by writers including Mitchell, Floros, Barford and Lea, but this article offers an alternate analysis that casts the overall 'meaning' of the symphony in a different light to their various conclusions.[10]
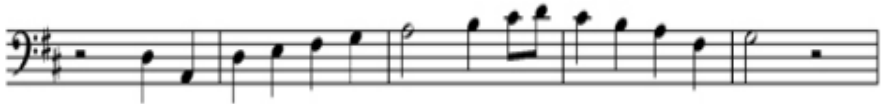
Fig.1 – First movement, cellos (bars 62-66).

Fig.1 is typically characterised as one of the principal 'Nature' themes in the first movement, presented as a significant piece of evidence supporting interpretations of this symphony as telling the story of a youthful, heroic protagonist triumphing over adversity.[11] Apart from it simply being a lyrical melody in a major key, the reason most frequently presented in favour of this motif characterising the first movement to set a scene of 'spring, happy dreams'[12] is that the melody line is taken directly from *Ging heut' heut' Morgen übers Feld* ('I walked across the fields this morning'), the second in Mahler's earlier song cycle, *Lieder Eines Fahrenden Gesellen* ('Songs of a Wayfarer'). The song this melody originates from concerns a protagonist walking through various

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[9] P. Barford, *Mahler Symphonies and Songs* (London, 1970), 19.

[10] D. Mitchell, *Gustav Mahler: The Wunderhorn Years* (London, 1975), 152.

[11] P. Barford, *Mahler Symphonies and Songs* (London, 1970), 19.

[12] http://www.good-music-guide.com/reviews/111-mahler-1-intro.htm (2012).

pleasant pastoral settings, admiring the world around him. The first verse is:

Ging heut morgen übers Feld,	*I walked across the fields this morning;*
Tau noch auf den Gräsern hing;	*dew still hung on every blade of grass.*
Sprach zu mir der lust'ge Fink:	*The merry finch spoke to me,*
"Ei du! Gelt? Guten Morgen! Ei gelt?	*"Hey! Isn't it? Good morning! Isn't it?*
Du! Wird's nicht eine schöne Welt?	*You! Isn't it becoming a fine world?*
Zink! Zink! Schön und flink!	*Chirp! Chirp! Fair and sharp!*
Wie mir doch die Welt gefällt!"	*How the world delights me!"*[13]

Lyrics such as this from the original song might initially support the interpretation of the first movement as conveying a pleasant, pastoral setting as the opening for a hero-based symphonic narrative. However, this interpretation overlooks both the original context of *Ging heut' Morgen übers Feld* within the song cycle, and its re-placing within the context of the symphony. The song itself is originally from a context in which the exploration and enjoyment of nature is being sought as an escape and distraction from torment (of unrequited love). After exploring the beauty and happiness nature has to offer, the song ends with the protagonist declaring, 'Now will my happiness also begin? No, no – the happiness I mean can never bloom!' Raymond Knapp interprets the beautiful, happy imagery present in this song in relation to the singer's detachment and misery, describing how, 'the cuckoo's call [in the music accompanying the singer] has become a taunt, representing the merriment of others from which the singer is estranged...'[14] Placing the song Mahler has chosen to quote in its original context supports the idea that there is something lacking in the interpretation of the first movement as straightforwardly presenting a 'true spring atmosphere' and 'poetically perceived forest idyll.'[15]

Furthermore, this interpretation ignores analysis of Mahler's placing of this melody in

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[14] R. Knapp, *Symphonic Metamorphoses: Subjectivity and Alienation in Mahler's Re-Cycled Songs* (Connecticut 2003), 155.

[15] Quotation from a review by August Beer, referenced in C. Floros *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies* (Cambridge, 1993), 31.

the context of the symphony as a whole. Knapp makes the point that, 'The exposition of the first movement consists entirely of material either taken directly or obviously derived from *Ging heut' Morgen*, elaborated, however, within a somewhat different narrative arc and standing in a somewhat different relationship to its surroundings...'[16] The theme is first heard emerging in the cellos from the shimmering harmonic As and cuckoo-calls of the opening. It is the first decidedly major theme to appear in the symphony, but it does so against a backdrop of dissonance, distorted cuckoo-calls and a 'crawling chromatic theme' (see Fig.5). It also recurs at bars 188-196 of the first movement, beneath the opening 'descending fourths motif' (Fig.3), which adds an unsettling, dissonant element, undermining its major tone. The first movement does appear to depict 'the awakening of nature.'[17] However, to conclude this is an expression of something wholly positive seems questionable, given the ironic detachment from nature described in the original song, and the context of its symphonic re-positioning. It is worth noting that Mahler is well known for exploring the decidedly negative aspects of nature – in *Kindertotenlieder* ('Songs for the death of children'), frequent references and analogies are made using features of the natural environment, such as storms and sunny hillsides, in conveying the grief, horror and denial of the narrator. 'Nature' is not a term which carries entirely positive, 'idyllic' connotations, and there is no evidence to suggest this was the case for Mahler. This leads onto analysis of one of the most frequently analysed motifs in the First, the 'Cuckoo-call.'

Fig.2 – 'Cuckoo-call' Motif (at bar 25 in the oboe).

Neville Cardus describes how, 'Mahler sinned… against the classical habit by adapting the poetically descending fourth to a cuckoo call… in its context it sounds unmistakably

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[16] R. Knapp, *Symphonic Metamorphoses: Subjectivity and Alienation in Mahler's Re-Cycled Songs* (Connecticut 2003), 155.

[17] Ibid, 156.

like a cuckoo-call; yet from time immemorial the call had been musically represented by the interval of a third… The interval of the fourth is the main germ-cell from which the entire work evolves.'[18] Reiterated throughout the entire symphony, the opening 'cuckoo-call' is one of the crucial moments in setting the tone for the symphony. It marks Mahler's unique approach to a 'classical' idea (the cuckoo-call as part of a pastoral music setting), and its recurrence, with relatively little development or alteration over the course of the symphony, marks a striking continuity of ideas. The only movement not to contain this motif in the original score was the 'Blumine' – Mitchell and Floros present various suggestions relating to negative reviews as Mahler's reasons for dropping this movement from the symphony after the first three performances, but perhaps he also felt it lacked a unity with the rest of the symphony, as the only movement not built on the 'germ-cell' of the fourth.

Cardus is amongst the only writers not to share the view that the 'cuckoo call' motif represents solely pleasant nature sounds: rather it can be interpreted as a sinister theme which pursues the listener throughout the music through to the final movement. Cardus refers to the motif as a 'villain,' describing how, 'Not until we come to a flash-back in the Finale do we hear again the cuckoo's fourth… The chromatic motif takes charge in the next movement as the villain of the piece: a smiling villain, sometimes.'[19] Score analysis supports this idea, as on multiple occasions when the fourth occurs, a disturbing or aggressive twist is added to the music. For example, as it opens the first movement, it creates a repeated dissonance against the backdrop of harmonic As, undermining the stillness of the opening, whilst its opening of the third movement is the beginning of a funeral march from the timpani. Cardus comments that the symphony 'might well be called the 'apotheosis of the fourth',[20] as the interval is so crucial in the development of nearly every recurring theme and motif throughout. For example, it is used in creating a strong and definite link between the beginning of the first movement with the latter section of the final movement:

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[18] N. Cardus, *Gustav Mahler: His Mind and his Music* (London, 1965), 39.
[19] Ibid, 45.
[20] Ibid, 39.

Fig.3 – Opening descending fourths, bars 18-21 (descending fourths first heard in bar 3).
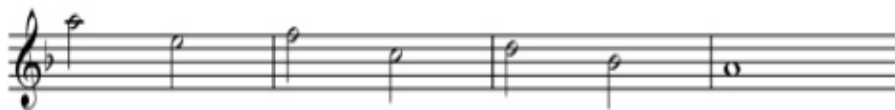

Fig.4 – 'Chorale' theme, fourth movement, bars 388-391.

Philip Barford describes how, 'The Finale is thematically related to the first movement, and after preliminary shrieks of despair soon settles down to develop a figure developed from it… Also important is the triumphant chorale theme, finally blasted out on trombones. This obviously derives from the descending fourths of the first movement, and reveals the underlying unity of invention linking the beginning and ending of the Symphony.'[21] Whilst Barford's general analysis of the First seems inconsistent, the 'underlying unity' he attributes to the symphony appears particularly apparent in a study of the development of the melodies based on fourths. In the above examples, Mahler takes the first melodic idea we hear in the musical work (a series of descending fourths which first appears in bar 3 of the symphony, above a static background of harmonic As), and reiterates the pattern right at the end of the final movement, only altering the relation slightly between the final three notes, so that there is a moment of resolution as the phrase ends by rising a fourth. The manner in which he has adapted the theme for this point in the fourth movement certainly gives the phrase a more positive, major ending, which Barford and Mitchell interpret as evidence for the overall 'triumph' of the Finale. However, whilst it is fair to acknowledge that the twist given to the recurrence of this musical phrase in the Finale gives it a more triumphant tone, the impulse to subscribe to the '*per aspera ad astra*' narrative seems reductive and damaging

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[21] P. Barford, *Mahler Symphonies and Songs* (London, 1970), 20.

to more rigorous interpretative possibilities of the symphony. A more plausible argument is that the most blatant and frequently reiterated expressions of 'triumph' in the Finale may be analysed as some of the strongest evidence in support of the interpretation of the First as making an ironic and bitter expression of joy. Analysis of the ideas as potentially being represented by the recurring fourth themes leads to the conclusion that, if there is genuine triumph in the Finale, then it is not that of an heroic protagonist, but rather of what has been pursuing him throughout the music.

Fig.5 – 'Crawling' chromatic figure, first movement, bars 47-51.

Whilst there are inconsistencies with the interpretative conclusions drawn by Cardus, his evocative description of the 'crawling' chromatic motif is useful. His analysis of its role in the first movement (and the symphony as a whole) is convincing: 'While the bugles and cuckoos are echoing in the prelude, a chromatic figure crawls up from the depths of the cellos and basses... The triplet, here surreptitious and hidden, becomes a snarling protagonist in the Finale.'[22] He highlights links between the first and fourth movements, and though this study finds this a particularly important moment in the development and recurrence of motifs within the symphony, Cardus, having drawn specific attention to it, goes on to treat it as an apparently irrelevant feature to the overall tone of the final movement. He describes at length the various ways in which violence and disintegration are conveyed in the music, in particular with a description of the fourth movement:

> Pandemonium, a dissonant chord (C, F, A flat, B, D flat) screaming in the wind; and an up-and-down rush of strings, with a signal... and a chromatic snarl... The triplet, born of the passive but potentially chromatic visitant to the symphony's introduction, has become a

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[22] N. Cardus, *Gustav Mahler: His Mind and his Music* (London, 1965), 40.

violent and actual protagonist.[23]

He even notes how features that he described as 'mournful' and 'menacing' in the first movement[24] recur in the fourth: 'the nature tune in D minor, cuckoo calls, the rising chromatic intrusion, bugle calls'. After these descriptions, however, his analysis seems to simply ignore any overall relevance these aspects could have to an interpretation of a musical narrative, and postulates:

> …at its crisis in a fanfare of intensely energetic jubilation the symphony clinchingly sounds the triumphant apotheosis… in which the fairly fruitful interval of the fourth has the last word or chime, which goes on rather too long. Mahler… never could make an end without emphasis.[25]

This conclusion of the Finale as triumphant and jubilant seems in contradiction to almost all of Cardus's musical analysis that has preceded it, in particular his assertion that the interval of a fourth is now heard as a positive final moment. This ignores the fact that at most of the other moments he has observed its appearance, it has undermined major melodies or has been directly tied in with unambiguously minor themes, such as in the timpani part of the opening funeral march of the third movement. His conclusion that the 'emphasis' and 'rather too long' nature of the ending is simply an odd character trait in Mahler ignores the possibility of the emphasised length of the Finale as a deliberate gesture. In later works such as *Um Mitternacht*, Mahler has frequently been interpreted as making use of musical irony[26], in particular through use of repeating an ending so emphatically that it gives the impression of it as undermining itself through sheer insistence. Johnson describes Mahlerian endings as often being as parodies of a triumphant finish.[27] Barford suggests that the insistent repetition of the Finale can be interpreted as conveying 'a rather desperate and simple-minded heroism.'[28]

Adorno suggests that 'the idea of disintegration' is prevalent in Mahler's writing, including the First, although *AMP* does not focus on any particular symphony at length.

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[23] Ibid.
[24] N. Cardus, *Gustav Mahler: His Mind and his Music,* 41.
[25] Ibid, 53.
[26] S. Downes, *After Mahler: Britten, Weill, Henze and Romantic Redemption* (Cambridge 2013), 43-44.
[27] J. Johnson, *Mahler's Voices: Expression and Irony in the Songs and Symphonies* (Oxford 2009), 285.
[28] P. Barford, *Mahler Symphonies and Songs* (London, 1970), 19.

Taking this idea of disintegration in the music and applying it to an analysis of motifs in the First draws conclusions which are more consistent both with broader interpretations of a narrative within the symphony, and with viewing the work as entirely characteristic of Mahler's writing. Adorno says this on disintegration within the First:

> The idea of disintegration is announced oddly in the third movement of the First Symphony. In its sections in canon it is, in its simple way, more intricately woven than most of Mahler's earlier works. By parodying the canon's dogmatic aspect, it negates it; that is why it allows remote colors like the solo double bass and the tuba that carries the melody to become prominent in a way that must have sounded scurrilous at the time. The disintegrating tendency then overtakes the movement in shock moments such as the sudden acceleration. At the same time the movement... becomes static, superimposing strata on each other; its striking originality is produced by the unity of the disorganized and the significant.[29]

Here, he closely relates the idea of disintegration to techniques in instrumentation and structure, but it may be argued that the recurrence and development of the various fourth motifs throughout the symphony should be viewed as also being integral to the expressions of disintegration. Initially serving to subvert classical expectations for the 'cuckoo-call' figure in a nature setting, the interval is repeatedly heard undermining major themes and dominant melodies throughout every movement of the symphony, causing a disintegrating effect on its surroundings. Descending fourths open the first movement, repeatedly creating a dissonance against a backdrop of harmonic As, thus suggesting from the offset that the 'nature' scene-setting is not an unambiguously idyllic environment. The *Ländler* melody from the second movement is built on intervals of a fourth between E and B, sabotaging the attempted moments of resolution from the melody's major third intervals. The entire funeral march from the third movement is built on a slow, recurring fourth brought in by the timpani, creating tonal uncertainty beneath both the distorted nursery rhyme and the 'fast and grotesque dance'[30] of the movement. The fourth movement, as discussed, constantly sees its 'triumphant' themes undermined and interrupted by recurrences of dissonant motifs from the first movement.

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[29] T. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy* (Chicago, 1992), 124.
[30] N. Lebrecht, *Why Mahler? How one man and ten symphonies changed the world* (London, 2010), 57.

Contrary to terming the First unusually positive and 'uncharacteristic' of Mahler, Adorno identifies it as containing some of the earliest examples of a compositional strategy and structural technique to become a defining trait in Mahler's writing: 'So early does the disintegrating tendency thus enter the procedure of composition.'[31]

Part of the recurring problem in much of the analysis of the First is the pervading idea that to acknowledge the negativity in Mahler's First would mean rejecting any elements of the positive. In agreement with Adorno, this study argues that accepting the negative, the expressions of horror and decay in his music, is essential to understanding the positive and affirming in Mahler. Adorno denies that Mahler's symphonies 'exist in a simple positive sense, as something granted to the participants as a reward,' arguing that, 'on the contrary, whole complexes want to be taken negatively – one should listen, as it were against them.'[32] He quotes Erwin Ratz as saying of Mahler's symphonies, 'We see an alternation of positive and negative situations.'[33] These are particularly relevant points in relation to the First. It seems undeniable that there are positive themes throughout the symphony (such as much of the 'nature' setting of the first movement and the moments of resolution in the 'chorale' theme of the fourth), but the tendency to assume that these positive aspects must either triumph over or be devoid of any negativity seems to fundamentally misunderstand Mahler's work. It is unsurprising that various theorists have put the label of 'uncharacteristic'[34] on this symphony when analysing it with such a view. The positive aspects in the music only seem uncharacteristic of Mahler when viewed through the lens of a '*per aspera ad astra*' narrative, as 'simple-minded heroism' winning out over adversity. This interpretation requires that analysis either ignores the prevalence and positioning in the music of the 'disintegrating' fourth motifs, as that of Floros and Mitchell, or that it comes to inconsistent conclusions, as that of Barford and Cardus. A more consistent interpretation, which takes into account the development of the motifs in relation to Adorno's ideas on disintegration, can be found in interpreting the symphony as conveying an overall message in almost direct contradiction to the '*per aspera ad astra*' narrative: that of a character, not a straightforward hero, struggling against and ultimately being defeated by his surroundings. Adorno comments on Mahlerian

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[31] T. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy* (Chicago, 1992), 124.

[32] Ibid, 125.

[33] T. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy,* 125.

[34] L. M. Smoley, *Gustav Mahler's Symphonies: Critical Commentary on Recordings Since 1986* (Westport 1996), 7.

narratives:

> How much Mahler's intrinsic musical negativity runs counter to the enthusiastic program of Berlioz or Liszt is shown by the fact that Mahlerian novels have no heroes and honor none... one will look in vain for the figure who is supposed to be smitten by fate.[35]

The most plausible interpretation of the overall narrative of the First is that it is an ironic inversion of the '*per aspera ad astra*' concept. One of the most important elements of the standard '*per aspera ad astra*' narrative is that of Fate as an ultimately positive driving force, and that triumphing over adversity is the natural, glorious fate of the heroic protagonist. Mahler, through his compositional techniques of collapse and disintegration, conveys an ironic twist on this narrative in the First. Fate is depicted as negative and inescapable in the pursuing and ultimately triumphant fourth intervals and chromatic motifs; the triumph of the Finale is in the defeat of the outsider protagonist by his violent and hostile world.

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[35] T. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy* (Chicago, 1992), 126.

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