

STANDPOINT.

Death's March

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Late and great: A Portrait of Gustav Mahler by Arnold Schoenberg a year before the former's death (Arnold Schoenberg Centre, Vienna)

Gustav Mahler's double anniversary is steaming into its second year — the centenary of his death — and now orchestras' attentions are turning to his late works. You may already have heard his Ninth Symphony conducted by the brilliant Andris Nelsons with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra; Valery Gergiev and the London Symphony Orchestra will play it in March.

Mahler's last completed symphony is the apogee of one of music's most peculiar phenomena. Why is it that music written near the end of a composer's life can "sound late"? It sometimes seems to possess an enhanced spiritual dimension, a sense of removal from life on to a higher, intangible plane. But is this real? Do we project a fantasy "endgame syndrome" on to the music? The answers are not as obvious as we might like them to be.

If Mahler evoked endgame syndrome in his Ninth Symphony, it is hardly surprising. His health — increasing heart trouble and recurring infections — was severely affected by his emotional response to his small daughter's death of scarlet fever, the loss of his post at the Vienna State Opera and his wife's affair with Walter Gropius. These blows contributed much to the valedictory nature of the Ninth Symphony. And

he knew ninth symphonies appeared to be cursed: Beethoven's, Schubert's, Bruckner's and Dvorák's ninth were their last. Considering his song cycle *Das Lied von der Erde* a symphony in all but name, Mahler pretended that his Ninth Symphony was actually his Tenth. He, too, died before he could finish one movement of his real Tenth.

We talk, with good reason, of "late Beethoven" and "late Fauré" — composers whose final creative explorations involved new and remarkable developments. Yet oddly, we also talk of "late Mozart", although Mozart died at just 36, without having made any obvious modifications to his style. Why?

The idea that Mozart sensed he was writing his own requiem is powerful; it also seems, from his letters, to be true. Less obvious is the fact that Mozart was lucky to be alive at all by then. Since childhood, he had suffered several nearly fatal illnesses. He had furthermore lost four of his and Constanze's six children, and both his parents. Facing death was a daily part of his life. In 1787 he wrote:

"As death, when we come to consider it closely, is the true goal of our existence, I have formed during the last few years such close relationships with this best and truest friend of mankind that death's image is not only no longer terrifying to me, but is indeed very soothing and consoling, and I thank my God for graciously granting me the opportunity [...] of learning that death is the key which unlocks the door to our true happiness. I never lie down at night without reflecting that — young as I am — I may not live to see another day. Yet no one of all my acquaintances could say that in company I am morose or disgruntled."

There is plenty of truth to the "endgame syndrome" in Mozart, but he would not have seen it that way. To him, it was the crystallisation in music of the essence of life itself.

Schubert died even younger, at 31. Why should his late music have such an air of spiritual wisdom? He contracted syphilis when he was 25; his music was haunted by death thereafter, or so the theory goes. Yet Schubert's premature death was rather sudden: he contracted a serious illness, possibly typhoid fever, from eating fish. From what turned out to be his deathbed, he wrote to his brother asking for a James Fenimore Cooper novel. He did not expect to die; he could have lived on with syphilis for years. Some of the visionary terror in his "late" music could be attributed to the awareness that he was facing a terrible, incurable illness — but he had written his spine-chilling song *Erlkönig* when he was only 16. To him, as to Mozart, death was part of life from the start and awareness of it figured strongly in his outlook.

Schumann's case was rather different. He spent his last two years in a mental hospital; unlike Schubert, syphilis was indeed killing him. His "late" music has often been considered "difficult". But that view, uncomfortably, can be traced back to his wife, Clara, who suppressed and even destroyed some of his late works, terrified that they might give the impression that he was mentally ill. Yet what if Schumann's late works weren't the product of a failing mind, but a push into the future? What's certain is that some — the *Gesänge der Frühe* and the slow movement of the Violin Concerto — are incredibly beautiful. With Schumann, beware of received opinion.

Beyond Mahler, later composers were frequently forced to face danger, exile and the risk of premature death. Yet as the 20th century progressed, the concept of "late

works" carried less power. Some commentators think that Shostakovich's late works are haunted by the fear of death; others suggest that an underlying terror had always characterised his style. Bartók's late Viola Concerto seems bathed in the autumnal glow of the hills around Buda, remembered from New York. But given that he had leukaemia and was living in straitened circumstances after fleeing wartime Hungary, his last work, the Third Piano Concerto, feels remarkably sunny.

Today the endgame syndrome has dissipated, possibly because we're shielded from the reality of death. In the West, relatively few of us now die young; inevitable mortality is pushed aside as if it simply shouldn't happen. Beyond plastic evocations in films and impersonal news reports, death is a cultural taboo. No such taboo figured for Mozart or Mahler.

The Ninth Symphony may end quietly, but Mahler is not going "gentle into that good night": it takes tremendous control to create such a work. Perhaps the recognition that his time might be limited induced him to muster, urgently, the very best of his abilities. Leonard Bernstein put it perfectly, writing: "It is terrifying, and paralyzing, as the strands of sound disintegrate [...] in ceasing, we lose it all. But in letting go, we have gained everything."

I'd add only that today the world's three most revered living composers are Arvo Pärt, Henri Dutilleux and Elliott Carter. They are respectively 75, 95 and 102. They are still composing.