

# “I have tried to capture you . . .”: Rethinking the “Alma” Theme from Mahler’s Sixth Symphony

SETH MONAHAN

My mother Alma was a legend. And legends are very hard to destroy.<sup>1</sup>

For students of her first husband’s life and works, Alma Mahler-Werfel is not merely a “legend,” as her daughter describes—though she is most certainly that. She is also a purveyor of legends, an essayist whose evocative and often sensational writings have profoundly shaped our understanding of Gustav Mahler the man and musician. Among the most enduring and influential of these “legends” is one that first appeared in her memoirs, twenty-nine years after Mahler’s death. There, Alma takes us back to a day in the summer of 1904, when her husband revealed that his newest symphony—his so-called “Tragic” Sixth—would contain a special tribute to her. “After he had finished the first movement,” she writes, “Mahler came down from the woods and said ‘I have tried to capture you in a theme; I do not know whether I have been successful. You will have to put up with it.’”<sup>2</sup> This tribute, we learn, was only the first of several such portraits. Alongside her own likeness (in the first movement’s “soaring” secondary theme), the Sixth would also depict their children (in the Scherzo’s metrically irregular trios) and the composer himself, as the ill-fated hero of the finale.

For three generations, critics have more or less taken Alma at her word. Though Mahler vehemently stressed the music’s “absolute” (i.e., nonprogrammatic) status, his enthusiasts quickly elevated Alma’s account of secret domestic portraiture to the level of a canonical paratext—a kind of “virtual program” to compensate for the one the composer withheld. So vigorous was this adoption that by the end of the twentieth century, the symphony’s “autobiographical” basis was, in many circles, simply taken for granted. And

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1. Anna Mahler, quoted in Monson, *Alma Mahler, Muse to Genius*, xv.

2. Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Erinnerungen und Briefe*, translation from Floros, *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies*, 163.

the legend of the “Alma theme,” as it came to be known, had long become a staple of journalistic and academic commentary alike.<sup>3</sup>

In a number of respects, though, the persistence of the legend is surprising, since Alma’s memoirs have routinely come under fire for their inaccuracies and embellishments.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, two of the three portraits she asserts vis-à-vis the Sixth are partly or entirely fabricated. When the Scherzo was composed in 1903, Mahler’s older daughter had just been born and the younger one had not yet been conceived—so much for the Trio’s “tottering” toddlers.<sup>5</sup> And while Mahler himself hinted that the work’s harsh tone reflected a variety of past ordeals,<sup>6</sup> Alma’s image of the composer prophetically depicting his own “downfall” in the finale’s hammer blows is clearly more the stuff of myth than of credible biography.<sup>7</sup> Thus of the three ostensible renderings mentioned in the *Erinnerungen*, only one—that of the author herself—is even potentially legitimate. And still we cannot be sure.

But if so many aspects of Alma’s legendary anecdote are implausible or inaccurate, and if her account of the “virtual program” is (uniquely among Mahler’s canonical paratexts) uncorroborated by the composer himself, are we not perhaps better off setting aside the entire autobiographic subtext as counterfeit, or at least as too problematic for serious consideration? A few noteworthy Mahlerians, including the conductor Pierre Boulez and the editor of Mahler’s critical edition, Reinhold Kubik, have done just that, pointedly rejecting Alma’s domestic vignettes as meddling postmortem accretions

3. Just to be clear: while it is true that much of Mahler’s music is generally heard as hyperpersonal and thus broadly confessional or “autobiographical,” the Sixth has been singled out for self-depiction of a different, more explicitly programmatic order. This shift of emphasis is evident, for instance, in Floros’s claim that “the Sixth takes its place [alongside Tchaikovsky’s Sixth and Strauss’s *Ein Heldenleben* and *Sinfonia Domestica*] . . . among the great symphonic works that have been autobiographically conceived”; *Mahler: The Symphonies*, 162. Floros’s comments—which were iconoclastic in the late 1970s but which anticipated more recent hermeneutic discourse—stand apart from more generalized, innocuous expressions of the “autobiography” trope, like Richard Specht’s effusion that Mahler’s works, *en masse*, “form a great autobiography” (*Gustav Mahler*, 171); or, more recently, Banks and Mitchell’s image of the mature Mahler becoming “the program of his own symphonies” (“Gustav Mahler,” 134).

4. Laments over Alma’s unreliability are now standard fare; see for instance Kennedy, *Mahler*, 68–69, or Carr, *Mahler: A Biography*, 106–7, 114. The charge to overcome Alma’s “distortions” of the historical record was led in the late 1960s by the eminent biographer Henry-Louis de La Grange (“Mahler: A New Image”).

5. Sue Taylor has proposed an alternative autobiographical reading of the Scherzo, whose plot she hears paralleling that of Brentano’s *Gockel, Hinkel and Gackeleia*, which Alma claims Mahler read to his daughter during the summer of 1904; “Mahler’s *Symphonia Domestica*.”

6. Röllner, *Die Bildnisse von Gustav Mahler*, 24.

7. This quotation and the one prior (“tottering”) from Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*, 70. Regarding the accuracy of Alma’s anecdotes, it is surely relevant, as de La Grange has recently discovered, that the two pages in Alma’s memoirs that discuss the Sixth Symphony were written some time after the rest of the manuscript (which itself dates to around 1920). De La Grange suggests that the pages may have been written considerably later, “when her memory was often at fault”; *Mahler*, Vol. 4, *A New Life Cut Short (1907–1911)*, 1586.

rather than true authorial paratexts.<sup>8</sup> But these responses are exceptional. Notwithstanding the memoirs’ other inaccuracies, the story of the Alma theme has shown remarkable staying power. Nowadays, even writers normally dubious of Alma’s agenda will tend to rehearse the story of her supposed symphonic embodiment without skepticism or disclaimers.<sup>9</sup> For many, it would seem, the image of a domestically imprinted Sixth makes enough intuitive sense that its shaky anecdotal foundations can be overlooked and its progenitor granted, perhaps grudgingly, the benefit of the doubt.

So far, so good. But I would argue that the truly interesting question is not whether one merely accepts or rejects Alma’s anecdote. Rather, what attracts me are the hermeneutic ends to which Alma’s claims, once embraced, might be used. What, for instance, should it mean for our understanding of the Sixth to accept that Mahler was compelled—this one time only, and seemingly against his own aesthetic precepts—to “capture” another person in symphonic form (and his new wife, no less)? How might we respond to the tendency among Mahler’s contemporaries to hear the theme in question as mawkish and derivative (or to the telling omission of such judgments in post-Alma criticism)? And what, above all, should be made of the portrait’s inclusion in so bitterly cynical a work? What kind of hearings might follow from so perplexing a merger of the tragic and the domestic?

Such questions have rarely been asked in earnest. For as much as critics have been open to the idea of a spousal portrait (and thus a degree of domestic subtext), they have also tended to limit its interpretive relevance, in terms of both breadth and depth. In practice, the Alma theme is usually framed as an ephemeral programmatic tableau, something separate from the work’s central tragic narrative and lacking greater ramifications for the symphony’s overall meaning. And those local meanings that *are* ascribed tend to be sentimental and affectively narrow, reflecting a naively romanticized view of Mahler’s marriage. The theme’s first appearance, we so often read, is a “passionate” tribute to the composer’s newfound nuptial bliss, while its frenzied apotheosis at the movement’s conclusion celebrates a symbolic “triumph of love over adversity.”<sup>10</sup> Such straightforwardly affirmational hearings are problematic, though, in that they beg the very questions I posed above as central; while paying lip service to the work’s nuptial subtext, they scarcely pursue it in any depth,

8. Boulez, Interview with Wolfgang Schauffer; Kubik, Liner notes for Mahler, Symphony No. 6, p. 5.

9. See for instance Kennedy, *Mahler*, 141; and de La Grange, *Mahler*, Vol. 3, *Vienna: Triumph and Disillusion (1904–1907)*, 822.

10. Del Mar, *Mahler’s Sixth Symphony*, 40. Depictions of the theme as “passionate” are ubiquitous in late twentieth-century writing; see, for instance, Commanday, “David Zinman and S.F. Symphony Take On Mahler’s Sixth”; Cooke, Liner notes for Mahler, Symphony No. 6; Mitchell, “Mahler’s Sixth Symphony: Triumph in Tragedy,” 2; Feder, *Gustav Mahler: A Life in Crisis*, 124; Kosman, “Symphony Storms Through Mahler’s Sixth”; Ledbetter “Program notes for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, 2008”; Millington, “Mahler: Symphonies Nos. 6–8,” 4; and Tommasini, “Ways that Maazel Knows His Mahler.”

preferring a safe recycling of journalistic bromides to a risky confrontation with the work's most provocative riddles.

I believe we can do better than this. The Alma portrait and its attendant conundrums both merit and reward our most concerted critical energies, as they light the way to valuable new perspectives on the Sixth. Thus my purpose in this study is to reopen the question of the symphony's nuptial subtext in a way that does justice to what I see as the work's leading structural and semantic complexities. I will argue that unguarded acceptance of Alma's portraiture claim, along with a rose-colored view of the Mahlers' marriage (itself propagated by Alma's memoirs), has led to skewed hearings of the theme itself and of the domestic program it serves. More specifically, I will hold that the clichéd image of the Alma music as a simple tribute to matrimonial ardor is gravely one-sided and can be discarded in favor of more nuanced hearings that (1) more closely engage the work's narrative, topical, and intertextual features; (2) adequately confront the troubled nature of Mahler's marriage in 1903–4; and (3) seek out a more integrated understanding of the symphony's tragic and domestic dimensions. This last element is key. Over the years, critics have heard a range of tragic allegories in the Sixth: the composer's own foreshadowed demise, the destruction of a heroic everyman, a vision of the coming World Wars, or the self-destruction of bourgeois musical institutions.<sup>11</sup> In what follows, I hope to show that we can add another: that of an imagined *domestic tragedy*—a play of irreconcilable gender clashes, disenchantments, and denials, of beleaguered consciences, sanctuaries collapsed, and the unraveling of anticipated bliss.

My essay falls into four broad sections. The first begins by considering various key aspects of the Alma theme itself—its character, its design, and the hermeneutic implications that follow from these—while also tracing that music's curious and checkered reception history, both before and after Alma's appropriation. Section two provides some crucial biographical background by looking closely at Mahler's marriage at the time the Sixth was written, aiming to dispel a number of stubborn misconceptions about his marital life and its relation to his work. The third section then returns to the Sixth to explore

11. Stefan Hanheide argues that the Sixth, along with Mahler's various "soldier songs," can be read as "premonitions" of Europe's twentieth-century political tragedies (*Mahlers Vision vom Untergang*). The image of Mahler as apocalyptic prophet also surfaces in Adorno's writings ("the Jew Mahler scented Fascism decades ahead") and also those of Leonard Bernstein ("ours is the century of death, and Mahler is its musical prophet"); see Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiology*, 34; and Bernstein, *Unanswered Question*, 313. The bleakness of the A-minor symphony surely stands behind comments of this sort. In terms of musical tradition, Adorno hears the finale of the Sixth staging the demise of both the symphonic sonata and "the era that bore the sonata"; Robert Samuels frames this same movement in terms of the "suicide" of the Romantic symphony. In another essay, I have read the finale as an oppressive triumph of traditional formal/organicist protocols over what Adorno called the "novelistic" freedom of Mahler's sonata forms. See Adorno, "Mahler Today," 609; Samuels, *Mahler's Sixth Symphony: A Study in Musical Semiotics*, chap. 5 ("Musical Narrative and The Suicide of the Symphony"); and Monahan, "'Inescapable' Coherence and the Failure of the Novel Symphony in the Finale of Mahler's Sixth."

some of the ways in which the opening movement’s overarching narrative—which stages a conflict and strained reconciliation between its two suggestively gendered sonata subjects—might be heard to reflect the tense and complex psychomechanics of the Mahlers’ relationship in its early years. Finally, section four asks how this more attentive, biographically informed hearing of the first movement might inspire us to rethink the Sixth Symphony as a whole. There, after exploring the many significant links between the symphony’s outer movements, I suggest several ways in which the finale carries the story of the opening Allegro (and thus of the Alma theme as well) forward to an expressly tragic conclusion—and in such a way that enables a number of radical rehearings, including one that invites us to imagine *Alma herself* (or at least a fictionalized projection of her) as the work’s “tragic hero.” My epilogue inscribes this reading within broader methodological and historiographical contexts by reflecting upon what Mahler’s lifelong ambivalence about the idea of musical self-depiction might mean for critics writing a century after his death.

Before moving on, though, I should like to clarify, in advance of certain foreseeable concerns, the general thrust of the argument to follow. To begin, I would stress that I do not seek to lay bare some definitive or obligatory “secret program” for the Sixth, authorial or otherwise. Though my reading relies extensively on “evidence” of various sorts (musical, circumstantial, anecdotal), the case I make is ultimately hermeneutic rather than documentary. Second, I would underscore that my relatively narrow interpretive focus here should not be taken to imply that a psychobiographical angle on the symphony should trump (or be taken as more “real” than) any or all others. It goes nearly without saying that a work as vast and complex as the Sixth houses many registers of potential meaning; we can understand it metaphorically to be “about” a range of issues—musical or societal, personal or universal. But as I hope to show, the musical features that underwrite these other readings can also be used to construe the work as a more private utterance, one whose inner tensions and conflict-dynamics mirror (often strikingly) those of Mahler’s unfolding marital crisis. Though grounded in biographical data, such a hearing is of course no less “metaphorical,” no less speculative than other hermeneutic positions. (No correlation, however provocative, can legitimate an overly literal or naively deterministic view of art/life relations.) But like many interpretations, its potential to convince depends in part on its resonance with the composer’s own outlook, agenda, and aesthetic milieu. And in the case of Mahler—who routinely declared that his music was imprinted with life experiences and whose putative “domestic” subtext took shape (not coincidentally, I suspect) while he was preparing the Viennese premiere of his chief rival’s own *Sinfonia Domestica*—such an angle is surely as viable as any other.<sup>12</sup>

12. The world premiere of Strauss’s *Sinfonia Domestica* occurred in New York City on 31 March 1904. Mahler conducted the first Viennese performance on 23 November of that year, shortly after finishing the Sixth. I have not been able to determine when Mahler first acquired the score, but it seems likely that Strauss’s work would have been on his mind—and perhaps also on his piano—during the months prior to this important premiere.

So ultimately, the only interpretive tradition I aim to supercede is that of mainstream biography itself, for reasons suggested above. My purpose will be to rethink thoroughly this semantic dimension of the symphony—to propose a range of interpretive strategies that take fuller account of the work’s musical particulars and that can claim a more meaningful engagement with the domestic realities it is imagined to reflect. In short, I want to show that it is both possible and defensible to accept the idea of a domestically “autobiographic” Sixth, but that in so doing we should be prepared to grapple with a range of meanings as complex and ambiguous as the Mahlers’ marriage itself.

## I. Listening to the Alma Theme: Past, Present, Future

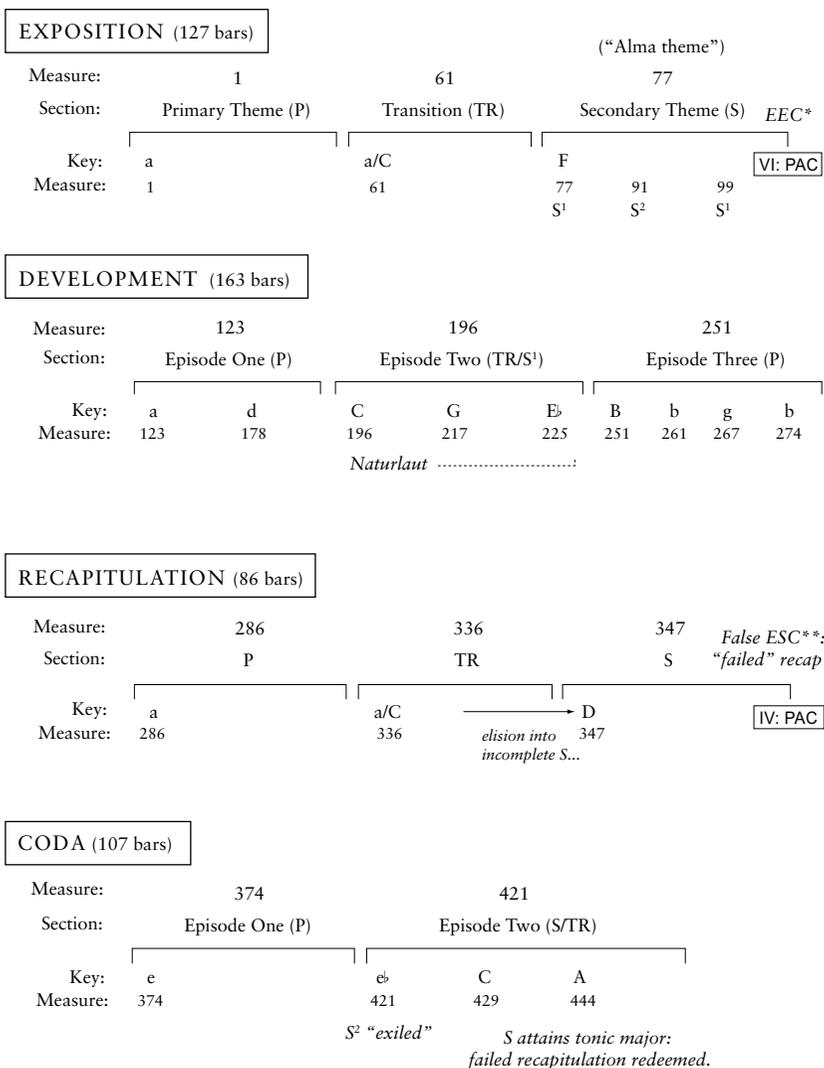
The theme that Alma claimed as her likeness was the second subject of the Sixth Symphony’s opening sonata form. Figure 1 offers a simplified overview of that entire movement, using the thematic nomenclature of James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy’s Sonata Theory.<sup>13</sup> I shall refer to this diagram at various points below. But for now, our focus goes to the first (i.e., expository) appearance of that subject—the incarnation of the theme most readily identified with Alma. As Figure 1 shows, Alma’s theme unfolds a small ternary (ABA) form in the submediant key of F major—one whose internal sections I shall call S<sup>1</sup> and S<sup>2</sup>. For reference, Example 1 presents the initial S<sup>1</sup> and then S<sup>2</sup> in their entirety. The reprise of S<sup>1</sup>, not shown, thickens the texture of the original and recomposes its final measures to produce a titanic perfect authentic cadence in the new key—the moment of “essential expositional closure” and indeed the only authentic cadence in an otherwise relentless exposition.

Given its long and seemingly indissoluble association with Mahler’s widow, it is easy to forget that the music of Example 1 had achieved notoriety long before Alma put her stamp on it. As it happened, this fervent *Gesangsthema* was one of several unlucky themes that fin-de-siècle listeners—including some of the composer’s closest allies—singled out as unforgivably sentimental, saccharine, or banal.<sup>14</sup> Mahler’s friend Guido Adler flagged it as a rare lapse of quality control, calling the theme “melodically weak” (*melodisch schwach*).<sup>15</sup> The

13. The abbreviations used here should pose few challenges to readers unfamiliar with Sonata Theory. “P,” “TR,” and “S” refer to the primary, transitional, and secondary thematic zones respectively. Those letters followed by a superscript (e.g., P<sup>1</sup>) refer to ordered thematic units within those zones. More specialized and normally abbreviated terms, such as EEC (essential expositional closure) and ESC (essential structural closure) are given in full. On Sonata Theory’s thematic-modular labeling system, see Hepokoski and Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory*, 71.

14. Other themes so maligned include the opening melodies of the Sixth Symphony’s *Andante* movement and the Fifth Symphony’s *Adagietto* (itself also widely understood as a tribute to Alma). On the reception of the former, see Buhler, “Theme, Thematic Process, and Variant Form in the *Andante Moderato* of Mahler’s Sixth Symphony,” 59; on that of the latter, see Kaplan “*Adagietto*: ‘From Mahler with Love,’ ” 382.

15. Adler, *Gustav Mahler*, 74.



\* EEC = Essential Expository Closure  
 \*\* ESC = Essential Structural Closure

Figure 1 Mahler, Symphony No. 6 in A Minor, first movement, formal overview

Example 1 Mahler, Symphony No. 6 in A Minor, first movement, secondary theme: the “Alma” theme

S1 (Ternary A Section)

**Schwungvoll.**  $x$   $y$

The musical score is presented in four staves. The top staff (Violin I) begins with a *ff* dynamic and a slur over measures 77-84, marked with  $x$ . A second slur covers measures 85-92, marked with  $y$ . The second staff (Violin II) features a *ff* dynamic and a complex rhythmic pattern. The third staff (Viola) has a *sf* dynamic marking. The bottom staff (Cello/Double Bass) starts with a *ff* dynamic and provides harmonic support. The tempo/style marking is **Schwungvoll.**

Example 1 continued

Musical score for Example 1 continued, measures 80-83. The score is written for four staves: Treble Clef (top), Treble Clef (second), Treble Clef (third), and Bass Clef (bottom). The key signature is one flat (B-flat). Measure 80 begins with a treble clef and a B-flat. The first staff contains a melodic line with a slur over measures 80-81 and a dynamic marking of *mf* at the end. The second staff contains a rhythmic accompaniment with a slur over measures 80-81. The third staff contains a harmonic accompaniment with a slur over measures 80-81. The fourth staff contains a bass line with a slur over measures 80-81. Measure 81 continues the melodic and rhythmic patterns. Measure 82 features a dynamic marking of *fff* and a slur over the measure. Measure 83 features a dynamic marking of *mf* and a slur over the measure.

Example 1 continued

Musical score for Example 1 continued, measures 83-86. The score is written for four staves: Treble, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The score includes dynamic markings such as *sf*, *ff*, *p*, and *f*. The notation features various rhythmic values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The score is divided into four measures by vertical bar lines.

Example 1 continued

87

"Breakaway" gesture (see Example 2)

"Absturz" gesture (see Example 2)

*p* *ff* *p* *ff* *ff* *mf* *ff* *sf* *ff*

Example 1 continued

90 *p* S2 (Ternary B Section)

The musical score consists of four staves. The first staff begins at measure 90 with a piano (*p*) dynamic. It contains a complex melodic line with many beamed notes. The second staff starts at measure 91 with a forte (*f*) dynamic, featuring a more rhythmic melody with accents. The third and fourth staves are accompaniment parts, with the fourth staff marked *sempre f* (always forte). The score is divided into measures 90, 91, 92, 93, and 94.

Example 1 continued

95

S1 reprise (Ternary A' Section)

*ff* *mf* *sf* *p* *ff*

composer's protégé Bruno Walter was more explicit, claiming to have told Mahler that he found this music "not strong enough, too sentimental, and a let-down after the [movement's] powerful, grim beginning."<sup>16</sup>

Judgments of this sort endured through the mid-twentieth century—though by then Mahler's supporters had long since devised redeeming workarounds, all of them variations on the idea that the quality of the theme was secondary to its use. Paul Bekker's analysis (1921) begins by conceding the Alma theme's "incontestable" (*unbestreitbar*) defects, but then argues that such atomistic assessments miss the point, since Mahler composed his themes mainly with an eye toward their role in the overall conception (*Idee des Vortrages*). Mahler's "melodic ingenuity" might occasionally flag, Bekker observed, but what mattered was that his themes were never inadequate *in context*, because the overall conception (which, of course, Mahler controlled with invariable mastery) imbues them with different meanings than they would have in isolation.<sup>17</sup> In the 1960s, Theodor Adorno revived this line of thought, with a characteristic critical-theoretical spin. Now, Mahler's use of such unseemly materials had become a veritable "necessity," dictated by what Adorno called "the objective problems of form." The whole point of this "much-reviled" secondary theme, Adorno maintained, was to provide a contrast to the primary theme so hyperbolic, so "extreme," that it broadcast their absolute "incompatibility" and in so doing underscored the "fruitlessness" of composing balanced, harmoniously integrated sonata forms at Mahler's late historical moment. Thus where Bekker had merely downplayed a perceived weakness, Adorno goes farther, making a virtue of it: rather than implicating Mahler with even a passing lapse of his craft, he takes the theme's egregious mannerisms—its "stigmata of contrivance"—as a testament to *heightened* artistry, a sensitivity to the "objective logic" (and, with it, the critical truth-content) of the artwork he had set into motion.<sup>18</sup>

Thanks to arguments like Adorno's and Bekker's, Mahlerians have long grown accustomed to the idea that seemingly banal themes could be used in compositionally sophisticated ways.<sup>19</sup> What has changed, though, are the types of material they regard as "banal." For over the last quarter of the twentieth century, negative assessments of the Alma theme dropped off precipi-

16. Stresemann, "Bruno Walter," 133. Translation from de La Grange, *Mahler*, 3:822.

17. Bekker, *Gustav Mahlers Sinfonien*, 215. Richard Specht had made a similar point in his 1913 monograph, arguing that Mahler's art was rarely as praiseworthy as when it used such inauspicious material for such exalted ends; *Gustav Mahler*, 293–94.

18. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, 96, 128–29. Hans Redlich revives Adorno's argument in claiming, a few years later, that the theme's "derivative character" was necessitated by its "structural purpose, not [a] lack of inspiration"; "Mahler's Enigmatic Sixth," 253.

19. De La Grange's recent comments are typical: "What matters in Mahler's music is less the nature of the material than its treatment, because his inspiration is always subjected to a thorough compositional process, regardless of its origin"; "Music about Music in Mahler: Reminiscences, Illusions, or Quotations?," 145.

tously, raising the question of whether the acceptance of Alma’s portraiture claims may have led to a spontaneous, culture-wide rehabilitation. This is a point I shall explore further below. First, though, it will be helpful to try to pinpoint some of the specific features that may have underwritten the theme’s early disrepute, for these will be crucial as we move ahead.

For many detractors, it was the Alma theme’s character itself that most offended. Resembling nothing prior in Mahler’s oeuvre, and little that came after, the theme’s syrupy lyricism and pat grandiosity struck many critics as perilously close to the “sentimental” fare offered by any number of second-rate Romantics.<sup>20</sup> But broad critiques of this sort are helpful only to a point. They tell us a good deal about a writer’s own stylistic biases, but they deliver little of substance, preferring a strategy of guilt-by-association to an elaboration of particulars. And they are especially problematic with Mahler, whose symphonic enterprise so often pivoted on the artful appropriation of plebeian musics. Given the many lowbrow elements that populate Mahler’s other, less controversial works, there is no reason here to imagine that a superficial resemblance to Theodor Kirchner’s more cloying cantabiles should, *ipso facto*, condemn the Alma theme to triviality. Indeed, when Mahler returned to this same impetuous, hyperlyrical idiom in the Seventh Symphony, he earned no comparable critical abuses.<sup>21</sup> Thus, while the Alma theme’s potential to be heard as generically banal or bathetic is vital here, I believe that in trying to grasp Bekker’s “incontestable” defects, we can point to more specific features than just its character—details that, at the very least, make it anomalous by Mahler’s own standards, and not always in the most flattering ways.

We might begin with the theme’s uncharacteristically dense scoring, an outgrowth of its oversized Straussian demeanor. Such sustained sonic opulence not only sets this music apart from any of Mahler’s prior secondary themes, it also runs counter to the composer’s much-vaunted textural/contrapuntal austerity. Adorno observes that Mahler, in contrast to his rivals Strauss and Reger, “does not write hybrid filling voices, nor inexact arabesques buzzing in [the] accompaniment. He is allergic to pseudo-counterpoint. . . . Rather than feigning polyphony for the sake of richness of sound, he accepts occasional meagerness of composition.”<sup>22</sup> For the most part, Adorno is right. But the normally ascetic Mahler indulges in virtually all of these “vices” here, engorging the texture with voices that, as Peter Andraschke points out, mainly provide heterophonic support to the *Hauptlinie*’s successive spasms and

20. Hans Redlich likened the theme to certain “sentimental” airs of Theodor Kirchner (1823–1902) and Eduard Lassen (1830–1904); “Mahler’s Enigmatic Sixth,” 253. Specht, too, invokes Kirchner; *Gustav Mahler*, 294.

21. Though rather more subdued, the second theme from the Seventh Symphony’s opening movement is the Alma music’s only stylistic sibling in Mahler’s oeuvre—indeed, it openly paraphrases the former (compare Sym. no. 7, mvt. 1, mm. 118–119 with Sym. no. 6, mvt. 1, mm. 89–90).

22. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, 113.

undulations.<sup>23</sup> The second staff of Example 1, for instance, shows precisely those “buzzing” arabesques Adorno had proscribed.

More troubling still is the fact that these massive orchestral means are put to relatively meager musical ends. For all its brilliance and vitality, the music of S<sup>1</sup> is likely to strike us as strangely “undercomposed” by Mahler’s usual standards. By comparison to the movement’s primary theme—itsself a tour de force of developing variation—this one shows an acute lack of melodic variety or development. Of the thirty total measures of S<sup>1</sup>, a full twenty arise from contour-adjusted repetitions of just two basic motives, labeled “x” and “y” in Example 1.<sup>24</sup> On these grounds, it is easy to hear the theme as precariously overextended, capable of achieving its ample dimensions only by stretching its scant melodic/motivic resources to the limits of good taste.

The events at measure 88 are especially telling. Here, the music finally moves to escape its repetitive circling, clearly intending to climax—but instead, it merely lapses into material recycled from the primary theme (P). Example 2 shows that the “breakaway” gesture itself (m. 88) reprises material from the second strophe of P (m. 35), while the *Absturz* that follows replays material that ended the first strophe (m. 10). Critics have long noted the close motivic ties linking this movement’s sonata subjects; even their headmotives are related (Ex. 3). But I cannot abide by analyses that hear in this only a wholesome (indeed almost conjugal) complementarity.<sup>25</sup> For me, the inability of S to find a continuation strategy without P is more suggestive of an incriminating dependency, a poverty of means. This is especially evident in the S<sup>2</sup> theme that follows the *Absturz* (Ex. 4). Here there is little truly new material, only a jaunty transformation of prominent motives from the closing of P.

The peculiar character of S<sup>2</sup> itself is also worth a moment’s consideration, since this otherwise innocuous little march is made grotesque by Mahler’s singularly uncouth orchestration: growling low brass combine with high winds, glockenspiel, and pizzicato violins to produce a choir that manages to be cloying and heavy-handed at the same time.<sup>26</sup> Analysts have rarely commented on this music, but I find its presence in the midst of Mahler’s nuptial tribute disturbing. If it is indeed part of the spousal portrait, then the latter is left

23. Andraschke, “Struktur und Gehalt im ersten Satz von Gustav Mahlers Sechster Symphonie,” 222.

24. As Andraschke writes, the theme, “though always newly embroidered . . . essentially stays the same” (*Ogleich immer neu ausgeschmückt, zeigt das Thema im Prinzip stets dasselbe*); *ibid.*, 223. For Hans-Peter Jürg, this repetitive character has negative connotations: symbolizing “the eternally unchanging,” the theme is locked in a fruitless orbit that “brings no enduring liberation”; (*Sie symbolisieren mit all ihrer Pracht ein Immer-Gleiches, ein Kreisen um immer dasselbe, welches keine bleibende Befreiung bringt*); *Gustav Mahlers Sechste Symphonie*, 63.

25. For Bekker the two themes “complete each other”; *Mahlers Sinfonien*, 216. Andraschke compares them to “differently shaped boughs from the same tree”; “Struktur und Gehalt,” 224. De La Grange calls S the major-mode “counterpart” to P; *Mahler*, 3:823.

26. Glockenspiel was added in Mahler’s revised orchestration, suggesting that the original scoring was perhaps deemed not “cloying” enough.

Example 2 Comparison of Alma theme's "breakaway" gesture to P-theme excerpts

Primary theme (P) 35

*ff*

Secondary theme (S<sup>1</sup>) 88

*ff* *p* *ff* *ff* *mf* *p*

Primary theme (P) 10

*sf*

**Example 3** Derivation of the Alma theme incipit from the primary theme

Primary theme (P)

6

76

Secondary theme (S1)

**Example 4** Derivation of S<sup>2</sup> from elements of the primary theme's third subrotation

Primary theme (P)

44

48

91

*f*

Secondary theme (S<sup>2</sup>)

perplexingly riven by incompatible affects and topics. If it is not, then the tribute itself would appear to be dislocated by an incongruously ironized intruder. In neither scenario are the tensions easily resolved, since in both, the ardent and the grotesque are intermingled in such a way that their affects begin unsettlingly to blend: the rapt S<sup>1</sup> is left subtly debased and ironized while the march-burlesque inherits an absurd tincture of intimacy.

This elaborately “problematized” hearing of the Alma theme is, of course, my own, not that of Mahler’s early- and midcentury critics. But in offering it, I hope at least to have validated their misgivings by establishing that the theme is not immune to reasonable critique—that there are, in fact, palpable reasons to hear it as overwrought, overextended, and even caricaturistic. I will return to these ostensible “defects” and their implications in the discussion on pp. 147–49 below. For now, what matters most is that modern commentators have abstained almost entirely from critiques of this (or any) sort, possibly because of the increasing authority of Alma’s portraiture anecdote.

As might be imagined, the legend of Alma’s theme did not become ubiquitous overnight. Though her memoirs appeared in 1940 (and in English six years later), her revelations about the symphony’s domestic subtext surfaced only intermittently in scholarship prior to the early 1960s, and the major analysts of the Sixth in that era, Erwin Ratz, Hans Redlich, and Adorno, do not mention them at all. With the boom of scholarship and recordings that began in the late 1960s, however, it became virtually obligatory for commentators on the Sixth to mention Alma’s apparent first-movement rendering.<sup>27</sup> And yet the nature of these discussions has varied, in subtle but important ways.

Many writers, then and now, have made a point to stress the portrait’s presumptive nature, framing it as hearsay or as a non-authorial anecdote—as when Michael Kennedy explains that the theme was “said by Alma to depict her,” or when David Hurwitz’s stipulates that it “supposedly represent[s]” Alma.<sup>28</sup> As time passes, though, critics have grown more comfortable presenting the anecdote without such mediation, as a simple fact—as when liner-note author Michael Murray tells us, without qualification, that the theme “is symbolic of Alma Mahler,” or when the journalist Richard Low invites us to listen for “a soaring portrait of Mahler’s wife.”<sup>29</sup> Such streamlined formulations might be expected from the popular press,<sup>30</sup> but they are no less prevalent in biography and serious scholarship. By the turn of the last century, a critic as scrupulous as Peter Franklin could refer offhandedly to the symphony’s “famous depiction of Alma,” while the ever-thoughtful Stuart Feder rhapsodized that this was “the only time in his composing career that [Mahler] attempted to depict a person musically: the soaring second theme . . . was meant

27. The Sixth was for a long time Mahler’s least popular work and the last to be recorded (1953). In the twelve years following, it was recorded only eight more times. Compare this to the Fourth, which could boast thirty-five recordings prior to 1965, or the Second, which had twenty-three. In the next period of twelve years (1966–78), however, twenty-nine recordings of the Sixth appeared—eight of them in 1967 alone—while the Fourth Symphony saw only twenty-seven and the Second only twenty-three; Fülöp, <http://www.mahlerrecords.com>; this is an expanded version of idem, ed., *The Mahler Discography*. There are good reasons to suspect that Alma’s “virtual program,” which gave listeners a toehold in this otherwise forbidding work, played a part in this change of fortunes.

28. Kennedy, *Mahler*, 141; Hurwitz, “‘Tragic’ Symphony,” 16. For writers who adopt a similar strategy, see for instance: Andraschke, “Struktur und Gehalt,” 223; Bookspan, Liner notes for Mahler, Symphony No. 6; Carr, *Mahler*, 134; Cooke, Liner notes; Diether, Liner notes for Mahler, Symphony No. 6; Hefling, “Song and Symphony (II), 120; Matthews, “Sixth Symphony,” 368.

29. Murray, Liner notes for Mahler, Symphony No. 6, 6; Low, “Conductor’s Interpretation of Mahler’s 6th Is Superb,” C1.

30. See for instance: Artner, “Gielen Handles Mahler with Uncommon Expertise”; Hurwitz, *Mahler Symphonies*, 107; Kaplan, “Restoring Order in a Cataclysmic Symphony”; Kosman, “Symphony Storms Through Mahler’s Sixth”; Millington, “Mahler: Symphonies Nos. 6–8,” 4; Osborn, Liner notes for Mahler, Symphony No. 6; Painter, “Symphony No. 6”; Tommasini, “Ways that Maazel Knows His Mahler”; Von Rhein, “CSO gives Mahler’s 6th the Conlon Treatment.”

to represent Alma.”<sup>31</sup> In the past decade, the theme’s drift from its anecdotal origins has gone further still, with many writers now referring to “the Alma theme” without *any* mention of the moniker’s origins.<sup>32</sup>

At first, these distinctions might seem trivial, a matter of mere semantics. After all, should the casual concertgoer be made to endure hand-wringing over the provenance of a cherished programmatic detail? And can we really fault Franklin or Feder for not girding their prose with cumbersome disclaimers? While I do not wish to overstate the case, I believe these phraseological subtleties do make a difference in the long term. Setting aside the fact that casual inaccuracies can be confusing to the unstudied (note the disheartening increase in journalists who think that Mahler himself named this music “the Alma theme”<sup>33</sup>), I would argue that every time Alma is streamlined out of her own story—whether out of convenience or ignorance—the portraiture claim inches closer to the status of an unquestioned truth, a seemingly ineradicable part of the work itself. I consider this a trend worth charting, as it contributed to the very state of affairs that I hope in this study to transcend.

But to understand fully that “state of affairs,” we must move beyond its symptoms to its causes. While recognizing, of course, that *all* criticism of Mahler fell off sharply after his accession to the canon in the 1960s, it is still surely the case that the ascension of Alma’s portraiture anecdote led to a significant change in critical orientation toward “her” theme. For after reading Alma’s memoirs, listeners would now be predisposed to hear this music not just as generically impassioned but also as pointedly sincere and heartfelt—an ardent tribute to the “splendid isolation” the spouses supposedly enjoyed in those first years of marriage.<sup>34</sup> This affirmative context likely fostered both a positive bias and a narrowing of interpretive scope, to the exclusion of the earlier, critical readings. Indeed, if we accept in advance that the music is the love song of a blissful newlywed, then there is little if any incentive to listen for ironies, tensions, or technical flaws.<sup>35</sup> This kind of positive bias might also help

31. Franklin, “Soldier’s Sweetheart’s Mother’s Tale?” 114; Feder, *Gustav Mahler*, 124. For comparably unqualified statements from other scholars and biographers, see de La Grange, *Mahler*, 3:822; Del Mar, *Mahler’s Sixth Symphony*, 16; Floros, *Mahler: The Symphonies*, 163; Jülg, *Mahlers Sechste Sinfonie*, 63; Keegan, *Bride of the Wind*, 121; Raynor, *Mahler*, 96; Ross, *Rest Is Noise*, 21; Samuels, *Mahler’s Sixth Symphony*, 157; Seckerson, *Mahler: His Life and Times*, 99.

32. Although one usually finds this in informal writing by Mahlerians for other Mahlerians (as on many blogs and fan-created websites), it is not unheard of in scholarship; see for instance Johnson, *Mahler’s Voices*, 120.

33. See Commanday, “Zinman and S.F. Symphony”; Morley, “Hall Swells to the Sound of a Thousand”; Tommasini, “Ways Maazel Knows His Mahler”; *Slant Magazine Blog* (Uhlich); and *View from the Podium* [blog] (Woods).

34. “Splendid isolation” was Alma’s chapter title for the portions of her *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters* dealing with the years 1903–6. Its use was ironic, as it originated in a 1902 letter from Siegfried Lipiner denouncing Mahler’s alienation of his former friends after becoming engaged to Alma (Feder, *Gustav Mahler*, 109–10).

35. Indeed, these “sentimental” biases can sometimes lead to hearings that are, at least for this author, truly incomprehensible, as when John von Rhein describes the spasmodic, extroverted

explain the striking nonsynchronicity of the theme’s two reception paradigms. For all the myriad discussions of this music, it is remarkable that one rarely finds Alma’s domestic program mentioned alongside—or even in reference to—the banality charges so prevalent around midcentury.<sup>36</sup> It seems that the two traditions refused to interact and that the one had truly to supplant, rather than merely succeed, the other.

But here is the rub: the two interpretive paradigms I have posited here—the critical and the autobiographical—are mutually exclusive only if one understands the Alma theme in the manner just described—as an affectively one-dimensional “love song,” Mahler’s breathless tribute to a marriage still in its halcyon early bloom. This is a popular image, and one (not coincidentally) that Alma herself promotes in her memoirs. But it is also fundamentally inaccurate. Contrary to Alma’s much-quoted account, the summer of 1904 was not uniformly “serene and happy.”<sup>37</sup> As the outer movements of the Sixth took shape, long-mounting tensions placed no small strain on Mahler’s marriage, culminating in at least one confrontation in which he expressed grave doubts about his wife’s love. Indeed, Alma’s most perspicacious biographer has argued that by the end of that summer, “the spouses’ estrangement had reached its nadir.”<sup>38</sup>

The more pressing problem, therefore, is not that Alma’s promise of a nuptial subtext has been so widely embraced as to become almost indistinguishable from fact. Rather, it is that the dominant understanding of that subtext is grounded in a distorted view of Mahler’s actual domestic situation. While embracing the idea of an “autobiographic” Sixth in principle, we have in practice allowed Alma’s mythology to obscure vital aspects of the very life we presume the symphony to reflect. It is precisely this disparity that I aim to address below. In sections three and four below, I will show that with a more accurate view of Mahler’s home life in mind, the critical and autobiographical perspectives are entirely compatible, and indeed mutually reinforcing. There is much to be gained, in other words, by following up on Franklin’s insight that “the irreconcilability of the Sixth Symphony’s oppositions . . . certainly echoed those underlying [Mahler’s] marriage.”<sup>39</sup> Before then, however, we shall want to get a better sense of the domestic dysfunction that Mahler faced in these critical early years.

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S<sup>1</sup> as “tender,” or when David Hurwitz regards the strident S<sup>2</sup> as “jolly” (Von Rhein, “Stand-in Leads the CSO in Mighty Mahler Sixth”; Hurwitz, “‘Tragic’ Symphony,” 18).

36. I have encountered only two exceptions: Philip Barford, who invokes the symphony’s “celebrated ‘portrait’ theme” only to dismiss it as “no more than a cliché of the Victorian salon, a fabrication of the utmost banality” (“Mahler: A Thematic Archetype,” 316); and Raymond Monelle, who calls the “Alma” music “bombastic and vulgar” (*The Sense of Music*, 170).

37. Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*, 70.

38. Hilmes, *Witwe im Wahn*, 84.

39. Franklin, *Life of Mahler*, 142.

## II. “Splendid” Isolation: The Mahlers’ Marriage in 1903–4

One often reads of the Sixth Symphony that its very existence rests on an autobiographical “paradox.” Why, critics have often asked, would Mahler have composed this consummate essay in tragedy during a time of such overwhelming personal triumph—one that found him at the height of his professional success, married to one of Vienna’s most desirable women, and blessed with healthy children whom he adored? Alma’s memoirs are often called forth as evidence on this point. The summer of 1904, she writes, “was beautiful, serene and happy,” the composer himself calm, self-possessed, “a tree in full leaf and flower.”<sup>40</sup> For Donald Mitchell, her account of the symphony’s composition “exemplifies the curious, often mystifying *non*-synchronization of art and life.” “The paradox,” he insists, “could not be *more* clearly exposed.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Alma’s most enduring image in those pages—the Sixth as an act of musical “prophecy”—seems designed to accommodate this paradox, since by decoding the symphony as a tragic vision of the future, one defuses the question of what it was in the present that might have inspired so negative a work. But we realize now that the early years of the Mahlers’ marriage were not as idyllic as Alma would have us believe. And we know this, ironically, thanks to Alma’s own diaries, which paint a very different picture from her published memoirs.<sup>42</sup>

The narrative of Mahler’s betrothal and marriage in 1901–2 is well documented.<sup>43</sup> What concern us here are specifically those points of tension that might have set the stage for later discord. Most obviously, there was the marriage contract itself, laid out by Mahler as a series of draconian decrees and injunctions in an infamous letter to Alma on 19 December 1901. There, after a rather limp attempt to distance himself from conventional “bourgeois” sexism—the sort that reduces a woman to a combination of “plaything” and “housekeeper”—Mahler gets to the heart of the matter, itself sexist to the

40. Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*, 70–71.

41. Mitchell, “‘Only Sixth,’” 383–84 (emphasis original). Other writers to discuss this “paradox” include Carr (*Mahler*, 127); Cooper (“Mahler the Romantic,” 70); Gartenberg (*Mahler: The Man and His Music*, 305–6); Kirshnit (“Gustav Mahler, Symphony No. 7, ‘Song of the Night,’”); de La Grange (*Mahler*, Vol. 2, *Years of Challenge (1897–1904)*, 713); Lozos (“Gustav Mahler, Symphony No. 6”); Morley (“Hall Swells to the Sound of a Thousand”); Newlin, (*Bruckner, Mahler, Schoenberg*, 182); and Steinberg (“Symphony No. 6 in A Minor,” Liner notes for Mahler, Symphony No. 6, p. 5).

42. Alma’s diaries from 1889 until January 1902 have been available in print since the 1997 (and in English since 1999). But her diaries from then until 1905 exist only in transcriptions in the Alma Mahler-Werfel collection at the University of Pennsylvania. (Alma destroyed all diary entries from mid-1905 until Mahler’s death in 1911.) That Mahler’s domestic circumstances during the composition of the Sixth have made little impact on criticism and analysis owes as much to the relative inaccessibility of these diaries as to the resilience of her official published mythology.

43. See for instance Keegan, *Bride of the Wind*, 66–99; or Monson, *Alma Mahler: Muse to Genius*, 22–50.

core: Alma would need to abandon her aspirations of composing and place herself in the subjection of all his creative and domestic needs.<sup>44</sup> His language was unambiguous and unrelenting, astonishing even today in its frank egoism:

You . . . have only one profession from now on: to make me happy. . . The role of “composer,” the “worker’s” role, falls to me—yours is that of the loving companion and understanding partner! . . . You must give yourself to me unconditionally, shape your future life, in every detail, entirely in accordance with my needs and desire nothing in return save my love!<sup>45</sup>

To accomplish this, he explained, Alma would need to adopt an ascetic outlook not unlike his own, renouncing all “superficiality,” “convention,” and “vanity,” as well as the “delusion” that she, however precocious, could be a person of comparable substance and character to him.

The vehemence of Mahler’s admonitions—the very degree of compromise and sacrifice demanded of his future bride—suggest that the match may not have been ideal from the start. Suzanne Keegan makes this point eloquently when she observes that

things did not augur well for their prospective union. . . . [T]he likelihood of Alma regretting her decision to sublimate her own gifts in the interests of her future husband’s creative stability was, to others, if not to herself, considerable. As for Mahler, whilst undoubtedly in the grip of an overwhelming passion . . . would he not come to regret an alliance with a girl of undeniable beauty and talent, but one of a notoriously flirtatious disposition?<sup>46</sup>

Had either lover been more attuned to these potential frictions they might have thought better of rushing into a commitment. For as Henry-Louis de La Grange and Gunther Weiss observe, these “incompatibilities and animosities” were “never fully reconciled” and “continued to smoulder beneath the surface” throughout their marriage, periodically erupting in heated confrontations and culminating in the seismic catastrophe of Alma’s affair with Walter Gropius in 1908–10.<sup>47</sup>

Gustav and Alma stayed their course, however, driven by a passion that was not only “overwhelming,” as Keegan rightly notes, but also deeply pathological for both. In Mahler’s case, the zeal with which he pursued Alma may have had as much to do with his own sudden desire for progeny as with the young woman’s charms *per se*. In late February 1901, the forty-year-old composer had suffered a near-fatal intestinal hemorrhage. Confronted with so acute a

44. These quotations and those that follow are from de La Grange, *Mahler*, 2:451–52.

45. Such spousal subjugation was hardly without precedent among nineteenth-century composers. Indeed, one wonders to what extent Mahler’s envisioned union might have been modeled on that of Richard and Cosima Wagner—that is to say, one in which the husband’s egoism was shouldered by his partner’s unchecked “subservience and idolatry”; Millington, “Wagner and Women,” 118–21.

46. Keegan, *Bride of the Wind*, 100.

47. Mahler, *Letters to His Wife*, 393.

reminder of his mortality, Mahler's thoughts may have turned to marriage—which, as Feder surmises, at least made available the symbolic “immortality” of fatherhood.<sup>48</sup> Although they had met several times before, Mahler's attitude toward Alma changed profoundly after this brush with death. From the moment of their chance encounter at Bertha Zukerkandl's home in November 1901, he courted her with what Feder sees as an “obsessional” urgency, proposing only three weeks later and rapidly arriving at an idealized (and patently unrealistic) image of what this flighty twenty-two-year-old could bring to his life:

What you are to me, Alma, what you could perhaps be or become—the dearest and most sublime object of my life, the loyal and courageous companion who understands and advances me, my stronghold invulnerable to enemies from both within and without, my peace, my heaven, in which I can constantly immerse myself, find myself again, and rebuild myself—is so unutterably exalted and beautiful, so much and so great, in a word, my wife.<sup>49</sup>

Alma, at least, can be credited with having foreseen their incompatibility; her diaries testify to a deep prenuptial ambivalence, their author swinging violently between poles of apprehension and elation.<sup>50</sup> But in the end, her desire to possess and to be adored by the illustrious opera director proved irresistible. As is well known, Mahler was only the most recent in a series of surrogate paternal figures (including Gustav Klimt, Alexander Zemlinsky, and Max Burkhard) with whom Alma had developed an erotically tinged relationship after the death of her father, the renowned painter Emil Schindler. But as Feder observes, each of Alma's past mentors, like Schindler himself, had shown both “generosity as a teacher” and “respectful (and preferably awed) attentiveness to [Alma] herself.”<sup>51</sup> Mahler was of a different mold altogether. Despite his initial fawning, he had little interest in mentoring for its own sake and was indifferent to the talents his predecessors had so eagerly cultivated. “My father always took me seriously,” Alma had once written.<sup>52</sup> But she would get no such validation from her future husband, and the fallout would be disastrous.

48. Feder, *Gustav Mahler*, 74.

49. Mahler, Letter of 19 December 1901, cited in de La Grange, *Mahler*, 2:449.

50. Diary entries from 3 December 1901 to 16 January 1902 vividly depict Alma's vacillations. The following entry from 7 December is especially revealing: “Never in my life have I met anyone as alien as he. How alien (and yet so close!) I cannot say. Maybe that's one of the things that attracts me to him. But he should let me be as I am. Already I'm aware of changes in myself, due to him. . . . If this goes on, he'll make a new person of me. A better person? I don't know. I don't know *at all*”; Alma Mahler, *Diaries 1898–1902*, 451.

51. Feder, *Gustav Mahler*, 84; see also Keegan, *Bride of the Wind*, 17, 112; and Hilmes, *Witwe im Wahn*, 58. Freud himself wittily surmised that Alma's attraction was based in part on a subconscious parallel between the composer's name (Mahler) her father's profession (“Maler”—i.e., painter); Feder, *Gustav Mahler*, 213.

52. Keegan, *Bride of the Wind*, 11.

The couple married on 9 March 1902. Alma’s adjustment to cohabitation—and, from November of that year, motherhood—was difficult. As Françoise Giroud notes, her diaries in this period present a “dreary catalogue of complaints mingled with self-accusations,” containing “only expressions of torment and regret.”<sup>53</sup> Accommodating Mahler’s strict routine and repairing his muddled finances had been challenging enough, but the isolation brought on by their summer retreat to Maiernigg was almost too much to bear. By July, she was routinely convinced that marrying Mahler had been a mistake, that her subjugation and neglect would prove unsustainable: “I don’t know what to do. There’s such a struggle going on in me! And a miserable longing for someone who thinks OF ME, who helps me to FIND MYSELF! I’ve sunk to the level of a housekeeper! . . . Someone has seized me roughly by the arm and dragged me far away—from myself . . . I have never cried so much.”<sup>54</sup>

In print, Alma brushes off these early difficulties, claiming to have “broken” her husband’s “tyranny” after a spell.<sup>55</sup> But the memoirs’ stoic front belies her continued anguish. In December, after the birth of their first daughter, Alma laments, “I feel as though my wings have been clipped. Gustav, why did you bind to you this splendid bird so happy in flight, when a heavy grey one would have suited you better?”<sup>56</sup> As work began on the Sixth, several months later, the domineering composer had become a malevolent presence in her recurring nightmares as well.<sup>57</sup> And as always, her jealousies continued to fester—jealousy of Mahler’s music, of the daughter on whom he doted, and of the performers to whom he dedicated his professional energies.<sup>58</sup> By February 1904, not two years after the wedding, Alma seemed to be at her wits’ end: “I must begin another life, for I can’t bear this one any longer. My dissatisfaction grows hour by hour!”<sup>59</sup>

Although Feder sees evidence of “chronic depression” in her outlook, it should be stressed that Alma’s misery was hardly perpetual.<sup>60</sup> Her diaries also contain expressions of hope, including resolutions to live up to Mahler’s demands: “Now I have a goal. An ultimate purpose—to sacrifice my happiness for that of another—and in so doing find happiness myself . . . Knowing that through my suffering I’m giving him joy, how can I falter for a single moment! From now on I shall keep my inner struggle to myself.”<sup>61</sup> But if her outer resolve often concealed an inner turmoil, the opposite could also be

53. Giroud, *Alma Mahler, or the Art of Being Loved*, 54.

54. Diary entries of 10, 12 July 1902; de La Grange, *Mahler*, 2:536–37.

55. Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*, 43.

56. Carr, *Mahler: A Biography*, 143.

57. De La Grange, *Mahler*, 2:618–19.

58. See especially the incidents recounted by Hilmes (*Witwe im Wahn*, 79) and Carr (*Mahler: A Biography*, 143).

59. Alma Mahler, Diary entry of 25 February 1904, cited in de La Grange, *Mahler*, 2:682.

60. Feder, *Gustav Mahler*, 123.

61. Diary entries of 12 and 13 July 1902, cited in de La Grange, *Mahler*, 2:537.

true: her histrionics were sometimes purely theatrical, indicative of nothing within: “Outwardly I rage, weep, rave—and the interior is an unbreakable peace . . . frightening!”<sup>62</sup> Predictably, her fickleness itself quickly became a torment for them both: “One moment I’m dying of love for him—and the next I feel nothing—nothing! . . . If only I could find my inner balance! I’m torturing myself and him.”<sup>63</sup>

Mahler’s reactions to these tribulations were varied. Often, he appears to have been oblivious, absorbed wholly in his work.<sup>64</sup> At other times, he was affectionately didactic, chiding Alma gently about her anxieties and offering the only advice he, the inveterate egoist, could muster: he encouraged her to be more like him—to seize control of her impulsive moods and to seek the kind of “independence” and “inner freedom” that come through iron-willed self-mastery.<sup>65</sup> On occasion, though, he seems to have been more rattled by Alma’s discontent—enough to question whether the love she professed was sincere.<sup>66</sup> But one thing he was not, at least at first, was truly sympathetic. Alma complains of his insensitivity in her diaries, and we see evidence of this as well in his letters, when he pleads with her to get over these “futile concerns.” “One . . . must save one’s grieving,” he insisted, “for the real suffering of this world.”<sup>67</sup>

As the Sixth neared completion, though, Alma noticed a change in her husband, whom she found “more human, more communicative” than ever before.<sup>68</sup> Though this could merely reflect a change in Alma’s outlook be-

62. “Äußerlich tobe ich, weine, rase—und im Innern ist eine unbrechbare Ruhe, erschreckend!” Diary entry of 20 January 1903, cited in Hilmes, *Witwe im Wahn*, 79.

63. Diary entry of 13 July, 1902, cited in de La Grange, *Mahler*, 2:537.

64. This is the official stance of Alma’s memoirs: “I lived his life. I had none of my own. He never noticed the surrender of my existence. . . . I cancelled my will and being. . . . He noticed nothing of what it cost me”; Alma Mahler, *Memories and Letters*, 116.

65. Letter of 2 April 1903, cited in de La Grange, *Mahler*, 2:600.

66. Her diary entry of 13 July 1902 states: “And now he has doubts about my love! . . . How frequently I’ve doubted it myself”; de La Grange, *Mahler*, 2:537. Another, bleaker incident of this sort in 1904: “He said he could feel that I didn’t love him—and at this moment he is certainly right”; diary entry cited in Alma Mahler, *And the Bridge Is Love*, 31.

67. Letters of 2 and 3 April 1903, cited in de La Grange, *Mahler*, 2:600. If Mahler did not take his wife’s complaints entirely seriously, this may be because he saw them as unjustified. Oliver Hilmes has shown that even Alma’s diaries must be approached with caution, as they are often no more reliable in terms of objective report than the later memoirs. Her tendency to exaggerate, even to herself, is paramount. For instance, Alma’s entry of 25 February 1904 laments the monotony of her social life (“What a misfortunate no longer to have any friends!”) and implies that Mahler forbade her from socializing with her former lover Zemlinsky (“Gustav won’t see anyone. . . . If only I had the right to see Zemlinsky!”). But in fact it was no secret that she and Zemlinsky saw one another regularly at that time, for both conversation and music making. Indeed, Zemlinsky’s letters reveal that it was Alma who pulled the plug on their rekindled relationship, her ardor for his company having cooled once again. As Hilmes writes, “As much as Alma, in her diaries or even her published memoirs, repeatedly stressed her great loneliness during her marriage . . . , and as much as these comments might attest to her feelings of loneliness, they do not reflect the reality of her life as Mahler’s spouse”; *Witwe im Wahn*, 83–84.

68. Alma Mahler, *And the Bridge Is Love*, 29.

cause they received many more guests during their 1904 holiday than in previous years, it might also point to a renewed effort on Mahler’s part to accommodate his chronically discontented wife. This may have been too little, too late, though, for the holiday brought little long-term relief. Oliver Hilmes has even suggested that by the beginning of 1905, the marriage was in danger of “collapsing.”<sup>69</sup> It was only during this time, a few months after completing the Sixth, that Mahler at last showed real insight into his wife’s character, observing that the “key” to many of her ills was that she repeatedly acted “against her nature”—the implication, of course, being that her decision to marry him may itself have been misguided. Alma agreed: “How right he is, don’t I know! He was alien to me; much is still alien to me and will be—I think—forever.”<sup>70</sup>

By now, it should be clear that the tragic content of the Sixth may have firmer foundations in Mahler’s home life than the received wisdom dictates. The “paradox” critics so often cite—Mitchell’s “mystifying non-synchronization of art and life”—dissolves instantly when we acknowledge that Mahler’s domestic situation was, if not quite “tragic,” at least an ongoing source of tension, distraction, and disenchantment. On the contrary, the real paradox lies in the strange assumption that the Sixth could somehow be an expressly “autobiographical” work *without* any real-life grounding for its negative content. Along these lines, it matters little whether, as is so often claimed, the years 1903–4 were in fact the “happiest” of Mahler’s life—“happiest” being a relative term, they very well might have been exactly that. What matters, instead, is the fact that these were years that Mahler almost surely expected to have been happier. That is to say, even if marriage brought certain pleasures and conveniences, he would still have been painfully aware of the disjunction between his prenuptial fantasy and conjugal reality. Any expectation that his union with Alma would be “unutterably exalted and beautiful,” or that his spouse would selflessly provide only “peace,” “heaven,” and an “invulnerable . . . stronghold,” would likely have been met with progressive disillusionment.<sup>71</sup>

Of course, we can only speculate how, and with what intensity, these domestic dissonances affected Mahler, personally or artistically. Ever discreet, he left no first-hand accounts of his marital troubles. But there is no reason to take his silence as a sign of indifference or detachment. Indeed, if we imagine the Sixth Symphony as a reflection of his inner life at this point (as the composer himself always insisted), we can hardly take Mahler to have been “silent” at all. For what could be more suggestive of such personal frictions than a work whose opening movement is preoccupied with the reconciliation of its incompatible and suggestively gendered sonata subjects? Or one whose finale

69. “Die Ehe drohte zu scheitern.” Hilmes, *Witwe im Wahn*, 86.

70. “Wie Recht er hat, weiß nur ich! Er war mir fremd, vieles ist mir noch immer fremd und—wie ich glaube—für immer.” Diary entry of 5 January 1905, cited in Hilmes, *Witwe im Wahn*, 84.

71. Letter of 19 December 1901, cited in de La Grange, *Mahler*, 2:449.

repeatedly, even obsessively, demonstrates that catastrophe will strike precisely when ecstatic fulfillment seems at last to be within our grasp? In the analyses that follow, I will examine the outer movements of the Sixth with exactly these themes in mind, at last bringing the Alma theme's two reception traditions—the “critical” and the “autobiographic”—into a fruitful marriage of their own.

### III. The Allegro: Conflict and Reconciliation

It is hardly a new idea to frame the Sixth Symphony's opening movement in terms of the dynamic opposition of its sonata subjects. As we have already seen, Adorno took the “incompatibility” of its first and second themes to be paramount. Donald Mitchell gives this same polarity a dramatic spin, positing a sustained “central conflict” between P and S, which he takes to symbolize “death” and “life (or love)” respectively.<sup>72</sup> And when Franklin writes of the movement's “relentless antitheses” and “irreconcilable” oppositions, he surely has these two thematic worlds in mind.<sup>73</sup> My own hearing takes up this same binary framework, while also attempting to make good on Franklin's plea for a more explicit parallelism between these musical tensions and those in Mahler's home life.

Naturally, pursuing Franklin's parallelism in any depth will require us to adopt an expressly gendered view of the sonata's themes. In so doing, we follow not only the specific precedent set by Alma (whose gendering of her own theme, at least, was unequivocal), but also certain generic conventions of late-Romantic symphonic composition. Hepokoski has argued that this and a number of Mahler's other sonata-form movements are in dialogue with what he calls the “Dutchman”-style exposition, after Richard Wagner's overture. Such expositions tend to divide into two broad, affectively contrasting, and explicitly gendered blocks: the first presents a minor-mode primary theme that is “an aggressive, *forte* image of the tormented male in extreme crisis,” while the second offers its “redemptive” feminine counterpole, a “self-assured, lyrical” subject in the non-tonic major.<sup>74</sup>

Hepokoski's paradigmatic “Dutchman”-style P-theme—“restless, agitated, disturbed”—is a dead ringer for the march that opens the Sixth.<sup>75</sup> But the Alma theme departs tellingly from the traditional “feminine” archetype.<sup>76</sup> Far

72. Mitchell, “Only Sixth,” 386; idem, “Mahler's Sixth Symphony; Triumph in Tragedy,” 2. For Mitchell, this death/love dichotomy also governs the Sixth Symphony as a whole.

73. Franklin, “Socio-Political Landscapes: Reception and Biography,” 17; idem, *Life of Mahler*, 142.

74. Hepokoski, “Masculine/Feminine,” 498 (emphasis added). Hepokoski's essay identifies similarly gendered expositions in Mahler's First, Second, and Fifth Symphonies, Weber's *Freischütz* overture, Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*, Liszt's *Faust Symphony*, many of Strauss's tone poems, and an array of piano sonatas and concerto movements.

75. *Ibid.*, 498.

76. It will be noted I have neglected to mention TR here. Unlike paradigmatic “Dutchman”-style expositions, which feature two maximally contrasted thematic zones, Mahler's contains a

from being tender or reassuring (as would be the “Dutchman” norm), it is brash and agitated, a destabilizing presence rather than a “consoling” one. The same manic energy that underwrites its offer of redemption also undercuts it; rather than offering safe harbor, it threatens to sink us in a sea of ardor. Alma’s theme is also more mercurial than most gendered second subjects. The music of the nuptial portrait returns in at least five different guises throughout the movement, each drastically different from the others, suggesting an existential crisis and the search for a stable, sustainable embodiment. This mutability—which of course calls to mind Alma’s own notoriously protean personality—is essential to the narrative ahead.

Before moving on, though, it might be helpful to flesh out this physiognomy of the second group by returning briefly to the various “defects” laid out in the discussion on pp. 133–37 above. There, I problematized at least three aspects of Alma’s music: (1) the disparity between its orchestral excesses and its constructive shortfalls; (2) its “dependency” on the primary theme for materials; and (3) its inscrutable pairing with the peculiar  $S^2$  march. How should these anomalies appear in light of our glimpse above into Mahler’s home life?

The least charitable reading might seek to turn Alma’s music into a crass caricature, the ironic critique of a marriage gone sour. In this case the “flaws” from Section One would become the signatures of a misogynistically hyper-gendered feminine theme—one that is vital and effusive, but also impulsive and undisciplined, motivically unresourceful and orchestrally overdressed. I tend to agree with Julian Johnson, though, in resisting the idea that  $S^1$  is “insincere or deliberately ironic.”<sup>77</sup> For Johnson, the theme’s tensions emerge

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third space—sixteen measures of transition that bridge the two spheres. But this TR is so inert, so affectively blank, that it does little to disrupt the impression of a two-block exposition. Rather, it seems merely to “compose out” the silence of the medial caesura that would separate the themes. (I am grateful to James Hepokoski for suggesting this interpretation.) In terms of the domestic subtext, I have little to say about this music—though its archaic chorale topic, with its whiff of the sacred, might suggest the solemnity and ritual of the marriage ceremony itself, especially considering the music’s function as a “joining” of the gendered P- and S-themes.

77. That Mahler was a misogynist can hardly be disputed. But his attitudes seem by all accounts to have been conventional and, ideologically speaking, rather benign—they certainly pale by comparison to the toxic and obsessive misogyny of the Weiningerian variety. (*Geschlecht und Charakter* was published a year before the Sixth; no evidence suggests that Mahler ever read it.) That being said, there would be nothing to prevent one from assuming a far darker angle on the gender question than I do below. Suspicious hermeneuts could easily declare Mahler’s apparent lifelong indifference to the “woman question” to be incriminating rather than exculpatory, arguing that the symphony would have given him a forum for precisely the kind of sinister misogyny he would have banished from his conscious thought or speech. The finale’s sonata form, in particular, readily lends itself to interpretation as a sadistic exercise in sexual violence, following Susan McClary’s much discussed reading of Beethoven. My decision to steer clear of such readings stems partly from an intuition that such a projection of “sinister” misogyny onto the historical Mahler would be too forced, too contrived, and partly from the fact that the symphony’s tragic ending seems ultimately to spell a fate as disastrous for its masculine subjects as for its feminine ones.

when its expressive “intensity” begins to overtax “the language on which it is based,” thereby exposing the “inadequacy” of that medium. In this, it is typical of those “voices” in Mahler that “strain at the limits and are exaggerated in such a way that they risk becoming false.”<sup>78</sup>

I can certainly agree that a sense of strain lends the theme an unintended “ambivalence”—even a kind of “falsehood.”<sup>79</sup> But I would argue that Mahler’s *language* serves him just fine here, in that it more than adequately drives home the “intensity” of his sentiment. The strain, as I hear it, is that this “intensity” is vastly disproportioned to the meagerness of the musical argument. In other words, it is not the medium that is at fault; it is the message. In this sense, I am more aligned with Bekker, who dared to pin this music’s weakness on a creative deficit, a failure of Mahler’s “melodic ingenuity.” With a bit more nuance, I would submit that the Alma theme inhabits a kind of blind spot in the composer’s lyrical imagination, a place outside his topical/semantic comfort zone. It is as if this wholly new expressive idiom somehow caught Mahler unaware (not unlike Alma’s own charms three years before), leaving him to grapple with an unfamiliar mode of signification, one he could neither master nor render with his usual sophistication.<sup>80</sup> For as much as he might have wished to capture his lover’s unruly vivacity, he seems unable to fully envision what a theme of this sort—a truly liberated feminine impulse—would actually sound like, how it might develop according to the “logic” of its own “inner idea,” as he liked to say.<sup>81</sup> It is this failure of understanding that leads to the music’s foundering repetition, as well as its tendency to lapse into paraphrase of the patriarchal march, giving in turn an impression of incompleteness and nonautonomy.<sup>82</sup>

What is strange is that Mahler hurls himself at the task with an almost immodest zeal, as if unwilling to admit (or simply unaware) that his idealized image of the feminine Other was so thinly actualized, or that it could so easily and so tellingly shade into narcissistic self-depiction. The resulting “overexertion” (Adorno’s term), the sense that the music protests rather too much, inevitably calls to mind the self-deluding rapture that characterized much of

78. Johnson, *Mahler’s Voices*, 120. In some respects, Johnson’s argument here echoes Adorno’s—though for the latter, the theme’s “overexertion” was anything but a potential falsehood. Indeed, it spoke the “truth of the unattainable”; themes such as this are “contrived both as a will to reach the unattainable . . . and also as a sign of the unattainable itself”; Adorno, *Mahler, A Musical Physiognomy*, 129.

79. Johnson, *Mahler’s Voices*, 120.

80. Hefling makes a similar point: the Alma theme “is as surprising to this movement as she was to its composer”; “Song and Symphony (II),” 120.

81. Mahler, Letter of 12 April 1896 to Max Marschalk, trans. in *Selected Letters of Gustav Mahler*, 182.

82. The biographical parallels in this hearing are hard to miss: just as Mahler, lacking any insight into Alma’s character, pressured her into adopting aspects of his own (stoicism, commitment to “inner” freedom), so he patches the lacunae in his feminine theme with music lifted from “his own” (i.e., the masculine) march theme.

Mahler’s courtship and early marriage. That is to say, these disjunctions—between the fervor with which Mahler composes his theme and his lack of insight into how it might be carried through, between the music’s own effusive intensity and its developmental vapidness—mirror perfectly the disconnect between Mahler’s insatiable, high-minded affections and their flirtatious, independent-minded object.<sup>83</sup>

Let us now move on to the S<sup>2</sup> theme. Above, I suggested that we could hear this B-section either as an ironized intrusion into the portrait music or as a perplexing second region within the portrait itself. In either case, the music’s strangeness would derive in large part from its transgression of the “Dutchman” model’s gender partitions—that is, from the sudden influx of masculine march elements into the ostensibly feminine portrait space. In this regard, we might hear it as a further, more egregious instance of the second group’s tendency of to lapse into “narcissistic self-depiction” of the composer.

There is, however, another, more radical hearing at hand if we choose to pursue it. Faced with this bizarre replication of the primary theme—one whose incongruously frivolous orchestration seems at first either malicious or miscalculated—could we not imagine ourselves being offered a glimpse of the newest addition to the composer’s domestic lineup, the progeny that Mahler sought, as Feder argues, to insure his “immortality”? Could this awkward creature, which bursts forth into the world (literally from “within” Alma!) perhaps be the musical embodiment of the child that had so recently enlivened Mahler’s life, thus bringing the exposition-as-family-portrait trope to an unexpectedly literal completion?<sup>84</sup> To the extent that such a hearing is plausible (and it will not be for everyone, I am sure), it offers perhaps the most sympathetic perspective on an otherwise bewildering passage. But it is far from airtight; as we shall see, the coda’s treatment of S<sup>2</sup> is twisted enough that one shirks from freighting it too unequivocally with connotations of childhood.

For the moment, though, I would like to leave the question of S<sup>2</sup> open and at last move forward into the development, where the sonata subjects’ interactions tell a story of subjugation, retaliation, and flight. As Figure 1 shows, the development divides into three broad episodes. The first of these (m. 128) begins as a nightmarish reflection of the exposition: plunged back into the tonic

83. De La Grange hints at a similar “self-delusion” when he notes a kind of “willful . . . optimism” in this music, one that embodies “not so much the reality as the idea that Mahler had (or wanted to have) of Alma”; “Mahler: Symphony No. 6” [liner notes], 2; Peter Franklin makes virtually the same point (*Life of Mahler*, 142). While this argument has its pitfalls—are there *any* musical portraits that document the “reality” of a person rather than the artist’s “idea”?—it is useful as another variation on the trope shared by Johnson’s reading and my own: without doubting Mahler’s sincerity, one can nevertheless hear the theme to misfire owing to some telling gap between its perceived intention and its effect.

84. Initially, I was reluctant to offer this reading, as it struck me as rather far-fetched. But I was encouraged to include it by Sumanth Gopinath, who came to a similar hearing of S<sup>2</sup> after reading an earlier version of this paper.

A minor, the opening march returns as a miasma of dissociated motives that are able only briefly to coalesce into more coherent formations (cf. mm. 149, 163, 171). After several stalled attempts to move forward, the primary group augments its ranks with a new conscript: the Alma theme, which is divested of its former regalia and recast as a lumbering march in the low winds and strings (see Ex. 5). Elephantine and inert, heckled from above by macabre trills and lashing *col legno*, this D-minor disfigurement is the very image of the persecuted Alma we know from her diaries, the once “splendid bird” whose wings had been prematurely “clipped.” But the arrangement is hardly more ideal for the march-subject. Having imposed complete topical unity—having absorbed the wayward feminine element so fully as to negate it entirely—the primary group denies itself any element of contrast and is left to wallow in its own morbid solipsism. So it is no surprise that the situation quickly devolves into crisis, with both themes rushing headlong into a contrapuntal tussle at measures 192–198.

But the battle of wills yields no victor. Instead, at the quarrel’s climax, a quasi-cinematic jump cut drops us without warning into the midst of a surreal Mahlerian nature landscape, replete with cowbells, *Klangfläche*, and distant fanfares. Critics have universally heard this, the development’s second episode (m. 201), as an extreme expression of physical or psychological Otherness, often emphasizing the music’s diametrical remove from the “Alltagswelt” of the march.<sup>85</sup> And it is no coincidence that the character that flourishes in this idyllic fantasyscape is the Alma theme itself. At first, snatches of S<sup>1</sup> float past, but vaguely, like a thing sought but only half-remembered. Then, however, at measure 222, the music snaps into focus and the Alma theme at last begins to sing—not just the stock declamations that the exposition repeated *ad nauseam*, but a long, supple line, delicate in its expression and nuanced in its modulation, enfolded in a finely spun contrapuntal texture (see Ex. 6). This is the Alma theme in its most idealized, rhetorically purified expression; all that was “defective” about this music in the exposition, all that was contrived or decadent, is corrected here. For a fleeting Utopian moment, the feminine impulse is at last shorn of its derivative march elements and permitted to dream its own unfolding in the rapt pastoral style of Mahler’s early secondary themes.<sup>86</sup>

85. Flothuis, “Struktur und Gehalt,” 248. For Bekker, the music seems to sink into dream, forgetful of the present (*Mahlers Sinfonien*, 217). Floros and Jülg write of sounds from “another world” (Floros, *Mahler: The Symphonies*, 169; Jülg, *Mahlers Sechste Sinfonie*, 72), while Andraschke hears a “remoteness from civilization” (*Entfernung von der Zivilisation*) (“Struktur und Gehalt,” 229). Mahler himself intended the *Herdenglocken* to capture “the loneliness of a being far away from the world . . . as though [one] stood on the highest peak, in the face of eternity” (cited in Floros, *Mahler: The Symphonies*, 165).

86. The question of exactly *who* might be “dreaming” this fantasy episode is actually less clear cut than this. It could be “Alma,” indulging in a wholly reimagined self, unburdened of her mercurial nature and freed from the shackles of the workaday march world. Yet we can just as easily hear it as the march-subject, longing for a more docile, pliable, and conventionally “feminine” companion—his very own Senta, Agathe, or Gretchen, or perhaps some lost heroine from the

Example 5 D-minor “disfigurement” of  $S^1$  within P-space (Alma theme in bass voice)

The musical score for Example 5 is presented in three systems, each with a treble and bass staff. The key signature is D minor (two flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The first system features a treble staff with trills (tr) and a bass staff with dynamics *pp*, *p*, and *p < ff sf*. The second system features a treble staff with trills and a bass staff with dynamics *p* and *p < ff*. The third system features a treble staff with a dynamic *p* and a bass staff with a dynamic *sf*.

But like all such reassuring enclaves in the Sixth, this one shows itself to be unsustainable. For at the very moment we move to cadence in E flat, the vision begins to slip away. Just as the music locks onto the cadential dominant (m. 239), the orchestral focus softens, the nature sounds return, and the thread of the melody is lost. When the cadence effect finally arrives (m. 244), it is impalpable, a hazy form in the distance; the Utopian image cannot be actualized. A second, more arduous cadential attempt (m. 255) lurches deceptively to  $\flat VI$ , shaking the music from its daydream and sending us hurtling into the development’s third episode, a hectic melee of motives from the primary and transitional themes whose climax doubles as the sonata’s retransition.

The next time we encounter Alma’s theme is in its appointed slot in the sonata’s reprise. Much here has changed, though: where the recapitulatory

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world of the *Wunderhorn* symphonies. What matters, ultimately, is that the vision shows itself emphatically to be unreal, unattainable.

Example 6 E-flat-major “fantasy projection” of Alma theme (S<sup>1</sup>)

The musical score consists of three systems of music, each with a treble and bass staff. The first system (mm. 225-227) has a treble staff labeled [vlms/flutes] and a bass staff labeled [solo hn] and [vc]. The second system (mm. 228-230) has a treble staff labeled [solo vln/vlns] and a bass staff. The third system (mm. 231-233) has a treble staff and a bass staff. Dynamics include *pp* and *p*. The key signature is E-flat major (three flats).

TR had been oddly energized—unfolding at twice its original speed and sounding less like a chorale than a manic, overwound music box—S<sup>1</sup> now shows none of its former vigor; it enters only hesitatingly, as if seized by a new circumspection. Indeed, before discharging its recapitulatory duties, it lingers to reflect on its experiences in the development. First, it glances back fondly to the principal keys of the pastoral fantasy (C and E-flat major, mm. 353–356). Then it settles into a lush D major (m. 357), as if to rectify its D-minor debasement in episode one (m. 183). From there, the theme gradually builds confidence and redirects its energies toward the present. But there is no making up for the delay; by the time S<sup>1</sup> has fully crystallized (m. 364), there is time only for a brief reprise of the exposition’s closing gesture, the “breakaway” and “*Absturz*” that carry us gracefully into the closing cadence.

Mahler’s reconfiguration of S has two important consequences. First, the truncation of the reprise proper—the fact that it begins only in the repeat of the A-section—means that the peculiar S<sup>2</sup> is left out altogether. We can read this in several ways. If S<sup>2</sup> originally struck us as a blemish on the spousal portrait, then its elimination might suggest another instance of the march-subject arbitrarily modifying the feminine theme to its liking. But the ecstatic tone of

the surrounding music suggests nothing so malevolent. To grasp the alternative hearing, though, we must first take note of the reconfiguration’s second effect: by returning in the subdominant D major (rather than tonic), the secondary theme is unable to provide the sonata’s required tonal resolution. The result is what Sonata Theory calls a “failed” recapitulation—one that falls short of meeting the “generic demands” of the form.

Such failures, Hepokoski and Darcy insist, are structural defects of the highest order; wherever they occur, a “hermeneutic burden” falls to the analyst to explore their “inner logic.”<sup>87</sup> But critics have had little to say about this particular recapitulation, and with good reason: there are no outward signs of “failure” at all. Listeners lacking absolute pitch are unlikely to notice anything amiss here, since the oversized authentic cadence in measure 370 faithfully mimics a cadential moment of “essential structural closure” (here, as a transposed replay of the exposition’s own closing cadence from measure 115). All the same, the fact that Alma theme’s would-be closure is false, leaving the sonata unresolved, cannot be brushed aside. For the tensions that emerge here between rhetorical success and structural failure—the self-contradictions of a music that dramatizes triumph while masking defeat<sup>88</sup>—resonate powerfully with Alma’s own continuing struggle between public submission and private dissent. Outwardly dutiful, Alma’s music seems nevertheless to be inwardly resistant to its role as a mere functionary in the sonata’s master plan. Its ineffective partial compliance here might strike us as an act of passive-aggressive retaliation for the wrongs inflicted in the early development—the D-major “wrong-key reprise” being an especially poetic reprisal for the theme’s D-minor subjugation. For if it is true, as Hepokoski writes, that the feminine theme’s resolution into the tonic should generically signify “a resolution of the hero’s plight,” then this sabotage of the sonata process would preempt any such happy ending.<sup>89</sup> Ominously, the hero’s redeemer becomes an impediment to redemption.

Alternately, we could take this apparent tonal blunder to be the negligence of a theme still distracted by fantasy. The music leading up to the reprise proper (mm. 353–363) is so lavishly self-absorbed, so lost is it in reflection on past tonal escapades, that we might well hear a hint of narcissism, a self-regard so engrossing that it leads to dereliction. Such a reading is especially disturbing if we take S<sup>2</sup> to be an avatar of the Mahlers’ offspring, as suggested above. For Alma, whose vanity was legendary and whose limited capacity of selflessness was already exhausted by her husband’s needs, motherhood did not come instinctively. Pregnancy, in particular, was a trial; her first daughter’s birth

87. Hepokoski and Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory*, 245–46.

88. Such tensions are unusual in Mahler’s sonata forms. In works prior to the Sixth, recapitulatory failure is always accompanied by clear rhetorical signs of crisis. See Monahan, “‘Success’ and ‘Failure’ in Mahler’s Sonata Recapitulations,” 43–48.

89. Hepokoski, “Masculine/Feminine,” 498.

brought little apparent joy, and her diary neglects even to record the birth of her second.<sup>90</sup> In this light, we might hear the missing  $S^2$  less as a victim of strategic excision than as a casualty of neglect—as though the Alma theme's sumptuously protracted entrance were but an indulgent diversion from the labor of bringing the "progeny theme" once again into the world, along with the sacrifices of identity that this entailed. In this sense, the theme's sentimental reverie becomes an act of stalling, of waiting for the time span allotted to  $S^2$  to pass conveniently by.

Whether or not one is persuaded by these more extravagant hearings, there can be little doubt that in the broadest sense, the sonata's failed denouement stands as an uncanny metaphor for the Mahlers' domestic situation as a whole in 1904. To the casual observer, the marriage and the sonata alike would seem entirely successful—even demonstratively so. But for those with knowledge of their inner dynamics, each is clearly threatened by structural imbalances and unsustainable tensions. In the symphony, at least, these tensions quickly come to a head. Almost instantly, the music rejects this D-major closure and sinks into a turbulent coda. If the sonata proper offered a snapshot of the marriage crisis in the conceptual present, this extended coda seems to shift into future tense, imagining a range of possible outcomes. At first, the forecast is grim. Its composure flagging, the march theme swings between morbid brooding and raving hysteria. Tellingly, its first manic outburst—Adorno's "irruption of the horrible" (m. 387)—revives the D major of the failed reprise, only to fling it angrily aside.<sup>91</sup> Burrowing ever deeper into an anxious E minor and beset with premonitions of the disastrous finale, the agitated P-theme seems to militate against any agreeable outcome.<sup>92</sup> But in measure 419, the Alma melody buoys up from the contrapuntal depths in A *major* and hits like an unexpected epiphany, quickly dislodging the primary group and pointing the way to a belated tonal resolution and an ostensibly affirmative ending.

And yet the first step en route to the apotheosis is a potentially disturbing one. Into the void left by the disintegrating P rushes a hideous, shrilly orchestrated transformation of the long-absent  $S^2$  (Ex. 7). The tonality in this passage, E-flat minor, is crucial. Throughout the Sixth, Mahler consistently reserves E-flat major to mark out "Utopian" spaces, the points of farthest rhetorical remove from the relentless tonic-minor march—presumably because of E-flat's double polarity to that key: it is both the modal inverse of A

90. "All my married life was one long dread of pregnancy—every month I trembled," she wrote to her lover Gropius in 1910 (letter postmarked 21 July); cited in de La Grange, *Mahler*, 4:875. See also Hilmes, *Witwe im Walm*, 79 and 84. Alma's narcissism and insensitivity would cause no small strain in her relationship with Anna, her second daughter and only one (of three) to survive into adulthood; see Keegan, *Bride of the Wind*, 232–34, 273, 304–9.

91. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, 125.

92. The octave-leap figure in the low voices (m. 395ff.) and the related figure in the trumpet (mm. 407–410) anticipate a prominent cell found in the finale's retransition (m. 497) and coda (m. 790).

minor and the point farthest from it on the circle of fifths.<sup>93</sup> Yet as Figure 2 reveals, this same tritone-polar relationship arises between A major—the coda’s ultimate goal—and E-flat minor, making the latter a kind of “dystopian” counterpole to the strongly desired tonic major. Thus the impression in this final sounding is that S<sup>2</sup> is being forcibly purged, exiled to the symphony’s “worst-case scenario” key in advance of its exclusion from the triumphant finale.<sup>94</sup>

With S<sup>2</sup> thus dispatched, preparations begin in earnest for the concluding *Siegelied*, a bombastic tonic-major presentation of S<sup>1</sup> overlaid with motives from P and TR (m. 449; see Ex. 8). Like the Alma theme itself, this ending has divided commentators. Some, like Norman del Mar, have taken it—perhaps too credulously—as a straightforward “triumph of love over adversity.”<sup>95</sup> Others have been more guarded, finding the music’s brash triumphalism suspect or even unsettling.<sup>96</sup> On this point, I tend to follow Alex Ross, who locates the music’s “strain” in its ungainly conflation of masculine and feminine elements. Unlike its earlier incarnations, this ostensibly feminine S-theme neither swoons nor wafts—it storms ahead with a stiff, burly corporeality, flogged by the timpani’s relentless rallying cry. Though less hard-edged than the primary group, it is still ponderously and incongruously martial—“as if love,” Ross writes, “were an army on the march.”<sup>97</sup>

In this regard, the movement’s conclusion does little to defuse its own long-standing tensions. Programmatically, the coda would feign to show

93. In the present movement, that “farthest remove” is the E-flat-major climax of the development’s pastoral episode (m. 230); in the symphony at large, it is the idyllic E-flat Andante movement. Around the turn of the century, Mahler had cited precisely this kind of double polarity as a token of “outlandish” tonal remoteness: “In earlier years, I used to like to do unusual things in my compositions . . . Formerly, for instance, if a piece began in D major, I would make a point of concluding it in A-flat minor if possible. Now, on the contrary, I often go to a great deal of trouble to end in the key in which I began”; Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, 131. The tonal scheme Mahler describes here does not actually appear in his works.

94. Exactly *why* Mahler would send S<sup>2</sup> to so ignominious a fate is hard to say. If we first understood the theme as a contaminant, then its exile to E-flat minor would be a symbolic purification of the Alma music before its final appearance. Such grotesque treatment would certainly seem to undercut my exposition-as-family-portrait hearing—unless, perhaps, we imagine the exile of S<sup>2</sup> to be a kind of concession to the feminine impulse after its avoidance of that theme in the recapitulation.

95. Del Mar, *Mahler’s Sixth Symphony*, 40. For other unreservedly affirmative descriptions, see for instance Cooke (“joyful”; Liner notes) and Hurwitz (“glorious”; “‘Tragic’ Symphony,” 18).

96. For de La Grange, the sheer pitch of the music’s frenzy strains its credibility; it is “as if the ‘hero’ wanted to convince himself that he had triumphed, without really believing his own victory; ‘Mahler: Symphony No. 6,’” 3. Robert Samuels traces the music’s symptoms of “unease” to the unresolved scale degree  $\hat{6}$  that saturates the harmony and to the music’s mechanistic commodification of its own endless repeated motives; *Mahler’s Sixth Symphony*, 152; while Bernd Sponheuer hears ominous intimations of the symphony’s major-to-minor “motto” in the climactic IV–iv progression at bar 447; *Logik des Zerfalls*, 331.

97. Ross, *Rest Is Noise*, 22.

Example 7 E-flat-minor “exile” of Alma theme B-section (S<sup>2</sup>) (original melody in middle staff)

The musical score consists of three systems, each with three staves. The key signature is E-flat minor (three flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The first system (measures 421-423) features a woodwind part (winds/pizz./glock), a trumpet part ([tpt]), and a brass section (trombone [trbn], trombone/horn [trbns], and tuba [tuba]). The dynamic is marked *ff*. The second system (measures 423-425) features a trumpet part, a trombone/horn part ([trbn/hn]), and a tuba part. The dynamic is marked *f*. The third system (measures 425-427) features a trumpet part, a trombone/horn part, and a tuba part. The dynamic is marked *ff*. The original melody is in the middle staff of each system.

that its gender antitheses are far from “irreconcilable,” as Franklin wrote. But Mahler’s solution—to give the voice of triumph to a feminine theme thoroughly denatured and androgynized—seems more coercive than conciliatory, especially given the power imbalances evident in both the work and in reality. Indeed, we can hardly be sure that this is really “Alma’s” voice at all anymore. The purely musical processes are no less inconclusive. This glowing tonic-major presentation of S would surely have us believe that the broken sonata has been amended and its modal drama settled for good. But, as is often noted, this A-major “victory” is decidedly ephemeral. The Scherzo’s opening

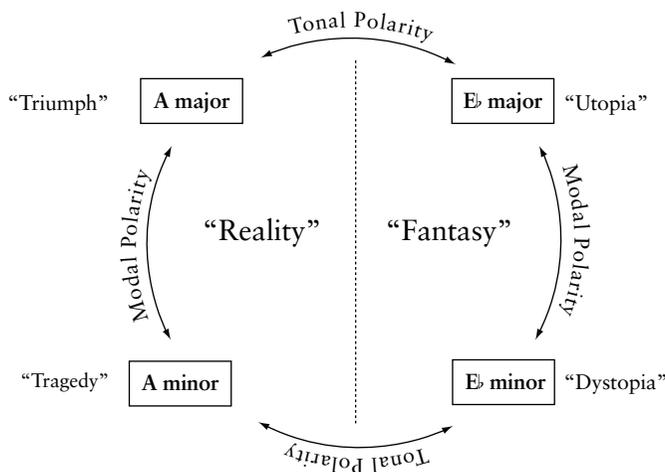


Figure 2 Map of proposed symbolic tonal associations for Mahler, Symphony No. 6

measures will reset the tonic to minor, where it will remain throughout the disastrous finale.<sup>98</sup> So for all its vibrancy, the tonic-major apotheosis offers no real redemption. Tainted by the calamity to come, its exertions merely elevate it to an Adornian “sign of the unattainable,” an image of deliverance offered in place of the real thing.<sup>99</sup> From this falsehood issues its ultimate truth: that *this* A major, no less than those that follow, is fated for collapse—a message that portends darkly for the family drama it purports to resolve.

#### IV. The Finale: Contrition and Catastrophe

For most listeners, the story of the Alma theme ends (ambiguously or otherwise) when the Allegro’s last A-major triad rings into stillness. But a number of critics have ventured to hear Mahler’s spousal portrait revived in the

98. How *soon* the scherzo will negate A major depends, of course, on one’s preferred ordering of the symphony’s inner movements. As is well known, Mahler placed the Scherzo before the Andante in his autograph score but then reversed them for the premiere two years later and saw that all related print materials (scores, reductions, thematic guides) were altered to reflect this. Today, both orderings are regularly performed, though debate continues over which is to be preferred, and for what reasons; see de La Grange, *Mahler*, 4:1578–87. From the perspective of this “domestic” narrative, I find Mahler’s original ordering to be significantly more disturbing, precisely because the luminous A major of the first movement’s ending is immediately and ruthlessly snuffed out. Also, if one accepts that the Andante’s E-flat major signifies an “escapist” impulse, then that movement is more convincing *after* the hegemony of A minor has been definitively established (which is not the case when the Andante is placed second).

99. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, 129.

finale—specifically, in its two effusive secondary themes.<sup>100</sup> This thesis deserves more than casual attention. For in addition to bringing important outer-movement continuities to the fore, it also invites us to extend the Allegro's gender conflict into a more expressly tragic realm, with the potential to profoundly recolor our hearing of the symphonic whole. In this section, I will map out a number of inter- and intratextual threads that give credence and unexpected depth to the idea that the nuptial subtext pervades the *entire* Sixth, not just its opening movement.

To provide some context for my reading, we turn first to a recent narrative analysis by Robert Samuels. Taking his cue from Anthony Newcomb's interpretation of the Ninth Symphony as a musical *Bildungsroman*, Samuels has proposed that the entire Sixth can be emplotted along the lines of a nineteenth-century "feminine tragedy" such as *Anna Karenina* or *Madame Bovary*—that is to say, as a story depicting a "protagonist struggling with forces that crush his or her individuality, promising and then denying freedom."<sup>101</sup> Figure 3 shows his mapping of this narrative archetype onto the work's four movements. Samuels, we should note, does not go so far as to reify a *specific* protagonist for the Sixth, male or female, though he does venture that the archetype "virtually necessitates a female"—a bold move, given the universal gendering of the work's tragic hero as male.<sup>102</sup> And he only hints, half apologetically, that Mahler's use of this plot paradigm may have autobiographical resonances, noting merely that the theme most suggestive of a "desire for sensuous gratification and Romantic individuality" is precisely the one in which Mahler supposedly depicts his wife.<sup>103</sup> But however much one wishes that Samuels had pursued this thesis in more depth, it is easy to understand why he would hedge. The narrative archetype he describes raises the possibility of a radically reimaged Sixth—one whose tragedy is, in a sense, *Alma* Mahler's, rather than her husband's. At first, such a prospect seems far-fetched; one can scarcely imagine an artist as neurotically self-obsessed as Mahler devoting an entire symphony to the portrayal of someone else. But if we take the Sixth to be less "about" Alma in some simplistically illustrative sense and more about the psychodynamics of an envisioned tragedy involving *both* spouses, an irresolvable clash of character and gender roles, the scenario becomes far more plausible.

Naturally, any such hearing will pivot on whether there are actually compelling musical reasons to hear the finale reopening the first movement's domestic drama. In fact, there are many—even beyond its redeployment of sonata form and its reanimation of the Allegro's motivic DNA. One could, for

100. Diether, Liner notes; Floros, *Mahler: The Symphonies*, 184; Hoeckner, review of Samuels, *Mahler's Sixth Symphony*, 127; Hurwitz, *Mahler Symphonies*, 113.

101. Samuels, *Mahler's Sixth Symphony*, 150. See also Newcomb, "Narrative Archetypes and Mahler's Ninth Symphony."

102. Samuels, *Mahler's Sixth Symphony*, 155.

103. *Ibid.*, 157.

Example 8 Apotheosis of Alma theme in coda (unpitched percussion not shown)

444 [tpts] **Pesante**  
*ff*

447 Von hier zum Schluß etwas drängend. [winds]  
*ff*  
 [8 hrns]  
*sf* *f*  
 [bssn/cl]

450 [vlns] *f* [vlns] *ff*  
 [tpt]

instance, cite the striking fact that the finale’s (failed!) exposition reinstates the exact tonal and topical design of the Allegro’s failed *recapitulation*, as if resuming an interrupted story: both begin with dystopian A-minor marches; both move on to chorale-derived TR-themes that pit A minor against C major; and both conclude with impetuous D-major S-themes.<sup>104</sup> What is more,

104. In the Allegro, TR is literally a chorale in the exposition; the recapitulation transforms the texture somewhat. In the finale, TR is based on a chorale first heard in the slow introduction (m. 49).

Allegro:	Adolescence and first realization of social forces (Emma Bovary's and Ana Karenina's marriages)
Scherzo:	Engagement with society, constraining personal choice (Emma's encounter with the viscount, Anna's rise in society)
Andante:	The promise of freedom and attempted escape through personal fulfillment (Emma's affairs, Anna's affair with Vronsky)
Finale:	Peripeteia and ultimate extinction (betrayal for Emma, Anna's illness and abandonment by Vronsky, suicide for both)

**Figure 3** Samuels's "feminine tragedy" plot archetype mapped onto the Sixth Symphony (adapted from Samuels, *Mabler's Sixth Symphony*, 120)

as Example 9 shows, the finale's two S-themes (Exx. 9a and 9c) plainly derive from the first movement's "Alma" theme (Ex. 9b):  $S^1$  (above) borrows its gestural and rhythmic template, while  $S^2$  (below) keeps the intervals constant but changes the rhythm. With all of this in mind, there is strong incentive to reimagine "the Alma theme" as a kind of protean, trans-symphonic impulse—one with well-defined energetic and gestural traits but which transcends any particular motivic/intervallic configuration. In so doing, we would give Samuels's "feminine tragedy" reading more traction in the score by positing a single feminine protagonist that endures across several movements.

However, the real strength of Samuels's interpretation is one that he himself does not draw out: the fact that it is precisely this newly broadened "Alma" impulse that is forced to bear the burden of the finale's many musical disasters. As I have shown elsewhere, each of the finale's negative climaxes finds either  $S^1$  or  $S^2$  derailed in an attempt to reclaim the kind of major-mode fulfillment secured (if only fleetingly) at the end of the Allegro.<sup>105</sup> In that same study, I also proposed that the finale's thematic processes are complicit in this conspiracy, inclining toward an "inescapable" coherence that progressively liquidates the feminine themes' distinguishing features in favor of a "denuded, generic similarity."<sup>106</sup> So there are ample grounds to hear the Sixth organized around the plight of an ill-starred protagonist who finds, after an early glimpse of emancipation, her freedom "denied" and her individuality "crushed" (to use Samuels's terms).

Of the many disasters that befall the finale's S-themes, none can rival the infamy of the development's two "hammer-blow" climaxes (mm. 336, 479). Indeed, one attractive feature of this reading is that it furnishes a richer narrative context for the hammer blows than is customary. And yet to unpack all

105. See mm. 229, 336, 385, 479, 773; see also Monahan, "Inescapable' Coherence."

106. *Ibid.*, 74–80.

**Example 9** Relationship of Alma theme to the Finale’s secondary themes (all melodies transposed to F major): (a) Finale, S<sup>1</sup> theme; (b) First movement, “Alma” theme; (c) Finale, S<sup>2</sup> theme

a. Finale S<sup>1</sup> theme

b. “Alma” theme

c. Finale S<sup>2</sup> theme

that we can from these crucial moments, we must trace the hammer-blow music back to its (perhaps surprising) origins. Earlier in the finale, after the introduction’s first waves of generative chaos subside, there emerges a grim wind chorale, the movement’s first truly coherent musical utterance. Comparing Examples 10 and 11, it is easy to see that the hammer-blow theme is a rhythmically augmented variation of this chorale tune. But the C-minor chorale itself has a significant prehistory; it originates in the fifth movement of the Third Symphony (1897), Mahler’s setting of “Armer Kinder Betterlied” for contralto and treble choirs.

Like many of its fellow *Wunderhorn* texts, “Armer Kinder Betterlied” draws its distinctive tone from a seemingly glib intermingling of the naive and the grotesque, the ingenuous and the knowing. Couched between buoyant tableaux celebrating divine forgiveness and “heavenly joy without end,” we find a dark meditation on a guilt so powerful that it would defy absolution. At the start of song’s B section, Christ admonishes Saint Peter at the heavenly dinner table: “What are you doing? Whenever I look at you, I find you weeping!” The chorale melody in Example 12 appears before, and then during, Peter’s response: “And should I not weep, you gracious God? I have violated the ten commandments and weep most bitterly.” If we take this quotation seriously, it impels a potentially revelatory question: why would Mahler take such pains to craft a hidden musical epigraph that frames the finale not in terms of heroic defiance (as is almost always assumed), but in terms of guilt, shame, and contrition?

Of course, this penitential subtext could be religious in nature, as suggested by the poem. Mahler endured many painful lapses of faith during these years—enough that Bruno Walter came to hear the Sixth evoking a “world without God” (*entgötterten Welt*).<sup>107</sup> But what if, following the path Alma has

107. Walter, “Mahlers Weg: Ein Erinnerungsblatt,” 166. It seems unlikely that Mahler, the eclectic pantheist, would have entertained much spiritual guilt over the nominal rejection of his

## Example 10 Chorale from the Finale's introduction

**Schwer. Markato. (ungefähr l'istesso Tempo)**

[cl/hn/bssn]

## Example 11 Chorale-derived “hammer-blow” theme from the Finale (texture reduced)

opened for us, we supposed this guilt to be more terrestrial, even domestic, in nature? Could we take this solemn chorale to be a veiled admission of culpability, Mahler's acknowledgment that his marital unrest was as much his own fault as anyone's? Could we imagine that the terrible "fate" paid tribute here is not some abstract future misfortune but the inalterable arrangements of the present—the fact that Mahler felt he had no choice but to put his art, his sublime calling, before the contentment of his wife? Before dismissing this out of hand, we should recall the striking fact that this same "penitential chorale" lashes out in a *fortississimo* shriek at precisely those moments in which the Alma-derived S-themes are most spectacularly cut down. With eruptive violence, the chorale's sidelong confession of guilt becomes a terrifying announcement.

And yet this is not to say that domestic and religious interpretations of the chorale-quotation are mutually exclusive; indeed, these spheres can merge quite seamlessly. By introducing the personage of Saint Peter, Mahler puts us in a position to hear provocative resonances between the first edition's

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birth religion for Catholicism. But bouts of more generalized doubt seemed to have been a part of the composer's spiritual makeup. Walter testifies that his friend became disenfranchised from God in these years, having "lost Him in the world, which seemed to [Mahler] ever more dark and mysterious"; Walter, "Mahlers Weg," 166. Ferdinand Pfohl and Oskar Fried also recount Mahler's agonized lapses of faith; see Floros, *Gustav Mahler*, 201–2.

## Example 12 Chorale from Mahler, Symphony No. 3 in D Minor, fifth movement

35 **Zurückhaltend.**

Und

[strings]  
*p*

39 **Meno mosso.**

sollt' ich nicht wei - nen du

[ob]

[hn]

[cl]

41

gü - ti - ger Gott.

three hammer blows, Peter’s three denials of Christ, and even the three nails “hammered” into the cross.<sup>108</sup> These associations, in turn, suggest that the finale might be involved with a different sort of nuptial “passion”—one that placed Alma in the role of sacrificial lamb, betrayed by those closest to her and

108. As de La Grange points out, the fact that Mahler had originally planned *five* hammer blows—the three present in the first edition, plus two to coincide with the major-minor “mottos” in the introduction and recapitulation (mm. 9, 530)—makes it unlikely that they carried any symbolic significance; *Mahler*, 3:812. That the first published configuration (three blows, two in the development and one in the coda) *did* have symbolic import has long been an article of faith

called to endure a “suffering” (as claimed in her diary) that ultimately stood to bring “joy” into the world. After all, sacrifice had become their matrimonial watchword. Before the wedding, Mahler had even asked her point-blank: “Could you stand by me and take all these burdens upon yourself—even to the point of humiliation—*could you happily bear this cross with me?*”<sup>109</sup> Now, three years later, it may finally have dawned on Mahler that Alma’s cross was borne not with him but simply for him, placing the composer in the double role of the penitent who has betrayed his redeemer and the stern deity who demanded the sacrifice in the first place.

Needless to say, this “penitential” reading, however elaborate, could never exhaust the hammer blows’ potential meanings. Even within a domestic interpretation such as mine, there are other semantic registers to be explored. Consider the following, which no scholar I know has ever discussed and the Freudian implications of which are as astonishing as they far-reaching: during the composition of the Sixth, amidst marital unease and, from what we can tell, intermittent sexual dysfunction on the composer’s part, Alma Mahler was receiving regular obstetric/gynecological care from a Doctor Albert *Hammerschlag*.<sup>110</sup> Now of course this connection might be entirely fortuitous. But it is hardly unthinkable that an artist hampered by intimate “performance” issues might develop negative subconscious associations with the name of the man whose duty it was to attend to his wife’s reproductive organs—especially given his possessive attitude and the threat posed by their difference in age.<sup>111</sup> Here we enter much darker territory, with overtones of

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among Mahlerians, along with the conviction that the composer removed the third—the “death blow,” if we believe Alma’s account—for fear of tempting fate. In terms of my argument here, it is telling that the two blows that remained in Mahler’s final version are precisely the ones coincident with the transformed “penitential chorale.”

109. Letter of 12 December 1901, cited in *Gustav Mahler: Letters to His Wife*, 61 (emphasis added).

110. Albert Hammerschlag (1863–1935) was a well-known Viennese doctor, brother of Mahler’s friend the banker Paul Hammerschlag (1860–1933) and close friend of Sigmund Freud. Members of the Mahler family (including the composer himself) had been seeing Hammerschlag for a variety of ills since at least the turn of the century; Justine Mahler refers to his care in a letter of 25 October 1899; Mahler, *Mahler Family Letters*, 331. Alma herself saw Hammerschlag in 1903 (*Gustav Mahler: Letters to His Wife*, 117), but was also seeing another gynecologist, a Dr. Fleischmann, in the summer of 1904 (*ibid.*, 170).

111. Since Mahler’s sexual proclivities are known to us mainly through Alma’s report, one must tread with caution here. Late in her life, Alma would insist that Gustav had been sexually apathetic, even puritanical, claiming sardonically that her children had been “immaculately conceived”; de La Grange, *Mahler*, 3:87. De La Grange is right, of course, in noting that this characterization provided Alma with convenient retroactive justification for her extramarital affair with Gropius. But her account has more than a grain of truth. After their famous meeting, Freud reported that Mahler had at long since “withdraw[n]” his libido from his wife; quoted in Feder, *Gustav Mahler*, 233. Hilmes locates this withdrawal around early 1905, tracing it to Alma’s chronically “reproachful dissatisfaction” (*ausgesprochenen Unzufriedenheit*) rather than impotence per se; *Witwe im Wahn*, 84–85. However, it is important to recall that Alma’s diary—which was

sexual jealousy lending the hammer-blow outbursts a sinister air only amplified by their manifest, even disturbing, violence.

Mahler once mused that his Sixth would pose “riddles” that could be solved only by a generation that had fully digested his earlier works.<sup>112</sup> But in a work of such depth, one can also stumble upon riddles whose meaning—indeed whose very presence—may have escaped the composer himself. The “Doctor Hammerschlag” revelation is certainly a contender in this regard; if the family physician *did* have an impact on Mahler’s percussion scoring, it was no doubt an unconscious one. Psychoanalysts would regard this as an instance of *parapraxis*—an inadvertent disclosure of meaning triggered by, or traceable to, some unconscious or repressed association. (So-called Freudian slips are perhaps the best-known sort.)

To close this section—and my analysis—I shall offer one more parapraxic vignette, one that is neither less speculative nor (for me) less compelling. For this, we must come full circle, back to the Alma theme as it first appears in the Allegro’s exposition. In his 1983 monograph on the composer, Quirino Principe noted some tantalizing similarities between Mahler’s “Alma” melody and an aria from Emil Kaiser’s 1882 opera, *Der Trompeter von Säckingen* (Ex. 13).<sup>113</sup> The themes’ keys, contours, and rhythms are quite comparable, and each features a characteristic  $\acute{6}$ – $\grave{5}$  appoggiatura on its initial downbeat. Were Mahler any other composer, though, we would have to take the resemblance to be incidental; never a household name, Kaiser had been unfortunate enough to compose his *Trompeter* only a year before Victor Nessler’s runaway hit of the same name, insuring that his own would be promptly forgotten.<sup>114</sup> But as Principe points out, Mahler may well have chanced upon the lesser-known score, as he was appointed Kaiser’s successor as first capellmeister of the Olmütz Municipal Theater in 1883.<sup>115</sup> For our purposes, however, it is

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hardly written with posterity in mind—recounts that their very first sexual encounter ended prematurely when the composer was unable to perform; entry of 1 January 1902, *Diaries 1898–1902*, 467.

112. Undated 1904 letter to Richard Specht; Mahler, *Briefe*, 318.

113. Principe, *Mahler*, 356.

114. Nessler’s *Trompeter von Säckingen* premiered on 4 May 1884 and was a “startling success,” with over 900 performances in north Germany alone; Franklin, “Nessler, Viktor E.” Curiously, Nessler’s own setting of “Behüt’ Dich Gott . . .” was a popular excerpt, destined to be recorded by several luminaries of the early twentieth-century stage, including Lauritz Melchior, Heinrich Schlusnus, and Richard Tauber.

115. Kaiser composed his *Trompeter* while in residence at Olmütz; presumably the work remained in the theater’s library after his departure. Mahler did not, in any event, deem the score worthy of performance; see Raymond Holden’s inventory of the works staged during Mahler’s three-month tenure; *Virtuoso Conductors*, 284n43. Nor did Mahler care much for von Scheffel’s poem—even though he was to write seven *tableaux vivants* for a dramatic performance of the text in Kassel the following year; letter to Fritz Lohr, 22 June 1884, cited in Mahler, *Selected Letters*, 77. One of these *tableaux* is believed to have become the discarded “Blumine” movement of the First Symphony; the others were destroyed in Kassel during World War II.

**Example 13** The Alma theme (top) compared to a bass aria from Emil Kaiser's *Der Trompeter von Säckingen* (below)

Be - hüt' Dich Gott, es wär' zu schön ge - we - sen, be - hüt' Dich

Gott, es hat nicht soll - en sein,

the text of the given passage that matters most: “Behüt’ Dich Gott, es wär’ zu schön gewesen, behüt’ Dich Gott, es hat nicht sollen sein” (“God keep you, it would have been too lovely; God keep you, it was not meant to be”).

“It was not meant to be.” If there is any substance to Principe’s argument, we would have to count this as a truly remarkable parapraxic moment, capable of betraying in an instant all that Mahler strove to conceal when “waxing idyllic” about his wife, the “hidden conflicts and intimate problems he was facing and the worries these caused him.”<sup>116</sup> Irony, of course, was a hallmark of Mahler’s style. But to have inadvertently encrypted his spousal tribute with an admission that their union was ill-conceived—this would be the greatest of all Mahler’s ironies, and one that the composer would have had neither the desire nor the opportunity to savor.

116. De La Grange, *Mahler*, 3:145.

## V. Epilogue: Music and Autobiography

My aim here has been to show that it is at least possible to draw provocative connections between the Sixth Symphony’s tragic content and Mahler’s home life. But is such a hearing credible? Is there any historical reason, beyond Alma’s passing and possibly spurious comment, to suggest that the Sixth might have served Mahler as a sounding board for his domestic anxieties? If so, how intentional should we suppose this self-depiction to be? Should it be imagined to preclude other types of interpretations? And what of Mahler’s own vehement proscription of any autobiographical reading? So far, I have kept these important questions mostly on the sidelines; it is time to bring them into the light.

That Mahler’s art is singularly self-disclosing has long been an article of faith for specialists and laypeople alike; as Leon Botstein writes, he is, for many, the “confessional artist” par excellence.<sup>117</sup> But as with any deeply entrenched truism—particularly one that had opened the door to so much facile and formulaic criticism—a backlash was inevitable. Adorno was perhaps the first critic to stake out a vehemently antiautobiographical position, insisting that Mahler’s music was anything but a “seismogram of the [artist’s] soul.” His symphonies are decidedly “not content with the first person,” and the subjectivities projected therein—the sites “where the musical process seems to say ‘I’”—are never to be confused with the historical Mahler, the “private person” who was merely the “executive organ” of the works’ creation.<sup>118</sup> Adorno’s skepticism opened the door for what might be termed “subjectivity studies” in Mahler, the investigation of the construction, dispersal, and interaction of “voices” in the composer’s music. A common thread in such writing is the belief that Mahler’s music problematizes or even “eradicates” the conventional (i.e., monological, unified) subject-position of the Romantic artwork—a conviction that throws a wrench into the works of any naively autobiographic hearing of the music.<sup>119</sup> In its most extreme incarnations, this

117. Botstein, “Whose Gustav Mahler?,” 6. Vera Micznik traces this trope to Richard Specht’s 1913 revised biography of the composer; “Is Mahler’s Music Autobiographical? A Reappraisal,” 50.

118. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, 24–25, 129–30. As evidence, Adorno cites the “stylized objectivity” of the *Wunderhorn* songs, which do not “sing of themselves, but narrate” and which remain “aloof” from the subjective lyric, and then asserts that the symphonies occur in the same “medium” (*ibid.*, 75). But on a deeper level, the compulsion to desubjectify Mahler’s music likely stems from his uncompromising position on the programmatic/absolute music debate. A music directly imprinted with a composer’s lived experience, Adorno seems to fear, would amount to little more than the kind of transcriptive realism that he found so unworthy and unsophisticated in Strauss—it would be a music, in other words, that ceded its own governing logic to extramusical mimetics.

119. Monelle, *Sense of Music*, chap. 5, “Mahler and Gustav,” 176. See also Abbate, *Unsung Voices*; Botstein, “Whose Gustav Mahler?,” 33–43; Johnson, *Mahler’s Voices*; and Knapp, *Symphonic Metamorphoses: Subjectivity and Alienation in Mahler’s Re-Cycled Songs*, 191–93. Needless

viewpoint has inspired some hyperbolic challenges to the status quo—none, perhaps, more brazen than Raymond Monelle’s provocation that “Mahler, on the whole, is absent” from his own music.<sup>120</sup>

Clearly, a number of hotly contested topics converge here—questions of authoriality, intentionality, and persona, to name a few—and to do them justice would lead us farther afield than space permits. For now, I shall make only two brief points. First, I would stress that this poststructuralist perspective, despite having inspired quite a few imaginative and gratifying analyses, is still only one hermeneutic genre among many; it enjoys no special privileges or purchase on the truth.<sup>121</sup> Second, I would point out that Adorno is surely right to insist that the subjectivity projected by Mahler’s works is fictional, in a sense, and should not be taken as an unmediated transcript of the artist’s psyche. But accepting this does not oblige us to disregard a composer’s lived experience altogether (as Adorno did) or to adopt an avowedly contrarian attitude toward the whole issue of art/life parallels. Nor does accepting that a work presents a multitude of conflicting “voices” require us to dispense with the premise of a central authorial subjectivity.<sup>122</sup> Like many contemporary analyses, my own reading has projected a number of fictional agencies or personae onto the work—most notably, the two gendered thematic impulses seen

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to say, the influence of Edward T. Cone is felt strongly in most of these writings—even though it is precisely Cone’s monological “composer’s voice” that these authors strive to unseat; see Cone, *Composer’s Voice*.

120. Monelle, *Sense of Music*, 195. When it comes to overstatement, Monelle takes more than a few pages out of Adorno’s playbook. Indeed, his plea for a desubjectified Mahler is structured much like Adorno’s own, with trenchant characterizations of certain works or passages—many of them from the *Wunderhorn* songs—being generalized (often unconvincingly) to Mahler’s entire oeuvre.

121. Such relativism is, perhaps ironically, a lesson learned from poststructuralism itself. All the same, if some readers still find the idea of “biographical” analysis to be inherently retrograde and/or outmoded, I would argue that we are surely better off resisting those grand metanarratives in which any one interpretive methodology (including poststructuralism itself) is permitted to heroically and irrevocably trounce all others. A wholesale dismissal of psychobiographical interpretation levels the distinction on which this entire essay pivots, and one that I believe is worth preserving: that between biographical readings that are rigorous, responsible, and discriminating, and those that are formulaic, facile, sensational, naive, or implausible.

122. Indeed, it is interesting to observe that the very Mahlerian traits that underwrite Monelle’s and Johnson’s analyses (pastiche, discontinuity, hyperbole, and so on) have led many to quite the opposite conclusion—that Mahler, among the great composers, is uniquely *committed* to depicting the mental life of the neurotic, nostalgic, questioning, self-alienating, and self-ironizing modern subject. As Botstein observes, many listeners value Mahler’s symphonies precisely because they seem to provide “a temporal geography of the psyche, . . . a metaphor for the process by which the soul is tormented by modernity” (“Whose Gustav Mahler?,” 6). So while it is certainly possible to hear subjectivity “undermined” or “eradicated” by Mahler’s fractured, multiplicitous discourse, we can just as well hear it more accurately depicted and thus confirmed in all its unseemly, self-contradictory detail. (Conceits of a stable, internally consistent subject may fall by the wayside in such readings, but not “personal subjectivity” itself.)

to be in contention throughout.<sup>123</sup> But such a hearing is hardly incompatible with the conceit of a unitary author-agent—a master of the proceedings, so to speak. For the present exercise (if not for Adorno’s), such a construction is valuable precisely for its potential to map convincingly onto the historical author-agent, the Mahler whose life we would hear reflected in the work.

But here there arises another conundrum, since the question remains open as to how, and in what capacity, we can legitimately regard Mahler’s music as self-depicting. As I see it, the difficulty lies not (as we might once have assumed) in the question of whether Mahler’s music “is” autobiographical or how he could have encoded biographical information “in the music” itself.<sup>124</sup> Rather, the problem is one of a maddeningly ambiguous contract between a composer and his listeners. My thinking on this matter is strongly influenced by James Hepokoski’s pathbreaking work on nineteenth-century program music. Hepokoski argues that “the essence” of a programmatic work or symphonic poem lies not in the inscription of extramusical concepts “into” the musical substrate per se, but rather

in the listener’s act (anticipated by the composer’s) of connecting text and paratext, music and nonmusical image, and grappling with the implication of the connection. The genre exists, *qua* genre, solely within the receiver, who agrees to create it reciprocally by indicating his or her willingness to play the game proposed by the composer; it does not exist abstractly in the acoustical surface of the music.

In this light, the “abstract problem” of music’s capacity to signify nonmusical images or concepts becomes “irrelevant”:

Within such a system it would suffice that both the producer and the targeted receivers of the musical text agree that forging musical and literary-pictorial interrelationships is fully within the spirit of the game.<sup>125</sup>

When “autobiographical” pieces provide unambiguous paratextual cues—as with, say, Strauss’s *Sinfonia Domestica*, or Smetana’s First String Quartet (*Aus meinem Leben*)—they invite a listener response more or less identical to the one Hepokoski describes above; in such cases, the distinction between

123. Fred E. Maus’s “Music as Drama” is still the authoritative discussion of this phenomenon, esp. 67ff.

124. These are the questions posed by Vera Micznik in her investigation “Is Mahler’s Music Autobiographical?,” 47, 54. But her study stacks the deck somewhat by presuming from the outset that the only legitimate meanings are those that can be objectively “decoded” (denotatively or connotatively) from its “conventional” musical signifiers. That is to say, her analysis admits only those semantic elements which can be elucidated by a localized semiotic exegesis of the acoustical surface, expressly bracketed from its paratexts. By so strict a measure, few of Mahler’s works could be heard as legitimately autobiographical. My apprehensions about so narrow a definition of musical meaning should be evident after the arguments to follow.

125. Hepokoski, “Fiery-Pulsed Libertine or Domestic Hero? Strauss’s *Don Juan* Reinvestigated,” 136.

the “autobiographical” and the “programmatic” is negligible.<sup>126</sup> But for many composers and/or works suspected of self-depiction (one thinks of Tchaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony, or perhaps Shostakovich’s Eighth Quartet), the “game” is less well defined, owing to a lack of paratexts or other reliable declarations of intent. Mahler presents something of a special case in this regard, since his public positions rarely align with his private ones. For the modern listener, who has access not only to the “official” paratexts but also his many private musings on the topic, it is often unclear exactly what kind of “game” Mahler really wanted us to play.

The problem begins with Mahler’s own notoriously slippery attitude toward the relation of symphony and self. Convinced that his works were an outgrowth of (and thus a sounding board for) his real-life experiences, he nevertheless rejected any intimation that they could be heard as “programmatic” in the conventional sense—that is, literally depictive of lived events or narratives. His experiences, he famously explained, were the “reason” for the works but not their “content.”<sup>127</sup> The relationship between music and life was thus intimate and inevitable but also abstract, and any attempt to elucidate their coupling risked doing more harm than good—at least as long as audiences remained as literal-minded as Mahler always feared them to be. Already in 1896, we see the composer beginning to rebrand himself, decrying pre- and post-compositional programs alike—and this even as he labored over his massively programmatic Third Symphony.<sup>128</sup> After the turn of the century, he would simply insist that his audiences engage his symphonies as “absolute” music, regardless of their original inspiration.

But this public about-face masks deeper continuities in Mahler’s private outlook. Early on, he had been quite unguarded on the topic of self-depiction. “My [first] two symphonies,” he declared to Natalie Bauer-Lechner in 1893, “contain the inner aspect of my whole life; I have written into them . . . everything I have experienced and endured. *To understand these works properly would be to see my life transparently revealed in them.*”<sup>129</sup> Over a decade later, writing to Bruno Walter about the newly completed Sixth, the rhetoric has cooled but the sentiment is much the same:

126. With a few adjustments, Hepokoski’s model can also account for the way that we engage works that are “autobiographical” only through the mediation of one or more fictional protagonists—as with Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique* or Schumann’s *Davidbündlertänze*—and even those whose paratexts were poetically undivulged but later made public, as with Berg’s *Lytic Suite* or Schoenberg’s Piano Concerto (cases in which the listener can be seen to intrude upon a clearly delimited “game” the composer had intended to play with himself).

127. Letter to Max Marschalk, dated 26 March 1896 (cited in Mahler, *Selected Letters*, 179).

128. Ibid, 179. Although Mahler’s intent was to make the Third Symphony less explicitly autobiographical than the previous two—it was to have “nothing to do with the struggles of an individual”—it is nevertheless telling that the final program frames the content *entirely* in terms of the composer’s first-person experience: “what the flowers in the meadows tell *me*,” “what love tells *me*,” and so on; letter to Ludwig Schiedermair, cited in Franklin, *Mahler: Symphony No. 3*, 27.

129. Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, 30 (emphasis added).

In making music, one should not try to depict, poeticize, and describe. Yet *what one puts into music is one’s whole (feeling, thinking, breathing, and suffering) being*. There would really be no objection to a program . . . , except that the thoughts expressed in it must be those of a musician rather than of a writer, philosopher, or painter (all of whom are part of the musician).<sup>130</sup>

Here Mahler permits himself a show of ambivalence notably absent from his one-sided public sloganeering, his cries of “let every program perish!”<sup>131</sup> Behind the rather tortuous logic we find him once again pleading for a music that could be imprinted authentically with his nonmusical life experiences—illustrative of his “whole being”—but which would nevertheless be immune to charges of representation as such.

Arguably, Mahler never hit upon a solution. From 1900 onward, he simply committed himself to a flagrant double standard: he would continue to write symphonies that were privately autobiographic, sometimes in very specific ways, but now keep his paratexts out the public eye—confined to his drafts (as with the Ninth and Tenth), selectively confided to friends (as with the Fourth and the Seventh), or quite possibly divulged to his wife (as with the present work). Thus Mahler’s longing to be “understood” lost out, in the end, to his fear of being “misinterpreted,” his conviction that any clues about his poetic inspiration would be turned against him by the philistine hordes.<sup>132</sup> Never would he have envisioned a day when critics might be willing to hear his life figuratively “revealed” in the symphonies without supposing it to be trivially dramatized or reenacted there as well. Nor did he seem able to imagine a culture in which exegetical discourse could be inherently open-ended, a means of exploring and engaging a work without stripping away its vital “residue of mystery” or reducing it to some vulgarly overdetermined verbal content.<sup>133</sup>

But we in the present are not bound by Mahler’s narrow and reactionary strictures for correct (i.e., programmatically agnostic) listening, any more than we can pretend not to know that his works were almost surely more autobiographical than he let on to his contemporary audiences. If my task here has violated Mahler’s prohibition on autobiographical readings, it has also given me the opportunity to sidestep the very pitfalls that made Mahler so apprehensive about such pursuits. To be sure, one takes a leap of faith in presuming the Sixth to be self-depicting in the strongest sense, comparable to the *echt*-autobiographical First and Second Symphonies. But this is still not to reduce the work to the kind of transcriptive realism that Mahler abhorred. It seems more likely, as Peter Franklin suggests, that the Sixth served Mahler more abstractly, as a kind of “testing ground” for the psychodynamics of his imperiled

130. Undated letter, Summer 1904, cited in de La Grange, *Mahler*, 2:527 (emphasis added).

131. Undated letter to Max Kalbeck, January 1902; translation adapted from Mahler, *Selected Letters*, 262.

132. Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, 153.

133. Undated letter to Max Kalbeck, January 1902, cited in Mahler, *Selected Letters*, 262.

relationship—the purpose being, Franklin writes, to “outmaneuver the *future* rather than [to] record the past.”<sup>134</sup>

Nor, as suggested at the outset, would I presume to offer my own reading as the last word on the Sixth—“domestic” or otherwise. Indeed, the thematic and rhetorical oppositions tracked in the analysis above readily map onto any number of interpretive binaries, yielding an array of isomorphic conflict-narratives. I have read the Sixth as the ascension of the masculine over the feminine, but we can just as easily hear it as a triumph of death over life (with Mitchell), of unfreedom over freedom (with Adorno), of aggression over compassion (with Hanheide), of fate over defiance (with Alma) or alienation over social acceptance (with de La Grange), and so on.<sup>135</sup> I see my reading as consonant with all these interpretations, not in competition with them; a Sixth broad enough to contain “the whole Mahler” (or indeed an entire “universe”) surely has room for them all. In the face of such semantic plenitude, we might even go so far as to say that it matters little whether Mahler consciously intended the Sixth to be his own “terrible *Sinfonia Domestica*.”<sup>136</sup> The parallels between its musical processes and its author’s private life may strike us as sufficiently compelling to stand on their own.<sup>137</sup> Mahler, after all, left exactly this door open for us when he insisted, repeatedly, that works of art contain mysteries that escape even their creators—including those of an autobiographical sort: “The parallelism between life and music,” he once mused, “may go deeper and further than [the artist] is at present capable of realizing.”<sup>138</sup>

134. Franklin, *Life of Mahler*, 142 (emphasis added).

135. Although this reading is only implicit in de La Grange’s biography, the portrait he paints of Mahler’s nearly debilitating anxieties about the work’s reception—his fear that its “radical new style” would insure the symphony’s public failure—is suggestive enough that one can easily project these tensions back onto the work itself. That is to say, in terms of public reception, one can understand the work as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: one whose acerbic tone and fatalistic outlook were prompted by the anticipation of the very failure they caused.

136. Darcy, “Rotational Form, Teleological Genesis, and Fantasy-Projection in the Slow Movement of Mahler’s Sixth Symphony,” 49.

137. To say that Mahler may not have consciously crafted these parallels is not to reduce his music to Adorno’s detested “seismogram of the soul,” an involuntary mechanism for turning experience into sound. He clearly had enough objective distance in 1904 to complete his “Tragic” symphony as planned and move on to the “Nachtmusik” movements of the Seventh, which have a very different character.

138. Letter to Max Marschalk, 17 December 1895, cited in Mahler, *Selected Letters*, 172.

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## Abstract

Since the 1940s, Mahler’s Sixth Symphony has been transmitted with an informal “domestic” program centered on several claims first made in Alma Mahler’s *Erinnerungen*. In the work, she writes, Gustav meant to depict their children (in the Scherzo), himself (in the Finale), and finally *her*, in the first movement’s swooning secondary theme. Though critics have almost universally accepted Alma’s anecdote, few have seriously asked the important question of what such a portrait would be doing in Mahler’s most expressly tragic symphony. In this study I offer a hermeneutic perspective on the Sixth that concedes the possible truth of Alma’s anecdote but which challenges the conventional assumption that such a spousal tribute should best be understood as a one-sided testament to Mahler’s newfound nuptial bliss. After examining the theme’s reception history and Mahler’s domestic circumstances during the symphony’s composition, I explore the ways in which the first movement’s sonata narrative—a protracted conflict between (and reconciliation of) its two gendered subjects—suggestively mirrors the prevailing psychodynamics of Mahler’s strained marriage. At the end of the essay I propose how this revised hearing of the opening movement might prompt a reimagining of the entire Sixth as a projected or imagined “domestic tragedy,” with special focus on the intertextual links between the work’s outer movements and also between the cataclysmic finale and the penitentially anguished portions of the Third Symphony’s “Armer Kinder Betterlied.”

Keywords: Gustav Mahler, Alma Mahler, Alma theme, Mahler’s Sixth Symphony, Musical Autobiography