



Musical Treasure Chest #18

I watched avidly for shooting stars last week until my neck ached. The Perseid meteor shower is one of my beloved celestial events, and I try to always spend a few evenings in mid-August gazing into the heavens with the hope of seeing one. It's funny, I stare and stare and am ready to call it a night, then I catch sight of one, and resume staring and staring, rather like a gambler winning a bit of his money back at cards and then betting more. But there is something so exciting about seeing a shooting star blaze across the sky.

Somehow thinking of the heavens that way reminds of **Gustav Mahler**. A few years ago I went on a Mahler trek to Austria, to visit all of his summer composing huts—the places where so much of his composition happened. This trip was extremely special and offered insights to Mahler's life in a way that reading books alone cannot quite do. There are three sites, but only two are truly worth seeing, as the first has been turned into an RV park! The "hut" near Klagenfurt, Austria, where he worked from 1900-1907 and the last "hut" near Toblach in South Tyrol, which he used from 1908-1910, are both incredible for many reasons. And to stand in the very rooms where he created his fifth symphony and *Lied von der Erde* makes shivers go up my spine.

Mahler was one of the great conductors of the late 1800s and the first decade of the 1900s. His repertory, particularly operatic, was so vast as to defy belief. He conducted hundreds of different operas and could learn the musical scores very quickly. I counted up one time the number of different operas he conducted during one partial season at the Wiener Staatsoper in the late 1890s: from August to

beginning of December he was on the podium for nearly 40 different productions! Can you imagine? These operas spanned from Beethoven to Wagner to brand new works. But all of this conducting activity left no time for composing, so early in his career, Mahler began to rent houses in the Alps during the summer and devote himself to composition. The music poured out of him during these months. He would start early in the morning, then after lunch take a four or five hour hike, then return and compose well into the evening. Standing in these *häuschen* and taking in the sweeping, stunning vista of the Alps, I began to understand the vastness of his compositions and the magnificence of their orchestration. He was musically assimilating all that was around him; every peak and valley, every crystalline lake, and every aspect of their immensity and grandeur.

Before my Mahler pilgrimage, I admired and loved his music, but after experiencing Maiernigg and Toblach, his huge percussion sections with their cow bells made sense. Mahler once wrote that he used these bells because they are "the last greeting from earth to penetrate the remote solitude of the mountain peaks." My trip to Austria coincided with the *bauernherbst fest*, an autumn festival where the cows are brought down from the Alpine meadows to winter in barns. Each farmer's cow has a special bell with its own recognizable ring. And each cow's milk is unique depending on which grasses it fed on. Hiking through the mountains and hearing the tintinnabulation of the herd's bells, I suddenly understood exactly what Mahler meant: these are the last sounds from man traveling up to heaven. It is a beautiful, inspiring, magical image.

I would happily share with you any of the Mahler symphonies or song cycles, but that is a many week listening endeavor, so I picked the symphony I played while in Austria, the 4th. In some ways, this is his chamber symphony, more lightly scored and more delicate than the others. But it is an incredible piece, a subtle work, for a composer who is not often so nuanced. He described this symphony as "childishly simple and quite unself-conscious." I think he misleads us a bit with this, and there is much more below the surface than his words imply. A three movement instrumental piece with the fourth movement an extended vocal scene for soprano and orchestra.

The text is taken from a favorite source of Mahler, the *Knaben Wunderhorn*. Here

is the opening stroph:

We enjoy heavenly pleasures
and therefore avoid the earthly stuff.

No worldly tumult
is to be heard in heaven.

All live in greatest peace.

We lead angelic lives,
yet have a merry time of it besides.

We dance and we spring,

We skip and we sing.

[Saint Peter](#) in heaven looks on.

This YouTube recording is by Claudio Abbado and the Lucerne Festival Orchestra. Abbado is a great Mahler interpretator, and you only have to look at the faces of the string players to see how much they enjoy working with him.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnfhInZLmUQ>

The pictures below were taken by me on my Mahler expedition! The one on the left is the composer's hut in Maiernigg, where Symphony No 4 was completed. The one on the right is the view from his hut in Toblach.

